

**Black Rams and Extravagant Strangers:
Shakespeare's *Othello* and its Rewritings,
from Nineteenth-Century Burlesque to Post-
Colonial Tragedy**

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Declaration

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Abstract

The labyrinthine levels through which *Othello* moves, as Shakespeare draws on myriad theatrical forms in adapting a bald little tale, gives his characters a scintillating energy, a refusal to be domesticated in language. They remain as Derridian monsters, evading any enclosures, with the tragedy teetering perilously close to farce. Because of this fragility of identity, and Shakespeare's radical decision to have a black tragic protagonist, *Othello* has attracted subsequent dramatists caught in their own identity struggles. Nineteenth-century white burlesquers, anxious to bolster their sense of themselves as superior human beings in the face of abolitionist movements that insist on the inhumanity of enslaving Africans, forced the play into the shape of an unambiguous farce, where Othello is an absurd and foolish minstrel, denied the gravitas of death. Since the 1960s, writers throughout Britain's former empire have, in contrast, retrieved the play's tragic energy, as part of instating themselves into a history from which they have been excluded. In these later rewritings, a fault-line emerges between 'race' and gender, since in *Othello* a zero sum game operates, where increasing the empathy for Desdemona as a woman cruelly treated undermines the focus on Othello as a tragic black hero.

Tragedy distances its characters from what makes us animal, and comedy delights in it, with those who are marginalised traditionally thrust into a comedic identity, while white, male abstract thought is seen as providing transcendence from our bestial state. Hence, the desire for post-colonial writers to adopt the masculine form of tragedy. However, as the value of this form of thinking has been progressively questioned, so this is changing how *Othello* is approached, which I reflect in my own practice: I explore, in *The Turn*, how tragedy gives a protagonist pathos through its aesthetic structure, but I then write a form of what I would call tragi-burlesque, *Ponte Dell Tette*, where I let go a little of the hegemony of the word, push against the borders of logic and linearity, try to keep the characters as untamed monsters. It is my goal to use my research and practice to help me further to walk this tightrope between the power of tragedy and the animal freedom of absurdist comedy.

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Introduction

In the final scene of Shakespeare's *Othello: The Moor of Venice*, believed to have been first performed in November 1604, we see a man under arrest, having killed his wife. An outsider figure and a soldier more at ease on the battlefield than in polite society, he is employed by the state of Venice, but never welcomed into its inner circle; his loyalty can only take him so far. The rich and elegant Florentine Cassio is given the position that should have been his, having already – he believes – cuckolded him. His eloquence is able to overwhelm other characters, but finally this power is lost and he voluntarily silences himself. The State – first and last – re-asserts its power and the upstart is crushed.

That this is a description of Othello, but equally could be of his malevolent ensign Iago, touches the heart of this strange tragedy where the characters' identities are so fragile and at risk of collapsing into each other, or veering into their polar opposite. And it is these oscillating identities in *Othello* that have made it such a compelling play to rewrite, as I will explore in the rest of this thesis, looking specifically at theatrical rewritings in English, although also drawing comparisons with plays in other languages.

Adapting and Rewriting

Theatre historically has an in-built advantage over film, or even prose, in that it can be done in its simplest form with limited financial resources. It can also be very responsive to fast-moving ideas; while a film idea might languish for months, on hold until its producers secure funding, a performance can be improvised on a street corner that very night. The result of this is that, as Mark O'Thomas writes: 'it is theatre rather than film that appears in the vanguard of

utilising adaptation as a means of resistance.’¹ This may now change, of course, as the making and distribution of films becomes increasingly easy through cheap access to cameras and editing equipment, and burgeoning social media. However, theatre’s far longer history, combined with its potential for political immediacy, makes it the obvious medium for my dissertation, where I want to concentrate on how rewritings of *Othello* have evolved over an extended period of time in response to diverse zeitgeists. Even though I have restricted this to a detailed analysis of rewritings in English, that still allows for examples from around the globe because of the British colonial legacy. Particularly revealing in these plays is what is and what is not allowed into the territory of laughter, and therefore my key interest is in how the aesthetics of comedy and tragedy are used by these rewriters.

My focus will be on how nineteenth-century white men on both sides of the Atlantic, anxious to bolster their sense of self in the face of abolitionist triumphs, forced Shakespeare’s black protagonist into the shape of a comic grotesque, and how writers in the post-colonial period, including myself, have retrieved the play’s tragic aesthetic to channel it towards their own cause.

With a bold faith in eternal values, which ironically now appears to be a faith that is welded to his own specific socio-historic context, G. Wilson Knight writes how ‘Othello is essential man in all his prowess and protective strength; Desdemona essential woman, gentle, loving, brave in trust of her warrior husband’.² In the rewritings I analyse, what makes a man or a woman is shown to be, in many respects, as ephemeral as all other aspects of human identity, as these playwrights deconstruct the slippery text of *Othello* and re-construct it to speak to their own lives and their periods.

¹ Mark O’Thomas, ‘Turning Japanese: Translation, Adaptation, and the Ethics of Trans-National Exchange’, in *Adaptation Studies: New Approaches*, ed. by Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis Cutchins (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 2010), pp. 46-60 (p. 51).

² G. Wilson Knight, ‘The Othello Music’ in G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespeare’s Tragedies with Three New Essays* (Methuen & Co., London, 1949), pp. 97-119 (p. 111). First published in 1930.

Thomas Cartelli makes a distinction between ‘appropriation’ and ‘adaptation’, seeing the first as a ‘primarily critical and the other a primarily emulative act’. He goes on to consider how:

Most adaptations are interested merely in adjusting or accommodating the original work to the tastes and expectation of their own readership and audience [...] although the acts of appropriation and adaptation are equally opportunistic, the former tend to serve social or political as opposed to primarily literary or commercial agendas.³

However, in the burlesques of *Othello* in particular, it becomes apparent how difficult it is for this distinction to be maintained. The Marxist objection that pandering to current tastes is itself a deeply political act can be no clearer than in these texts that were written in an intensely commercial environment and yet, as Michael Neill describes it, their ‘use of increasingly crude parody’ appears to have a specific aim: ‘to neutralise the racial anxieties stirred up by Shakespeare’s play’ in this period when slavery was being progressively abolished in both Britain and the United States.⁴

While ‘appropriation’ has an appealingly radical feel, the difficulty in determining the border between the critical and the emulative has perhaps led to most writers in the field settling on just one word to describe the process, most commonly ‘adaptation’. In considering what is involved in the process of adaptation, Linda Hutcheon writes that:

To interpret an adaptation *as an adaptation* is, in a sense, to treat it as what Roland Barthes called, not a ‘work,’ but a ‘text’, a plural ‘stereophony of echoes, citations, references’. Although adaptations are also aesthetic objects in their own right, it is only as inherently

³Thomas Cartelli (1999) *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 15.

⁴Michael Neill, ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: Othello, The Moor of Venice*, ed. by Michael Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 1-194 (p. 42).

double- or multilaminated works that they can be theorized as adaptations.⁵

However, this aspect of an adaptation is not, according to Barthes, unique to adaptations; it is present in all texts, and therefore surely cannot be the identifying mark of an adaptation. Does there not need to be a sign of a conscious engagement with one or a very limited number of predecessors? The predecessor(s) may have been created centuries earlier, as is the case with the adaptations that I analyse in my thesis, or merely minutes earlier, but some time will have elapsed, and it is the relationship between the two that is the focus of interest.

Inevitably, this will bring up the issue of where the adaptation diverges from its predecessor and where it does not, both aesthetically and in its content. As Hutcheon points out in the above quotation, such an interest seems inescapable if one is to look at an adaptation ‘as an adaptation’. Thomas Leitch appears to make a bid to escape when, in his book on film adaptations, he writes that he will ‘not focus on the question earlier adaptation theorists routinely pursue as soon as they have disavowed it: what it means for a movie to be faithful to its literary source’. However, then Leitch sets out what he will do: ‘The subject of fidelity will often arise in my discussions of adaptations of the Gospels, or Jane Austen’s novels or the adventures of Sherlock Holmes. But I treat fidelity as a problem variously conceived and defined by the filmmakers at hand, not as an unquestioned desideratum of all adaptations.’⁶ But is not his approach, then, very much like that of the other theorists he has just described?

⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 6. She is quoting from Roland Barthes’s ‘From Work to Text’ in the collection of essays by Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 155-64 (p. 160).

⁶ Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and its Discontents: From ‘Gone with the Wind’ to ‘The Passion of the Christ’* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins Press, 2007), p. 20.

Julie Sanders suggests that it is more helpful, rather than using such ‘loaded phrases [as] acts of fidelity and betrayal’ to adopt Steven Connor’s idea of ‘fidelity-in-betrayal’.⁷ Connor uses this term to describe what he calls:

The practice of fictionally rewriting well-known or culturally central texts [which] can take different forms and have different effects, but a feature that allows it, at least provisionally, to be distinguished from other forms of cultural mimicry is that it consists of a particularised and conscientious attachment to a single textual precedent, such that its departure from its original must be measured in terms of its dependence upon it.⁸

Here, again, is the recognition that we cannot escape from the process of comparison, with the interesting addition of the idea of being ‘conscientious’, which raises the question of conscientious over what – to our perceived duties to the original texts by in some way incorporating its spirit, for want of a better word, even while altering how this is expressed, to the needs of our new audience, or perhaps to the cause that we aim to further by taking on this culturally central text?

In a context in which ideas of fidelity have been used to dismiss adaptations as either failed or poor copies of their ‘original’, a certain anxiety about the term is understandable. In considering how the process of adaptation has been represented ‘as a subaltern discipline to translation’, Lawrence Raw writes that this ‘should be looked at in evolutionary terms’, having described how Hendrik Van Gorp ‘suggests that ever since Romantic hermeneutics emerged during the nineteenth century, the concept of adaptation has “gradually acquired more negative connotations”, when compared to translation. While translation

⁷ Julie Sanders, *Shakespeare and Music: Afterlives and Borrowings* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), pp. 10-11.

⁸ Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 167.

creates the “ideal image” of a source text, an adaptation potentially subverts that image.’⁹

This Romantic idea of translation has also now been refuted, for example by André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett, who point out how ‘translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text’. They go on to consider how:

All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society. Rewritings can introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping power of one culture upon another. But rewriting can also repress innovation, distort and contain, and in an age of ever increasing manipulation of all kinds, the study of the manipulation processes of literature as exemplified by translation can help us towards a greater awareness of the world in which we live.¹⁰

Certainly, Bassnett and Lefevere’s words prove apt when it comes to analysing my selection of rewritings of *Othello*, as will be apparent in this thesis.

The term ‘original’ can also not go undisturbed in a post-structuralist climate of intertextuality, where any claim to an authentic originality is soon revealed to be a mirage. In the case of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, any such pretence can immediately be dismissed since the tragedy is a quite conscious adaptation of an earlier prose work by Giovanni Battista Giraldi (also known as Cinthio or

⁹ Lawrence Raw, ‘Introduction: Identifying Common Ground’, in *Translation, Adaptation and Transformation*, ed. by Lawrence Raw (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 1-20 (pp. 1-2). He is quoting Hendrik Van Gorp, ‘Translation and Comparable Transfer Operations’, trans. by Katheryn Bonnau-Bradbeer, in *Übersetzung, Translation, Traduction: An International Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, ed. by Harald Kittel and others (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), I, pp. 62-68 (p. 66).

¹⁰ Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, ‘General Editors’ Preface’, in André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and The Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. vii-viii (p. vii).

Cinzio) from a collection of stories entitled *Hecatommithi*, published in Venice in 1565, which is itself modelled on Boccaccio's *Decameron*.¹¹ One of the adaptors I analyse – Ken Mitchell – highlights how both he and Shakespeare are simply rewriters of an earlier text when he offers a brief alphabetical list of acknowledgements for his play *Cruel Tears*, with Cinthio named before Shakespeare, and the Canadian country music performer Bria Sklar named after. In a further recognition of how this tragic tale is filtered through an evolving historical context, Mitchell uses the archaic spelling of 'Shakespear'. Implicit also in this list, and connected to the levelling that is part and parcel of intertextuality, is that Shakespeare is given no exalted place as a unique genius. This abandonment of the cult of individuality that so dominated the Romantic period returns our age to a certain degree to the attitudes dominant in Shakespeare's period, where open borrowing from others was widespread and did not necessarily diminish the status of the new creation.

Things are further complicated when it comes to Shakespeare's plays by there being no known existing manuscripts written by his hand but only versions made often some years after their first performance that bear his name but how they have been collated is not clear. Currently our only possible insights into these manuscripts are from comments by such contemporaries as Ben Jonson, who wrote that:

The players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare, that in his writing, (whatsoever he penned) he never blotted out a line. My answer hath been, would he had blotted out a thousand. Which they thought a malevolent speech.

Although Jonson hastily goes on to stress his overall admiration, and in doing so employs almost the very same words that the fork-tongued ensign character of

¹¹ A copy of this tale is reproduced in Appendix 3 of William Shakespeare, *Othello*, 3rd Arden Shakespeare edition, ed. by E. A. J. Honigmann (London: Methuen, 2001), pp. 368-87 (pp. 370-86).

Iago uses in describing Othello: ‘He was (indeed) honest, and of an open and free nature’.¹²

When it comes to *Othello*, there is the 1622 Quarto version and the 1623 Folio version, and subsequent editions have conflated the two while in some circumstances removing key plot turns and characters entirely, as I describe later in this Introduction. The version that I use and quote from throughout this thesis is E. A. J. Honigmann’s for Arden Shakespeare’s third edition of *Othello*, which mainly follows the Folio edition but also draws on the Quarto, and offers extensive footnotes to explain the reasoning for such decisions.¹³

Even the extent to which *Othello*, or any of Shakespeare’s plays, can be categorically described as his creation and his alone has caused considerable debate, as Warren Chernaik explores. He quotes De Grazia and Stallybrass speculating that the placing of Shakespeare’s name on the title page of a play:

may reflect not his authorship, in any traditional sense, but rather his centrality to the company [the King’s Men] in multiple capacities (as playwright, actor, shareholder), not to mention his distinctive loyalty to the company for which he wrote exclusively.¹⁴

Therefore, when I use the term ‘original’ to refer to *Othello* in this thesis, it is only as a practical device to clarify that I am referring to Shakespeare’s play in

¹² ‘*Observations of Poetry and Eloquence*’, in *Ben Jonson*, ed. by Ian Donaldson (Oxford: Oxford Standard Authors, 1985), p. 539. This was originally published posthumously in 1641. Iago’s description of Othello is ‘The Moor is of a free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so’ (I. 3. 398-99).

¹³ Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by Honigmann.

¹⁴ Margerita de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, ‘The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 44 (1993), 255-83 (pp. 275-76), quoted by Warren Chernaik in ‘Shakespeare at Work: Four Kings and Two Shrews’, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 85 (2014), 21-39 (p. 36). In their article, De Grazia and Stallybrass earlier suggest that the name of Shakespeare worked as ‘an advertising device’, quoting ‘an epistle to the 1622 quarto of *Othello* [that] attests, “The Authors name is sufficient to vent his worke”’ (p. 275).

this Arden Shakespeare edition rather than to whatever adaptation I am currently discussing.¹⁵

I will also settle for using the term ‘rewriting’, rather than ‘adaptation’, because in the medium of theatre, or at least that area of theatre involving a pre-written play script, any production is always an adaptation as it involves translation from the written text to a performance. It is therefore potentially confusing to describe the texts that I analyse as ‘adaptations’; what they offer, rather, are radical changes to the written text of their predecessor – Shakespeare’s *Othello* – and may, of course, themselves be realised in diverse ways in performance.

Commandeering Cinthio’s Bald, Little Tale: Shakespeare’s Rewriting

Before analysing how Shakespeare’s *Othello* has been rewritten, I wanted to understand how Shakespeare created a play that has offered such a rich canvas through its problematising of identity. The sense of the play as suffused in a perplexing darkness stems right from the opening scene when Desdemona’s father Brabantio is rudely awakened in confusion in the middle of the night, cannot see the identity of the men who are shouting up to his balcony, or even work out how many different voices he is hearing. Iago shouts up to him: ‘I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs’ (I. 1. 114-15). So Desdemona and Othello form one beast, a mockery and inversion of the sacred merging of identity of a man and a woman that the act of marriage is intended to bestow mystically, and that Iago is determined to tear apart by bonding Othello to him.¹⁶

¹⁵ For a discussion of the differences between the Quarto and Folio texts, see E. A. J. Honigmann, *The Texts of ‘Othello’ and Shakespearian Revision* (London: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁶ ‘Therefore, a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh’, *The Holy Bible and Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1959), Genesis 2. 24.

Brabantio identifies the voice as belonging to a villain – a conclusion that it will take the rest of the characters the entire play to reach – but it is none the less a misidentification as he believes he is hearing Desdemona’s disappointed suitor Roderigo, who is also present and has been taunting him too:

BRABANTIO Thou art a villain!

IAGO You are a senator!

BRABANTIO This thou shalt answer. I know thee, Roderigo!

(I. 1. 116-18)

As the tragedy unfolds, we see how the characters’ identities are in a constant process of re-creation, in large part formed by the regard – in the dual sense of seeing and esteem – of the other characters.

Michael Neill writes how: ‘In *Othello* the real imaginative focus is always the hidden marriage-bed, an inalienable private location, shielded, until the very last, from every gaze.’¹⁷ Such was then the impact of this final scene, with its ghastly eroticism, that Neill describes how many nineteenth-century productions resorted to having their Othellos ‘screen the murder from the audience by closing the curtains upon the bed’, but that this only served to raise ‘to a sometimes unbearable intensity the audience’s scandalized fascination with the now-invisible scene’.¹⁸ An additional effect of Shakespeare choosing to construct his plot around non-private spaces is to emphasise a sense of lives lived in and produced through the gaze of society. While we may not be allowed even a glimpse of Othello’s and Desdemona’s bed until the very end, the intimate details of their courtship are none the less turned over to public consumption right from the beginning, when they must describe the course of their love to the senate (I. 3).

The first time we see Othello and Desdemona actually alone together is not until an astonishing three-quarters of the way through the tragedy (IV. 2) when Othello’s trust in Desdemona has been corrupted by Iago’s lies. Othello specifically seeks a private interview with Desdemona and speaks as though she

¹⁷ Michael Neill, ‘Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 40 (1989), 383-412 (p. 396).

¹⁸ Neill, ‘Unproper Beds’, p. 385.

is a prostitute and her servant Emilia – Iago’s wife – a pimp or ‘a bawd’ (IV. 2. 20). A legitimate domestic meeting between a husband and wife is transformed by Othello into an extended role play of an illicit business meeting where he takes on the identity of a customer and gives his wife that of a whore, as he demands of Emilia ‘Cough, or cry hem, if anybody come. / Your mystery, your mystery: Nay, dispatch!’ (IV. 2. 29-30).

Once alone with Desdemona, Othello laments: ‘Was this fair paper, this most goodly book / Made to write “whore” upon?’ (IV. 2. 72-73). But it is not only Desdemona but the other characters also appear to offer up a blank surface on which to write. Like a bizarre party game where they walk about with post-its stuck to their foreheads, with their identities foisted upon them, they ask bemused questions of each other and desperately plead for the most favorable interpretation of their actions, because they do not see what those who read them see, until a new post-it with a new word, often snatched from the forehead of another of the characters, is stuck onto them.

The label ‘fool’ is one of those that particularly sails around: there is the ‘fool’ Roderigo (I. 3. 382) or Cassio who speaks ‘parrot’ when he is in his cups (II. 3. 275) or the ‘fine fool’ Bianca (IV.1.149), or Desdemona who ‘turned to folly’ (V. 2. 130) or the ‘gull’ and ‘dolt’ Othello (V. 2. 159). And then there is the one who is actually named in the *dramatis personae* as a fool, or a ‘clown’. Appropriately enough, in the brief stage time he has, the word play that is traditional for such a character as him turns quickly to problematising identity:

CASSIO Dost thou hear, mine honest friend?

CLOWN No, I hear not your honest friend, I hear you. (III. 1. 21-22)

‘Honest’ – yet another label that is ever passing from one to another character.

Iago seeks to be in control of this game, while Othello – who has escaped the loss of identity of slavery to build the fragile, temporary, glorious edifice on which he now stands – cannot bear the game at all. He has to stop it, to have certainty, even if that is the conviction that the wife he thought was a saint has become the polar opposite: a whore.

As Terry Eagleton writes, Othello is so intent on having ‘the “ocular proof” of his wife’s supposed adultery, but the irony of this naïve trust in brute

fact is that perception is itself a blank text, requiring interpretation before it means anything at all'.¹⁹ Unfortunately for Othello, Iago is, as Benjamin V. Beier describes him, 'Shakespeare's most potent sophist' with the full armory of classical rhetoric at his disposal in order to persuade others to take his own interpretation as read.²⁰ Othello demands of Iago:

Make me to see't, or at least so prove it
That the probation bear no hinge nor loop
To hang a doubt on, or woe upon thy life! (III. 3. 368-69)

But the play's world is made up of hinges and loops and it is only by killing Desdemona that Othello takes her out of this eternally morphing present and puts her in the past tense, stills her. Realising too late how badly he has misread her, Othello makes an heroic attempt to have himself parsed in as sympathetic light as possible, as he takes the floor to offer another self-defining speech that bookends with the one he made at the beginning of the action to the senate, and that Neill describes as amounting 'to his own funeral oration'²¹. As T. S. Eliot describes, he turns himself 'into a pathetic figure, by adopting an aesthetic rather than moral attitude, dramatising himself against his environment. He takes in the spectator, but the human motive is primarily to take in himself.'²² Of course, key to taking in himself *is* to take in those who watch him, because his sense of self is created in their reading of him. It is apt, therefore, that after Othello has murdered Desdemona, he parries Lodovico's urgent and practical demand of 'Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?' by a philosophical reply: 'That's he that was Othello? Here I am' (5. 2. 281). Aware that neither his, nor their reading, of

¹⁹ Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 65.

²⁰ Benjamin V. Beier, 'The Art of Persuasion and Shakespeare's Two Iagos', *Studies in Philology*, 3 (2014), 34-65 (p. 46). Joel B. Altman also explores at length the importance of rhetoric in *The Improbability of Othello: Rhetorical Anthropology and Shakespearean Selfhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

²¹ Neill, 'Unproper Beds', p. 383.

²² T. S. Eliot, 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), pp. 126-40 (pp. 130-31). The essay was first published in 1927.

him/self will ever again be as Othello the noble general, his body is now simply a hollow place-marker for where Othello once stood.

If the leitmotif of *Hamlet* is 'To be or not to be', *Othello*'s could be 'To be read and re-read, and re-read'. Whereas *Hamlet* has been noted for the revolutionary psychological depth of its characters, *Othello* flaunts its constantly shifting surfaces, its characters as decentred texts ephemerally created.

Key to achieving this are the decisions that Shakespeare made when transforming Cinthio's story into his play, and how he drew in this process, as is the case with all his works, on myriad theatrical traditions, rather than purely Aristotelian tragedy. Beyond, and working with, the Herculean efforts that Shakespeare's character of Iago makes to create identity crises amongst a small group of Venetians a long way from home, the particular decisions Shakespeare made in intertwining these forms builds crisis and unstable identities, including Iago's own, into the very structure of the play.

Allardyce Nicoll writes how, 'with a single exception, [Shakespeare] has followed the novelist Cinthio with meticulous attention. The exception, because of this, assumes particular significance.' This is that Othello and Desdemona marry in secret: 'With apparent deliberation [Shakespeare] makes Othello and Desdemona responsible for deception, thus bringing them into association with the arch-deceiver [Iago]'. This leads Brabantio to warn: 'Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee' (I. 3. 293-94).²³ Therefore, Shakespeare seems explicitly to put in central place the tenuousness of reading a situation, that what one takes for reality, for example that one's chaste daughter is safely and obediently at home, is an illusion.

However, it is not entirely accurate to describe Shakespeare as otherwise following Cinthio with 'meticulous attention', and it these further alterations that Shakespeare makes that are central to the impact of his play, as I will explore.

One of these changes is in what Shakespeare does with the ensign character. In Cinthio's tale the motivation for the ensign to destroy Il Muro is frustrated lust for Desdemona, as she is called, whereas Iago's stated motive is that, despite being passed over for promotion in favour of the high-born Cassio,

²³ Allardyce Nicoll, *Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 144. First published in 1952.

he is still expected dutifully to serve his master – both Othello and by extension the state of Venice – until he is finally cast away, ‘cashiered’ (I. 1. 48) when he is too old to be of any more use. To add further insult to injury, he believes this same master, and also Cassio, might have slept with his wife.

While the ensign is never able to possess Desdemona sexually, Cinthio has him take part with Il Muro in the intimacy of her murder. This is done with a bag of sand, before pulling down part of the ceiling to make it look like an accident. Shakespeare’s changing the manner of Desdemona’s death to Othello’s smothering her with a pillow as she lies on their wedding sheets was obviously partly ‘dictated by the exigencies of staging’, as Honigmann observes.²⁴ But Shakespeare’s decision to dispense with collapsing ceilings and being whacked with a bag of sand also removes a potentially ridiculous episode that could undermine the pathos of Desdemona’s murder. Whereas in Greek tragedy, such an obscene crime would be kept out of sight of the audience and merely reported (‘obscene’ meaning literally ‘off stage’), in *Othello* the murder is showed viscerally on stage but every effort is made to keep it dignified, and indeed as one of the few private scenes between these spouses.

Having the ensign figure Iago take part in Desdemona’s destruction might have had a certain appropriateness if we regard him and Othello at this point in the action forming a two-headed monster intent on vengeance. As Carol Thomas Neely writes, many critics, including Kenneth Burke, Arthur Kirsch, Stephen Greenblatt, Stanley Cavell, Edward Snow, and Richard Wheeler, see Othello and Iago as ‘closely identified with each other’ precisely in an ‘anxiety regarding

²⁴ Appendix 3, in Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by Honigmann, p.386. Honigmann also regards these practical concerns as the reason for the ensign no longer having the three-year-old daughter who plays a crucial, unwitting part in allowing him to steal the handkerchief in Cinthio’s tale. It is interesting to speculate also on how Iago presented as a family man perhaps might have impeded his isolated, devilish persona in Shakespeare’s plot.

women, sexuality and marriage'. Therefore, a fitting climax might have involved the pair of them sharing the murder of Desdemona.²⁵

When it comes to the relationship between Desdemona and Othello, Shakespeare makes two major alterations. Firstly, the wide disparity in their ages is not present at all in Cinthio's tale, and, secondly, Cinthio makes little of a Moor marrying a white woman (he is described as 'hot by nature' and as a 'Barbarian'), while Shakespeare's explorations of the explosive implications of this become central to his play.

Later in the Introduction, I will consider the effect of Shakespeare deciding to give Iago a socio-economic motive for destroying Othello, and also his choosing to introduce the wide age difference between husband and wife. But, first, I want to look at the issue that has commanded throughout the centuries the most interest in *Othello*: his ambiguous, dark identity.

In order to create this exotic stranger, Shakespeare had a range of travellers' tales at his disposal, but seems to have drawn most on Johannes Leo Africanus' *A Geographical Historie of Africa*, who was no distant observer but described as a Moor himself.²⁶ But what is a Moor? The conflicting associations surrounding this word add greatly to the ambiguities of the text of *Othello* overall. G. K. Hunter writes that:

²⁵ Carol Thomas Neely, 'Women and Men in Othello', in *Othello: Modern Critical Interpretations*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), pp. 79-104 (p. 81). An earlier version of this appeared in *Shakespeare Studies*

²⁶ Johannes Leo Africanus, *A Geographical Historie of Africa, written in Arabicke and Italian by Johannes Leo Africanus, a More, born in Grenada and Brought up in Barbarie*, trans. by John Pory (London: George Bishop, 1600). Extracts of it are reproduced in *Race in Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion*, compiled and ed. by Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 153-58. For a recent discussion of this source see Philip C. Kolin, 'Blackness Made Visible: A Survey of Othello in Criticism, on Stage, and on Screen', in *Othello: New Critical Essays*, ed. by Philip C. Kolin (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1-88 (particularly p. 15), and James R. Andreas, Sr, 'The Crime of Cush: Othello's Judaic Ancestry', pp. 169-88 (pp. 172-74), in the same anthology.

The vocabulary at [Renaissance travellers'] disposal frustrated any attempt at scientific discrimination. The world was seen largely, in terms of vocabulary, as a network of religious names. The word 'Moor' had no clear racial status. The first meaning in the O.E.D. (with examples up to 1629) is 'Mahomedan'.²⁷

Emily C. Bartels suggests that the label was vaguer than that: 'Moors, the most renowned of African subjects, came in a choice of colors (black or tawny), religions (Christian, Muslim, Pagan) and ethnicity (African, Arabian, even Spanish).'²⁸ This would appear to be backed up by Shakespeare's Othello, since this protagonist is apparently a Christian convert and yet still has the label 'Moor'. When it comes to his ethnicity, he has aspects of both an Arabian and a Sub-Saharan identity, the latter reinforced through those early references by Brabantio and Roderigo respectively to a 'sooty bosom' (I. 2. 70) and 'the thicklips' (I. 1. 65), which have allowed him to be performed in the full gamut of black to very tawny, the various political effects of which I will discuss in this thesis.

However Othello is perceived, Daniel Vitkus emphasises that central to this is how his identity is formed *in opposition* to another set of terms, rather than as him having a stable, essential core. Othello is not:

identified with a specific, historically accurate racial category; rather, he is a hybrid who might be associated, in the minds of Shakespeare's audience, with a whole set of related terms – 'Moor' 'Turk' 'Ottomite' 'Saracen' 'Mahometan, 'Egyptian' 'Judean' 'Indian' – all constructed and positioned in opposition to Christian faith and virtue'.²⁹

²⁷ G. K. Hunter, *Othello and Colour Prejudice* (Annual Shakespeare Lecture of the British Academy) (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 146-47.

²⁸ Emily C. Bartels, 'Othello and Africa: Postcolonialism Reconsidered', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 54 (1997), 45-64 (p. 49).

²⁹ Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 90.

One apparent influence on Shakespeare that fed into his creation of Othello's identity is the mystery play. Critics have speculated that as a young boy Shakespeare would have been part of audiences for these annual performances before they were banned by a Church that was unhappy to lose control over how key Biblical episodes were interpreted. It is believed the plays were called 'mystery' because this meant 'profession', and these plays were inventively created and performed by particular craft guilds. (I gave an example of the word used in this way above, when Othello has Emilia's 'mystery' as that of a brothel keeper.) Irvin Leigh Matus makes a compelling, brief case for Shakespeare having seen the Coventry mystery plays until they were discontinued in 1579, based on similarities in language between surviving scripts and Shakespeare's *Richard III*.³⁰ In relation to *Othello*, Hunter describes how:

The habit of representing evil men as black-faced or negroid had [...] established itself in a pictorial tradition that persists from the Middle Ages through and beyond the sixteenth century. This appears especially in works showing the tormentors of Christ, in scenes of the Flagellation and Mocking, though the tormentors of other saints are liable to have the same external characteristics to show their evil natures.³¹

Figure 1 is one of the examples Hunter provides. It is striking how at least one of the black tormentors appears to have white hands, whereas the others do not, in a bizarre mixture of actual black men and a form of theatrical blackface. Hunter writes that several authorities believe 'the pictorial tradition was associated with theatrical usage', and imagines that Shakespeare's earliest experience of theatre as a child would have involved seeing actors with their faces painted black, playing similar roles in mystery plays, and how such terrifying images would have profoundly affected him, with the influence of it shown in the portrayal of *Othello*. He describes how: 'The surviving accounts of the Coventry cycle (which

³⁰ Irvin Leigh Matus, 'An Early Reference to the Coventry Mystery Plays in Shakespeare?', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 40 (1989), 196-97.

³¹ Hunter, p. 142.

some think Shakespeare may have seen [...] retain the distinction between “white (or saved) souls” and “black (or damned) souls”.³²

Certainly, the tragedy is saturated with – appears to be built upon – the Biblical oppositions of good and evil, light and darkness, heaven and hell, angels and devils, which are absent from the original tale by Cinthio. Before Othello even appears, purely for his skin colour he is described by Iago to Desdemona’s father Brabantio as ‘the devil’ (I. 1. 86) who will contaminate Brabantio’s family line. At the end of the play, in Emilia’s perceptions, there is now a confluence between the static outward sign of devilment – Othello’s black skin – and his hellish act of killing Desdemona: ‘O, the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil! (V. 2. 128-29). This binary opposition between a devilish Othello and an angelic Desdemona would have been further apparent to a Shakespearean audience by the convention of female characters being acted by boys in whiteface, as explored by Dympna Callaghan.³³

However, when Iago arrives on the scene and Emilia pieces together the role he has played in Desdemona’s destruction, she and the others present see a new diabolic presence in the room, and this one has a white skin. Othello, in anguish, cries ‘Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil, / Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?’ (V. 2. 298-99).

The critic Thomas Rymer, writing less than a century after *Othello* was written, is dismissive of Shakespeare’s play, partly on the grounds that its choice of hero, as well as its dramatic action, violate what he considered standards of dignity and propriety essential for tragedy. To Rymer, *Othello* is a “Bloody Farce”, “fraught [...] with improbabilities”.³⁶ Rymer’s hostile view of

³² Hunter, p. 144.

³³ Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 88.

³⁶ Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy* (London, 1693), pp. 92, 146.

Shakespeare's play remained influential until at least the nineteenth century.



Figure 1: *The Tormenting of Christ* (John Rylands Library, Lat. MS. No.24, reproduced by Hunter, plate xxii).

Indeed, the first burlesque that I analyse in Chapter 1, the 1813 *Othello-Travestie*, ends with, as Neill describes it, ‘a doggerel paraphrase of Rymer’.³⁴ Moving into the twentieth century, Paula Vogel’s 1993 *Desdemona* has the subtitle *A Play about a Handkerchief*, suggesting a playful reference to Rymer’s dismissal of Shakespeare’s play on the grounds of the key role the handkerchief plays, writing: ‘It entered into our Poets head, to make a Tragedy of this *Trifle*.’³⁵

Rymer’s unsympathetic remarks on the play call attention to two aspects of *Othello* that have remained controversial: its generic instability and its treatment of racial difference and miscegenation. An overt or implicit racism has often been a characteristic of *Othello* criticism since Rymer.³⁶ G. K. Hunter in *Othello and Colour Prejudice* (1967) is the first critic to argue that Shakespeare’s play interrogates rather than reinforces ‘the unspoken assumptions and careless prejudices by which we conduct most of our lives’. Later critics who examine the role of racial stereotyping in the play, often from a postcolonial perspective, include Karen Newman, Jyotsna Singh, Ania Loomba, and Michael Neill.³⁷

³⁴ Neill, ‘Introduction’, p. 42.

³⁵ Rymer, p. 145. This comment about a handkerchief by Rymer also reveals how one needs to remember that he was writing from a different time period than Shakespeare’s own, however much closer than ours. Karen Newman in *Essaying Shakespeare*, describes the significance of this flimsy piece of fabric ‘in *cinquecento* Venice [where] possession of a lady’s handkerchief was considered proof of adultery and led to stringent punishments’ (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 55. This is something of which Rymer was presumably unaware.

³⁶ On racist assumptions in such critics as Bradley and Leavis, and in M. R. Ridley’s introduction to the Arden 2 edition of *Othello*, see Martin Orkin, ‘*Othello* and the “Plain Face” of Racism’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38 (1987), 166-88.

³⁷ Hunter, *Othello and Colour Prejudice*, p. 53. See Karen Newman, ‘“And Wash the Ethiop White”: Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*’, in *Shakespeare Reproduced*, ed. by Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O’Connor (London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 143-62; Jyotsna Singh, ‘*Othello*’s Identity, Postcolonial Theory, and Contemporary African Rewritings of *Othello*, in *Women, ‘Race’, and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 187-99; Ania

Rymer associates Othello as 'Black-amoor' with the devil, writing that the character can only escape being seen as overtly evil by the sheer force of his rhetoric: 'Hearing *Othello* talk [to the senate] ... was sufficient to make the Black-amoor White, and reconcile all, tho' there had been a Cloven-foot into the bargain'.³⁸ However, written into Rymer's sentence is an understanding that these categories of white angels and black devils are not essential but subject to being overturned. Moors cannot be labelled neatly as devils but have a morphing identity, not entirely pinned down conceptually, as I explored earlier.

Rymer conflates metaphorical associations of blackness and whiteness with cultural assumptions of racial superiority, asking scornfully if we are expected to believe that Venice would 'set a Negro to be their General, or Trust a *Moor* to defend them against the *Turk*?'³⁹ Like the play itself, he shuttles between the two terms of 'Moor' and 'Negro', treating them as equivalent. To Rymer, that a Moor, a figure to be treated with 'hatred and aversion', should be appointed to a high office, is in itself 'unnatural and improper':

With us a Black-a-moor might rise to be a Trumpeter; but *Shakespear* would not have him less than a Lieutenant-General. With us a *Moor* might marry some little drab or Small-coal Wench; *Shake-spear* would provide him the Daughter and Heir of some great Lord, or Privy-Councillor. And all the Town should reckon it a very suitable match.⁴⁰

Another influence on *Othello* seems clearly to have been the English morality plays. Also known as interludes, these largely escaped the condemnation of the

Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 40-64; and Neill, 'Unproper Beds', pp. 383-412.

³⁸ Rymer, p. 90.

³⁹ Rymer, p. 91

⁴⁰ Rymer, p. 91-2. Cf. Neill, 'Unproper Beds', pp. 4-4-5, on Rymer's insistence on 'the impropriety of choosing a hero whose racially defined inferiority must render him incapable of the lofty world of tragedy'.

Church by keeping to the safer territory of allegory, rather than the mystery plays' dramatic interpretation of specific events in the New or Old Testament. Hardin Craig describes this form succinctly as 'an allegorical play of perfectly general significance of which mankind was the hero and his salvation the plot'.⁴¹ The most archetypal surviving morality play is the late fifteenth-century *The Somonyng of Everyman*, and Eliaz Schwartz identifies an uncanny fit between *Othello* and morality plays in general, and that morality play in particular. He writes how the play moves on two different levels, the 'natural' and this other 'supernatural or quasi-theological' level.⁴²

Othello becomes for us a representative man, an Everyman. His love, though tainted like every man's with self-love, becomes a means of self-transcendence, a poetic equivalent of faith. Desdemona becomes a kind of divinity, Iago a diabolic force, and Othello succumbing to Iago is his damnation.⁴³

Therefore, a Jacobean playwright has been audacious enough to take this ambiguous hybrid of dark, threatening powers at the edge of Christendom and place him in the central position of representing mankind. This 'extravagant and wheeling stranger' with 'extravagant' still having its original meaning in this period of 'to wander outside' (from the medieval Latin *extra* and *vagary*), has wandered *inside* and become us all.⁴⁴ Such is the extraordinary ambiguity of Othello's character that he is helped along further in taking this role of Everyman by appearing at moments as embodying the straightforward Englishman at sea in a crowd of 'super-subtle Venetians' (I. 3. 357).

⁴¹ Hardin Craig, 'Morality Plays and Elizabethan Drama', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 1 (1950), 64-72 (p. 68).

⁴² Eliaz Schwartz, 'Stylistic "Impurity" and the Meaning of *Othello*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 10 (1970), 297-313 (p. 297).

⁴³ Schwartz, p. 299.

⁴⁴ *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Word Origins*, ed. by John Ayto (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), pp. 214-15.

Othello as morality play is therefore in tension with *Othello* as tragedy, driving the plot towards Othello not being destroyed but saved, and until the last moments this is tantalisingly possible as he wavers in his resolve to murder Desdemona. This act that brings about his own damnation is all the more devastating and disorienting as it tears against his identity as Everyman, the one who finds redemption.

What this apparent borrowing from the form of the morality play also does is disrupt the neat binary form of the play, because the black-faced protagonist is not permanently in the position of devil versus Desdemona's angel, but oscillates between this position – this identity – and that of Everyman in a three-way structure. (Indeed, even that third person in the triangle, Desdemona, does not of course remain as a stable angel; in Scene 4, seen through Othello's eyes she, too, is a 'devil' – IV. 1. 239.)

Looking more closely at Iago in the context of the morality play, we can then begin to trace how Shakespeare has created from Cinthio's ensign a character with which he can explore social conflict. The figure whom Iago has most widely been recognised as resembling is Vice, the crafty servant of the seven deadly sins who tempts Everyman. In a recent study, Joel B. Altman has even gone so far as to suggest that, in a meta-theatrical gesture, Iago himself sees the resemblance: 'Iago not only reveals his Vice origins, but takes special pleasure in behaving like a Vice.'⁴⁵ J. E. Tiddy traces the complex ancestry of this diabolic presence on stage from the 'black-faced fools of the folk-play' via the Devil of the Miracle plays and from this into the figure of Vice.⁴⁶ Therefore, not only does Shakespeare create striking parallels between Iago and Othello in his own plotting but I would argue that both can be seen as springing from the same black-faced theatrical ancestor. Robert Withington (writing in 1932) describes these folk-plays as having been orally transmitted for centuries, originating with: 'the pre-Christian rites of the Teutonic peoples [and performed] in isolated communities by people who never got far away from their own villages [and] it is

⁴⁵ Joel B. Altman, *The Improbability of Othello: Rhetorical Anthropology and Shakespearean Selfhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 159.

⁴⁶ R. J. E. Tiddy, *The Mummer's Play* (Oxford, 1923), p. 96, quoted in Richard Withington, 'The Ancestry of the "Vice"', *Speculum*, 7 (1932), 525-99 (p. 525).

in such communities that they are found today.’⁴⁷ Drawing on Tiddy’s research, he constructs a speculative diagram of how this Vice might have evolved (see Figure 2).

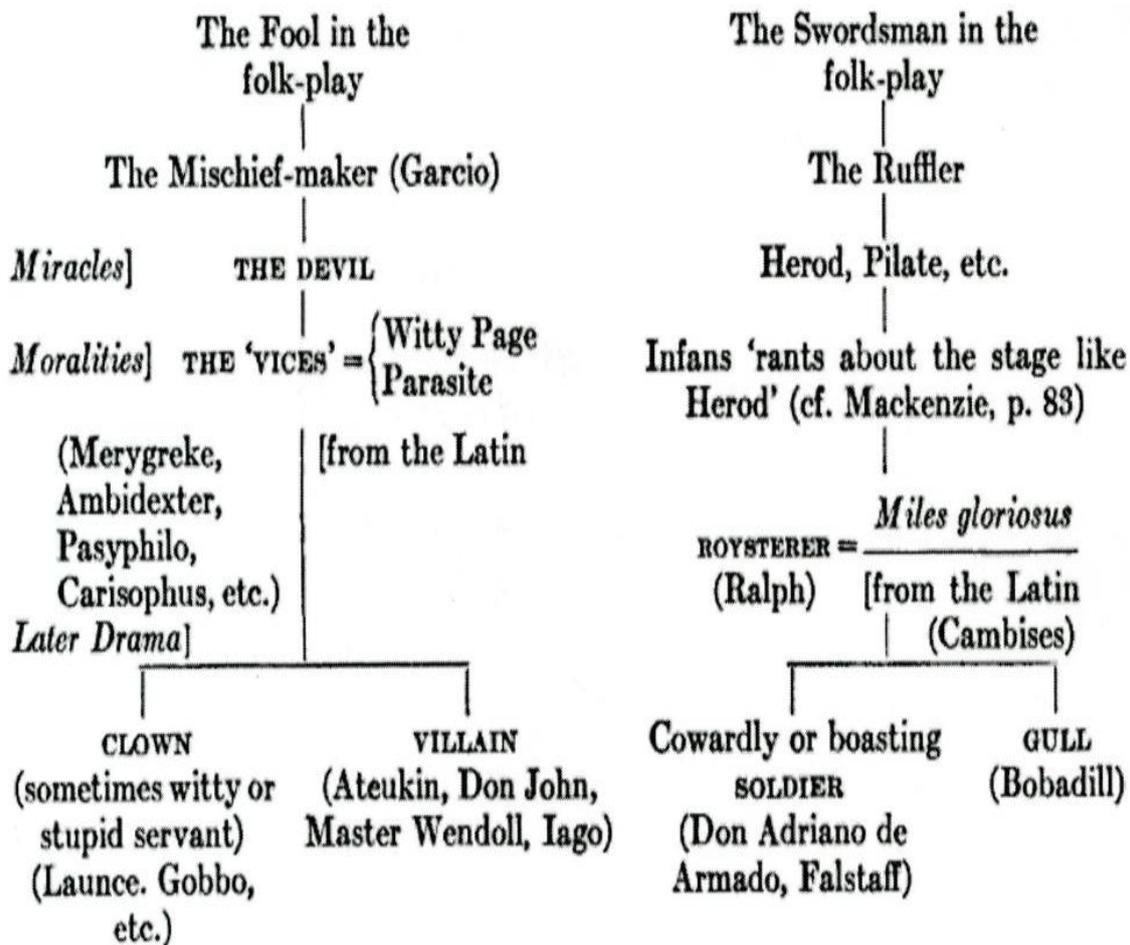


Figure 2: The Development of the ‘Fool’ and the ‘Swordsman’ in English drama (Withington, p. 528).

Considering how Shakespeare chose to alter Iago’s motivation for hating the Moor from Cinthio’s one of frustrated lust for Desdemona to that of belonging to a frustrated class, it is revealing that the etymology of ‘villain’, which is a label that Iago is unambiguously given in the *Dramatis Personae*, comes from ‘villein’ meaning a servant bound to serve a lord – a ‘serf’, with the medieval Latin root of

⁴⁷ Withington, pp. 525-26.

Villanus (from *villa*, 'farm').⁴⁸ Perhaps this prejudice against those in service springs from the powerful fearing the marginalised, who have less of a vested interest in the *status quo* so would be more happy to upset the apple cart, wreak vengeance, destroy all that feels good if you are on top. The necessary intimacy between a servant and their master also places the servant in the position of seeing behind any façade their master might adopt to hide an ugly truth, which again can only serve to make the servant an object of suspicion as a potential villain / villain of the peace.

Connected to this is Iago's resemblance to that disturbing late Medieval figure of the wise fool, that Michel Foucault sees as reflecting society's 'great disquiet' with itself:

The character of the Madman, the Fool or the Simpleton assumes more and more importance. He is no longer simply a ridiculous and familiar silhouette in the wings: he stands centre stage as the guardian of truth.⁴⁹

That a wise fool, a holy innocent, a madmen and a wicked Vice can all arguably be seen as sharing certain characteristics and theatrical histories reveal just how hard these identities are to pin down. When it comes to Iago, standing amidst all the foolish fools in *Othello*, he is the wily confuser of language, the revealer of disorder in apparent order, the seer who sees through and mocks society's folly, as the servant up close and personal to their master sees through his pretensions. Is there not a sense that along with Iago's deliberate deceptions, there is a certain clarity in his appraisal of a situation? He sees lust burning between Othello, Desdemona and Cassio, which they are all determined to interpret with the language of pure love or gentlemanly admiration. Following Desdemona's and Othello's declarations of marital devotion in the senate, Iago reassures the downcast spurned suitor Roderigo that, 'when she is sated with his body she will

⁴⁸ *Dictionary of Word Origins*, ed. by Linda and Roger Flavell (London: Kyle Cathie, 2000), pp. 258-59.

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard (Oxford: Routledge, 2005). First published in 1961.

find the error of her choice' (I. 3. 351-52), and when Cassio speaks adoringly of Desdemona's qualities, Iago once again offers an altogether different interpretation:

CASSIO She's a most exquisite lady.

IAGO And I'll warrant her full of game.

To which Cassio determinedly presses on with 'Indeed she's a most fresh and delicate character'. However, Iago is insistent: 'What an eye she has! methinks it sounds a parley to provocation' (II. 3. 18-22). Certainly, later rewritings of *Othello*, as I will discuss, have seized on this bawdy interpretation of Desdemona.

Another aspect of the fool that has a relevance for *Othello* is that he can breach the border of the stage, and exist beyond it to run riot in the real-life courts of Medieval and Renaissance kings. He is a treader between fiction and reality. Even when on the stage, these kinds of figures retain some of that freedom. As Robert Weimann writes, in reference to Shakespeare's period, both the Vice and the clown characters 'in their different ways and degrees of delivery, [...] retained, even from within textually prescribed roles, a partially sovereign stage presence'.⁵⁰ Therefore, fittingly, Iago is the character in *Othello* who appears to be most aware of the audience watching the action, who draws them – draws us – into the very crafting of his cruel plan, if one accepts that soliloquies were originally intended to be addressed directly to the audience, rather than as some inner dialogue with the self:

Cassio's a proper man: let me see now,
To get his place, and to plume up my will
In double knavery. How? How? let's see:
After some time to abuse Othello's ear
That he is too familiar with his wife. (I. 3. 391-95)

⁵⁰ Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Power of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 77.

In Act 2, Iago is back again, alone on the stage and with another question for us: ‘And what’s he then that says I play the villain?’ (2. 3. 241-43). Perhaps an ideal production would have him skipping off stage here, flinging an arm around an audience member, shattering the barrier of the stage.

As Chernaik observes, just such an alienated character as Iago had already made his appearance in an earlier play of Shakespeare’s: *Richard III*. Chernaik writes how both Laurence Olivier and Ian McKellen, when they perform the role of Richard on film, address his soliloquies and asides ‘directly to the cinema audience, turning the viewers into accomplices’. The effect of this is that ‘Richard’s cosy, intimate relationship with the theatrical audience complicates any moral judgment and keeps us from siding entirely with the victims (other than the two princes): he is too clever, prompting laughter and grudging admiration’.⁵¹

It is this coldly detached watching of the behaviour of others, perhaps almost as if they were microbes under a microscope, that led W. H. Auden in his essay ‘The Joker in the Pack’ to equate Iago with that modern kind of human involved in ‘the autonomous pursuit of scientific knowledge through experiment’, where ‘the investigator must discard all his feelings, hopes and fears as a human person and reduce himself to a disembodied observer of events upon which he passes no value judgement’.⁵²

Stephen Greenblatt writes how, in contrast to the *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello* ‘once again deals with outsiders and insiders [but] now the great hater is one of the insiders’.⁵³ Toni Morrison goes even further in asserting Iago’s insider status when, in talking about her rewriting of *Othello*, *Desdemona*, she describes how she had to remove Iago because in her work she seeks ‘to take away what I call the “white gaze”, whose I, whose language, is controlling this’.⁵⁴ But how

⁵¹ Warren Chernaik, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 53.

⁵² W. H. Auden, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 120.

⁵³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 70.

⁵⁴ In ‘Reading the Writing: A Conversation Between Toni Morrison and Claudia Brodsky’, *Literal* (2014) <http://www.literalmagazine.com/english_post/reading-the-writing-a-conversation-between-tony-morrison-and-claudia-brodsky-fragment/>

this Vice-like figure is placed economically puts him very far from being an insider, just as Othello is not unambiguously an outsider in his relationship to the state.⁵⁵ Even Iago's rank in the army, which technically makes him a 'subaltern', has a whiff of exclusion about it in contemporary thought, following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's frequent use of the term in a colonial and post-colonial context to describe those who are outside what she calls the circuit of hegemony.⁵⁶

Iago's disgruntlement comes precisely from that lack of power that marks him out as someone who may well be white but is none the less excluded, a mere subaltern. And Shakespeare having his character direct his vitriol particularly at Othello is an exploration of yet another aspect of the frustration of the economically marginalised, where impotent rage can be redirected from the masters towards the easier target of other marginalised figures. Othello succeeds in representing simultaneously the powerful and the excluded.

As can be seen from Figure 2, Withington also creates a diagram for another key character in the folk-play, 'the swordsman', and conjectures that one of his descendants is Shakespeare's Falstaff, via the boastful soldier or *Miles gloriosus* created by Plautus in his Roman classical comedy of the same name. While Withington does not recognise this character as related to Othello, in Iago's poisoned mind's eye, his general has more than a passing resemblance: in a parallel to *Miles gloriosus*, as Honigmann observes, 'Iago arranges that Othello, his dupe, overhears what he wants him to overhear, to mislead him'.⁵⁷ Rymer also considered that Othello's 'Love and his Jealousie are no part of a Souldiers

[accessed 12 July 2014]. *Desdemona*, Morrison's rewriting of *Othello*, premiered in Vienna in 2011.

⁵⁵ As Greenblatt describes Othello in his earlier *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, he in fact simultaneously represents 'the institution and the alien, the conqueror and the infidel' (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 234. First published in 1980.

⁵⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988), pp. 271-316. In using this term, she is drawing on Antonio Gramsci's earlier adoption of it to describe the Italian working classes.

⁵⁷ Honigmann, 'Introduction', in Shakespeare, *Othello*, 2001, (pp. 1-111) p. 77.

Character, unless for Comedy’, and implies he is cowardly as he ‘sets Jago [Iago] to the fighting part, to kill Cassio’, while he kills helpless Desdemona.⁵⁸ Other mirroring of *Miles gloriosus* can be seen in how Iago describes Othello to Desdemona’s would-be lover Roderigo as having a ‘bombast circumstance / Horribly stuffed with epithets of war’ (I. 1. 12-13), and in his promises to get rid of this love rival of Roderigo’s.

Given that for Rymer the mere improbability of a high-born Venetian woman marrying a black-a-moor was enough in itself to turn the intended tragedy into ‘a Bloody Farce’, one might have expected Shakespeare carefully to avoid any parallels with comic plots.⁵⁹

That he allows his tragedy to flirt so close to comedy is even more apparent when we consider yet another related theatrical form from which it seems hard to deny he has borrowed: the Venetian commedia dell’arte, where itinerant troupes of actors improvised comedies around stock characters. Robert Henke, drawing on references from the 1550s, describes how ‘the heart of arte playing in this early period consisted of the Venetian theme of the servant or zanni interacting with the master or Magnifico / Pantalone figure’, with one of the key features of the zanni being his tendency ‘to lament his condition in soliloquy’.⁶⁰ Apart from this wily servant, and the mean Magnifico, whose dramatic functions, as Northrop Frye writes, ‘often included keeping his daughter away from suitors’,⁶¹ another popular figure was the braggart soldier Capitano. These comic archetypes strongly resemble the characters of Brabantio, Iago and Othello.

This is not only significant in how it disrupts the tragic tone of *Othello*: it has a political implication as well. Iago’s insistence that he is motivated by a form of protest at his exploited status associates him with a long line of theatrical

⁵⁸ Rymer, p. 93.

⁵⁹ Rymer, p. 146.

⁶⁰ Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia Dell’Arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 74-75.

⁶¹ Northrop Frye, ‘*The Tempest*’, in *Northrop Frye’s Writings on Shakespeare and The Renaissance*, ed. by Troni Grande and Garry Sherbert (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp. 608-22 (p. 611).

ancestors who similarly refuse to accept their humble position. Peter Jordan writes, in relation to the *commedia dell'arte* in general, how 'the set-piece comic business [...] abound with examples of status reversal, in which the downtrodden are suddenly empowered and revel in it unashamedly'.⁶² More often than not, the empowered is the zanni.

Just as Othello's shuttling between the Devil and Everyman gives him a striking lack of stable essence, so does his sliding between disparate comic characters: for Iago, Othello's poetry may be dismissed first and last as mere Capitanoesque boasting, but are not Othello and Desdemona presented rather at the beginning of the play as the *innamorati* – or young lovers – having to marry in secret and facing Pantalone's wrath?

Here the effect of Shakespeare deciding to introduce the age disparity between Othello and Desdemona, not present in Cinthio's tale, is now apparent: by Act III, Othello comes to the crushing conclusion that he has been miscast as an *innamorato*, and that the post-it on his forehead actually reads 'Pantalone', as another aspect of that character is the foolish old man is deceived by a beautiful young woman:

Or for I am declined
Into the vale of years – yet that's not much –
She's gone, I am abused, and my relief
Must be to loathe her. (III. 3. 269-72)

And, of course, it is Othello, not Brabantio, who is locked into the master / cunning slave relationship. Now another border between characters begins to disintegrate as Othello and Brabantio merge.

That the Capitano, for example, has obvious similarities to those boastful soldiers traced by Withington indicates the presence of common ancestors and cross-fertilisation between these early dramatic forms. Louis B. Wright explores how this extended beyond the writing of plays to the sharing of acting techniques,

⁶² Peter Jordan, *The Venetian Origins of the Commedia dell'Arte* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 50.

as he charts the career of Shakespeare's most famous clown actor, Will Kemp, at home and abroad in Italy.⁶³

Shakespeare did play widely with these stock characters in creating his other plays, including his tragedies. Pantalone, for example, can be seen in semi-hidden forms in not only the characters of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* and Prospero in *The Tempest* (as Frye points out, 'Prospero' was even another name for Pantalone or the Magnifico⁶⁴), but is surely also present in the make-up of Polonius, Ophelia's father in the tragedy of *Hamlet*. As Jennifer Wallace writes: 'Repeatedly in Shakespeare's plays, characters lose the serious context in which their actions may be judged and find their tragic dignity subverted by a comic perspective.'⁶⁵ However, for Shakespeare to allow one of his tragic heroes to come so close to these stock characters takes such cross-overs between comedy and tragedy to – I would argue – a new level.

The game that Shakespeare plays appears to be to allow *Othello* to teeter on the border with comedy before snatching it back: being careful, as I described earlier, to remove certain potentially comic elements in Cinthio's story, but then adding elements such as the age difference between the lovers that allow Othello to collapse into the role of the foolish old husband doomed to become a cuckold, a favourite target of ridicule, in theatre and society at large, as Honigmann points out.⁶⁶

Michael D. Bristol discusses how such forms of transgressive liaisons were not only mocked on stage but punished in reality. He suggests the plotting of *Othello* eerily mirrors a specific real-life ritualised response to unions that go against what is perceived as the natural order, called the charivari:

The abusive language, the noisy clamour under Brabantio's window and the menace of violence of the opening scenes of *Othello* link the

⁶³ Louis B. Wright, 'Will Kemp and the Commedia dell'Arte', *Modern Language Notes*, 41 (1926), 516-20.

⁶⁴ Frye, p. 611.

⁶⁵ Jennifer Wallace, *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 55.

⁶⁶ Honigmann, 'Introduction', p. 76.

improvisation of Iago with the codes of a carnivalesque disturbance or charivari. [...] In this scenario, Iago assumes the function of a popular festive ringleader whose task is the unmasking of a transgressive marriage. [...] The play is organised around the abjection and violent punishment of its central figures.⁶⁷

The irony of the charivari is that, despite its anarchic air, its role here is to regulate society, to punish those who transgress its unwritten rules by daring to ignore, in their choice of partners, the barriers of race or age.

Neill, citing the critic Susan Snyder, points out that the beginning of *Othello* follows the conventions of romantic comedy, as Othello and Desdemona still believe their unconventional love can survive. 'The last act', he writes, 'returns to comic convention in the form of cruel travesty [since] the tragedy ends as it began with a bedding'.⁶⁸ Neely offers a slightly different reading when she describes this final scene as making *Othello* a 'cankered comedy':

The comic resolution of male with female, idealism with realism, love with sex, the individual with society is aborted. The play concludes, not with symmetrical pairings off and a movement towards marriage beds, but with one triangle: Emilia, Desdemona and Othello dead on wedding sheets.⁶⁹

Reading Neely, one can just about discern, shadowing the grisly events, another denouement, which could be one of gentle, formal comedy rather than anarchic humour or bleak tragedy, where Othello and Desdemona, Iago and Emilia, and Cassio and Bianca form three ecstatic couples, while Brabantio looks on, smiling

⁶⁷ Michael, D. Bristol, 'Charivari and the Comedy of Abjection in *Othello*', in, *Othello: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Lena Cowen Orlin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 78-102 (p. 78).

⁶⁸ Neill, 'Unproper Beds', p. 404. He is quoting Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 70-74.

⁶⁹ Neely, pp. 103-4.

benignly. But, then, to try to imagine this is to experience only the sensation of outlandish hope.⁷⁰

In this section, I have explored how the sheer number of labyrinthine levels through which the characters in *Othello* move, as Shakespeare draws on different theatrical and ritualised forms in rewriting Cinthio's tale, gives them a scintillating, coreless energy, a refusal to be domesticated – made still and familiar – in language. As Jacques Derrida writes:

Monsters cannot be announced [a better translation might be 'announced']. One cannot say: 'here are our monsters', without immediately turning the monsters into pets.⁷¹

In *Othello*, Shakespeare keeps his characters as monsters, evading any enclosures, with their existence as timeless archetypes lying uneasily with their belonging in the social context of a particular time and place. In the next section, I will introduce in detail how such a refusal to be domesticated has made *Othello* so appealing to future rewriters, many addressing those very same conflicts that Neely outlines. This will set the scene for the plays that I analyse in the rest of my thesis, including my own.

Commandeering Shakespeare's Play: Why Rewrite *Othello*?

The first rewriting of any of Shakespeare's plays happened shortly after the theatres were re-opened in 1660 during the Restoration, following a period of enforced closure, owing to the fatal combination of Puritan disapproval and the mayhem of the Civil War. Written as they were by men working close to the

⁷⁰ Neely, p. 81.

⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and other Small Seismisms', in *The States of Theory*, ed. by David Carroll (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 63-94 (p. 80).

centre of English power, their broad aim was to remove anything that might have unfortunate connotations in these troubled times where a king had only just been restored to the throne. One prominent writer was William D'Avenant who also claimed to be Shakespeare's illegitimate son.⁷² But leading the charge was Nahum Tate, who was so prolific that this practice of rewriting Shakespeare became disparagingly known as 'Tatification'. Tate's stated aim was to make Shakespeare fit for purpose; in the infamous case of his *King Lear*, this involved giving the tragedy a happy ending by letting Lear have back his throne.⁷³ Sandra Clark summarises his technique: 'Where Shakespeare's play is open, ambiguous, multi-faceted, Tate's operates to restrict meanings and render the rough places plain.'⁷⁴

There is a wide spectrum in these Restoration versions from wholesale rewriting, such as John Dryden's take on *Antony and Cleopatra* called *All For Love*, to considerable revising, such as *The Jew of Venice* by George Granville Baron Lansdowne, to very minor adjustment, with *Othello* receiving this last treatment from Dryden in 1670.⁷⁵ In this work, Dryden has remained faithful to Shakespeare's text, drawing both on the Quarto and Folio versions, but then has made explicit the comic undertones of the play by alterations to the *Dramatis Personae*, where the ubiquitous Commedia theme of an old man being cuckolded is highlighted by describing Roderigo as 'a foolish Gentleman, that follows the

⁷² Sandra Clark provides a detailed account of this period in her *Shakespeare Made Fit: Restoration Adaptations of Shakespeare* (London: Orion, 1997).

⁷³ Montague Summers revived the fortunes of these plays in 1922 when he published his anthology of *The Tempest, The Mock-Tempest and King Lear*. He writes how 'most critics have passed the severest judgments' but that any collection of plays that has managed to hold their popularity from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century deserves to be given attention, and that indeed Cibber's *Richard III* was still acted by the turn of the twentieth century 'and may still, perhaps, be seen in provincial theatres'. See *Shakespeare Adaptations: 'The Tempest', 'The Mock-Tempest' and 'King Lear'*, ed. by Montague Summers (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966), p. cvii. First published in 1922.

⁷⁴ Clark, p. lxviii.

⁷⁵ John Dryden, *Othello, the Moor of Venice: A Tragedy, as It Hath Been Divers Times Acted at the Globe and at the Black-Friers, and Now at the Theater Royal, by His Majesties Servants, Written by William Shakespear* (London: Richard Bentley, 1695).

Moor in hopes to Cuckold him' and Brabantio is described by that term popular to Commedia of a 'Magnifico'.

Perhaps the reason that the text of *Othello* was left largely as it was is that it has a superficial neatness and concision with no complicated subplots. When it came to any political dangers, the tragedy is only domestic in its reach in the sense that its protagonist is not a ruler, nor even a noble. The deaths of Othello, Desdemona and Emilia – and indeed Roderigo – risk no tremors to the state, not even wider bloodshed between warring aristocratic families; the curtain over the bed upon which they are heaped is simply drawn, and it is back to business as usual. Nevertheless, in its later history, as I will describe, *Othello* is to have a key political use when it comes to the excluded forcing their way in from the margins, and will perform a unique role in a whole line of emancipatory triumphs.

Other plays were written since this period that clearly show *Othello*'s influence, most notably Thomas Southerne's 1695 adaptation for the stage of Aphra Behn's 1688 novel *Oroonoko*, called *Oroonoko: A Tragedy*, and Edward Young's 1721 *The Revenge*. *Othello* also continued to be revised, largely with the aim of removing anything considered immoral or too sensational, with these versions being used in stage performances, in preference to Shakespeare's original text, throughout the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century. Neill charts how this even went as far as removing any reference to Othello's and Desdemona's marriage bed:

Late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editors sought to restrict the curiosity that the final scene gratifies, and to obscure its most threatening meanings, by progressively excising from the text every explicit reference to the bed.⁷⁶

While eighteenth-century versions did still have Bianca and the clown, such as in the 1705 Theatre Royal acting edition,⁷⁷ or even the much later 1760 acting

⁷⁶ Neill, 'Unproper Beds', p. 385.

⁷⁷ *Othello, Theatre Royal Acting Edition* (London: R. Wellington, 1705). It is not stated which Theatre Royal. Advertised at the back of this edition was *A Burlesque of Ovid's Epistles* (price 2s) and *Love-Letters, written by a Nun to a Cavalier, with the Cavalier's*

edition for the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden,⁷⁸ by the middle of the eighteenth century these two characters had often been removed in their entirety, as shown in Bell's version, which was widely used not only in Britain but in the United States.⁷⁹ An eighteenth-century actor Francis Gentleman added a note to Bell's version, writing that 'Shakespeare, in a strange flight of fancy, crammed a clown in to this tragedy, who has been with strict justice banished; as has been another excrescence, Cassio's mistress, Bianca'.⁸⁰ While the removal of Bianca was done on the grounds of decency, its effect on the play was to make Othello's jealousy seem even less justified and more the product of an unbalanced mind, as the whole scene where he witnesses Cassio giving his mistress the handkerchief has been excised. As regards the clown, the comment about its being crammed in is significant; there is perhaps no room in this tragedy for an actual clown, overstuffed as it already is with real fools.

These omissions continued throughout the nineteenth century, for example in the widely used Kemble promptbook version of *Othello*,⁸¹ and seen in the examples of playbills reproduced as Figures 3 and 4, where Kemble's practice of

Answers (price 1s, 6d), suggesting that Shakespeare's plays were read by the same audience that enjoyed burlesques and other rather more salacious publications.

⁷⁸ *Othello, As it Now Acted at The Theatre Royal in Covent-Garden* (London: T. Witford, 1760).

⁷⁹ *Othello: A Tragedy, by William Shakespeare, as performed at the Theatre-Royal Drury-Lane* (London: John Bell, 1777). A one-page introduction expresses satisfaction with the edited result: 'In this edition, though the unities are still intruded upon, the play may be esteemed regular, we had almost say perfect' (p. 1). In 2007, the Colonial Williamsburg Project in Virginia combined Bell's version with a 1755 prompt book to produce a production of *Othello* as close as possible to how it would have been performed in eighteenth-century America. Information from a correspondence with the play's director Todd Norris and from:

<http://www.history.org/foundation/press_release/displayPressRelease.cfm?pressReleaseId=700> [accessed 3 February 2013].

⁸⁰ Quoted by George Branam in his *Eighteenth-Century Adaptations of Shakespearean Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), p. 49.

⁸¹ *Shakespeare's Othello, The Moor of Venice: A Tragedy*, revised by J. P. Kemble (London: McMillan, undated).

naming the gentlemen of Venice who remain unnamed in Shakespeare's original is also evident. The first playbill advertises Charles Kean's famed performance of *Othello*, and the second, in an example of the cross-fertilisation between Britain and the United States in the nineteenth-century, has the 'American Tragedian' Mr Roberts. These also illustrate how a Shakespeare tragedy would form only part of an evening that would also include burlesque and farce, as I will be exploring further in Chapter 1.

One of the most radical cuts is a version of *Othello* prepared by Benjamin Charles Jones in 1846. It was for any actor wishing to give a public reading, rather than a performance, which was a popular practice in Victorian Britain, when the stage could be considered to have a certain vulgarity (as I will return to in Chapter 1). As well as all the usual excisions, it not only omits the first two scenes to avoid all the salaciousness of Iago's and Roderigo's conversation, but does away with Desdemona's and Iago's playful teasing while they wait for Othello at the seaport. Justifying his cuts, both on the grounds of morality and the need for compression, Jones writes in his notice at the back of the book that:

It being my opinion that there is still a great deal of objectionable matter retained in the acting editions of Shakespeare's plays, and however that it may be tolerated on the stage, it does not follow that any gentleman ought, and I am sure a lady would not, read such words to an audience in a hall or a room.⁸²

By the twentieth century, we can see a move to return to a more authentic version of the *Othello* script. A 1902 edition of the play by the celebrated actor-manager Johnston Forbes-Robertson follows more faithfully the first Folio edition of 1623, and brings back Bianca, although he still feels obliged to make some cuts, particularly of the explicit language. In his foreword, he writes how what he has

⁸² Benjamin Charles Jones, *Shakspear's Tragedy of Othello, Compressed and Arranged for Public Reading* (London: C. & J. Adlard, 1846).

The new Farce of **LE BAS BLEU** is unavoidably postponed for a few days. Due notice will be given of its production.

Mr C. KEAN'S RE-ENGAGEMENT.

In consequence of the unprecedented Success which continues to attend

Mr CHARLES KEAN'S PERFORMANCES,

And at the request of numerous families who cannot attend the Theatre during the present week, it is respectfully announced that his Engagement will be

PROLONGED UNTIL THURSDAY EVENING, APRIL 7th,

Which will positively be his last Appearance in Edinburgh this Season.

THE FREE LIST MUST BE SUSPENDED, RENTERS AND MEMBERS OF THE PRESS EXCEPTED.

THIS PRESENT EVENING, TUESDAY, MARCH 29, 1836,

Will be performed, for the Third Time this Season, SHAKSPEARE'S Tragedy of

OTHELLO.

Othello by Mr CHARLES KEAN.

The Duke by Mr POWER—Brabantio by Mr G. COOKE—Ludovico by Mr G. ELLIS—Montano by Mr FAUCIT,
Iago by Mr MONTAGUE STANLEY—Cassio by Mr MURRAY—Roderigo by Mr HIELD,
Gratiano by Mr ROBERTS—Antonio by Mr FREDDIE—Messenger by Mr STEWART—Sailor by Mr C. PERCIVAL.

Desdemona by Mrs FISHER—Emilia by Mrs HIELD.

AT THE END OF THE TRAGEDY A FAVOURITE PAS SEUL BY MISS FAIRBROTHER.

After which, for the First Time this Season, the favourite Farce of

THE HAUNTED CHAMBER.

Will love by Mr MONTAGUE STANLEY—Jeremy by Mr LLOYD.
Rafiel by Mr FISHER—Landlord by Mr STEWART—Claudian by Mr G. ELLIS.

Negomba by Mrs FURNBULL.

Zephyrina by Miss NOVELLO, being her first Appearance in that Character, and in which she will introduce the favourite Ballad of
THE QUEEN OF THE GREENWOOD TREE.

Tickets and Places may be had at the Box-Office of the Theatre-Royal from Eleven till Four o'clock.

PRICES—BOXES, 3s.—PIT, 2s.—LOWER GALLERY, 1s.—UPPER GALLERY, 6d.

AND NO SECOND PRICE TO ANY PART OF THE HOUSE, OR ANY FURTHER REDUCTION OF PRICE WHATSOEVER.

The Performance to Begin at Eight o'clock precisely.

In consequence of the numbers of Persons who were last night disappointed in procuring seats to witness the Representation of the Tragedy of

MACBETH,

And from the great Applause which attended

Mr CHARLES KEAN'S PERFORMANCE OF THAT CHARACTER,

It will be repeated once more next week, of which due notice will be given.

The Public is respectfully informed that

Mrs HONEY,

Of the Theatre-Royal, Haymarket, will make her first Appearance here, on Monday, April 11th.

Mr CHARLES MATHEWS, Junior,

Is also engaged, and will speedily make his First Professional Appearance in this City.

To-morrow will be performed, for the Fifth Time this Season, SHAKSPEARE'S Tragedy of **HAMLET**—Hamlet by Mr C. KEAN.
On Wednesday will be repeated SHAKSPEARE'S Tragedy of **KING RICHARD THE THIRD**—Richard by Mr C. KEAN.

ON FRIDAY EVENING THE THEATRE-ROYAL WILL BE CLOSED.

On Saturday, the Comedy of **THE MERCHANT OF VENICE**—Shylock by Mr C. KEAN.

THORNTON & BRYDONE, PRINTERS.

Figure 3: A playbill of an 1836 production of Shakespeare's *Othello* at The Theatre Royal Edinburgh (Birmingham Shakespeare Collection, Playbills).

LYCEUM THEATRE
Licensed by the Lord Chamberlain.] ROYAL. [Lessee, Mr. C. DILLON, Westbourne Terrace.

UNDER THE MANAGEMENT OF MR. CHARLES DILLON

MISS HELEN FAUCHT
 Is Engaged for **SIX NIGHTS ONLY**, commencing
 On **THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 18th,**
 IN THE CHARACTER OF
LADY MACBETH,
 And will perform on Monday and Thursday in the
 Two Following Weeks.

Wednesday, (Being Ash-Wednesday) There will be No Performance.

ON MONDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 1858,
Will be Repeated SHAKESPEARE'S Tragedy of

OTHELLO

Othello, **Mr. ROBERTS**—(The American Tragedian)
 Iago, (First Time in London) **Mr. CHARLES DILLON**
 Duke of Venice, **Mr. HOLSTON**
 Ludovico, **Mr. G. BURT**
 Cassio, **Mr. J. G. SHORE**
 Roderigo, **Mr. S. CALHAEM**
 Julio, **Mr. FRANCIS**
 Antonio, **Mr. FITZHENRY**
 Desdemona, **Mr. SPHYNX**
 Emilia, **Mrs. CHARLES DILLON**
 Brabantio, **Mr. BARRETT**
 Gratiano, **Mr. POYNTER**
 Montano, **Mr. J. ROBERTSON**
 Messenger, **Mr. CLIFFORD**
 Marco, **Mr. BAILEY**
 Paulo, **Mr. DEVON**
 Mrs. WESTON

To Conclude with the Burlesque of LALLA ROOKEE

On TUESDAY, February 16th,
(In consequence of the immense approbation with which it was received on Thursday last)
 The Performances will commence with O'KEEFE'S Comedy of

WILD OATS!

Sir George Thunder, **Mr. HOLSTON**
 Harry Thunder, **Mr. J. G. SHORE**
 Rover, (First Time in London) **Mr. CHARLES DILLON**
 John Dory, **Mr. BARRETT**
 Banks, **Mr. G. H. BURT**
 Ephraim Smooth, **Farmer Gammon, Mr. POYNTER**
 Sim, **Mr. J. L. TOOLE**
 Trap, **Mr. BAILEY**
 Landlord, **Mr. SPHYNX**
 First Ruffian, **Mr. FRANCIS**
 Jane, **Lady Amarenth, Mrs. BUCKINGHAM WHITE**
 Amelia, **Mrs. ALFRED MELLON—late Miss WOOLGAR**
 Mrs. WESTON

After which, A Domestic Tale, by **WESTLAND MARSTON, Esq.**, entitled

A HARD STRUGGLE

THE NEW SCENERY BY MR. RAMSDEN.

Reuben Holt, **Mr. Trevor**, (a Rich Farmer) **Mr. BARRETT**
 Fergus Graham, (Mr. Trevor's Ward) **Mr. CHARLES DILLON**
 Postman, **Mr. SIMPSON**, (a Young Surgeon) **Mr. J. G. SHORE**
 Lillian Trevor, **Walters**, Messrs. WATSON & DEVON
 Amy, (Betrothed to Reuben) **Mrs. CHARLES DILLON**
 Mrs. Tapps, (Mr. Trevor's Orphan Grandchild) **Miss ANELIE CONQUEST**
 Susan, (Landlady of the "Old Swan") **Mrs. C. MELVILLE**
 Miss TURTLE
SCENERY: Death of Mr. Trevor's in the Country, & partly at the "Old Swan."

Figure 4: A playbill of an 1858 production of Shakespeare's *Othello* at The Lyceum Theatre (Birmingham Shakespeare Collection, Playbills).

omitted is: ‘For the most part to be of a character which might prove distasteful to a modern audience.’⁸³

It was also in the nineteenth century that Shakespeare’s *Othello* began to be radically rewritten in English for the stage in the form of burlesques, in both Europe and the United States, with the burlesquers using the popular nineteenth-century edited versions of *Othello* as the basis for their plays, with the clown and Bianca excised. However, now the inappropriate humour and the lewdness that these two characters were seen to represent respectively infiltrates the entire rewriting, despite their absence as characters. It is a selection of these that I will be analysing in Chapter 1 to consider how, as Michael Dobson puts it, ‘the sublime of Shakespeare’s Moor could be collapsed into the ridicule of blackface minstrelsy with troubling ease’.⁸⁴

The burlesques fall into a tradition of absurd humour that can be traced right back to the comedies of Aristophanes, such as of *The Knights*, written in 424 BC, with its early appreciation of the comic potential of the sausage, and onwards to the Theatre of the Absurd. As Aristotle wrote, ‘Tragic wonder’ requires events not just to happen ‘by accident’,⁸⁵ whereas in this particular brand of comedy life becomes one giant slip on a banana skin. In considering the potential of this form of humour, Alain Badiou writes:

I do not believe the main question of our time to be that of horror, suffering, destiny, or dereliction. We are saturated by these notions, and besides, their fragmentation into theater ideas is truly incessant. On all sides, we are surrounded by a choral and compassionate theater. Our question instead is that of affirmative courage, of local energy. To seize a point and hold it. Consequently, our question is

⁸³ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, arranged for the stage by J. Forbes-Robertson (London: The Nassau Press, 1902).

⁸⁴ Michael Dobson, ‘Review of *The Moor of Fleet Street*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 45 (1995), 364-65 (p. 365). There is a separate history of its being rewritten in prose, dating back at least as far as the all-male *Iago Display’d* (London: A. More [1731]).

⁸⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book IX, trans. by S. H. Butcher, available online at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1974/1974-h/1974-h.htm#link2H_4_0007> [accessed 15 March 2014].

less concerned with the conditions for a modern tragedy than with those of a modern comedy. Beckett – whose theater, when ‘completed’ correctly is truly hilarious – was well aware of this.⁸⁶

However, while twentieth-century absurdist plays can be read as a self-critical attempt to undermine white, European grand narratives, the nineteenth-century burlesques, in their specific treatment of Othello and their undermining of his romantic love for a white woman, seek to dismantle the narrative of the noble and tragically wronged black man. It is the white men who are writing these burlesques deflating not so much their own culture, but that of those who have been enslaved by them and who throughout the nineteenth-century demanded, and progressively gained, their freedom. As Othello had become the poster boy for nineteenth-century abolitionist discourses in both Britain and the United States, to debunk this particular hero became crucial.

Joshua Delpech-Ramey writes how the comedy Badiou is referring to is that of: ‘the buffoon, the clown, and the writer of doggerel. [...] the comedy that evokes the uncanny persistence of humanity as grace, cry and protesting laughter in the face of the absence of meaning, the deterioration of the body, and the silence of God.’⁸⁷ These burlesques equally strip their characters of the comfort of a cosmic destiny, replacing it with a series of ridiculous events where cause and effect are torn apart, where even death can be overturned. However, that ‘uncanny persistence of humanity’ only seems to emerge *in spite of* the desires of these burlesquers, as I analyse in Chapter 1, and its presence perhaps unacknowledged for the majority of those first audiences rolling about in the aisles. In reading the burlesques now, an uncomfortable gap opens up between intention and reception, where the aesthetic form encourages alienation and mockery, but our post-colonial sensibilities cause us to feel compassion for Othello’s suffering. If the aim of theatre is to disturb, then these do just that, at least for us now if not for the original intended market.

⁸⁶ Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 131.

⁸⁷ Joshua Delpech-Ramey, ‘Sublime Comedy: On the Inhuman Rights of Clowns’, *SubStance*, 122 (2010), 131-41 (p. 131).

In the burlesques, Delpech-Ramey's 'deteriorating bodies' are foregrounded by reminding us constantly of the characters' bodily fluids and digestive processes. Even the ethereal love token of the handkerchief is transformed into something covered in dirt or mucus, or lost during a visit to the toilet. That this materiality is the stuff of comedy, and lethal to tragedy, is also analysed by Henri Bergson in his seminal book on laughter:

No sooner does anxiety about the body manifest itself than the intrusion of a comic element is to be feared. On this account, the hero in a tragedy does not eat or drink or warm himself. He does not even sit down any more than can be helped.⁸⁸

There are, of course, hints of animality already in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Snyder points out how Iago's reassurances to Roderigo that Desdemona will soon tire of Othello are couched in 'persistent images of eating and disgorging', but it is significant that this imagery, belonging as it does to a form of comedy associated with 'the antiromantic servant or rustic whose imagination is bounded by the physical' is used by Iago and not Desdemona and Othello, as if he is determined to force a comic form onto events while they determinedly cling to their elevated and noble status.⁸⁹ That the rustic is inextricably linked with the comic for Shakespeare's audience would appear to be apparent in how, according to David Wiles, 'the word "clown" is ambiguous in Elizabethan usage, meaning both "countryman" and "principal comedian"'.⁹⁰

That tragedy has always traditionally concerned itself with those close to the centre of power, while comedy is reserved for the marginalised, to the rude mechanicals, has a kind of logic in lived experience. If you are powerful, you are

⁸⁸ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Rockville, MD: ARC Manor, 2008), p. 30. First published in French in 1899. First English translation published in 1911.

⁸⁹ Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 79.

⁹⁰ David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 12.

more likely to feel part of some great narrative, some tragic arc, that your fall is not simply arbitrary. It seems impossible that your life is not of interest to the gods. But the further you reach the margins, the less this is felt. The lack of power, of agency, the sense of playing a minor, dispensable part in a greater person's life, of servicing them, fits better with the comic model, since life does feel like one inconsequential moment followed by another that will end in some arbitrary fashion.

Not only has the content of comedy focused on those sectors of society that are condemned to leave little lasting trace of themselves, but this is echoed in the fate of early comedy itself. Aristotle writes that, 'The successive changes through which tragedy passed, and the authors of these changes, are well known, whereas comedy has no history, because it was at first not treated seriously'.⁹¹ There is a certain fittingness in an unserious form, used to depict the lives of those whose roles were not taken seriously, itself not being treated seriously.

Turning to more recent, post-1960 responses to *Othello*, which I look at in Chapter 2, it is useful to consider Judith Butler's definition of canonical texts as 'deliberately selected remnants of history that work to perpetuate and legitimize certain relations of power and certain understandings of normative identities'.⁹² The effect of this on those who find their identities unacknowledged or reflected negatively within such texts can be profound. Derek Walcott, writing in the 1970s, having had an education in the Caribbean dominated by the western canon, expresses the sense of alienation combined with longing with particular eloquence (although with a definitively patriarchal flavour that reminds us inadvertently of the double exclusion that can be felt by black women):

My first poems and plays expressed this yearning to be adopted, as the bastard longs for his father's household. I saw myself as legitimately prolonging the mighty line of Marlowe, of Milton, but my sense of inheritance was stronger because it came from estrangement. I would learn that every tribe hoards its culture as fiercely as its prejudices, that English literature, even in the theatre,

⁹¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book V.

⁹² Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 192.

was hallowed ground [...] that colonial literatures could grow to resemble it closely, but could never be considered its legitimate heir.⁹³

The need, therefore, to re-vision the canon, to find some way to master it, is apparent; not permitted our fantasy of identifying with that ‘mighty line’, we see, rather, our actual selves reflected in these texts as craven, worthless, a vessel only for others’ emotions or the butt of jokes – or worst of all invisible – and so now like a classic patient of Freud’s we must return to the site of what now feels like our abuse in an attempt to gain mastery over the abuser. And who is more canonical than William Shakespeare? And yet his works have largely ridden the storm to be reinvented as radical, seized upon as having an anarchic undercurrent made even more appealing by the exalted place he has held. One could qualify Butler’s definition by adding that it is not necessarily the canonical texts that ‘work to legitimize certain relations of power’, but rather these texts *have been made to work* in this manner, and still hold other liberating possibilities. As Ania Loomba writes about *Othello*, it manages to be ‘both a fantasy of interracial love and social tolerance, and a nightmare of racial hatred and male violence.’⁹⁴ The uneasy juxtaposition of these two offer rich possibilities to a post-colonial rewriter intent on deconstructing this text.

Even the very atmosphere in which Shakespeare created his plays can be seen as having parallels less with a stiff, white European enclave of privilege and more with the sometimes chaotic wildlands where the marginalised live. Natasha Distiller, for example, quotes the black South African Lewis Nkosi describing the affinity that he and many of his fellow writers in the townships of the 1950s felt with that milieu:

Ultimately, it was the cacophonous, swaggering world of Elizabethan England which gave us the closest parallel to our own mode of existence; the cloak and dagger stories of Shakespeare; the marvelous

⁹³ Derek Walcott, ‘What the Twilight says: An Overture’ in *Dream on Monkey Mountain’ and Other Plays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), pp. 1-40 (p. 31).

⁹⁴ Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 91.

gay and dangerous time of change in Great Britain came close to reflecting our own condition.⁹⁵

Therefore, Shakespeare's writings have become vital for re-examining and questioning how the past has been presented.

When one of the key founders of the negritude movement, Aimé Césaire, rewrote *Une Tempête (d'après 'La tempête' de Shakespeare: adaptation pour un théâtre nègre)* in 1968/9, to reveal Prospero as the brutal colonial master of the no-longer monstrous but now sensitive, exploited Caliban, he was actually not so much turning the original play upside down as excavating clues – sites of resistance – within Shakespeare's own text. 'You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to Curse' says Shakespeare's Caliban, in an eerie presentiment of post-colonial pain and rage.⁹⁶ A predecessor to this rewriting, showing an extraordinarily radical attitude for the period, can be seen in a 1878 play by the white French Middle Eastern scholar, Ernest Rénan, *Caliban*, where Caliban returns to Milan with the rest of the party, leads a revolution and usurps Prospero to be the new Duke of Milan.⁹⁷

Rewriters of *Othello*, in seeking to articulate unspoken, repressed discourses offered by this other text so clearly influenced by sixteenth-century colonising exploits, have largely abandoned the aesthetic trajectory set by the burlesquers. There is only one play in English, *An Othello* written by Charles Marowitz in 1972, that could be a direct descendent of the absurdist elements of the burlesques. The others may allow comedy to intrude, but this is largely the

⁹⁵ Lewis Nkosi, 'Home and Exile', quoted by Natasha Distiller, *South Africa, Shakespeare, and Post-Colonial Culture* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), p. 172. The quotation originally appeared in Kirsten Holst Petersen, 'The Moral Position' in *South African Resistance Culture* (Department of English, University of Copenhagen, 1998), pp. 10-24 (p. 21).

⁹⁶ Aimé Césaire, *Une Tempête (d'après 'La tempête' de Shakespeare: adaptation pour un théâtre nègre)* (Paris: Editions du Seuil [1969]), and William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 3rd Arden Shakespeare edition, ed. by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (London: Methuen, 1999), I. 2. 364-65.

⁹⁷ Ernest Rénan, *Caliban: A Philosophical Drama Containing 'The Tempest' of William Shakespeare*, trans. by Eleanor Grant Vickery (New York: The Shakespeare Press, 1896).

ordered comedy of empathy that does not seek to deny the ultimate tragedy of the play. Even Marowitz does not ultimately seek to do that.

One reason why this might be is that, whereas the burlesques were all written by white males, so post-1960 rewritings have been predominantly created by female and black playwrights or by those who have some other claim to marginalisation. Therefore, in content, they are almost in direct opposition to the nineteenth-century burlesques in their support of current emancipatory movements from the perspective of those who are oppressed. They use *Othello* to insist on the significance of the group that they belong to, and that for them to have been scorned or imprisoned in servitude was a grave injustice because their lives have as much value as that of their former oppressors. By placing a member of their group centre stage – which when it comes to female writers has involved skewing the tragedy so that Othello is pushed from this central position – they are part of a process of creating those same identity myths for their group that dominant white males created for themselves in the preceding centuries. The post-1960 writers therefore seek to accord their protagonists a tragic dignity that absurdist comedy seeks to disrupt.

Jyotsna Singh warns of the dangers, when analysing *Othello*, of speaking of ‘a shared victimization of blacks and women, thus conflating the particular histories of white women’s sexual oppression with the enslavement of black man’.⁹⁸ These post-1960 rewritings certainly expose the fault line between the two in their revisioning of a play that has at its core the murder of a white, wealthy woman by her black, formerly enslaved husband.

The process for both the nineteenth-century burlesques and the post-1960 tragedies involves foregrounding certain elements in *Othello* – either the tragic or the comic – and repressing others, since, as Rymer wrote, for Shakespeare, ‘a Tragedy in *Burlesk*, a merry Tragedy was no Monster, no absurdity’ and nowhere more than in *Othello* do we end up with such a hybrid monster.⁹⁹ But how are we

⁹⁸ Jyotsna Singh, ‘Identity, Postcolonial Theory and Contemporary African Rewriting of *Othello*’, in *Women, ‘Race’, and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 287-99 (p. 290).

⁹⁹ Rymer, p. 157.

to judge what is a tragedy? My explorations of this question have revealed why it is such an important aesthetic form for post-colonial rewriters of *Othello* to use.

For Rymer, as for other neoclassical critics, literary genres tended to be strictly defined, in aesthetic terms. In knocking Shakespeare he praises Ben Jonson since he at least had enough ‘Common sense to tell him that the Unity of Action was necessary [and] had stumbl’d (I know not how) on a *Chorus*’.¹⁰⁰ Philip Sidney, writing a few years before Shakespeare’s *Othello*, was similarly disappointed by the neglect of ‘Aristotle’s precept’ in plays of the period, considering this led to ‘mongrel tragi-comedy’.¹⁰¹

However, in more recent times, there has been a shift from such criteria to using the *content* of a work to define tragedy, as Eagleton demonstrates in his dazzlingly broad summary of tragic theory in *In Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*. Eagleton points out that the difficulty of all these theories is that, while they work for some tragedies, they force other texts, long regarded as tragedies, out in the cold because their content does not fit, or the theories are too vague to be much help at all. The hunt, therefore, goes on to find the ‘the Holy Grail of a faultless definition’.¹⁰²

As an example of a critic who focuses on content, in a recent article George Steiner writes how he prefers not to ‘work with any formulaic, legislative definition of “tragedy”, including Aristotelian Poetics’. Instead, he describes tragedy in purely non-aesthetic terms as that which is not contaminated by hope: ‘Absolute tragedy, whether in Euripides, Bacchae or Kafka’s parable of the Law

¹⁰⁰ Rymer, p. 161. Of course, a chorus was also a key part of Ancient Greek comedy, being even larger, as Ian Storey and Arlene Allan describe, with twenty-four members to tragedy’s twelve or fifteen, and a ‘greater participation in the action of the play’ (Ian C. Storey and Arlene Allan, *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), p. 180.

¹⁰¹ Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry (or The Defence of Poesy)*, ed. by R. W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 112. It was written around 1582 and first published posthumously in 1595.

¹⁰² Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Malden, MA: Wiley & Sons, 2009). See particularly Chapter 1 ‘A Theory in Ruins’, pp. 1-22. The quotation is from p. 5.

is immune to hope. [...]. The rest is very much in Dante's sense of *Commedia*, 'tragic-comedy', however bleak.'¹⁰³ For Steiner, one of these tragic-comedies is *Othello*. He writes: 'Repeatedly in Shakespeare [...] the fifth act borders on redemption, on a recuperative dawn after the tragic night.' He gives as an example that 'Cassio's regime will benefit Cyprus'.¹⁰⁴

Eagleton, writing from close to the other side of the political spectrum than that of Steiner, and drawing on Raymond Williams's views on Shakespearean tragedy in his *Modern Tragedy*, rejects the idea that such hope is fateful to tragedy, as tragedy can be 'affirmative'. It can represent 'a political hope and a sense of continuing collective life, a capacity for faith even at the darkest of historical moments, which transcends any mere individualist fixation on the protagonist'.¹⁰⁵

However, through considering the implications of rewriting *Othello*, I have come to the conclusion that it is possible to settle on a Holy Grail of tragedy, and it is one that does lead us right back to its aesthetic form as laid out by Aristotle. It is this form that forces tragedy on the material with which it works, and that is essential for understanding the post-1960 rewritings that I analyse. Many dramatic characters represent people who are neither purely evil nor purely good, and have terrible, non-accidental things happen to them for which they share a certain agency. But what makes the play that they appear in become a tragedy is when they are placed in the role of the protagonist and where there is sufficient unity of action for the audience to keep their focus on this protagonist, and where their fall is marked with due solemnity. This makes us aware that their destruction, which has to be absolute – there is no possibility of a return to the life we have watched them lead – must inevitably bring about the end of the action, and so destroy also that entire created world that we as the audience have been watching. Therefore, it becomes also the end of us in that spectator role, and that vastly increases its impact. The nuances of the protagonist's guilt or innocence, the justice or injustice of their downfall, can be debated; what cannot be disputed,

¹⁰³ George Steiner, "'Tragedy' Reconsidered", *New Literary History*, 35 (2004), 1-15 (pp. 2 and 4).

¹⁰⁴ Steiner, p. 7.

¹⁰⁵ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. 27.

because of how the tragedy is structured, is that their destruction matters, and therefore so does their existence.

As an example, we cannot read Shakespeare's *Othello* as the tragedy of Emilia, even though her death is not just a meaningless accident but the accumulation of a train of events for which she holds some responsibility, because the construction of the play assigns her to a minor role. As an audience we would be baffled if the curtain came down after Iago stabbed her. Our first reaction might even be to run our minds over the events of the play and reframe them to attempt to create a trajectory that places Emilia's final days to the fore. Nor is it even Desdemona's tragedy, however much her murder might excite our pity.¹⁰⁶ The play could not have stopped with that grisly scene; its entire momentum, created by its aesthetic structure, forces it onwards to Othello's death. Newman writes that:

Othello is, of course, the play's hero only within the terms of a white, elitist male ethos, and he suffers from the generic 'punishment' of tragedy, but he is nevertheless represented as heroic and tragic at a historical moment when the only role blacks played on stage was that of a villain of low status.¹⁰⁷

I would argue rather that there is no 'nevertheless': the punishment is all part of the package that makes Othello and his life significant.

¹⁰⁶ Tales abound of how audiences have been affected by Desdemona's death down the centuries. As an example, an anonymous review in *The Caledonian Mercury* on 6 January 1825 (unnumbered page) describes how an audience member, watching the celebrated Edmund Kean as Othello, 'started from his seat, and exclaimed in a tone no less impassioned than Othello himself [...] "Damn the villain, is he gaun to kill his ain wife!"'.

¹⁰⁷ Karen Newman, *Essaying Shakespeare* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) p. 58. There was, however, another play performed in the Jacobean period that did have a black character who was far from low-born, called *The Sultan and The Fair Greek*. I include a discussion of this play in Chapter 3.

Even as Shakespeare draws from miracle and morality play, commedia and charivari, he structures the play so that the tragedy's centrality may be threatened but is never eclipsed. In the final reckoning, Shakespeare even pulls off a cunning trick: the buffoonish archetypes that these other dramatic traditions evoke, and the overt insults that begin almost as soon as the action begins, with Iago's 'old black ram' (1. 1. 87) quip, add to the weight of Othello's fall, as Shakespeare's character fights to be taken seriously as a complex human and not a butt of jokes.

The desire by post-1960 writers to appropriate *Othello* – to insert their stories within the aesthetic framework of this tragedy – is because this bestows a significance upon their own protagonists. The characters are made tragic *by* the aesthetic form. In this endeavor, they have largely tamed Shakespeare's characters – tamed those monsters – so that the ridiculous or devilish in them is exorcised. Equally, the desire by nineteenth-century burlesquers to invade the aesthetics of *Othello*, and then subvert it by unravelling the plot in a mayhem of song, dance, boxing matches and wild absurdities, where, most key of all, Othello is cheated of his death, is done to rob a black protagonist's life of that significance and centrality that tragedy offers.

Eagleton's 'sense of continuing collective life, a capacity for faith even at the darkest of historical moments' that a redemptive ending can offer, and that for Steiner spoils the tragedy by its offer of hope, can, ironically, be the part of the action that in fact robs us of hope, if a play like *Othello* is seen through the lens of black oppression. Up to the moment of Othello's suicide, the aesthetic form of the play insists that this man's existence matters and, by association, the lives of other black people. For the action then to return abruptly to business as usual profoundly undermines that effect. Far more devastating than Othello's final lines, 'no way but this, / Killing myself to die upon a kiss' (5. 2. 356-57) are those of the noble Venetian Lodovico – with his manager's hat on and speaking while the warm corpses still leak blood – 'Gratiano, keep the house / And seize upon the fortunes of the Moor / For they succeed to you' (5. 2. 363-65). The outsider Othello's brief sojourn on the inside, as a respected citizen and defender of the Republic of Venice, is over.

When we think of continuing collective life, it provokes the question, 'Whose collective?' Nineteenth-century and post-colonial rewriters of *Othello*

have very different answers to this question. In the former, there is sufficient uniformity in the burlesques to describe the collective as a white world, in both Britain and the United States, insisting on its moral superiority in the face of abolitionist discourse that seeks to undermine that image; in doing this, Othello must be that black ram, contained in his comic animal identity. In the latter, extravagant strangers have wandered in from outside and got hold of Shakespeare's text to place their own collective, and its struggles, at the heart of the tragedy. They are extravagant in that their ethnicity or gender has historically pushed them to the margins, and they are strangers not only to those at the centre but also to themselves because, as they seize upon traces left of their group's past, they find themselves recreating their identity at an often breakneck pace.¹⁰⁸

Taking this PhD has transformed my practice in that I have had to articulate in language what before would have been vaguely understood influences on my playwriting. Like Theseus in the labyrinth, this thesis is my ball of string whereby I can trace my journey through the maze of Shakespeare's tragedy and the creative responses it has produced, in order to formulate and then contextualise my own responses. In Chapter 3, I focus on this practice, analysing my own rewritings: a contemporary tragedy called *The Turn*, and what I would call a tragi-burlesque set in an indeterminate time called *Ponte Delle Tette*, which form Chapters 4 and 5.

However, these are not the only rewritings that I have been involved in since starting my PhD. I am a writer for The Factory's constantly evolving version of Homer's *The Odyssey*, which three years later is still touring Britain; I co-wrote an exploration of the place of medieval morality in contemporary London, called *Abandon* and based on Dante's *Inferno*, which opened at the Bussey Building, Peckham, in September 2013, produced by Pure Fluke, the theatre company I co-founded; and in 2012, I was commissioned to write an adaptation of the experimental 1960s novel by James Kennaway, *Some Gorgeous Accident*, which has not yet made it to the stage because of on-going legal issues.

¹⁰⁸ The lines in Shakespeare to which I refer are Iago's descriptions of Othello as both 'an old black ram' and an 'extravagant and wheeling stranger' (I. 1. 87 and 134).

In all this work, I have used the insights that I have gained by researching the diverse responses to just this one play: *Othello*.

After reading O’Thomas’s comment that, ‘if we want students of adaptation studies to gain knowledge of the field, then it might be more pedagogically appropriate to begin to think about adopting a traditional art school approach – to teaching the theory *through* the practice’, I have come to realise how applying what I have discovered to my practice, in tandem with continuing my research, has indeed helped me reach a new level of theoretical understanding as well.¹⁰⁹ Before analysing my practice, I now turn, in Chapters 1 and 2, to looking in detail at this process of adaption in past rewritings of *Othello*. In this exploration, the relationship between tragedy and comedy and how it relates to constructions of identity will be a recurring theme, illuminating and illuminated by each play.

¹⁰⁹ Mark O’Thomas, ‘Adaptation and Creative Writing: Brokeback Mountain on the London Underground’, in *Redefining Adaptation Studies*, ed. by Dennis Cutchins, Laurence Raw and James M. Welsh (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2010), pp. 45-53 (p. 45).

Chapter 1 ‘Rich in Black fun’: Burlesquing *Othello*

Introduction

In London in 1859, at the height of the craze for Shakespearean burlesques, audiences watching *Romeo and Juliet Travestie* or *The Cup of Cold Poison* witnessed the curious spectacle of the young and tragically dead Brat Pack of Mercutio, Tybalt, Romeo, Juliet and Paris brought back to life by Queen Mab,¹¹⁰ and appear ‘sitting on five chairs, like nigger serenaders, with banjo, tambourine, bones’.¹¹¹ However, the jollity is interrupted by the ghost of Shakespeare dressed in white, rising through the trap door, holding up his finger in a menacing attitude. The characters stop their singing and dancing in alarm. Romeo is pushed forward, as ‘the hero’ (p. 38), to placate the silent bard. He does not do too well, but then the nurse succeeds, by pointing out to Shakespeare that he himself wrote a burlesque of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Shakespeare silently concedes the point and descends back beneath the floor. This representation of Shakespeare visualises what feels apparent in not only these irreverent burlesques, but in all adaptations of Shakespeare: that he is there in the subterranean level below the stage, a constant suppressed presence. His original script hovers beneath each re-writing, both excised and present.

¹¹⁰ Queen Mab is a rather bizarre, tiny creature, perfectly suited to the surreal aesthetics of the burlesque, whom Shakespeare’s Mercutio describes as driving her chariot, drawn by a ‘small grey-coated gnat’ (I. 4. 67), up into people’s noses to make them dream of their desires. Quoted from the third Arden Shakespeare edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. by René Weis (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

¹¹¹ Andrew Halliday, *Romeo and Juliet Travestie or The Cup of Cold Poison: A Burlesque* (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, 1859), pp. 38-39.

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the comic sub-terrain threatens to undermine the play's tragic import, while simultaneously increasing it, because it provokes our compassion for Othello's efforts to escape the cage of scorn. In burlesques of *Othello*, the tragic sub-terrain – and particularly the ballast of solemnity provided by nineteenth-century bombastic performances of *Othello* – buoys up the comedy, greatly adding to its potential for hilarity. However, a constant vigilance is needed in these burlesques to prevent the Othello character again subverting his comic status to become an object of compassion – a tragic figure – as I will explore in this chapter.

Shakespeare had only been dead a few decades when he was first burlesqued, with the Irish writer Thomas Duffet's 1674 *The Mock Tempest, or the Enchanted Castle*, which is set in a brothel and begins with a brawl to replace the storm in Shakespeare's original play.¹¹² However, it was only in the nineteenth century that there was an intense interest in burlesquing Shakespeare's plays in Europe, particularly Britain, and in the United States. These burlesques were produced at great speed and at a frequency that means that the nineteenth century far overtakes even our contemporary, post-1960 period for the sheer number of creative responses it produced to Shakespeare's texts.

While it was open season for pretty much any classical text, the popularity of burlesquing Shakespeare's plays in particular reflected the huge interest in Elizabethan literature during this period. Allardyce Nicoll describes how 'the long-buried works of the minor Elizabethans were unearthed [...]. The poetic dramas of the time are literally filled with Shakespearian and Elizabethan imagery'.¹¹³ That the consequently large numbers of straight productions of Shakespeare's plays were provoking considerable disappointment amongst audiences and critics alike, with their stylised performances and elaborate scenery and costumes, made them obvious targets for the burlesquers. Charles Dickens, for example, in his praising of his 'intimate friend' the actor Mr Fechter who was

¹¹² In *Shakespeare Adaptations: The Tempest, The Mock Tempest, and King Lear*, ed. by Montague Summers (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966), pp. 105-174. First published in 1922.

¹¹³ Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama 1660-1900*, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), IV, 88-89. First published in 1930.

shortly to embark on a professional tour of the United States, makes clear his distaste for the usual fare on offer in theatres:

[Fechter's] Iago is not in the least picturesque according to the conventional ways of frowning, sneering, diabolically grinning and elaborately doing everything else that would induce Othello to run him through the body very early in the play. Mr Fechter's is the Iago who could, and did, make friends; who could dissect his master's soul, without flourishing his scalpel as if it were a walking-stick; who could overpower Emilia by other arts than a sign-of-the-Saracen's head grimness [...]. Mr Fechter's Iago is no more in the conventional psychological mode than in the conventional hussar pantaloons and boots.¹¹⁴

Another aficionado of the theatre – a Mr Wilmott – suggested, however, that many were considerably less impressed by Mr Fechter's acting:

The Press uniformly condemned the extraordinary spectacle of Othello dragging Iago to the bedside of the murdered Desdemona. By which outrageous proceeding, Mr Fechter seemed determined to out-do the every worst efforts of our present race [to corrupt] the public by a course of sensational dramas.¹¹⁵

That burlesquers of Shakespeare's tragedies explicitly set up their plays as in an antagonistic relationship with tragedy, with there being some eliding between disappointing contemporary productions of tragedy and the idea of tragedy itself,

¹¹⁴ Charles Dickens, 'On Mr Fechter's Acting', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 24 (1869), 243-44. This reference to Saracens is yet another example of oscillating identities between Iago and Othello since, as G. K. Hunter writes, in his discussion of how Othello is depicted, 'In the medieval romances, the enemies of the knights are usually Saracens, often misshapen and monstrous (eyes in forehead, mouth in breast, etc.) and commonly black' (G. K. Hunter, *Othello and Colour Prejudice* (Annual Shakespeare Lecture of the British Academy) (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 142.

¹¹⁵ Mr Wilmott, 'A Retrospective Glance at Mr Fechter's Iago', in Wilmott's acting edition of *Othello* (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, 1862).

is made no clearer than in a boxing match between the characters Burlesque and Tragedy in James Planché's burlesque *The Camp at The Olympic*. Stanley Wells quotes some delicious lines from the play:

For Burlesque is up! up! up!
And Tragedy is down! down! down! O!
Pop up your nob again, And I'll box you for your crown, O!

When 'in the words of Macbeth to Banquo's ghost, Tragedy bids Burlesque depart', Burlesque responds by threatening to 'shew [sic] up your shows, affect your affectations', before dismissing Tragedy as 'bombast and puff'.¹¹⁶

The reason burlesques took the musical form they did is connected, as Wells describes elsewhere, to a specific legal situation in Britain, as 'since the Restoration, in 1660, the right to present serious plays in London was [...] under the monopoly of the Theatres Royal at Drury Lane and Covent Garden'.¹¹⁷ Throughout the country, other selected theatres were also the only ones officially to enjoy this privilege. However, following the Acts of Parliament under George II, in 1741 and 1755, Justices of the Peace could licence establishments for music, dancing, and public entertainment as distinct from stage plays. This attempt to protect Shakespeare and other dramatists spectacularly backfired when writers realised they could get round the restrictions and lampoon serious productions of classical plays as long as they threw in some song and dance.

Just how much song and dance was required was a matter of intense debate. Nicoll quotes from a correspondence in February 1824 between George Colman The Younger and the Lord Chamberlain, who was required to approve all plays for performance in Britain. The Lord Chamberlain writes that a burletta –

¹¹⁶ Stanley Wells, 'Shakespeare in Planché's Extravaganzas', in *Shakespeare Survey 16: Shakespeare in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), pp. 103-17 (p. 115).

¹¹⁷ Stanley Wells, *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*, 5 vols (London: Diploma Press, 1977), II, x-xi. Since Planché, as with other burlesquers, was also involved in straight productions of tragedy at the patent theatres, these lines appear tongue in cheek on more than one level.

that is, a short burlesque – should contain songs that form ‘a natural part of the piece (and not forced into an acting piece)’. Colman replies that there ‘always remains the question whether a Burletta must not be in verse, and the whole sung, not *said*, which makes the question dangerous’.¹¹⁸

The burlesque writers, then, walked a fine line to acquire permission for their adaptations to be performed. David Worrall writes that this allowing of only the so-called patent houses to stage serious plays ‘was an absolute and invariable practice’, with the exception of The Haymarket, which was largely managed by Colman and had ‘a special [but highly unofficial] status’.¹¹⁹ This presumably had something to do with Colman having been appointed in 1824 by the Lord Chamberlain to be ‘Examiner of Plays’. Colman’s abuse of the role seems to have played a part in the final scrapping of the monopoly: an 1832 ‘Report from the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature’ details how Colman was called in for questioning, since he had become ‘renowned for his ingenuity in reconciling an extraordinary freedom of speech in himself as a play-wright with an exceeding intolerant jealousy of the exercise of similar liberty on the part of others’.¹²⁰ The report concludes that this ‘barbarous monopoly’ should end. It was not actually abolished until the 1843 Theatre Regulation Act, and the division this caused still has its legacy now in Britain, where the distinction between ‘popular’ musical forms of theatre and serious theatre is polarised by often being performed in different physical spaces.

Henry Barton Baker, who attended such burlesques at The Strand Theatre in London at the height of their popularity in the 1850s and 1860s, gives a sense of the giddy smorgasbord they offered, writing how they were:

¹¹⁸ Letters bound up with the plays submitted to the Lord Chamberlain in 1824, quoted in Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama*, IV, 138.

¹¹⁹ David Worrall, ‘Drama’, in *A Handbook of Romanticism Studies*, ed. by Joel Faflak and Julia M. Wright (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), pp. 177-94 (p. 182).

¹²⁰ ‘Report from the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature: With the Minutes of Evidence’, *The Monthly Review 1832*, 3 vols (London: G. Henderson, 1832) III, 461-78 (p. 464). This report first appeared in the December 1832 issue of *The Monthly Review*.

A compound of music hall, minstrel show, extravaganza, legs and limelight, puns, topical songs, and gaudy irreverence – the lightest, frothiest, most loved and most detested of Victorian light entertainment.¹²¹

In writing of their abundance, in order to keep up with the demand, Richard Schlock describes how the plays were:

Written practically overnight, rehearsed in a week, and performed for a month or two [and] attractive only as long as they remained novel. Burlesque playwrights laboured under no illusion that their works would survive as theatrical masterpieces; rather, they laboured under the relentless pressure to turn out scripts at a rapid pace.¹²²

Schlock writes how this speed is echoed in the breathless pace of the productions themselves, culminating in what was known as the ‘breakdown dance’, performed at the end of each scene. An illustration of this dance from the United States can be seen in Figure 12, a playbill for Christy’s Minstrels in the United States. Baker, reminiscing again about The Strand, recalls how:

The enjoyment of the performers was really, or apparently, so intense that the wild ecstatic breakdown into which they broke out at the end of almost every scene seemed perfectly spontaneous; it was a frantic outburst of irrepressible animal spirits, and they seemed to have no more control over their legs than the audience had over their applause.¹²³

¹²¹ Michael R. Brook, *Prefaces to the English Nineteenth-Century Stage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 186.

¹²² Richard Schlock, *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 16-17.

¹²³ Henry Barton Baker, *History of the London Stage* (London: G. Routledge and Sons, Ltd, 1904), p. 448, quoted by Brook, p. 186.

This manic speed works with the use of crude parody to destroy psychological coherency, dismantling motivation and meaning to create an anarchic world. In this world, former hierarchies can be joyously toppled; typically, in *Romeo and Juliet Travestie*, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it is the old, female nurse rather than the gallant, young male hero Romeo who is able to best Shakespeare when defending their performance. However, the aesthetic effect of burlesque is also broadly to close off the characters from our empathy. As I shall explore, this is often viciously exploited when it comes to burlesques of *Othello*, and their treatment of its black protagonist.

In this chapter, I want to explore how this treatment can be read as a testament to the psychological effort involved in confronting how one's culture has kept fellow human beings in the category of slave, of non-human, in a period when the law was increasingly recognising this practice as illegal, and abolition discourse portrayed black people's enslavement as a tragedy and a stain on the honour of those countries who practised it.

Slavery was technically abolished in the British Empire by the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 and throughout the United States by the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, following the bitterly fought Civil War.¹²⁴ The international trading in enslaved Africans had already been banned in 1807. The (British) Royal Navy West African Squadron was the most dominant among various country's squadrons in policing the Atlantic to attempt to stamp out rogue traders of various nationalities, often now operating, as the orientalist Lieutenant Henry Yule described it (in 1850), 'with small vessels and little capital', which created even more inhumane conditions than when the trade was legal.¹²⁵ Yule argued that Britain had a moral obligation to stamp out slave trading as 'a chief abettor

¹²⁴ Kenneth Morgan in *Slavery and The British Empire: From Africa to America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) provides a comprehensive account, including how slavery continued to exist to a limited extent, through various fudges and loopholes - see, for example, pp. 202-3. Peter Hogg, *The African Slave Trade and its Suppression: A Classified and Annotated Bibliography of Books, Pamphlets and Periodical Articles* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) includes an excellent list of historical sources.

¹²⁵ Henry Yule, *The African Squadron Vindicated* (London: James Ridgway, 1855), p. 37.

and agent in the system of man-stealing'.¹²⁶ He depicts a desperate and widespread scene where missionaries and slavers fight for influence over the West African chiefs who were essential in supplying the trade.¹²⁷ Ten years later, an anonymous 'Late Senior Officer of the West-African Squadron' again makes a plea for continuing the squadron following an 1859 Motion in Parliament to withdraw it, describing for the reading British public the devastating effect of slavery not only on those enslaved but on Africa itself, as he envisages the nightmare result of a withdrawal:

The slave-trader would pursue his inhuman schemes wherever he pleases, with the most perfect impunity; and not only would the smouldering embers of the traffic be rekindled along the coast line, but soon a flame would be raised through the interior [...]. The interior would be devastated by the cruel and bloody wars that would everywhere be carried on to supply the human market.¹²⁸

By calling the slave trader 'inhuman' and the slave trade 'the human market', he effects a reversal whereby it is the white man, not the black slave, who is inhuman, in an indication of how the horrors of slavery could create such a profound assault on white people's sense of their own identity if they allow themselves to feel implicated in this trade and are unable to maintain a belief that those whom they trade in are simply a form of livestock.

When it comes to the previous century, Michael Neill remarks that 'oddly enough the eighteenth century seemed, for the most part, to find the idea of a black hero relatively unproblematic'.¹²⁹ However, perhaps it is not so odd that when black people seemed safely and permanently enslaved, to have the odd black romantic hero possessed no great threat; it is only when there is the threat of a wholesale epistemological shift in what the category of 'negro' might mean, and

¹²⁶ Yule, p. 34.

¹²⁷ Yule, p. 32.

¹²⁸ *The West-African Slave-Trade: Suggestions for its Gradual Extinction*, by a Late Senior Officer of the West-African Squadron (London: W. H. Dalton, 1860), pp. 34-35.

¹²⁹ Michael Neill, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Shakespeare: Othello, The Moor of Venice*, ed. by Michael Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 41.

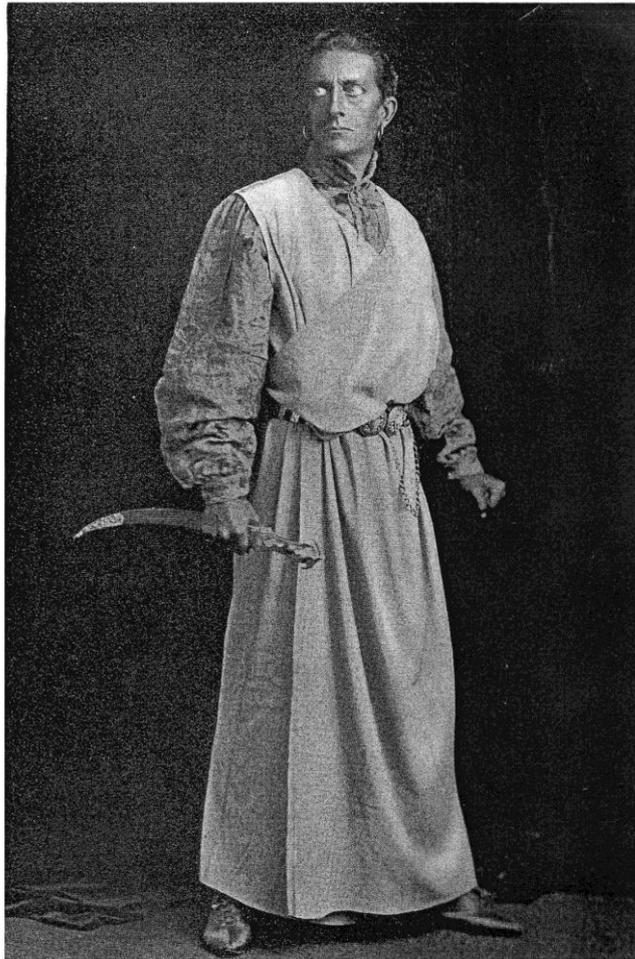
therefore the rights that a negro should be accorded, that any stray examples of their nobility and tragic potential must be hunted down and erased.

There were, of course, some exceptions to this in the eighteenth century that laid the way for the crude black caricatures of the burlesques. An anonymous pamphlet described as ‘A Satirical Dialogue between a Sea Captain and his Friend in Town: Humbly addressed to the Gentlemen who deform’d the Play of *Othello*, on Thurs_y, M_ _ _ the 7th, 1750, at the Th_tre R_y_l, in Dr_ry Lane’ has, as its epilogue: ‘For sure such Wretches never trod the stage / Unless it was to lull a nodding age’, but then wanders from criticising the production to the subject matter itself, questioning why Othello should be so upset at the prospect of losing his wife to another man: ‘Suppose he had lost her – why this mighty pothel / His monkey F _ _ t can help him to another’.¹³⁰ Apparent in this is the image of the black man as a more primitive human being, in fact not fully human, and incapable of higher forms of love, so that one sexual partner can always be replaced by another.

While in the burlesques Othello is presented as a caricature of blackness, in straight productions, as Neill describes, ‘a more orthodox means of addressing the racial anxieties stirred up by this tragedy was to play down Othello’s blackness by orientalising the Moor’,¹³¹ and thereby effectively removing him from the slavery debate. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, writing in the 1830s, specifies

¹³⁰ Anonymous, *A Satirical Dialogue between a Sea Captain and his Friend in Town* (London: J. River, 1750). Fragments of this are in the Birmingham Central Library Shakespeare Archive (BSL S639-41 ff. 633511). The easy-to-read blanks are presumably mocking the fashion for using this device to protect a person’s identity.

¹³¹ Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by Neill, p. 45.



W. & D. Downey, 57 & 61, Ebury Street, S.W.

Figure 5: Johnstone Forbes-Robertson as Othello (Forbes-Robertson, p. 89).

that ‘Othello must not be seen as a negro, but a high and chivalrous Moorish chief’.¹³² An example of just how pale he could get by the turn of the century – as if this trajectory was unstoppable, although it was soon to go suddenly in reverse – is given in Figure 5, with the photograph of Johnstone Forbes-Robertson as Othello.

A striking exception to this trend were the controversial performances of Othello by the black American Ira Aldridge. In analysing nineteenth-century burlesques of *Othello*, it becomes apparent that this cannot be done in isolation

¹³² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘Notes on the Tragedies, 1836-39’, reproduced in *A Routledge Literary Source Book*, ed. by Andrew Hadfield (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 48-50 (p. 50).

from the career of this extraordinary actor, which developed in tandem with their own evolution, as he toured Britain and the rest of Europe in a career that spanned five decades. Aldridge explicitly presented himself, and particularly his performance of *Othello*, as an argument for black emancipation, just as the burlesquers worked overtime to disarm any political potency that *Othello* could hold. As I will show, each camp was very much aware of the other.

Aldridge is believed, while still in his early teens, to have been part of New York's short-lived radical African Theatre (also called briefly the American Theatre, as documented by George Thompson), which had grown out of a pleasure garden called the African Grove.¹³³ In his *Memoir*, Aldridge, referring to himself in the third person, records his debut as playing the part of *Othello* at The Royalty Theatre in Tower Hamlets in 1826, where 'he first felt the pulse of the British public, and found it favourable to his pretensions'.¹³⁴ He does not mention this as being anything other than Shakespeare's *Othello*, and neither do various critics who cite this key event, for example Bernth Lindfors who dates it at rather 1825, and writes that there 'at age seventeen he made his debut as Othello'.¹³⁵ But nothing is raised by these critics about the issue of a non-patent theatre such as The Royalty staging Shakespeare, and Worrall writes that in fact Aldridge 'played (as the licence required) the title role in 'a "Melo Drama" (that is, a burletta)

¹³³ George Thompson, *A Documentary History of the African Theatre* (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University, 1998), p. 5 and p. 21.

¹³⁴ Ira Aldridge, *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge: The African Roscius* (London: Onhwyn, 1850), p. 13. How close was Aldridge's involvement with the memoir's writing is unclear but, if he did not write it, it seems certainly to have been approved by him since he has signed the copy of it held by the Bavarian State Library. A facsimile of this copy is available at:

<<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=O905AAAACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=aldridge+memoir&hl=en&sa=X&ei=mQUPVJbvDrT77Aaw6IHADQ&ved=0CCIQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=aldridge%20memoir&f=false>> [accessed 10 July 2014].

¹³⁵ Bernth Lindfors, *Ira Aldridge: The Vagabond Years* (New York: Boydell and Brewer, 2013), p. 1. See also, for example, *African American Lives*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 13; or Ruth M. Cowhig, 'Ira Aldridge in Manchester' in *Ira Aldridge, The African Roscius*, ed. by Bernth Lindfors (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007), pp. 126-34 (p. 130).

version of *Othello*'.¹³⁶ However, Worrall gives no reference for where he found this information and the eliding of the two separate, although closely linked in their Victorian forms, genres of melodrama and burletta is confusing. And as far as I have been able to find out, the first burlesque of *Othello* actually performed in London was Charles Mathews's *The Moor of Fleet Street*, which was not until 1833. It is typical of the fragmented histories of the marginalised that such vagueness shrouds the essential issue of whether Aldridge's London debut was as a tragic or comic *Othello*.

On further research, it becomes clear that the restricting of Shakespeare and other legitimate drama to the Theatre Royals was not as absolute after all; there were pockets of resistance that flouted this law, refusing to content themselves only with burlesques. Aldridge certainly did appear in Shakespeare's *Othello* at another non-patent theatre, the Surrey Theatre in London in 1833, following his Covent Garden performance, since the playbill still exists (see Figure 6), which was still ten years before the patent law was abolished. As can be seen from the playbill, the first act, with its crude insults against *Othello*, has been cut entirely. It also provides an example of how Aldridge liked to emphasise his West African heritage, to the extent of claiming to be 'a native of Senegal'. Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, in their discussion of the patent law, suggest that there was some relaxing of it in the years leading up to its abolishment so that theatres in the suburbs were able 'to mount legitimate drama with legal impunity'.¹³⁷ However, the Surrey Theatre was just off Westminster Bridge Road, which was hardly the suburbs even in Victorian times, but it seems they felt they could risk it too.

Also, outside of London, Aldridge played the part of Shakespeare's *Othello* as early as the end of 1825. A *Times* review dated 22 December 1825

¹³⁶ Worrall, p. 189. Joyce Green MacDonald seems to back this up by referring to Aldridge's 1833 performance at the patented Covent Garden Theatre Royal, following much success in the provinces, as the first time London audiences saw the 'role of *Othello* played by a black actor', in 'Acting Black: *Othello*, *Othello* Burlesques and the Performance of Blackness', *Theatre Journal*, 46 (1994), 231-49 (p. 231).

¹³⁷ Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatre Going, 1840-1880* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), p. 167.

describes how Aldridge played the role with such emotion that he ‘staggered, fell, and continued motionless on stage’, causing the performance to have to be halted for fifteen minutes.¹³⁸

Alternating with this performance was his lead role in *Oroonoko*. A reviewer for *The Morning Post* described his performance in this as being marked by ‘sparks of genius’ and ‘peals of approbation’.¹³⁹ Directly before Brighton, Aldridge had played this part at the Coburg Theatre, which is now the Old Vic, where a *Times* reviewer, wrote that his features, ‘although they possess much of the African character, are considerably humanised’, in another indication of the insistence of the animality of black people, which has been so important in justifying attempts to possess them.¹⁴⁰ Conjuring an appalling scene of humiliation, the reviewer describes how the audience ‘laughed at him through all the play [and] applauded him loudly’ when he stabbed his wife, but it was only when he killed himself that ‘their delight grew outrageous’. Aldridge is insisting on the tragic dignity of a black man by placing himself – an authentic black man rather than a white man in light-brown make-up – in the central role of a tragedy, and yet for that particular audience, if the reviewer is to be believed, so preposterous is that association that Aldridge’s presence forces the tragedy into comedy.

The contrast in reception that Aldridge got at the Coburg, as opposed to in Brighton, follows a pattern of how he was regarded much more favourably outside London, and suggests the extent that the British public’s attitude was influenced partly by whether they lived in a city with a significant black population, such as London or Liverpool, or the provinces where a black man might still be an excitingly exotic stranger. However, the extent and status of black people in Britain in previous centuries is still not fully researched, and clearly one should be wary of making any general assumptions. Black people

¹³⁸ ‘The Black Tragedian at Brighton – Mr Keene, the African Roscius’, *The Times*, 22 December 1825, p. 3. (Aldridge sometimes took the name of Keene, or Kean, in order to connect himself in audience’s minds with his contemporary, the tragedian Edmund Kean. See, for example, Aldridge, *Memoirs*, pp. 14-15.)

¹³⁹ *The Morning Post*, 15 December 1825.

¹⁴⁰ *The Times*, 11 October 1825, p. 2.

were not all working in various forms of servitude, nor were they exclusively in the cities. As just one example of the complexity of the picture, Felicity Nussbaum, drawing on historic sources from the late 1780s, describes how ‘Elite Africans [...] sent their free young children to be educated in Europe’, so that there were ‘at least 50 African school children in Liverpool and the surrounding villages’.¹⁴¹

Aldridge came from a country where *Othello* was used, in the Antebellum North, by both pro- and anti-slavery lobbies, and his and his collaborators’ awareness of the political significance of his presence as a tragic actor in Britain is clear to see, from as soon as he began acting in London.¹⁴² This is evident from a playbill for that performance of *Oroonoko* at the Coburg in 1825, which describes the play as ‘exhibiting a most faithful portrait of the horrors that arise out of that dreadful traffic [African slavery]’ and having the principal character played by ‘a Man of Colour, and one of the very race whose wrongs [the play] professes to record’.¹⁴³

As another example from twenty years later, Aldridge quotes in his memoirs from a reviewer in *The Era* on 26 March 1848, writing about a performance of *Othello* at the Surrey Theatre that Aldridge had just given:

[Aldridge] speaks in a measured and grave style, almost too sober to be in keeping with the fiery nature of the Moor [...] We advise the anti-slavery people [...] to see Mr Aldridge at The Surrey. His appearance there is ‘a great moral lesson’ in favour of anti-slavery.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Felicity Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race, and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 219.

¹⁴² See, for example, Edward Kahn, ‘Desdemona and the Role of Women in the Antebellum North’, *Theatre Journal*, 60 (2008), 235-55.

¹⁴³ The playbill is reproduced in Thompson, p. 154.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in Aldridge, p. 26.

SURREY THEATRE.
 BOXES 2s. Half Price 1s. PIT 1s. No Half Price. GALLERY 6d. No Half Price.

Miss VINCENT.

Mr. OSBALDISTON begs respectfully to announce to the Patrons of the SURREY THEATRE, that, in consequence of Miss VINCENT having given up her engagement at the HAYMARKET, he has entered into a further arrangement with that Lady, who will have the honor of making her re-appearance on these boards *This Evening*, in the favorite Farces of INTRIGUE and GIOVANNI IN LONDON—Ellen and Giovanni, by Miss Vincent.

Mr. ALDRIDGE,
 A NATIVE OF SENEGAL, AND KNOWN BY THE APPELLATION OF
THE AFRICAN ROSCIUS!
 is engaged at this Theatre FOR TWO MORE NIGHTS; and will have the honor of making his Fifth Appearance
 THIS EVENING, in the Tragedy of OTHELLO!

OTHELLO, the Moor of Venice, by the AFRICAN ROSCIUS!

This Evening, **MONDAY, May 6th, 1833,**

Will be presented SHAKESPEARE'S Tragedy of

OTHELLO!

THE MOOR OF VENICE.

Commencing with the Second Act:—**OTHELLO'S ARRIVAL IN THE ISLE OF CYPRUS.**

Othello, by the AFRICAN ROSCIUS,

Iago, Mr. RUMBALL, Cassio, Mr. S. JOHNSON,
 Roderigo, Mr. C. HILL, Montano, Mr. MAITLAND,
 Julio, Mr. ROBERTS, Antonio, Mr. C. PITT,
 Gratiano, Mr. YOUNG, Ludovico, Mr. LEE, Leonardo, Mr. BANNISTER.
 Desdemona, Mrs. W. WEST, Emilia, Mrs. WILKINSON.

A FAVORITE PAS DE DEUX, by Mr. ROBERTS and Miss FAIRBROTHER.

After which, the laughable Comedietta called

INTRIGUE:

Or, THE BATH ROAD.

Captain Rumbleton, Mr. C. HILL, Varnish, (*his Friend*) Mr. MAITLAND,

Tom, (*formerly Valet to Rumbleton*) Mr. VALE.

Ellen, (*Wife of Tom*) Miss VINCENT, who, with Mr. Vale, will sing the Duet,

"WHEN A LITTLE FARM WE KEEP."

A PAS SEUL, by Miss FAIRBROTHER.

To conclude with the Operatic Extravaganza, (written by W. T. MOSCRIEFF, Esq.) entitled

Giovanni in London

Or, THE LIBERTINE RECLAIMED.

Don Giovanni, Miss VINCENT.

Leporello, (*his Servant of All-work*) Mr. VALE.

Finnikin, Mr. MAITLAND, Popinjay, Mr. LEE, Deputy English, Mr. YOUNG,
 Drainemry, Mr. BRUNTON, Porus, Mr. BANNISTER, Simkins, Mr. ROGERS, Styles, Mr. ALEXANDER, Noakes, Mr. JONES,
 Shirk, Mr. NELSON, Gobler, Mr. C. PITT, Pluto, Mr. JAMES, Mercury, Mr. ROBERTS, Chasen, Mr. MOORE,
 Constantia, Miss JORDAN, Mrs. Leporello, Mrs. YOUNG, Squalling Pao, Mrs. VALE,
 Mrs. English, Miss NICHOLSON, Mrs. Drainemry, Miss CROSS, Mrs. Porus, Mrs. HARRISON,
 Mrs. Simkins, Miss FAIRBROTHER, Presterpine, Miss JONES, Succubus, Miss FRANCES, Tartarus, Miss YOUNG.

In active preparation, a New Play, to be entitled

BEN-SAMUEL: or, THE WRECK OF THE GULF OF VENICE.

Also in rehearsal, a Drama to be called

FEUDAL TIMES: or, THE CASTLE CLOCK TOLLS ONE!

A New Drama has been accepted at this Theatre, and will shortly be produced, under the title of

ELLEN WAREHAM.

To-morrow, (not acted these four years) **JOHN BULL**; or, *An Englishman's Friend*—Peregine, (first time) Mr. Rumball, Job Thornberry, (first time) Mr. Dibdin Pitt, Hon. Tom Shuffleton, Mr. C. Hill, Frank Rochdale, Mr. Maitland, Dan, Mr. Vale, Dennis Brulgraddery, Mr. H. Wallack, Simon, Mr. Rogers, Mary Thornberry, (first time) Miss Chaplin, Mrs. Brulgraddery, Mrs. Vale. A Variety of Singing. After which (not acted these three years) with alterations, **PAUL AND VIRGINIA**—Paul, Mr. Maitland, Captain Tropic, Mr. Dibdin Pitt, Dominique, Mr. Vale, **Alambrn**, (*by the desire*) **THE RENT DAY**—Old Crumba, Mr. Dibdin Pitt, Martin Heywood, Mr. Rumball, Toby Heywood, Mr. C. Hill, Bullfrog, Mr. Rogers. Silver Jack, Mr. H. Wallack, Rachel Heywood, Mr. W. West, Polly Briggs, Miss Vincent. **For the Benefit of Mr. H. WALLACK.**

On Wednesday, (in consequence of the great success of its revival) the Drama of **THE STRANGER**—The Stranger, Mr. Osbaldiston, Mrs. Haller, Mrs. W. West. With other Entertainments.

On Thursday, May 9th, (never acted here) **THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE**; or, *First Love*—Sir David Daw, Mr. Vale, Tempest, Mr. Dibdin Pitt, Penruddock, Mr. Rumball, Woodville, Mr. Young, Sydenham, Mr. S. Johnson, Henry Woodville, Mr. Maitland, Wazzel, Mr. Rogers, Mrs. Woodville, Mrs. W. West, Emily Tempest, Miss Chaplin, Dame Dunskey, Mrs. Vale. After which, the Petite Comedie of **IS HE JEALOUS!**—Mr. Belmour, Mr. Osbaldiston, Harriet, Miss Vincent. To conclude with (first time here) **THE WHISTLER**; or, *the Fate of the City of St. Leonard*—Sir George Stanton, Mr. Maitland, Donacha Dhu, Mr. H. Wallack, Dicky Dutton, Mr. SMITH, Sandy Sanderson, Mr. Dibdin Pitt, The Captain of Knockunder, Mr. EUGENE MACARTHY, and The Whistler, Miss MACARTHY, (by Permission of G. Almar, Esq.) Lady Stamtun, Mrs. Wilkinson. **For the Benefit of Mr. W. HAYNES**

PRIVATE BOXES may be obtained of Mr. WARDELL, Box Book-keeper.

Director of Music, Mr. JOLLY.

Arranger of Tableaux, Mr. C. HILL.

Theatre open at Six; commence at half past Six. Stage Manager, Mr. B. S. FAIRBROTHER. [S. G. Fairbrother, Printer, Exeter Court

Figure 6: A playbill for Ira Aldridge as Othello in Shakespeare's *Othello* at the Surrey Theatre, 1833 (Birmingham Shakespeare Collection, Playbills).

What is apparent is that what mattered as much as the content of the play was the visibility acting offered Aldridge; what impressed was Aldridge himself, as a rarely seen representative of his race taking centre stage and acting with dignity.

Lois Potter writes how Aldridge also even played the Duke of Venice in a production at The Surrey Theatre in 1844 ‘while a (white) visiting American actor played the hero’.¹⁴⁵ Here, then, the audience would have had seen a black actor playing the white character at the absolute centre of power in the play, while a white actor plays the extravagant black stranger.

Not only that but Aldridge whited-up to play many other major Shakespearean parts, including King Lear, Richard III, Shylock and Macbeth. Lindfors describes how Aldridge performed Macbeth ‘with his dusky epidermis coated first with bismuth [made by treating bismuth chloride with water and then drying it to a white precipitate] and afterwards toned up with carmine and burnt umber, to depict not only Macbeth’s nationality, but the affect of his vigorous and open-air life’.¹⁴⁶ This attention to realistic detail is in marked contrast to the cartoon-like blacking up of the burlesques.¹⁴⁷

However, Aldridge, famous though he was as ‘the Negro Tragedian’, ‘The Black Tragedian’ or ‘The African Tragedian’, also it seems has the distinction of being one of the very first – perhaps the first – non-white minstrel on either side of the Atlantic, fully exploiting its commercial possibilities when the form came over from the United States and merged with the aesthetics of British burlesques. The March 1848 review in *The Era* declares that ‘no mock “Ethiopian serenader”

¹⁴⁵ Lois Potter, *Othello*, Shakespeare in Performance series (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 111.

¹⁴⁶ Bernth Lindfors, ‘Ira Aldridge in Macbeth’, in *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*, ed. by Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 45-55 (p. 54).

¹⁴⁷ Although it does have a parallel with Laurence Olivier’s extravagant attempts at authenticity when playing Othello, even if the end result appeared minstrel-like. He describes in *Confessions of an Actor* how he began with ‘Max Factor 2880’, before using various other types of make-up on top, and ends with ‘that great trick, that glorious half yard of chiffon with which I polished myself all over until I shone’ (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), p. 109, quoted in Harvey Young, *Theatre and Race* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.16.

could come near' to Aldridge's performance of Mungo. Out-minstrelling the white minstrels, he crammed 'into his capacious mouth a lighted candle, which he mistakes for the neck of a bottle in his other hand'.¹⁴⁸

Aldridge's departure from New York was almost contemporaneous with white American Thomas Dartmouth Rice's 1828 performance of his Jim Crow in the same city, which is regarded as seminal in the development of minstrel entertainment. Rice claimed he got his inspiration for his wildly popular character from watching an old black stable hand who, as Dale Cockrell describes, 'sang a funny kind of song and danced a peculiar hopping, unjointed dance.'¹⁴⁹ His performance mocked, but also rose the profile of, negro folk music, making Rice vast amounts of money in the process on both sides of the Atlantic (see Figure 7). The minstrel shows that evolved from this were exclusively formed of white men who would black up and play both male and female roles in a programme of singing and short skits. It was only later that black men joined these troupes, with Jearold Holland writing how this occasionally happened as early as the 1840s, and Henry Sampson dating the first all-black minstrel troupe to 1865, with the Georgia Minstrels.¹⁵⁰

That Aldridge had the versatility to do such absurd comic acts as shoving a lit candle in his mouth, but could also tragically hold one above a sleeping Desdemona, was not only part of his popular appeal but meant, ingeniously, that he was able to play the burlesquers at their own game: having a black man perform these parts so brilliantly must have had the disorienting effect of both

¹⁴⁸ Aldridge, p. 26.

¹⁴⁹ Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 63.

¹⁵⁰ Jeorold W. Holland, *Black Recreation: A Historical Perspective* (Chicago: Burnham, 2002), p. 126, and Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press), p. 13. Thomas Recchio explores how white women later in the century also began to play minstrel parts in black face, in 'The Serious Play of Gender: Blackface Minstrel Shows by Mary Barnard Horne, 1892-1897', *Nineteenth-Century Theatre and Film*, 38 (2011) <<http://www.readperiodicals.com/201112/2759790131.html>> [accessed 30 January 2013].

making more convincing the buffoonish stereotype of a negro but then, by that very same consummate skill, undoing it. Highlighting his versatility, a playbill for the Theatre Royal, Chichester, boasts how on the same night 'The African Roscius' will not only pull off Shakespeare's *Othello* but will also then appear as Ginger Blue 'an independent nigger' in the farce *Mummy*, or *The Elixir of Life*, and 'sing several negro melodies'.¹⁵¹



Figure 7: An 1837 print, published in Britain, of the American minstrel T. Rice (Houghton Library, Harvard <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/houghton/2010/06/02/the-american-minstrel-show-collection> [accessed 1 February 2013]).

¹⁵¹ The year of the playbill is unknown but c. 1850-1860 (from the Birmingham Shakespeare Collection, Playbills).

Aldridge's desire explicitly to associate himself with Othello even extended into his personal life, where in his memoirs he describes how shortly after arriving in London he met and married the 'daughter of a member of parliament, and a man of high standing in the county of Berks [Margaret Gill]. The lady played, to some extent, a modern Desdemona to Mr. Aldridge's Othello.' Her father, sadly, was 'much after Brabantio's way of thinking'.¹⁵²

Of course, key to the anxieties that the burlesques both exploit and uneasily battle with is how to approach the fictional Desdemona. The solution in straight nineteenth-century productions of the play was largely to desexualise her, to insist on her passivity and innocence. This went beyond the actress's performance to the cutting out from Shakespeare's text of what was seen as inappropriate; for example, as discussed in the Introduction, in Kemble's promptbook version of *Othello* even her witty and sparring exchange with Iago as they wait for Othello's ship is excised.¹⁵³

As an early example of how she was perceived, Charles H. Shattuck describes how Mrs Siddons, playing alongside her younger brother John Kemble in the part of Othello, from 1785 to 1804, was regarded as succeeding in assuming what her biographer Thomas Campbell called the 'subdued spirit', the 'lowly, violet-like sweetness' required. That is until 'age and corpulence unfitted Mrs Siddons for Desdemona'.¹⁵⁴ (She gracefully retired from the role at age 49.) By the turn of the nineteenth century, critics are still eulogising on Desdemona's uncanny resemblance to the plant world. William Robertson Turnbull says how she could be compared to many varieties – primrose, woodbine, lily – but

¹⁵² Aldridge, p. 13.

¹⁵³ See *Kemble Promptbooks*, ed. by Charles H. Shattuck, published for the Folger Shakespeare Library, 11 vols (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), VII, or Bell's version of *Othello* (London: J. Bell, 1773).

¹⁵⁴ Thomas Campbell, *Life of Mrs Siddons*, 2 vols (London, 1834), II, 60, quoted in *Kemble Promptbooks*, I, ii. This idea of the modern sensibility being more delicate than past ages has a certain irony given how the modern world has evolved.

‘always, however, as a flower’.¹⁵⁵ He later says how he sees her ‘gowned in virginal white’, and contrasts her to:

the ideal woman of ancient art - the Antigone and Electra of Sophocles, for example [who] are, with all their purity and piety, with all their queenly dignity and heart-moving loveliness, essentially harsh and masculine to the modern eye ... [They lack] the trustful submissiveness, and the purely passive courage of the Venetian maiden.¹⁵⁶

This insistence on neutralising Desdemona as much as possible did meet with some dissenting voices. The British actress Ellen Terry complained how in casting the role, ‘the general idea seems to be that Desdemona is a ninny’, and Konstantin Stanislavski, writing from a Russian context, points out that Desdemona is ‘resolute, courageous, resists the orthodox type of marriage prescribed by tradition’.¹⁵⁷ In this, in fact, she is very much like Electra and Antigone, transgressing against her own class and society, in her case by choosing a husband who is far from her father’s idea of a suitable choice. Indeed the inciting incident for the entire play is Desdemona’s decision to be more than a silent observer of Othello and Brabantio’s conversation, but to speak herself and make her desires, albeit coyly, known, with her desire being to marry a man who is black.

¹⁵⁵ William Robertson Turnbull, *Othello: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1902), p. 336.

¹⁵⁶ Turnbull, p. 341.

¹⁵⁷ Ellen Terry, ‘Desdemona’, in *Four Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. by Christopher St. John (London: Martin Hopkinson, 1932), reproduced in Susan Snyder, *Othello: Critical Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), p. 61-68 (p. 61); Konstantin Stanislavski, *Stanislavski Produces Othello*, trans. by Helen Novak (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1948), reproduced in Snyder, pp. 69-90 (p. 76). Terry’s editor, Christopher St. John, was in fact the pseudonym of the suffragette activist Christabel Marshall, whose pioneering, feminist play, *The First Actress* I discuss later in this thesis.

The evident danger here is that rather than Desdemona, in her purity, loving Othello in spite of his colour, it is because of his blackness – with all its associations of sexual virility – that she desires him. The need to emphasise that this is not the case is made particularly explicit in the anonymous 1823 prose rewriting of *Othello* called *Jealousy: Exemplified in the Awful, Tragical, and Bloody History of the Lives and Untimely Deaths of Othello & Desdemona* where, resonating with the *Beauty and the Beast* fairytale, ‘the Moor’s outside only, to [Desdemona’s] imagination, was black – and deformed; but his mind, the greatness of his soul, did not suffer from his colour’.¹⁵⁸

However, some critics were not buying this and decided that Desdemona’s actions put her beyond the Pale. The US President John Quincy Adams took time off from his pressing, real-world duties to condemn this fictional character:

We never can sympathise much with Desdemona because we never can separate [her] from the estimate that the lady is little less than a wanton. [. . .] She falls in love and makes a runaway match with a blackamoor, for no better reason than that he has told her a braggart story of his hair-breadth escapes in war. For this, she not only violates her duties to her father, her family, her sex, and her country, but she makes the first advances.¹⁵⁹

Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, another American, Welker Given, takes a more sympathetic view but still sees the tragic end to such a union as inevitable. He writes how Shakespeare was able to transform this:

alarmingly proposed miscegenation until it becomes a thing of hope; displaying heavenly beauty where we had looked expecting to see only vile repulsion; sweeping us on past successive stages of surprise, contrast, and sympathetic emotional revolution up to the very ecstasy

¹⁵⁸ Anonymous, *Jealousy: Exemplified in the Awful, Tragical, and Bloody History of the Lives and Untimely Deaths of Othello & Desdemona* (London: Hodgson & Co., 1823), p. 9.

¹⁵⁹ John Quincy Adams, ‘Misconceptions of Shakespeare upon the stage’, *New England Magazine* (1835), quoted in Kahn, pp. 244-45.

of woe [but though] Shakespeare alone could bring a black-white marriage up to the elevation of the beautiful and pathetic; not even he could give it permanent and prosperous life.¹⁶⁰

What more perfect play is there, then, than Shakespeare's *Othello* for the nineteenth century to burlesque, with a main female character where the suspicion is that her innocent exterior hides a lascivious interior, and a protagonist who is not only black but has dared to marry a white woman? Delicate sensibilities that formed a straitjacket for many straight productions explode into a maelstrom of risqué humour, violent racism, sexual explicitness and black minstrelsy as white men painted their faces into a crude stereotype of blackness and tore open Shakespeare's text with a manic energy.

The first burlesque of *Othello* in English appears to be the anonymous *Othello-Travestie* of 1813 although, according to Manfred Draudt, it was never actually performed but merely enjoyed in its textual format.¹⁶¹ Certainly, there appears to be no performance history for it and no copy is archived in the Lord Chamberlain's Collection archived at the British Library, which should contain all plays ever performed in Britain. Draudt believes the first actual performance of a burlesque of *Othello* in any language was *Othello, der Mohr in Wien* in 1806,

¹⁶⁰ Welker Given, *A Further Study of the 'Othello': Have we Misunderstood Shakespeare's Moor?* (New York: The Shakespeare Press, 1899), pp. 332-33.

¹⁶¹ The terms 'travesty' and 'burlesque' are often used interchangeably in discussions of the plays I analyse in this chapter, but Margaret Rose provides a helpful distinction by describing how, since the seventeenth century, burlesque had been divided into two forms: the high form applies the style of a high form of art to 'a less worthy subject', whereas low burlesque treats 'the subject of that work in an aggressively familiar style', which is how travestie operates, with its 'jocular, undignified treatment'. Therefore, these Shakespearean burlesques, by this definition, all fall in the category of low burlesque, also known as travesty (or travestie). See Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 54-61.

which proved to be a Viennese box-office hit, and that the first in English was *Othello, The Moor of Fleet Street*, first performed in 1833.¹⁶²

However, in an indication of how difficult it is to construct a comprehensive history for these neglected burlesques, R. Farquharson Sharp lists an earlier 1792 play called *Arlequin Cruello*, subtitled a *Parodie d'Othello*. This strays considerably from the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello* and, in doing so, plays closely with the commedia dell'arte heritage of *Othello* that I discussed in the Introduction. Sharp summarises the plot, noting the appropriateness of Doucelmone's resuscitation, which would become a common, striking feature in the nineteenth-century burlesque versions of many of Shakespeare's plays:

The characters are members of a troupe of actors in which Cruello [the Othello character] plays the Harlequin parts. Doucelmone is betrothed to Cruello, but her affections are alienated by the black masks he wears, and she philanders with the son of the 'Directeur'. Cruello attacks Doucelmore [...] but the Vaudeville ends, as it should, with her resuscitation.¹⁶³

In the selection that follows, I begin with that first English burlesque, *Othello-Travestie*, and then analyse how the form evolved through later burlesques written throughout this racially turbulent century.

***Othello-Travestie* (Anonymous) (1813)**

Written anonymously and printed in 1813, *Othello-Travestie* went through two editions in the same year in an example of how these plays, while short-lived, could be tremendously popular. I refer to the first edition, printed by Stockdale of

¹⁶² Manfred Draudt, 'The Real Thing? Adaptations, Transformations and Burlesques of Shakespeare, Historic and Post-Modern', *Florianópolis*, 49 (2005), 289-314.

¹⁶³ R. Farquharson Sharp, *Travesties of Shakespeare's Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 3.

London.¹⁶⁴ The play begins with an ‘advertisement’ that sets out neatly the familiar position of the burlesquers: that the author’s reason for not apologising for writing the burlesque is that it is not Shakespeare himself who is the object of the author’s scorn, and reflects the growing taste for Shakespeare to be read rather than performed:

The following pages were written, *currente calamo*, principally to occupy a few hours, when leisure from matters of a more serious nature enabled the Author to indulge in a relaxation of mind. [...] He will not apologise to the theatrical world for travestizing this tragedy [...] There lives not one who entertains a stronger feeling of veneration for Shakespeare than the humble individual who pens these lines. [...] In the present rage for Hippo-Dramas [...] and whilst the formation of theatres remains so ill-judged as it is, no play of merit can be performed to the satisfaction of the delicately accurate and discerning mind. To travestie works, therefore, which can alone be duly appreciated by private and patient perusal, cannot be deemed culpable.¹⁶⁵

Othello-Travestie follows Shakespeare’s play fairly closely, although, as with all burlesques of *Othello*, it is updated to the present day, closing the time gap that has opened through the passage of centuries, aware as they are that a certain distance helps to bolster the solemnity of tragedy. As A. C Bradley points out, it was only in *Othello* that Shakespeare himself dispensed with creating such a gap;

¹⁶⁴ Anonymous, *Othello-Travestie* (London: J. Stockdale, 1813). The second 1813 edition was printed by John Kempston, London.

¹⁶⁵ *Othello-Travestie*, p. 3. The Hippodrama, which involved the spectacle of horses on stage, was pioneered from the 1760s partly for the practical reason that the end of the continental wars left soldiers and horses in need of new employment. For a history of the hippodrama, see Michael Gamer, ‘A Matter of Turf: Romanticism, Hippodrama, and Legitimate Satire’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 28 (2006), 305-34.

his other tragedies take place in a 'distant period [so that their] general significance is perceived through a thin veil which separates the persons from ourselves and our own world'.¹⁶⁶ Events are made even more familiar in *Othello-Travestie* by beginning the burlesque in the location where it is to be performed, that of London.

Othello still has the position of a general and the duke wants him to defend Cyprus against the encroaching Turks who all turn out to be shipwrecked. Therefore, as in the original, the characters then find themselves far from home and turned inward on each other now that the external threat is gone.

The undermining of the characters' dignity extends to their names with Michael Cassio's becoming Mick and Desdemona Desdy, which is also a nickname that appears in many of the other burlesques, suggesting that these burlesque writers were all familiar with each other's works and that, to some extent, the various burlesques are engaged in a dialogue with each other as they force this tragedy into comic form. This leads to the burlesques seeming to go on a tail spin of moving ever further away from Shakespeare's original, as if gaining their own momentum, their own organic life.

In *Othello-Travestie* it is as if Shakespeare's play has been swung round to the perspective of Iago. As I suggested in the Introduction, in the original tragedy there could always be a suspicion that Iago is the wise fool who sees things as they really are, who refuses to accept the romantic gloss that Desdemona and Othello put on their love when it is really straightforward carnal desire. In this burlesque, that carnal desire is laid right in front of our noses when Othello addresses Desdemona straight away as a 'hussey' (p. 11). This questioning of the passivity and innocence of Desdemona, as had already been done in nineteenth-century commentaries on the tragedy, is common to almost all the burlesques I analyse. The delicacy of the original Desdemona does not appear to be able to survive this kind of rewriting. Jyotsna Singh writes how in Shakespeare's *Othello*,

¹⁶⁶ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth* (London: Macmillan, 1918, reprint of 1904 edition), reproduced in *A Routledge Literary Source Book*, pp. 52-54 (p. 54). However, as I discuss in Chapter 3, Shakespeare did not set *Othello* exactly in the present day, but at least thirty years earlier, since Cyprus had already been forced to cede Cyprus to the Turks in 1573.

‘Desdemona remains an idealized, virtuous woman – keeping alive the image of a besieged, white femininity so crucial to the production of the black man as a “savage”’.¹⁶⁷ While this may be the case in the original, the opposite appears to be at work in the burlesques: key to making Othello appear as a foolish savage is for his wife to be shown to be far from an idealised woman.

The society *Othello-Travestie* depicts is a brutal one for women where force is used to control them, as seen in this exchange between Desdemona and her father during the scene at the Council-Chamber:

BRABANTIO Come here, you slut; don't you know *white* from *black*?
DESDEMONA You brought respect from me by many a whack. (p. 15)

The light rhyming couplet suggests this should be seen as amusing, rather than alarming. That we hear that Brabantio hits his daughter to keep her in line, and then watch Othello do the same, reinforces how these characters can merge into that one oppressive yet gullible, patriarchal Pantalone-like figure, either jealously guarding his daughter or his young wife.

In this ugly world, beauty struggles to exist. Bodily functions, which are excluded from the original play, are now exposed for the audience's amusement. Even Desdemona's excuse for not having her handkerchief – that key romantic symbol – is that, ‘I think I've left it where I paid a visit’. (p. 40). Here are pissing, shitting creatures, which, as I explored in the Introduction, closes the characters off from tragedy and return them to an animal state.

Just as Desdemona is stripped of her chastity, Othello is stripped of his romantic and exotic past. His speech when he describes how he won Desdemona is changed into a song with the refrain, ‘Bow wow, wow’, and his tales made banal and ridiculous:

¹⁶⁷ Jyotsna Singh, ‘Othello's Identity, Postcolonial Theory, and Contemporary African Rewritings of *Othello*’, in *Women, 'Race', and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 287-99 (p. 290).

How collieries at Newcastle I'd seen, and didn't falter.
A donkey-race at Brighton, and the rock of Gibraltar. (p. 14)

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago may claim Othello is just a braggart, but we know of Iago's hatred, so the words of Othello are still able to stand pure of this. However, does not Shakespeare intend there to be a lingering doubt that Iago is telling the truth? Why else would he have Othello tell us of men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders? However, that ultimately we believe Othello is no foolish boaster is essential not only for our perception of him but of the love that Desdemona and Othello have for each other. If these tales are false or ridiculous, their love is built on a lie.

In *Othello-Travestie*, the irony in the original play that the site where Othello and Desdemona consummate their love is also the site where he kills her, is made crudely comic and explicit by Desdemona and Othello sleeping on a box sofa bed, with all its coffin-like connotations, and in which Othello locks Desdemona in order to smother her. When Emilia turns up and hears Desdemona rapping on the lid, and asks who locked her in the box, Desdy replies: 'Nobody – I turned the key – farewell'. And promptly dies. To which Emilia replies: 'Oh, that's rather odd'. (p. 51) The absurdity of Desdy claiming to be able to turn the key when she is inside the box lampoons the selfless gesture of the original Desdemona by taking her tenuous claim to ridiculous extremes. Still, by doing this, the burlesque does keep the submissive loyalty of Desdemona faced with her murderous husband; the later burlesques reject that.

Following Desdy's death, the speech where Othello identifies himself with the enemy, with all its rich connotations of a divided self, is this time the tale of a Turk who avoided being arrested by Othello by jumping into the river to drown himself. Therefore, for the burlesque Othello to mimic or re-enact this death, he jumps out of the window into the sea below. Here again the dialogue robs the scene of any tragic potential. Commenting on the off-scene action, Gratiano cries: 'He's gone, though floats his wig!' (p. 56). A comic image comes into our mind of a soggy wig bobbing on the water. That it is a wig is perhaps significant: the last sign of him is something theatrical and fake, a semblance of the self that is also a signifier of status – a status that the entire burlesque suggests

is not deserved by Othello. His pretensions as a gentleman float away, as he sinks to the ocean floor.

As Ludovico mourns his passing, Mick Cassio suggests: 'Faith, you may chance to get him – with a hook!' (p. 56). Here Othello has sunk to a non-human, to be hooked as if he were a fish. The distress of a real drowning is made to be amusing as we imagine the scene. In a vicious cycle, we are able to laugh at Othello's and Desdy's misfortune because we are distanced from their pain, and the act of laughing then creates a further distancing, allowing us to stomach ever-more distressing scenes and find them amusing, until even the protagonists' deaths are humorous.

The frontispiece of this first edition, although not the second, also includes 'rejected addresses', which express the desire that Desdemona does not die after all:

Wife, come to life; forgive what your black lover did
Spit the feathers from your mouth, and munch roast beef.

The banality of munching roast beef replaces the tragic significance of dying. After this burlesque, Desdemona's and Othello's death are aborted all together in later versions, either by cutting short events before a death could happen, or by reviving corpses to allow them to argue with their confused ghosts. This, it seems, is not done to create a more compassionate play but out of an awareness that their deaths are in danger of forcing tragedy even onto a burlesque, and thereby providing these figures with that fateful gravitas that the burlesques seek to undermine, particularly when enacted with all the force that a living body on stage provides. The inclusion of these deaths in *Othello-Travestie* plays a dangerous game, since the mocking that aims to make them ridiculous is in danger of increasing the pathos. It is after all a key aspect of the passion of Christ's crucifixion that he was mocked in the hour of his death. These burlesques appear sometimes to walk a knife edge where they are not entirely in control of their material and its effect.

***Othello: The Moor of Fleet Street* by Charles Mathews (1833)**

In the excoriating *Times* review of Aldridge's performance at the Coburg theatre, the writer begins, 'Aside from Prince Anamaboo, who was engaged by the late Stephen Kemble to exhibit the true method of eating beef-steak, we never remember to have heard of any sable candidate for histrionic distinction'.¹⁶⁸ This might have sent off future historians to find this mysterious predecessor of Aldridge had it not been that the reviewer then explains that Prince Anamaboo turned out to be Jew in disguise, a kind of nineteenth-century Ali G. Therefore, in the ranks of authenticity in black performance it begins with non-black men performing blackness, then non-black men masquerading as black, and now on stage, the reviewer is witnessing the genuine article. However, even on this front he is dismissive, suggesting that if the production wanted a 'black-a-moor' who was even more the real thing – 'more foncé' (meaning 'dark') – then they could have employed, instead of Aldridge, 'the man who sweeps the crossing at the end of Fleet-Market, for example'.

In an example of how intently the burlesquers seem to be watching Aldridge's progress – and their determination to undermine him – it can surely be no coincidence that several years later (and in the very year when Aldridge finally got to perform in a legitimate patented London theatre, the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden) Charles Mathews wrote a burlesque of *Othello* where the ridiculous protagonist is based on none other than that very same sweeper.

For his burlesque, which premiered at the Adelphi Theatre in 1833, actor manager Mathews transports the entire action to a few streets in contemporary London, and as such follows most closely out of all these plays what Brook describes as 'the standard burlesque treatment' in England, which was to 'violently juxtapose [a classical play] with the topography, social life and supposed comic eccentricity of modern London'.¹⁶⁹ It has a very large cast and something of the atmosphere of John Gay's *The Beggars' Opera* with all of

¹⁶⁸ *The Times*, 11 October 1825, p.2.

¹⁶⁹ Brook, p. 184.

London lowlife and working classes on view, with Mathews blacking up to take the central role of the black sweeper.

Manfred Draudt, whose annotated edition of the burlesque I will be referring to, gives examples of how closely straight and burlesque performances of *Othello* were intertwined, with, for example, Mathews having also played Shakespeare's *Othello*, first in New York and then in Liverpool in 1823. Also, Edward Kean and William Macready, who were 'splendidly parodied in the burlesque, were not only personal acquaintances of their imitator, but also regular visitors to the theatre [The Adelphi]'.¹⁷⁰

Dale Cockrell writes how Mathews also wore blackface to 'play-mock an American black he claimed to have observed butchering the role of Hamlet'.¹⁷¹ There is some debate as to whether this was Ira Aldridge or James Hewlett who was the chief actor of the African Theatre in New York. Certainly, as Thompson describes, Hewlett had had cordial interviews with Mathews on several occasions and was incensed with this portrayal, which he believed to be based on him, even writing 'a letter protesting Mathews's deceit to the *National Advocate* in May 1821'.¹⁷² However, Ira Aldridge took advantage of the publicity this offered by claiming that the man was him. As Roark describes 'from his London debut, Aldridge was consistently advertised on playbills as the original actor mocked by Mathews [thereby] inviting British audiences to come see the original Mathews had ridiculed, and judge the fidelity of Mathews's portrayal'.¹⁷³ Therefore, just as the white burlesquer sought to undermine a black tragedian, a black tragedian sought to undermine the white burlesquer's claims to authenticity – an authenticity on which Mathews's reputation stood, since, according to Jane

¹⁷⁰ Charles Mathews, *The Moor of Fleet Street*, ed. by Manfred Draudt (Tubingen: Franke Verlag, 1993), p. 8 and p. 28. The original, hand-written manuscript of the play, which Draudt has followed exactly, is in the British Library (LCP Additional 42920, ff. 77-95).

¹⁷¹ Cockrell, p. 13.

¹⁷² Thompson, p. 18.

¹⁷³ Kathleena Lucille Roark, *Acting America in the Age of Abolition: Transatlantic Black American Celebrity and the Rise of Yankee Theatre, 1787-1827* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Proquest, 2007), p. 148. Proquest ebook.

Goodall, Mathews was ‘celebrated’ for how he ‘captured patterns of diction, intonation and gesture’.¹⁷⁴

In fact, during a stay in the United States, Mathews had assiduously studied the dialogue and mannerisms of its inhabitants for material for his writing and performances, even having, as he recalls in his memoirs, an ‘ear-witness’ listen out on his behalf.¹⁷⁵ However, he wrote in disappointment to his friend James Smith in a letter in 1823 how ‘a week in Ireland would supply more drollery than twelve months here’, although he did find much amusement in hearing black Methodist preachers:

I shall be rich in black fun. I have studied their broken English carefully. [...] It is a pity that I dare not touch upon a preacher. I know its danger but perhaps the absurdity might give it colour – a black Methodist!¹⁷⁶

Evident in Mathews’s account is firstly that, while it is fine to mock a black man, it is not acceptable to mock a man of the cloth (in a reversal of the moral code in Britain now), secondly that for a black person to be in any position of authority has an inbuilt absurdity, and lastly that he recognises the commercial potential of mimicking a black dialogue.

Othello: The Moor of Fleet Street has the breathless subtitle *An historical, comical, operatical, travestical Burletta by William Breakspeare*, and the familiar madcap pace, speeded up even more by the rhyming couplets spanning different characters’ speech, for example:

OTHELLO Holoa, Mr Brab, stand there, keep the peace!
BRAB Knock him down, my good friends of the City Police. (p. 50)

¹⁷⁴ Jane Goodall, *Performance and Evolution in the Age of Darwin: Out of the Natural Order* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 123.

¹⁷⁵ *A Continuation of the Memoirs of Charles Mathews, Comedian*, ed. by Mrs Mathews, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1839), I, 239.

¹⁷⁶ Mathews, *Memoirs*, I, 239.

The plot is now quite radically changed from Shakespeare's original, with a drastic downgrading of the characters' status: Brabantio is a brazier, Cassio a marshalman who summons people to court, and Iago deputises for Othello in his role as street sweeper. There is just a short relocation from Blackfriars to the Old Bailey rather than a relocation to Cyprus. Here, the senate is replaced by the Lord Mayor, and the Turks by a mob of costermongers – sellers of fruit, vegetables and fish – going to a boxing match, where there is concern that there will be unrest. Once more, there is the interestingly ambiguous position for Othello, but now rather than protecting Christians against the Muslims that he once was himself, here he is defending polite society against the raucousness of a class to which he belongs.

Again, it is soon made clear that Desdemona is no pure creature, but is cheerfully described by Othello as 'a drab', or slut. The suspicion that white women, quite apart from being repelled by black men were strongly sexually attracted to them is explicitly voiced by the Othello character as he stumbles drunk and singing up to their bed chamber: 'Buckra wives, dey like Old Nick' (p. 76). F. G. Cassidy writes that the word 'Buckra', an early usage of which can be found as far back as Aphra Behn's 1688 *Oroonoko*, comes from the Nigerian Efik word *mbakára*, which 'means "white man, he who surrounds or governs"; and it has kept the associated senses (white man, master, boss) wherever it has gone'.¹⁷⁷ The idea that part of the attraction of black men for white women is that here is a man whom society allows them to dominate recurs in the post-1960 rewritings of *Othello*, as I will explore in Chapter 2.

An early set piece is Desdy's and Othello's marriage ball (Scene 4), which takes place at the 'Holy Land' in St Giles and should show '*the well-known mendicants of the metropolis*' (p. 59).¹⁷⁸ The celebration is interrupted by Cassio, who has come in from a brawl, which, as in the original play, is the result of Iago's machinations. Here, Iago does not want to be Othello's right-hand man but

¹⁷⁷ F. G. Cassidy, 'Another Look at Buckaroo', *American Speech*, 53 (1978), 49-51 (p. 49).

¹⁷⁸ The use of comedy to send up real-life contemporary figures goes right back to Athenian Old Comedy. See, for example, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy*, ed. by Martin Revermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 261.

actually to take the place of Othello himself: to get his hands on Othello's sweeping patch. Cassio has apparently killed Roderigo, and Othello is furious. The willingness of the constables to turn a blind eye on the raucous marriage festivities is contingent on the guests not causing any real trouble.

Following the marriage ball, Desdy goes to lodge near the old Bailey at the house of Iago and his wife, while Othello conducts his business of seeing that a certain criminal is convicted on his evidence. When called to defend his marriage to Desdy, Othello's speech is a mockery of Shakespeare's original:

ye potent men and grave,
My noble friends and masters:
Listen to my stave
I'll tell of strange disasters. (p. 55)

Serious prose is replaced with comical song, and the song ends in doggerel, as the framing structure of language disintegrates into absurd non-sense:

Tooral looral lay. Te rol rumpti nay
Tweedle deedle rem! Ri fol rumpti doodle em! (p. 55)

Again, Othello drifts close to the Pantalone character, this time with humour derived from the suggestion of meanness: Othello comes home unexpectedly early because lighting a torch would cost money on a winter's late afternoon. He catches Desdy and Emilia looking guilty, having stuffed Cassio in a closet. This time Desdy really has lent her handkerchief, or 'belcher', as part of Cassio's disguise so he can escape by ship to 'double the Cape' (p. 66), with the use of the slang word degrading the original airy love token by associating it with the gross bodily function of belching.¹⁷⁹

Observing Othy's rapid descent into maddened jealousy, this for Emilia is not something distinct in him because of his ethnicity but a symptom of

¹⁷⁹ The burlesque is rich in slang, some still in use, but much of it has had to be researched by Draudt in order to unravel the meaning of this text.

masculinity in general. Emilia, with a proto-feminist insight, declares: ‘They’re all alike, poor jealous-pated knaves, / Who think us women born to be their slaves’ (p. 71). It is not long before Othello is dragging Desdemona to the bed to force her to drink prussic acid. What stops him is the hue and cry that Desdemona raises, the fight she puts up, and that he finally notices the handkerchief back on her neck, which Cassio had managed to smuggle back to her. By this time Desdemona is in a deathlike swoon. The arrival of the police prevents Othello attacking Iago, having realised he is behind all this. Roderigo then turns up alive; his death is just a fraud. Then Desdemona revives.

As I explored in the Introduction, the intense focus of tragedy provides a sense of inevitability: that all events lead up to the moment of the protagonist’s destruction and that that can be his or her only fate. In contrast, in *The Moor of Fleet Street*, the actor who plays *Othello* just casually steps away from the events of the play to make a jolly jibe at the patent law: ‘No patent shop is this, and we / Are not the patent folk.’ Desdemona destroys the theatrical illusion further by addressing Othello by the actor’s real name: ‘If you applaud him, he’ll improve – / Now won’t you, dearest Jack?’ (p. 79).¹⁸⁰

Even in the apology that ends this play, there is still room to stuff in a final reference to Othello’s blackness, in a pun that carries the subliminal message that to be black is to be inherently unworthy of tragedy, by yoking together ‘black’ and ‘joke’: ‘Immortal Shakespeare’s friends will see / ‘Tis only a black joke’ (p. 79).

***Othello Travestie* by Maurice Dowling (1834)**

While the bones of this burlesque are more faithful to Shakespeare’s original than is *The Moor of Fleet Street*, it moves ever more sharply away from realism into increasingly absurd territory. It premiered at Liverpool’s Liver Theatre in 1834, before transferring to London, and was written, according to Bernth Lindfors, by as prominent a public and political figure as Liverpool’s Superintendent of Police.

¹⁸⁰ Fraudt has published the original cast list, where Jack Reeve is listed as playing Othello.

¹⁸¹ Lindfors charts the burlesque's huge popularity with it having performances in Edinburgh, Doncaster, Birmingham, Leicester, Alnwick, Davenport, Sheffield, Exeter, Bristol, Coventry and Tiverton: 'A stereotype of African ignorance and foolishness was thus perpetuated and strengthened.'¹⁸² I shall be referring, unless where otherwise indicated, to Lacy's Acting Edition of the play, printed after its

¹⁸¹ Lindfors, *Ira Aldridge: The Vagabond Years*, p. 61.

¹⁸² Lindfors, *Ira Aldridge: The Vagabond Years*, p. 67.

New Strand Theatre.
 LICENSED BY THE RIGHT HON. THE LORD CHANCELLOR.
 Under the Joint Management of Messrs. W. J. HAMMOND and JERROLD.
EVERY EVENING. 1836

“OTHELLO!”
According to Act of Parliament.”

 Not in the memory of the “oldest” Play-goer—(and no pains have been spared to discover that interesting individual) has any Tragedy, Play, Opera, Farce, or that most equivocal of all dramatic equivocations—“*BURLETTA*,” been produced with such astounding success, as “*OTHELLO*” mis-represented (that is, strictly “within the meaning of the Act.”

Every Evening at the above Theatre.
 The excellent age-stricken person above-named, (he is shrewdly suspected to be the identical butcher who was wont to bring his large Dog into the Pit to see Mr. Garrick—since then, dogs have been promoted to the Stage itself) has survived many dramatic triumphs, but confidently predicts that “*OTHELLO*, According to Act of Parliament” will be “the death of him.” Nothing less is to be expected. The

“ROARS OF LAUGHTER”
 hitherto “roared” by an enlightened British Public have been the laudable, yet ineffectual, efforts of “sucking doves.” The combined

“THUNDERS OF APPLAUSE”
 carefully collected for the last twenty years, impart but a very inadequate notion of what thunder really is, every evening at the New Strand.

“SHOUTS OF APPROBATION”
 may, in their time, have filled every Play-house; but were they ever known before to blow off—to absolutely untile a roof? [N. B. A person is in attendance to exhibit to the Public this gratifying damage. N. B. (No. 2) Fragments of the tiles may be had of Mr. Massingham, between the hours of 10 and 4.] The

“ELECTRIFYING EFFECTS”
 sustained nightly, up to the present time, by every audience, are as nothing to the shock given to the feelings of thousands, by the pathos, the sublimity, the terrible tranquillity of

“THE UNRIVALLED”
MISS DALY,
 “the gentle lady, married to the Moor.”

MR. W. J. HAMMOND
 is very desirous to speak of his own merits as “*OTHELLO*,” but has a morbid fear that such eulogy might be liable to mis-conception. He, as the representative of the Moor feels, however, that he should be guilty of deeper than black ingratitude to a most respectable householder in the Minories—whose modesty is an extinguisher to his name—were he to fail to call public attention to

“THE REAL COCKED HAT OF DAVID GARRICK”
 most liberally lent to him—(due security having been required for its return) for the next three years; that is, during the run of the *Burletta*; yes, the REAL HAT originally worn in White-chapel, by Garrick himself in Shakspeare’s attempt of “*OTHELLO*.”

MR. HENRY HALL
 has been requested to write his own opinion of his inimitable performance of *IAGO*; but with a sensitiveness unworthy of this advanced age, has, after due consideration, declined the grateful labour. The Public however will shew their generous sense of such delicacy by judging for themselves. How needless is it to inform an obliged world, that for a considerable time

BEYOND EVERY EVENING TILL FURTHER NOTICE,
“OTHELLO! According to Act of Parliament”
 will be repeated.

N.B. The Public are most respectfully requested—if they can—to moderate their enthusiasm at the fall of the curtain; it having hitherto been impossible for the musicians to play the Finale, every fiddle-string being snapped by the concussion of air, consequent on the

“DEAFENING PLAUDITS.”
 In order to meet the wishes of every Class of the Play-going Public,

A SPACIOUS GALLERY
 Thoroughly Ventilated, and capable of containing EIGHT HUNDRED PERSONS, has been constructed.
 OWN SEATING—Half-Price (4 to None) SIXPENCE—GALLERY DOOR, STEP
 W. & JOHNSON, Publishers.

Figure 8: A playbill for *Othello Travestie* by Maurice Dowling at The New Strand Theatre in 1837 (Birmingham Shakespeare Collection, Playbills).

New Strand Theatre
 Licensed by Authority of the Right Hon. the Lord Chamberlain.
GALLANTEE SHOWMAN every Evening!
 REVIVAL OF
Othello, According to Act of Parliament,
 Being the 108, 109, 110, 111, 112 & 113th Nights of its Representation.
 This present MONDAY, April 10th, 1837, & during the Week,
 Will be presented Mr. DOUGLAS JERROLD's Comedy of The

After which (13th, 14th, 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, Time) an entirely New Burletta, by H. BROWNIGG, Esq. Author of the "Bill Sticker," &c. called The

GALLANTEE SHOWMAN!
Or, Mr. PEPPERCORN 'AT HOME.'

"It was near that part of Bloomsbury, known at the time of our history as the Long Fields, that the uninhabited tenements owned by Mr. Peppercorn, were situated. They formed a long dismal line of blackened brick. Each house, viewed by itself, with its uncurtained cheerless windows looked grim and desolate—an eyeless skull. Spiders wore their webs in the doorway, and the sparrows chirped from the smokeless chimney. There seemed the curse of crime or law upon the buildings; surely some murder had been done there—or, perhaps, the mortar was crumbling from the bricks, and the rot was growing in the rafters, whilst justice weighed in her separate scales, the claims of litigants to the wasting ruin."—NEW MONTHLY MAGAZINE March 1837

Young Hyacinth..... Mr. J. LEE. Isaac Peppercorn..... Mr. A. YOUNGE.
 Flittermouse..... (the Gallantee Showman)..... Mr. W. J. HAMMOND.
 Muzzleby..... (Bear Leader)..... Mr. H. HALL. Captain Rockwood..... Mr. H. B. ROBERTS.
 Sheepskin..... Mr. G. COOKE. General Pompey..... Mr. A. RICHARDSON.
 Puddings..... Mr. ATTWOOD. Badger..... Mr. DEARLOVE. All-a-Mort..... Mr. JONES. Dingy..... Mr. RILEY.
 Whip..... Mr. SEARLE. John..... Mr. CHICHELEY.
 Fanny Flittermouse, Mrs. STIRLING. Molly Muzzleby. Miss DALY. Catherine Rockwood, Miss BROOKES.

Scenic Effects: The Hyacinth Estate, Bloomsbury.—Mr. Peppercorn's Bed-room—The Gallantee Show !!!

To conclude with (108, 109, 110, 111, 112 and 113th Times) the Operatic Burlesque Burletta, called

Othello!
(ACCORDING TO ACT OF PARLIAMENT.)

Duke of Venice.... Mr. A. RICHARDSON. Brabantio.... (a hasty old cogler, and senator of Venice).... Mr. A. YOUNGE.
 Othello, (Moor of Venice, formerly an independent nigger from the republic of Hayti) Mr. W. J. HAMMOND.
 Iago (Othello's officer once a native of the Gallantee mountains county Tipperary province of Munster & Kingdom of Ireland) Mr. H. HALL.
 Rodrigo,.... (a very silly youth, and very partial to Mrs. Othello).... Mr. ATTWOOD.
 Cassio, (a man of no note, but still an injured man, rather in liquor, or the liquor rather in him) Mr. H. B. ROBERTS.
 Ludovico.... (a very respectable gentleman).... Mr. G. COOKE.
 Montano, (caught in a row with Cassio, but not at all disposed to fight) Mr. DEARLOVE. Police, Messrs. SEARLE & BURTON.
 Desdemona.... (a very good-natured lady, wife of Othello, and not a bit too well treated by him) Miss DALY.
 Emilia, (a lady in attendance on the latter).... Mrs. H. HALL. Ghost of Desdemona,.... (with a few expiring notes)....

Incidental to the Burletta, the following Parodies:—
 Duet—“The morn will soon be peeping” —Air “Barcarole” Messrs. H. HALL and ATTWOOD.
 Song—“Farewell my dear friend Roddy” —Air “Bow wow” Mr. H. HALL.
 Song—“Follow, follow, there's good creatures” —Air “Follow over mountain” Mr. A. YOUNGE.
 Duet—“Will you go to the Senate” —Air “Will you come to the bower” Messrs. W. J. HAMMOND & H. HALL.
 Duet—“Dho him fierder now in sorrow” —Air “Tho' you leave me” Messrs. W. J. HAMMOND & A. YOUNGE.
 Song—“Patent, grave, and reverend sirs” —Air “Yankee doodle” Mr. W. J. HAMMOND.
 Song—“I'll tell you why I lov'd the Black” —Air “Soldier laddie” Miss DALY.
 Song—“Meet me to night on the sly” —Air “Meet me by moonlight” Mr. H. HALL.
 Song—“Oh she that's fair and never proud” —Air “Katty M soney” Mr. H. HALL.
 Song—“Oh much him wonder” —Air “The girl I left behin' time” Mr. W. J. HAMMOND.
 Song—“Tell him what de row” —Air “Love and whiskey” Mr. W. J. HAMMOND.
 Song—“Believe me I'd rather my tongue” —Air “Believe me of all those endearing young charms” Mr. H. HALL.
 Duet—“Dearest Othello” —Air “Lova's Ritonet” Miss DALY and Mr. W. J. HAMMOND.
 Duet—“Oh beware! this love” —Air “Oh! 'tis love” Mr. H. HALL and Mr. W. J. HAMMOND.
 Song—“S'pose dis ting you hab not tell” —Air “Billy Taylor” Mr. W. J. HAMMOND.
 Duet—“A Gipsy woman whose name was Powell” —Air “Tyrolean” Mr. W. J. HAMMOND.
 Song—“De cause, de cause” —Air “The King of the Cannibal Islands” Mr. W. J. HAMMOND.
 Finale—“Behold I'm Desdemona's Ghost” —CHARACTERS.

IN PREPARATION,
TWO ORIGINAL BURLETTAS!!!
 And an Original, Operatical, Tragical Burlesque Burletta, entitled
ROMEO AND JULIET!
 “As the Law Directs” by the Author of Othello “According to Act of Parliament”

THE BILL STICKER: Or, an Old House in the City.
 Will shortly be revived.

BOXES 4s. PIT 2s. GALLERY 1s. Second Price, Boxes 2s. Pit 1s. Gallery 6d.
 Doors open at half-past 6—Commence at 7. Box-Office open from 11 till 4. where places may be taken and Tickets had of Mr. MASSINGHAM. Half-price Quarter before Nine. (Gallery door in Strand Lane).
Mr. SAMS, (Bookseller to the King) St. James's Street, is appointed SOLE AGENT for the disposal of Private Boxes.
 Applications for the Bills to be addressed (Post-Paid) to Mr. ORGAR, at the Stage Door of the Theatre. No Money Returned Vivant Rex et Regia. J. W. PEEL, Printer, 9, New Cut, Lambeth.

Figure 9: Another playbill for *Othello Travestie* by Maurice Dowling at The New Strand Theatre in 1837 (Birmingham Shakespeare Library Collection, Playbills).

premiere, where it is described on the title page as ‘an operatic burlesque burletta’.¹⁸³ Unlike all the other plays I discuss, we are able to have a clear idea of how the play looked in performance as Lacy gives a full description of the army costumes for the men and the blue and white dresses for the women, with a particular interest in highlighting Othello’s colour: his uniform has red facing but his military suit is white ‘to contrast with his dark complexion’ (p. 4).

In Dowling’s handwritten manuscript submitted to the Lord Chamberlain, ‘Travestie’ has been written but crossed out, leaving the title simply as *Othello*, although whether this is Dowling perhaps playfully denying his work’s derivative status, placing it on an equal footing with Shakespeare’s text, or even someone in the Lord Chamberlain’s office questioning its validity as a travesty, is hard to know. A subtitle is also given on the manuscript: ‘According to an Act of Parliament’, offering a little theatrical joke, as did *The Moor of Fleet Street* in its final lines, about the draconian legislation concerning burlesques. This sub-title was retained in some of its productions (for example, see the phrases following the first mention of the title in Figures 8 and 9).¹⁸⁴

The constantly hilarity to be wrung both out of jokes about blackness and the irreverent daring with which burlesques such as these go beyond insulting current productions to appropriating Shakespeare’s *Othello* itself, is evident in the text on the playbill in Figure 8. Not only have dogs been ‘promoted to the stage itself’ in straight productions, but the star and manager of this production, W. G. Hammond, would ‘be guilty of deeper than black ingratitude’ if he did not mention that he has been lent ‘The real cocked hat of David Garrick’ that Garrick wore to play the lead part ‘in Shakespeare’s attempt of *Othello*’. These urges seem constantly to wrench *Othello* burlesques in opposing directions, as they simultaneously seek to overturn certain (aesthetic) hierarchies while ferociously maintaining other (racial) hierarchies.

Green MacDonald, referring to Lacy’s acting edition, explores how having Othello as ‘Formerly an Independent Nigger, from the Republic of Hayti’, as he is described in the list of characters, explicitly sets the burlesque in the context of contemporary events. Haiti was the site of a slave revolt led by Toussaint

¹⁸³ Maurice G. Dowling, *Othello Travestie* (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, undated).

¹⁸⁴ The manuscript is in the British Library (LCP Additional 42936, ff. 289-306).

L'Ouverture that resulted in Haiti's independence in 1804, and led to L'Ouverture's becoming a potent symbol of freedom for the Romantics, with William Wordsworth writing a sonnet addressed to him, following his death in 1803.¹⁸⁵ This Othello, then, is identified not just with slavery but with a people who did not accept their enslaved condition, who wrested freedom from their white oppressors before due legal process brought about the end of slavery. However, what is striking is that in Dowling's manuscript this description of Othello in the list of characters is not present; it was presumably added later to capitalise on contemporary political concerns. That the decision to make Othello have this past came after the play was written creates a strange impression because the play itself remains unchanged, so this identity of Othello is never mentioned, and therefore hovers like a spectre over the play.

While the burlesque is set in Venice, it has a disregard for the conventions of geographical realism, so that Venice becomes somewhere in Britain when convenient, with, for example, Roderigo telling Brabantio that Desdemona and Othello are 'on their road, I'm told, to Gretna Green' (p. 10). That Othello is much older than Desdemona – a detail that connects him in yet another way to the Pantalone figure – is highlighted in this burlesque, when Brabantio calls Othello, 'a nasty, fusty, black old fellow' (p. 12).

Othello speaks again, as with *The Moor of Fleet Street*, in the minstrel dialect:

Potent, grave, and rev'red Sir
Very noble Massa –
When de maid a man prefer
Den him no can pass her. (p. 13)

Desdemona's delicate hints that she would like Othello to woo her in Shakespeare's play are here turned into a joke about the determination of women

¹⁸⁵ Joyce Green MacDonald, 'Acting Black: Othello, Othello Burlesques and the Performance of Blackness', *Theatre Journal*, 46 (1994), 231-49 (p. 232).

once they have set their cap on a man; Desdemona is once again no shrinking, submissive violet.

As in the 1813 burlesque, there is an actual move to Cyprus, with the comedy being that the man charged with the work is a stereotypical lazy and lascivious negro. Othello leaves Cassio in charge with a sleazy warning for Cassio not to come to find him too soon the next morning. Othello refers to himself as ‘him’ and speaks to Cassio as if as a slave to a master: ‘Him not get up a-morrow afore noon (*laughing*) / Eh, Massa Michael’ (p. 19). He adds with a wink that he wants to spend plenty of time in bed with his ‘Misse O’.

The revolt is never mentioned again; instead, as in the original, the action turns inward. Cassio is disgraced for drunken brawling and Iago suggests he tries to get Desdy to influence Othello. Lacy’s acting edition is rather more risqué than the manuscript, making Cassio and Desdemona’s original chaste relationship explicitly sexualised, with Iago having a suggestion if Desdy seems unwilling to help Cassio: ‘and if you find she freezes, / Don’t be afraid, give her a few sly squeegee’ (p. 21). To which Cassio replies: ‘I’ll do it – ‘tis an angel of a plan, / And worthy only of an Irishman!’ So here an Irish stereotype also makes it in, which is regularly exploited in other burlesques, including the later ones I analyse. What does not appear here, or in any of the other burlesques I this chapter, is any of the sense of class injustice in the resentment of Shakespeare’s Iago against the cultured Cassio’s being given the job he felt he deserved. Instead, Iago is annoyed because his friends asked Othello to get him a job in the Excise Department, but Othello had no influence there so instead gave him a job as his ensign, which Iago objects to on the reasonable grounds that ‘I don’t like being shot at’ (p. 7). The heroic ideal of war espoused throughout Shakespeare’s tragedy is now replaced by the unpleasant reality of being killed.

The handkerchief is now a towel, an object that accentuates the potential ridiculousness of the original item, and now serves as a reminder not of a mysterious, exotic past, as in the original, but the dreary tasks of daily life and the financial, rather than spiritual, cost of things, when Desdemona exclaims over its loss:

’Tis the only one
I had in th’ house – the other’s at the wash!

And I can't buy another, I've no cash. (p. 33)

As usual, part of the absurd humour is in how quickly the burlesque races through the plot. As with *Othello-Travestie*, the irony that Desdemona's and Othello's wedding bed by a hideous reversal becomes the site where he will kill her is emphasised, this time by her being squashed underneath it. Desdemona pleads to be spared and sent instead to 'Botany Bay' (p. 41). As with Cassio in *The Moor of Fleet Street* planning to flee beyond the Cape of Good Hope, this was a unique period in history when the ending of one's life in summary execution could instead be replaced by a complete recreation of the self in the colonies, with a letting go of all former identities and connections. The inevitability of tragedy, where the aesthetic juggernaut can lead you to only one end, is replaced by its opposite: the possibility of an entire escape from who you are.

Whereas *The Moor of Fleet Street* contented itself with a mere revival of Desdemona to dodge the tragic impact of murder and suicide, *Othello Travestie* goes for something rather more spectacular. As Desdemona lies dead, her ghost rises from her body. Here the manuscript and Lacy's acting edition diverge sharply. In the manuscript, the ghost escorts Othello and Iago both down through the trap door, while warning Roderigo that, 'I'll call for you another time' (ff. 307), although even this doesn't have the finality of death as the ghost goes on to say that, 'But if their friends for them enquire / They shall come again when they desire' (ff. 307). However, in Lacy's version events take a stranger turn when just as the ghost has Othello by the throat, Desdemona revives, so in a peculiar splitting of the self, both she and her ghost are simultaneously present.

This scene is also present in another edition of the burlesque, published by Duncombe.¹⁸⁶ However, it is only in Lacy's edition that at this point there is yet another added episode: Othello and Iago have a boxing match. Ken Bloom writes

¹⁸⁶ Maurice M. G. Dowling, *Othello-Travestie: An Operatic Burlesque Burletta* (London: J. Duncombe & Company, undated) Although undated, it seems this edition, like Lacy's, came out shortly after the 1836 production at The Strand as it lists the Dramatis Personae for both that production and the play's premiere at the Liver Theatre. The cast has been entirely changed for the latter production except that the crowd-pulling W. J. Hammond still stars as Othello.

how in the United States, real boxing matches were sometimes ‘staged between the coarse acts’ of a burlesque.¹⁸⁷ The shoehorning of a boxing fight *inside* the confines of Dowling’s play, rather than as a separate entertainment, in addition to adding to the absurdity, focuses the audience’s attention, as do the frantic dances, on the sweating, whirling bodies of the actors, on their physical, animal presence.

Schlock writes of the frequency that such boxing matches occur in burlesques, and suggests that the fact ‘that boxing matches were parodied on the stage by the middle of the nineteenth century tells us that the sport had seen better days’.¹⁸⁸ However, another reading of why the boxing matches are included could be that the burlesques were intent, rather, on riding the wave of the sport’s popularity and attracting some of its intense energy so ebulliently communicated in, for example, George Cruikshank’s mid-century artworks, which also reveal how this was one arena where black men could take centre stage (see, for example, Figure 10).¹⁸⁹ I would question whether something being parodied is an indication of its fading power. As we have seen in the case of *Othello*, it seems rather that while some current productions might have been lacking, Shakespeare’s tragedy itself rather had too much potency and so to burlesque it so brutally is an attempt to rob it of that power.

Both the Lacy and Duncombe edition end with the foolish Roderigo making the simultaneously insane and sane suggestion: ‘Then let the past be all forgot’. To which the response is:

OTHELLO Agreed!

DESDEMONA Agreed!

IAGO Agreed!

GHOST Why not? (p. 43)

In tragedy, there is no forgetting. At the moment when Shakespeare’s Othello realises he has murdered his chaste wife, he cannot walk away. He has his history

¹⁸⁷ Ken Bloom, *Broadway: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 89.

¹⁸⁸ Schlock, p. 126.

¹⁸⁹ Cruikshank is best known for his illustrations for Charles Dickens’s series of *Sketches by Boz* in the 1880s.

– his tragic arc – that has brought him to this point and there is no way out. In Shakespeare’s romantic comedies, all is forgiven, forgotten; even those who are believed to be dead come back to life after appearing as dead stone in the case of King Leontes’s wife in *A Winter’s Tale* – another victim of a husband’s jealousy. But the actual dead cannot return. In the transition from manuscript to performance, that limitation is broken in Dowling’s burlesque with surreal results. The desire to forget – and the impossibility of forgetting – are both played out in this final scene. The black man must forgive the white people who have made him a humiliated beast. The woman must forgive the man who has imposed his will upon her to such an extent that he has been the judge of whether she should live. They sing together, the same words coming out of every mouth, the divisions between them temporarily gone in this extraordinary ending. It seems that anxieties brought about by how humans have treated other humans here surface to show both the absurdity of believing it possible, and the intense desire, to erase the past.



Figure 10: *Sparring* by George Cruikshank, c. 1850.

The tale was to take a new twist when T. D. Rice of Jim Crow fame saw the burlesque on a visit to Britain and, as W. T. Lhamon describes, used it as the basis

for his parody of Giuseppe Verdi's 1816 opera *Otello*.¹⁹⁰ Rice's operatic burlesque *Otello* premiered at the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia in 1844. His innovation was to dare to go one step further than any other burlesque I have been able to find by letting Desdemona and Othello actually have a child, who first appears after the storm, and is presented to Othello by Desdemona to kiss. A storm seems appropriate given the disturbance such a sight would have caused on stage, particularly as, according to Lhamon, one side of the boy actor's face was painted black and the other white.¹⁹¹ Karen Newman writes how:

Before the English had wide experience of miscegenation, they seem to have believed, as George Best recounts, that the black man had the power to subjugate his partner's whiteness, to make both his 'victim' and the off-spring resemble him, to make them black, a literal blackness in the case of child, a metaphorical blackness in the case of a sexual partner.¹⁹²

What is striking here is, in a nineteenth-century American context that would have been more familiar with such unions, their apparent monstrosity needs to be highlighted by suggesting, rather, that the human body revolts against any such subjugation, or even intermingling.

¹⁹⁰ In *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture*, ed. by W. T. Lhamon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, University Press, 2003), p. 78. The play is reproduced on pp. 343-85 of his anthology.

¹⁹¹ Lhamon, p. 81.

¹⁹² Karen Newman, "'And Wash the Ethiop White'": Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*, in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. by Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 143-62 (p. 151).

***Othello or The Moor and his Amour* by Henry W. Nicholas (1861)**

This extremely short burlesque is not only just one act but has only one scene. It was first performed at the Theatre Royal, Manchester, in 1861, and exists only in handwritten manuscript form.¹⁹³ The title allows for yet another ingenious pun on blackness, since Othello is a ‘black amour’ (p. 8). The speeding up of the action is now taken to even more frenzied extremes, and the cast trimmed down to just four of the original characters – Othello, Iago, Desdemona and Emilia. The police and the legal system are a feature of many of these *Othello* burlesques, their presence making explicit the dynamic in the original tragedy, where affairs in wild Cyprus have descended into lawlessness and a representative from the ordered world of Venice needs to reassert the Law. In this burlesque, we have ‘Z74’, who is ‘an active and intelligent police officer’.¹⁹⁴

Trumping even the absurdity of Dowling’s version, it begins well into the original plot with Desdemona asleep in her bedroom and Othello entering with his candle, all set to kill her. He ignores Desdemona’s pleas and explanation that she only lent Cassio her handkerchief because ‘he has a cold’ (ff. 5) – providing the usual required dollop of bodily fluids – but, after singing a lengthy song, Othello does offer to take any messages back to Venice as he is heading there the next morning on that banalist of all possible forms of transport, ‘the omnibus’ (ff. 6). Whereas in Shakespeare’s tragedy at this point we know we are reaching the inevitable climax of the action that will end the play, in comedy life goes

¹⁹³ The manuscript of this burlesque is available in the British Library (LCP Additional 53003). In an indication of the efficiency of the Lord Chamberlain’s screening of plays for inappropriate content, the manuscript is marked as having been received by his office on 19 April 1861 and the licence permitting its performance, signed by a W. B. Donne, was sent on 23 April.

¹⁹⁴ Police officers had been introduced by Home Secretary Robert Peel into London in 1829, and Peel had stipulated that each must have a number so that they were accountable. For a person to be identified by a number perhaps might still have been a novelty only thirty years later.

cheerfully and indifferently on, with the insignificant Othello joining the other undifferentiated masses on the bus.

As soon as Othello smothers Desdemona with a pillow, Emilia knocks on the door. Othello easily switches between minstrel dialect and an archaic voice, exclaiming, 'Who dat knocking on de door' (ff. 6), but then addressing Emilia as 'thee' when he answers it. Emilia has news that Cassio has killed Roderigo.

With no apparent motive from the plot, Othello and Emilia simply start dancing. Desdemona revives long enough to give them a terrible fright and to declare she killed herself. Iago enters and kills Emilia and exits. Othello – looking at the carnage – declares, 'I feel quite queer and rather miss my misses' (ff. 9). The policeman drags in Iago, and demands to know, as in Shakespeare's play where is 'this rash and most unfortunate man?' to which Othello, in a paraphrasing of his tragic counterpart replies, 'That's he that was, Othello here I am. Taking some slight refreshment on the quiet'. It is interesting that of the very few original lines that are used in this skit, this exchange is included, with its existential flavour. The question, in Shakespeare's play, of what is left of Othello after he has destroyed his image through his reckless actions, has the additional layer in these burlesques of what is left of Othello after his noble image is dismantled by absurd comedy that forever circles around the animal needs and functions in humans – even in the moment of seeing his wife dead, Othello can't resist having a light snack.

Before we have time to ponder this, though, there is Iago no longer tight-lipped but appealing piteously for clemency, crying, 'Think of my wife' (ff. 10). To which the policeman points out, 'She is dead', with a deadpan Monty Pythonesque brevity. With no explanation as to how, Iago and Othello then '*appear in boxing costumes and commence fighting*'. Then, describing himself as an 'independent nigger', in an apparent nod to Dowling's play, Othello tells his tale of how he killed a 'turbann'd Turk' who, in an early example of the perils of a smoking ban, had 'cowed' a young Venetian in an Aleppo theatre and 'put out his pipe – no smoking was allowed' (ff. 11).

Othello then attempts to wrest his life into tragic form, by appealing, 'My friends come here and watch me die' (ff. 11). Whereas in Shakespeare's original play, the other characters oblige, thereby allowing Othello to create with them his

identity of a tragic hero, here everyone roundly refuses to be his audience, making the performance of this act pointless, so Othello does not do it.

From the beginning, all psychological realism – all logical response to events – is abandoned, leading to a crescendo of absurdity for the finale, where Othello cheerfully declares:

So now our tragedy is done
Desdemona dead and gone
So whilst we're here, let's have some fun
And I'll dance down de middle. (ff. 12)

But, of course, Desdemona cannot really be dead; she is only asleep, and wakes to join the mayhem of the dance.

Othello: A Burlesque, Griffin and Christy's Minstrels **(1870)**

It might seem that nothing could top T. D. Rice's pie-coloured child. However, this burlesque, first performed by Griffin and Christy's Minstrels at the Opera House in New York in 1870, introduced its own disorienting spectacle by having Desdemona played by a white man in blackface and drag, and her father, Iago and the rest of the cast also blacked up, and yet apparently only Othello being recognised as black by them.¹⁹⁵

These were, of course, disorienting times in general when it came to white people's conception of black people, and black people's conception of themselves. In the very same year that this play premiered, and a mere five years after slavery was abolished, the fifteenth amendment of the American Constitution at least officially guaranteed the rights of all male citizens to vote, regardless of colour. This rapidly led to black men also taking political office, with twenty-two African-Americans in total serving in Congress between 1870

¹⁹⁵ I will be referring to the edition published by Samuel French (New York, 1870), reproduced in Wells, *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*, V, pp. 127-40.

and 1901 (see Figure 11).¹⁹⁶ That many of these had once been enslaved shows a giddy swing from excluded to the heart of American power. To give more of a sense of how extraordinary is this swing, it took another fifty years for women of any colour to be regarded as capable enough to be trusted with the vote. A climate that combines entrenched prejudice and racist violence with very visible black powerful men would certainly seem to provoke a certain anxiety, and so what better than to have a ridiculous burlesque on hand to release this unease through explosive laughter?

Having a black Desdemona as well as a black Othello did have a precedent of sorts in that two genuinely black actors had already performed as Shakespeare's doomed spouses some fifty years earlier in New York in 1822 at the very same African Theatre where Aldridge is believed to have begun his career. An audience member, calling himself Simon Snipe, describes how Desdemona was 'a very handsome copper-coloured woman'. Whether the entire cast was black is unclear from this account, since certainly according to Snipe two out of three of the members of the orchestra were actually white. The audience was also 'variegated', being 'white, black, copper-coloured and light-brown'. The night that Snipe attended, the performance of the tragedy had to be abandoned half-way through when some of the audience members pelted the cast with apple cores, and comedy and musical acts were brought on instead.¹⁹⁷ Once again, as

¹⁹⁶ *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction: A Documentary Sourcebook*, ed. by Stephen Middleton (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), p. xv.

¹⁹⁷ Simon Snipe, 'Sports of New-York. Containing an Evening at the African Theatre. Also a Trip to the Races! With Two Appropriate Songs' (New York, 1823), reproduced in Thompson, pp. 114-16 (p. 114).



Figure 11: The first colored senator and representatives – in the 41st and 42nd Congress of the United States (New York: Currier and Ives, 1872, available in the Library of Congress online archive <<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/98501907/>> [accessed on 2 July 2014]).

with Aldridge’s early performance at the Coburg, an audience tries – here successfully – to force black actors out of the arena of tragedy. Frustratingly, Snipe does not say whether the missile throwers were from the entire audience or only from a particular ethnic group. This should have been easy to spot since, according to Eric Lott, ‘whites (many of whom were hecklers) were confined to a separate section because, a handbill said, “Whites do not know how to conduct themselves at entertainments for ladies and gentlemen of colour”’.¹⁹⁸ The handbill gives a flavor of the provocative and playful stance of the theatre, which presumably made it even more of a target for white aggression, with the theatre being forced to close after a couple of years following a litany of

¹⁹⁸ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the African Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 45. The handbill is quoted from Roi Ottley and William Weatherby, *The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1967), p. 73.

public order issues and white rioting. It briefly re-opened around the time when Mathews visited it in 1824, but then closed permanently in a climate of continuing hostility.¹⁹⁹

Returning to Griffin and Christy's burlesque, Christy's Minstrels claimed to be the oldest minstrel troupe in the union, set up by Edwin Pearce Christy in 1842. In Figure 12, at the bottom of the playbill is an illustration of Christy performing as a black woman. The enthusiastic burlesque writer G. W. Griffin later added his name to their troupe.

Wells writes how most of the American Shakespeare burlesquers were:

little concerned to parody Shakespeare's language. It seems clear that American audiences were not expected to possess the intimate familiarity with theatre texts of the plays that was natural in the close-knit community of London theatre-goers.²⁰⁰

There are nods towards Shakespeare, but certainly the exuberance of the language play is turned far more towards sending up immigrant voices – undermining any claim they might have to tragic status – whether it be negroes in *Othello* or Eastern European Jews in another of Christy's Minstrels' plays from the 1870s,

¹⁹⁹ See, for example, Hazel Waters, *Racism on the Victorian Stage: Representation of Slavery and the Black Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 58.

²⁰⁰ Wells, *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*, V, xii.

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Figure 12: A playbill for Christy's Minstrels (Houghton Library, Harvard, <<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/houghton/2010/06/02/the-american-minstrel-show-collection> [accessed 1/2/2013]).

Shylock; or, The Jew of Chatham Street, the location referring to a seedy and large open market in New York, where the final punishment is for Shylock to be tossed in a blanket.²⁰¹ However, since all the characters are played in blackface, there would be a curious homogenising effect on the spectrum of ethnicities on display.

In this *Othello* burlesque, the play has shrunk to a domestic drama where most of the characters' employment is not even mentioned. Iago is now the deserted lover of 'Desde', left by her so she can be with: 'a nasty, dirty fellar, / As black as mud — a white-washer — a nager called Othello' (p. 129). Brabantio speaks in a mock German or Yiddish dialect, his speech even more exaggerated than it was for Christy's Shylock. He exclaims: 'What! Married mit a nigger?' (p. 129). Then shortly afterwards verges on the nonsensical with: 'Ter dyvel! You're von humbug!' (p. 130). Perhaps this is an eliding of the two characters of Brabantio and Shylock – both wealthy, Venetian single fathers deserted by their daughters, but whom we are invited to pity in one case and to mock in the other, in the original plays. These two characters might already be associated in a nineteenth-century mind because, as Charles H. Shattuck writes in the context of straight versions of these two plays, in London:

In all likelihood [at Drury Lane] the Venetian scenes of the first act [of *Othello*] shared sets with *The Merchant of Venice*. Thus, the street scene of I. 1. showing Brabantio's house at centre stage [. . .] was probably the same set from which Jessica eloped with Lorenzo [. . .] the Council-Chamber of I. 3. was probably the *Court of Justice* in which Shylock was tried.²⁰²

But then, in the spirit of doing away with stable, psychologically coherent characters, a few lines later in the burlesque Brabantio's voice seems to slide into

²⁰¹ In the collection *Darkey Plays: A Collection of Ethiopian Dramas, Farces, Interludes, Burlesque Operas, Eccentricities, Extravaganzas, Comicalities, Whimsicalities, Etc. Etc. As Played by the Principal 'Burnt Cork' Performers All Over the Union, Part Six* (New York: Happy Hours Company, [1876]).

²⁰² *Kemble Promptbooks*, VII, iii.

the minstrel dialect, as he explains why he is so angry at losing his daughter: ‘I feed her up, to see if I could make her / So fat to see her dat people would pay’ (p. 130). Paternal love is replaced by harsh economics. The nineteenth century was a popular time for freak shows and the exhibiting of humans. Given that Desdemona here would have been played by a blacked-up actor, this may have created some connection in the audience’s mind with the South African Saartje Bartmann who was, in effect, a live exhibit in Britain and France a few decades earlier, with talk of her large buttocks causing particular excitement.²⁰³ This is, of course, in total contrast to the original Desdemona, who would have been hidden from view, destined for the private pleasures of one of the ‘curled darlings’ of Venice’s aristocracy.

This time the use of the handkerchief is even more degraded. Iago says he saw Cassio using it to mop up his mucus: ‘I saw him (*imitates wiping nose*). Then put it in his pocket’ (p. 135).

In short order, Othello slaps Desdemona, giving her a black eye, and then finds Iago and ‘*knocks him down with a whitewash brush*’ (p. 137). Othello’s distress is communicated, as in the original play, with a realistic breaking-down of language, a howl of inarticulacy: ‘I feel like tearin’ things; Oh, blood! Iago, blood!’ (p. 137). The docile Desdemona has now entirely gone and been replaced by one seeking vengeance, who gives an explicit reminder of the improbably short time frame of the original play: ‘Just one day married, and to cut this figure – / But I’ll have satisfaction on that nigger’ (p. 138). Andrew Carlson points out, in an example of how much of the humour in these scripts would perhaps only be

²⁰³ See Nadja Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009) for a general discussion of nineteenth-century British freak shows, and Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

apparent in performance, that ‘Desdemona’s reference to her figure was probably humorous to an audience watching a man’.²⁰⁴

In the final death scene, Othello enters with a lighted candle and does a parody of the ‘Put out the light’ speech, to which Desdemona challenges him about her eye. Othello tells her she is about to die. Desdemona exclaims: ‘About to die! What do you mean by that?’ But they are interrupted by a cat caterwauling outside. Othello is distracted: ‘List’ to the squalling of that old tom cat’ (p. 139). Again there is no intense focus of tragedy here but the familiar territory of everyday life, where our delusions of importance are constantly upstaged by the indifference of the world around us. This burlesque finds yet a new way of circumventing the original death of Desdemona: this feisty Desdemona is not going without a struggle, and so a childlike pillow fight starts to replace the tragic pillow smothering, and that is where the burlesque finishes.

Dar’s de Money (Anonymous) [1880]

Dar’s de Money is, like *Othello or The Moor and his Amour*, another one-scene burlesque, first performed in New York, in Wood’s Minstrel Hall, and published in a collection of *Darkey Dramas*.²⁰⁵ Ray B. Browne dates the play’s first performance as not until 1880.²⁰⁶ The frontispiece makes claims to the burlesque’s enormous popularity, listing a large number of ‘first-class Negro Minstrel Troupes’ that have performed the burlesque with ‘complete success’. Neill describes this and another minstrel burlesque, *Desdemonum* as ‘the latest

²⁰⁴ Andrew Carlson, ‘Othello and Desdemonum: Defining Nineteenth-century Blackness’, in *Theatre History Studies Volume 30: African and African American Theatre Past and Present* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), pp. 176-86 (p. 178).

²⁰⁵ *The Darkey Drama: A Collection of Approved Ethiopian Acts, Scenes, Etc.*, 9 parts, ed. by Henry Llewellyn Williams, Jr (London: Samuel French, 1867-77), Part 1 (1867), 21-27.

²⁰⁶ Ray B. Browne, ‘Shakespeare in American Vaudeville and Negro Minstrels’, *American Quarterly*, 12 (1960), 374-91 (p. 384). Browne also outlines the plots of other minstrel burlesques of *Othello*.

and most degraded of the parodies' where 'the threat posed by racial intermarriage was removed altogether by the simple expedient of converting the entire cast to black-face minstrel-characters'.²⁰⁷ Griffin and Christy's *Othello* would also have had the entire white male cast in blackface, but simply doing this does not remove the threat of interracial marriage if the actors none the less perform the parts of a black man courting or married to a white woman; it merely introduces another level of representation, just as the casting of two white men to play Othello and Desdemona in Shakespeare's productions of *Othello* would not have removed the threat from the original tragedy.

However, *Dar's de Money* is distinct from either *Desdemonum* or Griffin and Christy's *Othello* since in this burlesque the actors do always remain as simply minstrel characters, who are attempting to stage the tragedy of *Othello*. Therefore, they are not within the world of *Othello* but outside, looking in. They are dressed as tramps, returning to that earliest form of minstrelsy dreamt up by Rice with one of them – Jake – described in the *dramatis personae* as wearing the classic 'blue swallow-tailed coat' used by Rice, and ridiculously wearing one Wellington boot and one shoe. The skit has a pared-down plot that abandons many of the elements that give a hare-brained pace to traditional burlesque, such as frantic rhyming couplets, madcap dancing and boxing matches. It is hard not to be reminded of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

The burlesque begins with Jake finding Pete in dejected spirits. Pete says how he attempted to get money and sympathy from a stranger by pretending that he is black in the face because he has been garrotted. But the stranger had not been impressed, pointing out that he also had black arms. Rolled into this rather dismal little joke are a complex association of meanings: the stereotype of the lying, itinerant, lazy black man, attempting to live on his wits but too stupid to do it properly; the suggestion of blackness as a punishment; a link to the lynch mobs who terrorised African-American communities; and a metatheatrical drawing of attention to the pretence essential to any performance – that an actor is pretending to be something he or she is not.

Jake explains that he too has fallen on hard times, having left the theatre where he works as an actor, as: 'I broke wid my manager [...] 'cause he gave me

²⁰⁷ Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by Neill, p. 44.

too much to do. I'm tired ob dese fellers' (p. 23). He is now trying to set up a theatre company himself, and with sudden inspiration, he asks Pete if he wants to join him. There is some disagreement over who should be in charge of the finances, with neither trusting the other, until they reach a compromise of appointing a third person to have this office.

Having run through and dismissed several plays that they could perform, Jake suddenly hits on *Othello* and reckons it will be perfect for the two of them to perform. Jake summarises the story, making it ridiculous through the speed with which he tells it:

Othello a jealous Moor – tells tales of love – runs off wid
Desdemoney – excited! Whar's de handkerchum? (*catches Pete by the
throat*) seizes her! Strangles her; ha! (p. 24)

Pete gets free, feels his throat and says, 'I guess I'll play Othello'. The humour in this line is that Pete's throat really is hurt; the distance between playacting and reality has collapsed, and so Pete's decision on who he would like to play is based on the judgement that it is better to deliver than receive pain – a desire to wrest oneself from the position of victim.

Much of the humour would have also derived from the idea of black actors 'getting above themselves' by trying their hand at tragedy but making it ridiculous. Fifty years after Ira Aldridge and his black compatriots at The African Theatre first asserted their right to play tragedy, this and burlesques like it specifically attacked that right. In an even more explicit example, another minstrel sketch – *The Darkey Tragedian* – has a black Mr Forrest turns up on stage, dressed as Richard III, and with a crown, refusing to do any more burlesque: 'I's got above that now. Don't do anything but de first-class legitimate. Hamlums, and Richard Number Two, and Skylark, and dem t'ings'.²⁰⁸ He '*throws himself into an attitude to perform*' but his theatrical manager Mr Brown has seen plenty of these black actors who now despise the 'burnt cork', with which they blacked up their skin to create a caricature of blackness, and is unimpressed. He suggests Mr

²⁰⁸ Charles Townsend, *The Darkey Tragedian: An Ethiopian Sketch in One Scene* (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1874), p. 4.

Forrest 'put it in the shape of a burlesque and I'll think of it' (p. 7), and then takes the truncheon that the actor has used as a sword and beats him off-stage with it, literally driving him from the serious stage.

In *Dar's de Money*, the slapstick comedy gets into full swing when Jake puts out two chairs to make the bed on which Desdemona will be murdered, and lays a sheet on them, having insisted that Pete still plays Desdemona. Pete ends up falling between the chairs with only his head peering out of the sheet.

Here the epilepsy scene, which was omitted from both Bell's and Kemble's editions of the tragedy as it suggested a lack of dignity, is revived – and Jake has an old theatrical trick to make it look convincing. He eats a bar of soap to start foaming at the mouth. However, things take a troubling turn when it appears that Jake has actually managed to kill Pete with some over-enthusiastic acting. That when we watch a tragedy, we need to be moved by the death of a character on stage with all its irreversibility, and temporarily quash our awareness that the still body we are watching is that of a live, and alive, actor, who will soon stand up, is here absurdly foregrounded: we are watching a white man in black make up pretending to be a black man genuinely killed while he clumsily and grotesquely attempted to create the illusion of a white woman killed by her black husband.

While Jake is pondering what to do with this apparently real, heavy, dead body, which will not conveniently dematerialise as it would in theatre, Pete revives and that brings both the skit and their own rendition of *Othello* to an end. But not before we have experienced a complex and discomfiting exploration of the nature of representation that makes this skit worthy of attention, despite, its unpleasant subject matter, and not simply dismissed as degenerate.

Othello the Second: a Burletta by Frank Hudson (1888)



ACT I.

SCENE.—*Stage represents Council Chamber, high chair at back, row of chairs down each side. Entrance at back to right of high chair.*

[Enter IAMAGO.]

IAMAGO. Kind friends, pray note—I am a desperate man!
To tell oh, of Othello is my plan.

E 2

Figure 13: The title page to *Othello The Second* by Frank Hudson.

This is an example of a burlesque written in England for the popular nineteenth-century past-time of the private family performance, and published in 1888, the only play in a selection of fairy tales.²⁰⁹ In his introduction to *Othello the Second*, Hudson writes of how ‘dozens of plays have been written and published for the use of amateurs, but I believe this is the first time a Burletta has been published

²⁰⁹ It appears in the collection Frank Hudson, *The Origin of Plum Pudding’ with other Fairy Tales and a Little Burletta (For Little People and Big)*, with illustrations by Gordon Browne (London: Ward and Downey, 1888).

for that purpose' (p. 61), which was perhaps the case in Britain but it seems doubtful as certainly in the United States a long list of burlesques were published for 'the amateur stage' by the New York-based Happy Hours company, as well as a booklet on *How we Managed our Private Theatricals*.²¹⁰ There was even in Britain another burlesque of *Othello* written for private theatricals, but this one was not published in its entirety. It was called *O'Thello* and was written by a young Charles Dickens in 1833 – the same year as both Mathews and Dowling's burlesques – and had a special new role created for his father as 'the Great Unpaid'.²¹¹

As befits a burlesque, *Othello the Second* relaxes any rules around there being a consistent time; it can be 'Any time you like' (p. 63). Othello is as usual seriously downgraded in status, here to 'Sammy, the Black. A Street nigger' (p. 63). As an 'uppity' negro, he dresses preposterously in: '*Chessboard Trousers, Blue Swallow-tail Coat, Black Waistcoat, Displaying Elaborate Shirt-front, Ordinary Boots, Tall White Hat, Enormous 'Milton' Collar, and Cuffs*' (p. 64), the imagined result of which can be seen in the illustration reproduced as Figure 13. As with the American minstrel shows, where the playbill in Figure 12 lists the admission price for children, this burlesque too was clearly seen as appropriate entertainment for children to watch or even act in. Hudson suggests that the play 'can be performed either by the little ones or by the elder folk' (p. 61).

This burlesque plays with the idea of blackness as something that can be washed away, associating it with dirt but also suggesting that to have a white skin is the default identity and other colours an aberration. The explicit inspiration for it is the now-infamous Pears' soap adverts (see Figure 14 for an example). It is an idea that still continued to have currency in the twentieth century, with Henri Bergson asking, 'Why does one laugh at a negro?', and concluding it is because

²¹⁰ Advertisement appearing on the end pages of *Darkey Plays*, [1876].

²¹¹ Stray pages of the part for Dickens's father were subsequently sold in 1842 by his often-broke father. Therefore, the haphazard way in which some of these burlesques have survived and others perished was even the fate of one written by such an esteemed writer. In 1929, three pages emerged, one at an auction in Sotheby's and two in an auction in New York, causing a considerable stir of excitement, and were then published in *The Dickensian*, 26 (1930), pp. 9-11.

he appears ‘daubed over with ink or soot’, making us think of ‘a white man in disguise’.²¹²

The burlesque begins with Iamago, an Irish hurdy-gurdy player, described as a ‘Brigand, very ragged’ (p. 63) resenting that he is having to compete with another street musician: ‘A nigger minstrel of a jetty hue, / Who’s father’s father lived in Timbuctu’.²¹³ Here, then, as in the other burlesques, Othello is an immigrant now only distantly connected to faraway lands. He then falls into this curious category of both despised for his difference, while simultaneously robbed of it. Hauled in front of the Lord Mayor and his council to explain how he came to marry Dearmona, his words are met with comic confusion:

OTHELLO Ahem! Most potent, grave and reverend sinners.

ALL Eh?

OTHELLO My very noble and improved skin plasters.

ALL What? (p. 72)

The Mayor remains baffled as to ‘why one should love a nigger’ (p. 73), and decides the most sensible course of action is to send Othello to jail for three months as punishment for daring to marry a white woman. But then faithful Dearmona bursts in and begs for her husband’s release. Her father Brabanter cries

²¹² Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Rockville: ARC Manor, 2008), p. 25. First published in French in 1899. First English translation published in 1911.

²¹³ The Irish have, of course, also been a popular target for mockery, by non-Irish white people. William Maley claims that the title of that other amateur burlesque, Dickens’s *O’Thello*, actually had the subtitle *The Irish Moor of Venice* (Willy Maley, ‘*Othello* and the Irish Question’, in *Celtic Shakespeare: The Bard and the Borderers*, ed. by William Maley and Rory Roughlane (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), pp. 121-38 (p. 134)). Therefore, whereas in Hudson’s burlesque, as in others, Iago is made Irish while Othello is kept black, here two persecuted groups are conflated in one central grotesque.

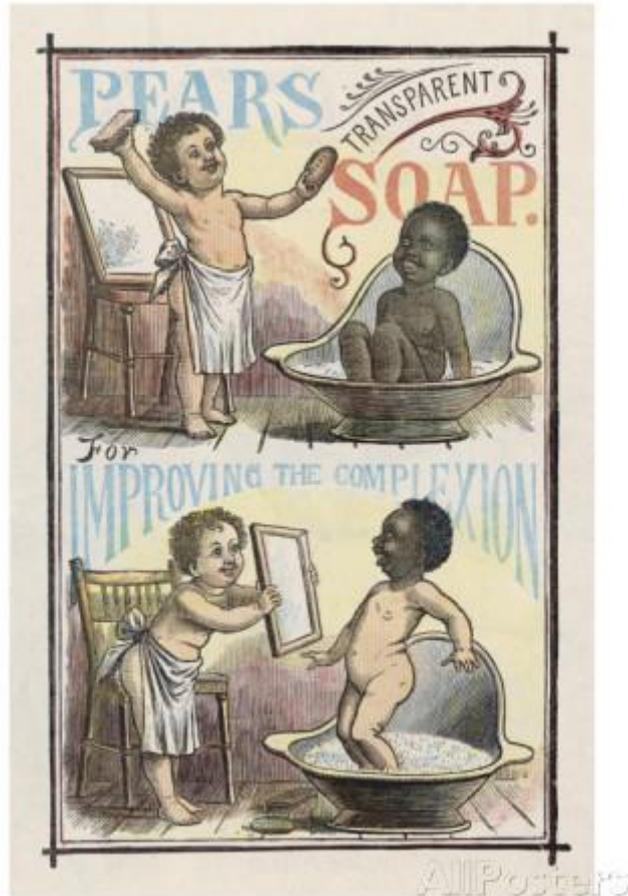


Figure 14: A nineteenth-century advert for Pears Soap.

to the Mayor: 'Ho! Separate them. Quick, make them desist!'. To which the Mayor replies with those little political quip so beloved of burlsequers: 'I can't separate them, being a Liberal Unionist' (p. 74).

In his prison cell, Othello longs for his liberty, to be out on those lively modern London streets that formed a backdrop to so many burlesques, with its cheery food sellers. Just as a white discomfort with how black people have been treated appears uneasily to break through in the commercial burlesques in a desire for a form of amnesia, for an erasure of the history, here amidst all the overt and jocular racism, we again have moments when white shame seems apparent. Strangely at odds with the gay rhythm of the rhyming couplets, Othello cries: 'In prison, caged, confined – because I'm black! / There was a time they'd place me on the rack' (p. 79).

Then we are swiftly back in the territory of unambiguous comedy when Hudson's Othello remembers a poster he has seen at Brighton Railway Station, and cries out:

A young nigger boy who in his bath was laughing loud for joy.
Now, this nigger's face was WHITE – the black had vanished
and the mysterious compound which had banished all black away
Was PLUM'S SOAP! That's the name. (p. 79)

This is a reversal of the original Pears' advert, where it is actually the boy's body that has become white and his face remains the same.

Dearmona comes to visit Othello, accompanied by her unmarried servant Milli, and Ratherigo and Iamogo. In this burlesque, Desdemona's character comes closest to Shakespeare's original. Her love for Othello is constant and pure, and she says how she 'would not lose his love for untold gold' (p. 81). However, the difference from the original and every other rewriting of *Othello* that I have found – whether from this period or more recent – is that Othello never doubts her; the barriers to their relationship are the purely external ones of a society that regards an inter-racial marriage as abhorrent.

Seeing Iamago, Othello promises not to compete with him on the streets anymore. In fact, Othello now has bigger plans – and once again here is the mocking image of the black man with grandiose ambitions that are doomed to failure that had been used to attempt to silence Aldridge. He is going to set up a 'monster company', which 'must be musical and operatic, literary, scientific and dramatic' (p. 83).

The other characters get Othello the soap, and it has miraculous results: when he next appears his face is white, and it is just in time for the Lord Mayor's and Brabantio's prison visit. In an example of high burlesque, Othello enters to the accompaniment of '*the first act of the Faust*' (p. 85), in a fashionable suit, and with Dearmona on his arm. Instantly, Othello is given Brabantio's blessing and he and the mayor even offer to invest in his company. And Milli eagerly agrees to marry Ratherigo who appears to have forgotten his crush on Dearmona.

The Lord Mayor proposes a midnight supper that very evening where on the menu, in a long list of tempting delicacies including Irish Chowder and

Charlotte Russe with sugar powder, comes ‘roast beef’ (p. 87). With a certain pleasing circularity, in quite possibly the last *Othello* burlesque of this type, either amateur or professional, the desire is satisfied in that earliest burlesque, *Othello-Travestie*, for a world where the past has been erased so that Othello has not killed Desdemona, so she can still ‘eat roast beef’.

With that, the characters join together in a final dance, for, as Othello says, they are now ‘as brothers all’ (p. 87). Rather than face the complex problems brought about from the aftermath of one ethnic group enslaving another, the problem is obliterated by the black man simply being able to wash away his colour, his difference.

As in all these burlesques – reflecting their anarchic structure – the effect of *Othello the Second* is slightly out of control. The reduction of a black man to a grotesque mask of burnt cork and thick red lips painted on a white man’s face, while forcing blackness into a comic caricature, does simultaneously emphasise how colour is only skin deep, and particularly in this burlesque for family theatricals where the audience actually witnesses the black paint being washed away, and who is revealed is none other than a family member. Whatever the crude racism of the play, would this not have the effect, particularly in the minds of the impressionable children watching it, of revealing the cruelty of confining a man who turned out – in that moment of delighted recognition as the cork is washed away – to be none other than a black-skinned version of dear papa, or perhaps a doting uncle?

The Dying Away of the Burlesque

Hudson begins his retelling of Jack Frost in his collection of fairy tales by writing:

The members of the London Celebrated Comedy and Burlesque Company, which were playing to enormously empty houses at the

Theatre Royal, Nojokeborough, declared, one and all, that they never experienced such a Frost before.²¹⁴

It appears that a certain frostiness was actually on its way in how burlesques would be received. Davenport Adams in his 1891 book on burlesques suggests there is now little enthusiasm for them, particularly singling out Maurice Dowling's no longer performed *Othello Travestie*, as having 'a text [that] is almost wholly without humour'.²¹⁵ Fiddle-strings snapping in 'the concussion of air, consequent on the "deafening plaudits"', as playfully described on Dowling's playbill, have been replaced by a deafening silence.

The speed of the decline in popularity is startling. Less than a couple of decades earlier, George Eliot, in her last published writing in 1879, presents burlesques as something to be regarded as a very real threat to both culture and morality. In a collection of essays purporting to be by a minor scholar, Theophrastus Such, who is Eliot's own fictional creation, Such has burlesques as his first target in the chapter 'Debasing the Moral Currency':

Some high authority is needed to give many worthy and timid persons the freedom of muscular repose under the growing demand on them to laugh when they have no other reason than the peril of being taken for dullards; still more to inspire them with the courage to say that they object to the theatrical spoiling for themselves and their children of all affecting themes, all the grander deeds and aims of men, by burlesque associations adapted to the taste of rich fishmongers in the stalls and their assistants in the gallery. The English people in the present generation are falsely reputed to know Shakspeare [...] but there seems a clear prospect that in the coming generation he will be known to them through burlesques, and that his plays will find a new life as pantomimes. A bottle-nosed Lear will come on with a monstrous corpulence from which he will frantically dance himself free during

²¹⁴ Hudson, p. 11.

²¹⁵ *A Book of Burlesque: Sketches of English Stage Travestie and Parody*, ed. by W. H. Davenport (London: Henry & Co., 1891), p. 130.

the midnight storm; Rosalind and Celia will join in a grotesque ballet with shepherds and shepherdesses; Ophelia in fleshings and a voluminous brevity of grenadine will dance through the mad scene, finishing with the famous ‘attitude of the scissors’ in the arms of Laertes; and all the speeches in *Hamlet* will be so ingeniously parodied that the originals will be reduced to a mere *memoria technica* of the improver’s puns – premonitory signs of a hideous millennium, in which the lion will have to lie down with the lascivious monkeys.²¹⁶

We can see how a reaction to the class snobbery expressed by Eliot’s Such actually helped bring about the dismantling of the cultural canon that he already mournfully predicts, as previously excluded voices, such as rich fishmongers’ assistants, demanded to be heard. However, where Such – of course we do not know how close his views aligned with his creator’s – is way off the mark is in his belief that Shakespeare would only be known to us through burlesques; in fact, they have been all but forgotten, treated in the spirit in which they were offered, as mere trifles to provide an evening’s entertainment. This none the less gives us a startling sense of their cultural dominance at the time, so that Such bemoans how many felt an obligation to laugh despite finding nothing to amuse.

Stanley Wells, in championing the Shakespearean burlesques in general, in the 1970s, writes how they ‘show us something of Victorian society at its most unbuttoned, with a vivid immediacy and informal charm such as scarcely can be found anywhere else’.²¹⁷ They are certainly essential social documents, offering a huge repository of slang, cultural mores and even what food might be served at a celebratory midnight dinner. However, the *Othello* burlesques in particular do

²¹⁶ George Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, the beginning of Chapter 10 (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1879) <www.gutenberg.org> [accessed on 2 February 2013]. The little we learn of her fictional scholar’s life suggests a little sending up on her own part: he is a bachelor, has suffered from unrequited love, and had an accident in the Alps that caused him ‘the nervous shock which has ever since notably diminished my digestive powers’.

²¹⁷ Wells, *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*, II, viii.

more than this in that they have the potential to deeply unnerve a twenty-first century audience.

While nineteenth-century critics might object to how Shakespeare's plays are distorted in these burlesques, a twenty-first-century audience is likely to feel far more uncomfortable about how black people are grotesquely distorted. The burlesques' various portrayals of Othello put these plays as beyond the Pale as Desdemona's choice to marry him once put her. What might still pass for 'informal charm' in the 1970s now makes these burlesques virtually unproduceable. A public performance might even constitute a criminal offence under current British law where part of Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 forbids the use of 'insulting words or behaviour [...] within the hearing or sight of a person likely to be caused harassment, alarm or distress thereby'.²¹⁸ The only exclusion being if this occurs within a 'dwelling'.

Burlesques of *Othello* did not entirely disappear in the twentieth century but reappeared in altered yet still connected forms. An Edwardian farce called *Desdemona Did It* has some of the madcap hilarity of a burlesque but only contains elements of the *Othello* plot, interestingly redistributed amongst the characters.²¹⁹ Written anonymously and first performed at the Empire Theatre, Kingston-on-Thames, in 1912, it begins with Sadie Burtlandt – a young white American actress staying in London – remarking on how black people in England give themselves 'airs' in a way not allowed in the States. She then pretends to be Desdemona, her aggressive and mentally unstable 'coloured servant', in order to impress a theatrical manager, Frank Sloeman, with her impersonation skills.

Sadie / Desdemona pretends to be about to kill Frank, so offended is she at his unwillingness to go for a walk in public with her. She has already lasciviously and bizarrely taken a large piece of butter on her knife and smeared it over Frank's mouth, and it is only when he is almost collapsing in terror that she lets him in on the joke. The white well-born woman, then, blacks up and turns herself into a female version of the most stereotypical failings of Othello that have been well mined by the burlesques, even though, ironically, with the name of the white,

²¹⁸ <<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1986/64>> [accessed on 14 December 2012].

²¹⁹ The manuscript is in the British Library [LCP 1912/32].

wealthy Desdemona: violent, on her pride, defensive, emotionally and sexually incontinent, even borrowing words from Shakespeare's Othello when she urges the terrified Frank 'repent o' you sins', as Othello urges Desdemona.

Between 1919 and 1920, the pioneering British animator Anson Dyer made burlesques of a number of Shakespeare's plays, with only *'Amlet, Oh'phelia* and two fragments of *Othello* surviving. While these were not plays but silent, black and white animations, Dyer's *Othello* is quite possibly the last exploration of Othello as a minstrel – as black but with the white actor apparent beneath – rather than simply a black caricature. In this burlesque, Desdemona runs a bathing-machine at the seaside and is courted by Othello, a seaside minstrel. She is called Mona for short because, as the intertitle explains, 'she has been bobbed', as can be seen in Figure 15, where Othello, with his banjo on his back, is offering her that fated love token of a handkerchief, here chequered.

Michael Brooke writes how in the first surviving fragment – from the beginning of the perhaps ten-minute film – 'the animator's live-action hand is seen sketching Othello, who comes to life to take over the final application of burnt cork'.²²⁰ In this opening sequence is revealed that fascination with the process of blacking-up, which is apparent in many of the burlesques that I have discussed. Playing with layers of representation and reality, Dyer's own filmed hand draws first a white man, sitting at his greenroom mirror. Dyer's hand then uses a real match to light a two-dimensional, drawn stub of a candle on which he can burn a real cork to begin the blacking-up process of his cartoon Othello, which his cartoon then takes over. The whole process occupies perhaps a fifth of the whole film. The theatrical nature of Othello's blackness is further reinforced at the end when, as with *Othello the Second*, his black colour comes off, this time by being rubbed onto Mona's white skin as they embrace, in the second fragment, perhaps echoing that old fear that Newman described of the black man having the power to make his white sexual partner 'resemble him'.²²¹

²²⁰ The surviving, three-minute fragment of *Othello* can be seen at <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/media/stream.jsp?id=1185221>> [accessed 1 February 2013], with an introduction by Michael Brooke.

²²¹ Newman, "And Wash the Ethiop White", p. 151.

XXXX But in keeping with this cartoon's much softer humour than is found in the nineteenth-century burlesques, any connotation this might have of Mona's whiteness being stained, corrupted, is undermined by the jollity of the intertitle: Othello 'proceeds to smother her...' but then the next intertitle continues 'with burnt cork and kisses!'



Figure 15: A still from *Othello* (1920), directed by Anson Dyer, produced by Hepworth Picture Plays.

There was actually a 1927 play called *Othello: A Burlesque in One Act*, but it seems misnamed, being more a drawing room comedy that neatly abides by the rules of realism.²²² Written by the American Hope H. Moulton, who also wrote 'burlesques' of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, the prologue warns the audience to have their handkerchiefs ready as it 'is all so heart-rending' (p. 3). Desdemona is a flapper, her father a US senator, and Othello a wealthy sheik come to visit him, moving him away from the negro caricatures of the nineteenth-century burlesques. After a courtship that lasts only a few lines, Desdemona marries him, believing he will be more exciting than the young men of her own

²²² Hope H. Moulton, *Othello: A Burlesque in One Act* (Boston, MA.: Walter H. Baker Company, 1927).

society, only to be sadly disillusioned. Leaving Othello at home doing crosswords in order to dance the Charleston with Cassio, she promises to be back in time to warm his malted milk. Othello, discovering where she has been, is enraged and tries to smother her. However, Desdemona dramatically produces a revolver and threatens to shoot him, and watches as Othello ‘sneaks out dejectedly’ (p. 11).

As we have seen, in dismantling the tragedy of *Othello*, the nineteenth-century burlesques send up the delicate, passive image of Desdemona, so beloved in Victorian productions of Shakespeare’s play, and create instead an active, bawdy woman who won’t obediently play her role of quietly quitting the stage of life to allow Othello to make his final tortured speeches. The burlesques’ Desdemona refuses simply to be an object that represents Othello’s loss. In their very mocking of a cherished image of femininity, largely to dismantle her black husband’s gravitas, they create a character who has proto-feminist elements. That Othello’s tragic currency appears to increase or decrease on a sliding scale in relation to the effacement of Desdemona leads in later, post-colonial rewritings of the play to a schism between those that keep their sights on Shakespeare’s black hero and those who relocate the tragedy onto the plight of a female protagonist, as I explore in Chapter 2. Othello’s tragic status now faces a new threat, this time from feminist quarters.

Even more than the burlesques, the three early twentieth-century comic rewritings of *Othello* foreshadow this threat. *Desdemona Did It* moves a woman to the central role and has this protagonist, in a confused playing of gender and race, takes on the role of vengeful aggressor, all passivity gone. She also aspires to more than simply being a self-sacrificing wife and to have her own profession – as an actress – another new departure for the Desdemona character. This is followed by Dyer’s Mona running the seaside bathing machine, offering ‘mixed bathing’ for men and women, and with the radical cropped hair that signaled visually a move amongst women to remove classical symbols of their femininity and claim equality with men. Then we have, as far as I am aware, the first rewriting of *Othello* by a woman, with her heroine last seen brandishing a gun at a cowed and terrified husband.²²³

²²³ Lemuel A. Johnson, in *Shakespeare in Africa (and Other Venues): Import and the Appropriation of Culture* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998) p. 154, describes how

There then appears to be a curious hiatus of thirty years before these characters are transformed again in a resurgence of reinvention of Shakespeare's texts that began in the 1960s and still continues today. As the minstrel shows breathed an embarrassed last and the next stages of the emancipation of human beings took the form of decolonisation and civil and gender rights movements, *Othello* offered itself as the perfect hunting ground for an exploration of the charged relationships between male and female, black and white.

Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré imagines Desdemona's revenge taken to its logical conclusion with Desdemona actually killing Othello, by poisoning him, in her fiction *Fábulas de la garza desangrada* (Mexico City: Joaquin Mortiz, 1984), pp. 58-9.

Chapter 2 The Eclipse of White Males?

Rewritings of *Othello* post-1960

Introduction

When beginning to write this thesis, I had a recurring image in my mind of two white Jacobean male actors – one a boy, and the other much older, playing Desdemona and Othello. It is their final scene together and as they say their lines, both the actors start to cry. The tears running down Othello's cheeks smudge, blur and begin to wash away his black make-up, leaving white tracks down his face. Desdemona touches him and more black comes off on her hands. He goes to stroke her hair and her wig slides off, revealing the boy's short hair underneath. When Othello reaches the line, 'Being done, there is no pause', he appears stuck on these words, repeating them. Then:

O insupportable, O heavy hour!
Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
Of sun and moon, and that th' affrighted globe
Should yawn at alteration.²²⁴

But the alteration he mourns is not the death of Desdemona but a future alteration that both of them can preternaturally foresee: the progressive, unstoppable eclipse of themselves – of white men – as enjoying a monopoly on the creation, and performance, of tragedy, as those who were previously excluded gain access to the stage.

Such is the obscure, and deliberately obscured, history of all marginalised groups, including women and black people, that it is difficult to state with any certainty when they first appeared on stage even in as narrow a context as the English-speaking world. The difficulty is exacerbated by theatre itself being such an amorphous form; theatre in the sense of performing to entertain others

²²⁴ These are Shakespeare's lines I. 2. 97-100.

stretches back to the very earliest forms of human life, and the border between that and more formalised performance is difficult to place. However, when it comes to exploring how marginalised groups have infiltrated tragedy – an aesthetic form that bestows a central significance on both its characters, particularly its protagonist, and those who embody those roles – it is easier to construct a history precisely because of the significance this particular genre has been accorded. In this history, one tragedy is at the forefront, and it is fittingly the one that took the radical first step of having a black tragic protagonist: *Othello*.

Since the first instances of black people performing in tragedy coincides with the rise of *Othello* burlesques in the nineteenth century, I have already discussed some of this history in the last chapter. James Hewlett, the chief player at the African Theatre who was almost definitely the man burlesqued by Charles Mathews, is generally regarded as the first named black actor of either gender to perform in a tragedy, and the play was none other than *Othello*. This was not Hewlett's first part. As George Thompson describes, when the African Theatre opened on 17 September 1821, its first production was the history play (although occasionally known as a tragedy) *Richard III*, using Colley Cibber's Restoration version, which in this period was still popularly used rather than Shakespeare's original both in the United States and England. James Hewlett again took the lead role, although Thompson has found evidence to suggest that on the very first night of *Richard III* a substitute actor had to be employed, another black man called Charles Taft.²²⁵ Ira Aldridge is generally accepted as being the first black actor of either gender to perform in a tragedy in Britain, from the mid-1820s and again this was in *Othello*.²²⁶

Othello then went back to being solely a white man's part in prominent productions, with the exception of Paul Robeson performing the role at the Savoy Theatre in London in 1930, until a shift in the zeitgeist in the last couple of decades of the twentieth century meant that now casting a white man swung from being accepted practice to a controversial act. It was done when Patrick Stewart

²²⁵ Thompson, p. 7 and p. 10, and p. 230 for a copy of Hewlett's Repertory'.

²²⁶ Although, as I discussed in Chapter 1, if we accept that his first performance as *Othello* at the Royalty Theatre was in a burlesque version, then arguably his first at least semi-tragic role was in *Ooronoko* at the Coburg Theatre.

played Othello in a Washington Shakespeare Theatre production in 1997, but this was in what was called a ‘photonegative production’ where he did not change the colour of his skin and all the rest of the cast were black.²²⁷ However, as I describe in Chapter 3, when I write about my own tragi-burlesque, this taboo is increasingly being dismantled as part of a wider fragmenting of Othello’s identity.



Figure 16: An illustration of mummers (Bodleian Library MS Bodle. 264 fol 21v).

Now turning to women, it would be a mistake to date their appearance on the stage as going back only as far as the Restoration, since medieval illustrations of mummers plays or folk plays do appear to show women performing (see, for example Figure 16). However, when it comes to tragedy, the white male’s physical embodiment of women’s characters does seem to have come to an end when the theatres re-opened after the Civil War in 1660.

In 1662 Charles II issued a royal decree permitting female roles to be played not by boys but by women, used as he was to seeing them act during his exile on the continent, as the practice was already widespread in France, Italy and

²²⁷ For a discussion of this production, see Denise Albanese, ‘Black and White, and Dread All Over: The Shakespeare Theatre’s “Photonegative” *Othello* and the Body of Desdemona’, in *Othello* (New Casebooks series), ed. by Lena Cowen Orlin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 220-49.

Spain.²²⁸ As an indication of how such a custom had been viewed by the earlier Jacobean, Thomas Nashe published a pamphlet in 1592, *Pierce Penniless, his Supplication to the Devil*, in which, possibly tongue in cheek, he boasts that English players were ‘not as the players beyond sea, a sort of squirting bawdie comedians, that have whores and common curtizans to play women’s parts’.²²⁹ But in an increasingly Puritan England, the idea of boys performing as women had come to be considered equally scandalous. William Prynne’s post-Jacobean 1633 attack on the English stage, in his pamphlet *Histriomastix*, condemns ‘comely youths’ playing women and ‘thus purposely, yea, affectedly, to unman, unchristian, uncreate themselves, if I may so speak, and to make themselves neither men, nor women, but monsters’.²³⁰

With that familiar obscurity, the identity of the first woman to have performed in tragedy, or in any Restoration play, is uncertain. However, there is a general consensus that the first role in any kind of play was as Desdemona in none other than *Othello*. This was only months after the theatres re-opened and two years before Charles’s official decree. Styan writes that ‘Margaret Hughes is on record as having appeared [as Desdemona] with the King’s Company in 1660 in *The Moor of Venice*’. However, Elizabeth Howe speculates that another woman hired by Killigrew for the King’s Company, Anne Marshall, ‘seems to be the most likely candidate’ for being the first woman to play the role in this 1660 ‘historic production’.²³¹ No commentators mention who might have played Emilia

²²⁸ For an edited version of this decree, see J. L. Styan, *Restoration Comedy in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 90.

²²⁹ Quoted by Edmond Malone, ‘A History of the English Stage’, in *The Plays of William Shakespeare, Illustrated by the Prefaces and Annotations of the Various Commentators*, ed. by George Stevens and Henry Fuseli, 10 vols (London: T. Bensley, 1805), IX (1805), pp. 527-781 (p. 617).

²³⁰ William Prynne, *Histriomastix: The Player’s Scourge* (London: Michael Sparke, 1633) in *Shakespeare’s Theater: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Tanya Pollard (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 279-296 (p. 291).

²³¹ Styan, p. 90, and Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1992), pp. 19 and 24.

and Bianca, which leaves the perplexing question of whether they were still played by boys.

A prologue and epilogue for the King's Company production of *Othello*, written by Thomas Jordan, highlights the titillating possibilities of having a female actor. The actor reading the prologue declares that he can confirm Desdemona is a woman as he has seen her 'drest', in the sense of being undressed and having her clothes put on:

I come, unknown to any of the rest,
To tell you news; I saw the lady drest:
The woman plays to-day: mistake me not,
No man in gown, or page in petticoat.²³²

An early claim that Margaret Hughes was the first actress is made in the 1911 play *The First Actress*, written by suffrage activist Christabel Marshall, under the pseudonym Christopher St. John, and directed by her partner Edith Craig. Katherine Cockin writes that 'explicit comparisons were made in [*The First Actress*], and in a different spirit by hostile reviewers in national newspapers, between the pioneering Margaret Hughes [...] and contemporary women campaigning for enfranchisement and equal opportunities at work'.²³³ Once again, then, *Othello* is intertwined with emancipatory movements and reactions against them.

The play begins back stage at the New Theatre, Drury Lane, where the performance of *Othello* has just ended, starring Hughes and 'an actor with a very black face' (ff. 5). Of course, this would be a white man in blackface as is evident from Hughes's later complaint that he has stained and therefore ruined her veil (ff. 7). The play has a scene reminiscent of that performance of *Othello* at the African Theatre recorded by Simon Snipe, quoted in Chapter 1, since again the

²³² 'A prologue to introduce the first woman that came to act on the stage, in the tragedy called *The Moor of Venice*', quoted in Malone, pp. 625-26.

²³³ Katherine Cockin, 'Introduction to Part One', in *The Routledge Reader on Gender and Performance*, ed. by Lizbeth Goodman with Jane de Gay (Abingdon, Routledge, 2002), pp. 19-24 (p. 21). The manuscript for the play is in the British Library (LCP 1911/14).

actors are pelted by apple cores, amid ‘hissing and hooting’ (ff. 5), although where Marshall got the information on which she bases this scene is unclear.

Certainly, Jordan’s epilogue for *Othello* anticipates an unfavourable reaction from sections of the audience. Defending the right of the actress to perform on the stage, the epilogue insists she is ‘as far from being what you call a whore, / As Desdemona injur’d by the Moor’. It then directly appeals to the female members of the audience:

But, ladies, what think *you*? For if you tax
Her freedom with dishonour to your sex,
She means to act no more, and this shall be
No other play but her own tragedy.²³⁴

Just as Othello smothers and silences his Desdemona, thereby erasing her from the metaphorical stage of life, so these early female actors dread being erased once more from the physical stage of London theatres. The tragedy, perceptively recognised by Jordan, is to be made invisible, which is tragic both for this particular actress and for her whole gender, if it is excluded, or excludes itself, from the ‘freedom’ to be able to act.

Interestingly, while Marshall’s Margaret Hughes character claims that the hooting is being led by Kynaston (ff. 6), who was a famously pretty and, by 1660 aging, male actor who played women’s parts, Jordan suggests it is female members of the audience who might be most likely to cause this exclusion through their condemnation.

That threat of laughter – of being denied the gravitas of tragedy because of your gender or your race – is further explored by Marshall when she has her character Lord Hatton describe how Lady Castlemaine ‘could not forbear laughing when Desdemona was strangled’ (ff. 8), in a mirroring of the response Aldridge received when he, as Ooronoko, strangled his wife at the Coburg. Even in tragedies that are about black men and white women, to have real black men or

²³⁴ Quoted in Malone, pp. 625-26.

white women play these parts is in danger of destabilising them into farce. By having a woman laugh, Marshall is suggesting here – much like Jordan with his epilogue – that women themselves are often only too happy to collude in their own exclusion through mocking or chastising those of their gender who break through barriers.

Having invaded the tragic stage, the next step was for the once-marginalised not merely to be content to inhabit Shakespeare's characters but to actually rewrite them. This process has been to a certain extent aided and abetted by those in power who have relinquished or restricted their own right to represent, as part of what is a wider, perhaps unprecedented schism between the holders of economic power and the holders of cultural power.

The issue of who has the right to use these texts to create revisions of the past can, in theatre practice as elsewhere, now be fraught. White Canadian theatre director Rod Carley describes how in 1994 his initial application to the Ontario Arts Council (OAC) for funding for *The Othello Project* was turned down. His intention was to use a modified version of Shakespeare's original script, with Othello as a leader of an FBI team sent in 1964 to investigate reports of racial violence in the Klan-dominated town of Cypress, Mississippi. The OAC was concerned that this might be, as Carley describes it, a 'case of voice appropriation – a Caucasian director depicting the racism of the early 1960s'. However, once he had spoken to members of the Canadian African and Jamaican artistic community in Toronto about the project, 'got letters of support from a variety of individuals regarding my sensitivity to the issues at hand', and made it clear that the adaptation would also have five Canadian African/Jamaican actors, his second grant application to the OAC was successful.²³⁵

One question provoked by Carley's experience is: Why is the history of racial abuses in the American South not regarded as something that white people need to explore and re-evaluate as much as black people? A further linked question is why are Canadian African and Jamaican artists regarded as having a privileged position in interpreting these events – events that happened thirty years earlier in a different country with radically different cultural practices where

²³⁵ Rod Carley, interviewed by the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project, in 2004 <http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/i_carley.cfm> [accessed 14 September 2014].

racial discrimination was enshrined in the law? A possible answer to the first question is that we have heard enough of white people's versions of these events. The answer to the second question is more complex, and goes to the heart of how we identify ourselves – how we draw the line of who is part of our group and who is not, and becomes a key issue in analysing the plays in this chapter.

In this example of Carley's experience, we can see in microcosm here how our concept of the past, and therefore of our present, is formed – as it always has been – by decisions about who is permitted to produce history, enforced in myriad ways ultimately by economics. Before, black voices struggled to give their version of events that directly affected them; here a white voice can only be heard in certain prescribed circumstances, if, that is, Carley wants funding.

In the plays I analyse in this chapter, what is noticeable is an increasing shift towards writers who have some claim to exclusion. Of course, to be fully excluded, to be one of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subalterns, would mean that you could not be heard at all, as she writes herself:

If speaking involves speaking and listening, this possibility of response, responsibility, does not exist in the subaltern's sphere. You bring out the so-called subaltern from the woodwork; the only way that that speech is produced is by inserting the subaltern into the circuit of hegemony. [...]. Who the hell wants to museumize or protect subalternity? Only extremely reactionary, dubious anthropologicist museumizers. No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the space of difference.²³⁶

Inevitably, the voices that we do hear must be refugees from those worlds, both of them and separate from them, their very audibility compromising their ability to speak authentically as the absolutely excluded. Like those Victorian archaeologists' accounts of Egyptian mummies crumbling to dust in the moment they are made visible by their tombs being opened, so the true subaltern

²³⁶ Leon de Kock, 'Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, New Nations Writers Conference in South Africa', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 23 (1992), 30-47 (p. 46).

disappears at the moment he or she speaks and is thereby drawn away from the margins and towards the centre.

What it is possible to say is that the majority of the writers in this chapter belong to a race or gender or both that in the past has considerably restricted their access to the 'circuit of hegemony' where these writers have now attempted to place themselves, thereby altering and fracturing the circuit. First, I want to look at how each of these, from diverse angles, use Shakespeare's tragedy to address their own present, before I consider if anything unites the plays as a group, however disparate are their settings and choice of protagonists.

***Not Now, Sweet Desdemona* by Murray Carlin (1968)**

Michael Neill regards the white Carlin, who originally came from South Africa, as 'prophetic' in his analysis of how the twentieth century must interpret Shakespeare's play as being, above all else, about race:

If the existential 'prison' of *Hamlet* was the place in which generations of post-Romantic intellectuals, following the example of Goethe and Coleridge, found the angst-ridden image of their own alienation; if, in the wake of World War II, it was the wasteland of *King Lear* that provided a mirror for humanity living under the shadow of the holocaust and nuclear destruction; then, towards the close of the twentieth century, it was *Othello* that began to displace them both, as critics and directors alike begun to trace in the cultural, religious and ethnic animosities of its Mediterranean setting, the genealogy of the racial conflicts that fractured their own societies.²³⁷

The particularly heightened racial atmosphere created by apartheid no doubt helped to crystallise this understanding. Just a few years before Carlin's play, as Natasha Distiller describes, the black South African critic, novelist and short-story writer Can Themba used 'the sexual and racial politics of [*Othello*] to mock

²³⁷ Michael Neill, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Shakespeare: Othello, the Moor of Venice*, ed. by Michael Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 1-180 (p. 1).

savagely the defensive identity of the white man' as part of his cavort through Shakespeare's plays in his 1963 piece, 'Through Shakespeare's Africa: Falstaff, Dumizulu, Dube, Agincourt'. Themba writes:

All the horror that one can conceive in the imagination of a backveld farmer who has tended his lands, jealously; guarded his honour, savagely; and contemplated his women in this dark jungle of black, virile, uninhibited men, fearfully; leaps up when these words ['Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tuppung your white ewe!'] are hurled to affright the night.²³⁸

That Themba is described by Essop Patel as at 'the centre of the Sophiatown Renaissance' and yet even the year that he died in exile is under some dispute (though the general consensus seems to be that it was 1968) is yet another example of how hard it is to excavate the traces of the marginalised, even in recent history.²³⁹

First performed at the National Theatre in Kampala in 1968, six years after Uganda gained independence from Britain, *Not Now Sweet Desdemona* is set in Carlin's present. The action takes place in a just re-opened theatre in London, where a wealthy white South African and a black Trinidadian are rehearsing their parts of *Desdemona* and *Othello*.²⁴⁰

Peter Nazareth describes how 'the presence of the deadly mosquito, aided by humid weather, saved West Africa from the type of settler-colonialism experienced in East Africa', which led to East Africa suffering a form of 'linguistic colonialism' that stifled indigenous expression, and where theatre was largely restricted to amateur performances of British plays given by 'the

²³⁸ Natasha Distiller, *South Africa, Shakespeare, and Post-Colonial Culture* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005). She is quoting from Themba's piece in the radical journal *The New African*, 2 (1963), 150-54 (p.153).

²³⁹ Essop Patel, 'Preface', in *The World of Can Themba: Selected Writings of the Late Can Themba*, ed. by Essop Patel (Braamfontein: Ravan Press, 1985), p. 2.

²⁴⁰ All quotations from this play and from Carlin's introduction are taken from Murray Carlin, *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona: a Duologue for Black and White within the Realm of Shakespeare's 'Othello'* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

expatriate groups, the colonial officers, their wives, etc'.²⁴¹ This began to change post-independence when 'various groups such as the Ng'oma Players were formed with the intention of producing relevant plays'.²⁴² Active amongst this group was David Rubadiri, who produced Carlin's play.

Oyin Ogunba writes of how, in 1962, the West African writer, Wole Soyinka remarked how the newly built National Theatre in Kampala 'lacked the architectural adventurousness he had expected and was nothing more than a doll's house, a "miniature replica of a British provincial theatre"'.²⁴³ In this context, we can understand the opening of Carlin's play as attempting a kind of exorcism by laughter of this colonial legacy – of which Carlin as a white African was part – where the two actors, actually performing in this same theatre that provoked Soyinka's scorn, but with the set suggesting this is a dilapidated London theatre, imagine when it might last have had a performance and go ever backwards in time, belting out Second World War songs, imitating the posturing of Oscar Wilde and finishing off with a trite Gilbert and Sullivan routine. They look out at an auditorium that for them is empty, creating the unsettling effect for the actual audience that they also are ghosts. The tawdry, dilapidated theatre, thick with dust, and the dated white voices, act as a metaphor for the British Empire: a tired relic that the new free nations of Africa and the West Indies have cast aside. Cast aside, but psychologically not freed themselves from, because the present-day love affair between the two actors is shaped and corrupted by this past.

Giving them no names other than those of the Shakespeare characters they play creates a sense that the two identities merge, their real relationship a proxy for their stage relationship, or *vice versa*. And so it turns out: Othello's dogged insistence that he and Desdemona radically reassess their roles in the play is a way for him to express the disquiet he feels over their off-stage relationship. Therefore, as with the anonymous burlesque *Dar's De Money*, the play is used to explore levels of reality and performance.

²⁴¹ Peter Nazareth, 'East African Drama', in *Theatre in Africa*, ed. by Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1978), pp. 91-113 (p. 92).

²⁴² Peter Nazareth, p. 97.

²⁴³ Oyin Ogunba, 'Introduction', *Theatre in Africa*, p. xii.

In the Introduction to his play, Carlin discusses how ‘the production needs a brisk pace – there are a lot of words but not a lot of action, so the thing must be kept on the move continually’.²⁴⁴ This is, as the title makes clear, a duologue, a largely verbal analysis of Shakespeare’s *Othello* from the outside. This sets it apart from the other plays in this chapter, where the characters are imprisoned inside the action of Shakespeare’s play, without the benefit of perspective, which it is then up to the audience to bring to the performance.

Nazareth, writing in 1978, concludes: ‘the best plays to date [in East Africa] have not demonstrated any particular exuberance in language; there has been no Soyinka of the East African theatre [...] on the other hand, language in East African drama has tended to be functional in order to deal with the colonial and non-colonial reality.’²⁴⁵ Certainly, this could be said of Carlin’s lucid, direct language, and this functionality is carried through into the realist structuring of his play, which runs in real time and in just one location – mirroring the ‘unity of action’ that Aristotle identified as essential to tragedy, with all the action taking place on the same stage within a stage.

Carlin makes it clear in his Introduction that his play has a specific agenda, that is to explore an inter-racial relationship honestly, to articulate how the subtler forms of racism can operate in such a relationship:

The poisons of race are, still: pity, and self-pity. The blacks must stop being sorry for themselves. The whites must stop feeling false sympathy. Let them each sheer off this cloying embrace and have a go at each other, like my two characters.²⁴⁶

The bulk of the play involves the two actors rehearsing and re-rehearsing alone one scene from Shakespeare’s *Othello*, where Desdemona first tries to persuade Othello to re-instate the disgraced Cassio as his lieutenant while Othello tries to put her off: ‘Not now, sweet Desdemona, some other time’ (III. 3. 55). The director, described by Othello as an ‘an effete, English, intellectual idiot’, is

²⁴⁴ Carlin, p. 5.

²⁴⁵ Nazareth, p. 111.

²⁴⁶ Carlin, p. 5.

meanwhile getting drunk down at the pub. The spent white male, then, has relinquished his control, leaving those whom he has previously sought to master through racialised and gendered myths of inferiority to face their own demons and take charge of their own performance.

Desdemona wants to act her part in this scene with the traditional sweetness and gentleness attributed to her, but Othello refuses to play along with that interpretation, threatens even to walk out on the play unless Desdemona does it his way. ‘You must be all over me – sweet but commanding. Stifling’, says Othello, ‘This woman is determined to be on top’ (pp. 24-25). Claiming that this is ‘the first play that was ever written about colour’ (p. 29), Othello insists that the sub-text of this play is that Desdemona wants Othello as ‘her personal black man. Hers, because he is black – he’s a slave’. Desdemona is ‘the first of the White Liberals – they tell themselves they are on the side of the black man [...] but what they really want is to tell them what to do [...] they want power and they get it through love – because they are too sensitive to get it by force’ (p. 37).

Carlin’s Othello finally persuades Desdemona to perform the scene as he wants, and she rapidly plays the part of the cloying, domineering young white wife with great authenticity (there being a certain irony in Othello’s bullying and emotionally blackmailing her into agreeing to be domineering), until the scene rehearsal comes to an abrupt end when Othello cries ‘Devil’ and slaps her with ‘explosive vigour’ (p. 41). The stage directions indicate that it should not be made clear whether this was mimed or ‘real’. Of course, for an audience watching this play there is an additional level of representation, as they are watching actors pretending to be actors, miming an action that is to be an ambiguous gesture that might be mime or real. But what are we witnessing on stage? How should we interpret it? Should the explosive vigour of this slap be celebrated as a black person no longer accepting his subjectivity to white hegemony in all its manipulative forms, or is what we are seeing the historically dominant male hitting a historically subordinate female, with this act a simultaneous doubling as both Shakespeare’s Othello slaps his Desdemona and Carlin’s post-colonial Othello slaps his girlfriend?

The shocked response of Carlin’s Desdemona to Othello’s assault is to say that he has mixed up his scenes; the slap does not come until Act 4, the violation – the disruption – of the linear path of the script adding a further revolutionary

feel to the gesture. This marks a turning point in *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona*: since the slap is not scripted at that point, it has a reality outside of Shakespeare's play, whether it is mimed or not. It acts as an aural full stop, ending the masquerade that the actors' performance is separate and does not relate to the hurt that plagues their own lives.

When the characters speak again it is as themselves and about themselves, and they symbolise this by her removing her wig and he his turban. Othello apologises, but he and Desdemona share the realisation that his rage has a more intimate source than that of the play. As they speak honestly about their own relationship, they confess what drew them to each other: the white, pampered daughter of a wealthy South-African businessman and the African-Caribbean man whose ancestors were enslaved. Desdemona says the appeal was to go to bed with a savage, 'a devil'; Othello admits he got a kick out of having a white woman, whose 'backside' was as white as an angel's (p. 60). They face the fact that what first sexually attracted them to each other were the racist myths they both abhor and that their relationship went flat when, as Othello says, 'Our bodies stopped being strange and became real' (p. 61). But out of the ashes of this disappointment, they discovered that they actually liked and desired each other, not for what one symbolised to the other, but for themselves, to the extent that the two can be separated.

Before reaching this revelation, they experiment with switching destinies, imagining that Othello could write a play set in 'a black court in Central Africa – and Desdemona is the only white person there', in which she is called 'the thinlips', and murders a submissive Othello (pp. 44-45).²⁴⁷ Othello sings Desdemona's willow song, which causes them to 'explode' with laughter at the hilarity of a man going so passively to his death. That we, too, probably see this as funny and absurd, rather than tragic as in the original version, offers a reminder

²⁴⁷ Around the period in which Shakespeare wrote *Othello*, there were several theatrical versions of a tale set in just such a black court, one of these plays being *The Courageous Turk, or Amaranth the First*, by Thomas Goffe, written circa 1613-18, which I return to in Chapter 3. However, in all these versions, the white female slave is killed by her black Sultan lover, as described by Daniel Vitkus in his *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-1630* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 99.

of the patriarchal ideology that still defines our understanding of how men and women should act. Desdemona enormously enjoys bouncing on top of Othello and smothering him with a cushion, the liberation this brings echoing the pleasures found within Shakespeare's comedies as female characters step outside the confines of their own gender, in a manner that their tragic counterparts can never do. For example, in Shakespeare's other Venice play, the comedy *The Merchant of Venice*, there are, as in *Othello*, three women. However, each of these escapes their female identity by taking on what Warren Chernaik describes in the case of Portia as a 'double or divided identity [...] consistently described as androgynous rather than, even in outward show, unequivocally masculine'.²⁴⁸ Of course, in Jacobean theatre the audience would have been aware that these are male actors, playing a woman, playing a man, which is further highlighted by the constant gender confusion and sexual jokes continuing up to the very last lines of *The Merchant of Venice*. In *The Merchant*, it is a man, instead, whose identity is codified and fixed and constrained by Venetian society: the character of Shylock.

In his Introduction to *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona*, Carlin writes of how he is living in a period when 'race relations everywhere are a serious and central problem'.²⁴⁹ His two protagonists might joke and tease each other but ultimately they are at risk of being destroyed by a contemporary racist zeitgeist that is near fatal to their prospects of being able to be together, as demonstrated by that violence, that vicious slap, that spills out from the original tragedy into the actors' own dealing with each other. The collapsing of these characters' lives into those of Othello and his wife appropriate the tragic aura of the original play, so that it hovers like a miasma over this contemporary tale.

However, just three years after this, Carlin wrote a spoof interview in a satirical Ugandan magazine, *Transition*. In *The World of Hogarth Mbogwa: a literary interview*, a character called Edward Blushless from the BBC African Writers' Program, asks Mbogwa about his 'Personal Agony'. Mbogwa replies: 'My Personal Agony, yes, well now ... you see, I was brainwashed by capitalist-imperialism. We were mentally colonised by Britain', and goes on to say how

²⁴⁸ Warren Chernaik, *The Merchant of Venice* (Devon: Northcote House Publishers, 2005), p. 47.

²⁴⁹ Carlin, p. 6.

they were only taught ‘the geography of Scotland’. Blushless enthusiastically chimes in, ‘there we have it – the essential African Tragedy’, to which Mbogwa replies, ‘You mean learning the geography of Scotland?’²⁵⁰ Re-reading *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona*, in the context of this slightly later text, a struggle is apparent in the writing of the play between the desire for a seriousness that recognises the suffering endured by those who were colonised, and the desire to mock emerging pieties of post-colonial discourse, to puncture inflated sacred cows.

In the next play I analyse, Charles Marowitz’s *An Othello*, this mocking is taken to an extreme, after which rewritings of *Othello* appear to settle into a pattern of reverence in marking how a dominant group has excluded and exploited others.

***An Othello* by Charles Marowitz (1972)**

Charles Marowitz’s *An Othello* was first performed in 1972 at the Open Space Theatre in London, a theatre set up by Marowitz in 1968 in order to put on experimental work.²⁵¹ Unlike the other writers I discuss in this chapter, Marowitz did not only choose *Othello* to rewrite but also ‘collaged’ or did ‘variations’ on *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Tempest*, *Timon of Athens*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

An Othello is set simultaneously in two timeframes and locations: that of the original play and that of a late 1960s / early 1970s New York at the height of the Black Power movement. The opening image is of: ‘*DESDEMONA – blond, white solitary. From behind, a dark figure approaches. Great black hands encircle her*’ (p. 259). Othello’s power is then suddenly deflated by the

²⁵⁰ *Transition*, 14 (1971), 35-36.

²⁵¹ Marowitz describes the process of getting this experimental theatre established in his introduction to *Open Space Plays*, selected by Charles Marowitz (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), an anthology where all but one of the plays are written by Marowitz himself. All quotations from *An Othello* are taken from this anthology.

appearance of Iago, who is now also black, and tells him: ‘Hey stud. Massa’s come to spank yo’ black ass. You caint go chasin’ white poontang all night.’

Frantic Assembly’s physical theatre version of *Othello*, which premiered at the Lyric Theatre in London in 2008, similarly transposes a hard-edged, brutal, contemporary underworld onto the rarified Venetian society of Shakespeare’s play, in their case setting the play on a depressed council estate in West Yorkshire where the white regulars of a pub seek to defend it from a rival gang whose ethnicity is never made explicit. However, whereas Frantic Assembly faithfully used the original script, although heavily edited, and found equivalences that would resolve any discordance between the new setting and the original play – for example references to Cyprus are explained by the pub being called *The Cypress*, and the ‘Turks’ is the name for the rival gang – Marowitz uses these discordances to create a disorienting experience where a coherence of meaning is forever postponed and the audience is never allowed to settle into the illusion of watching real life being played out in front of them.

From that opening scene onwards, the dialogue in *An Othello* constantly switches from Shakespeare’s original text to United States street slang and back again, reaching its crescendo of racist, sexist and sexualised language during an interrogation scene between two white men: the Duke and Cassio, where Cassio is forced to take on the crude language of the Duke and agree that they ‘don’t want a bloody coon General trottin’ around these islands with a white pussy in tow’ (p. 286). The explicitness of the language exceeds anything found in the other contemporary rewritings in English and is perhaps matched only by a cult German rewriting of *Othello*, written by Günter Senkel and Turkish-born German Feridun Zaimoglu, which premiered at the Munich Kammerspiele in 2005.²⁵²

Amid this poisonous hatred and paranoia, Desdemona enthuses to the audience about how *Othello* comes from ‘a culture that we can never hope to understand – except by loving those representatives of it who walk through our trashy white streets like ambassadors from an enchanted land’ (p. 292). Here

²⁵² This play is discussed by Tom Cheesman in ‘Shakespeare and *Othello* in Filthy Hell: Zaimoglu and Senkel’s Politico-Religious Tradaptation’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 46 (2010), 207-20.

again, as in Carlin's play, is the white liberal figure, her romantic ideals preventing her from seeing the perilous nature of her and Othello's situation.

Given the controversial language and content of this play, it appears that Marowitz's own membership of a marginalised and persecuted group has to be foregrounded in order to legitimise his writing of such material. In the playful preface to the play by 'Lionel and Virginia Tiger' – probably a joking reference to Lionel Trilling – Marowitz is described as that 'Jewwhitey': while 'Whitey Shakespeare embraced then what was a small perplexity [black people] (in the good old days); that Jewwhitey Marowitz responds to the assault of the present with this play'.²⁵³

The ambiguity of a Jewish identity – of being both invisibly absorbed into and being outside white society – Marowitz explores in his treatment of Brabantio, who does not go away as he does in Shakespeare's tragedy, but haunts the action, offering a constant reminder to Othello of Desdemona's rebellious spirit: 'She has deceived her father, and may thee' (originally from I. 3. 294). Brabantio morphs from his high status to a stereotypical Shylock-like, excluded figure as the play progresses, switching to a 'Yiddish accent', and describing Othello as a 'schvarza' (p. 295), echoing the same slide in language in Brabantio as is in Griffin and Christy's Minstrels' burlesque version of *Othello*.²⁵⁴

Brabantio's segueing into a Shylock figure additionally works away at the discrete borders between Shakespeare's plays – their separate identities – so that *Othello* leaks into that other play that shares the same physical territory, *The*

²⁵³ *Open Space Plays*, pp. 256-257.

²⁵⁴ The fascination with *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* as almost existing in parallel realities in the same physical space seems to have survived from the nineteenth century, to be apparent still in not only Marowitz but a prose parody by Richard Armour of *Othello* from 1957, where he writes 'the play is set in Venice, probably so that the costumes and stage properties of *The Merchant of Venice* can be used over again', so we imagine them stepping into those other characters' clothes (Richard Armour, *Twisted Tales from Shakespeare: In which Shakespeare's Best-known Plays are Presented in a New Light* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1957), *Othello*, pp.125-42 (p. 129)).

Merchant of Venice, and the parallels between Brabantio and Shylock come into focus: both aging, patriarchal single fathers who lose their daughters to an alien citizen and who both demand justice from the state and leave empty-handed and broken.²⁵⁵

However, for a Jacobean audience the plight of Brabantio is intended to provoke sorrow, and the plight of Shylock laughter, the one belonging to a tragedy and the other a comedy. In contemporary times, a post-Holocaust, post-black-civil-rights movement sensibility has forced a reversal in these sympathies. It is now hard when reading these two scripts not to see Brabantio as anything other than a racist bigot, whilst Shylock excites pity and guilt for his persecution, causing Shakespeare's comedy to be wrenched into the shape of tragedy. To ensure further that the audience's sympathies are redirected to Shylock, Chernaik writes how 'one curious aspect of the play's theatrical history has been how frequently productions have quietly excised Shylock's lines "I hate him for he is a Christian" and "Cursed be my tribe if I forgive him", presumably as too strong for the delicate sensibilities of theatre-goers'.²⁵⁶

Marowitz, in his treatment of the original text of *Othello*, plays with the two poles of empathy and mockery, so that we shuttle disconcertingly between them when witnessing the pain – whoever's pain it is – displayed on stage. In the case of Brabantio, Marowitz's play raises the question of whether we pity a person who has lost his daughter more if he is a prominent white man close to the centre of power or an excluded Jew, revealing how contingent an audience's emotional reaction is to factors unconnected to the extent of a stage character's

²⁵⁵ An additional parallel between the two plays, in their treatment of filial obedience, is that there is another female character in *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia, who embodies the 'ideal' daughter, obeying her father's wishes even when he is in the impotent state of being dead. She also has an instinctive suspicion of the foreign when it comes to marriage partners of which both Brabantio and Shylock would have approved. While Desdemona is enchanted by Othello's exoticism, Portia sturdily dismisses the black man, that is the Prince of Morocco, who tries to court her, but fails to choose the right casket, with: 'A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains: go. / Let all of his complexion choose me so' (II.7.72-73).

²⁵⁶ Chernaik, 2005, p. 3.

suffering. By making Brabantio an anti-Semitic cliché, and so inviting us to laugh and thereby make ourselves complicit in his pain and persecuted status, Marowitz drifts closer to the cruel nineteenth-century white burlesques than any other post-1960 rewriting of *Othello* that I have found. The disturbing effect he deliberately creates by this is an indication of how those early burlesques could also be used now to provoke and discountenance us, if they were performed.

And as with the burlesques, cause and effect are set asunder: Iago does not need to work slowly on Othello to convince him of his wife's unfaithfulness; before Iago has spoken a word on the subject, Othello is already seeing her infidelity in an extended dream sequence, where the 'double dialogue' is suspended, and only the language of the original text used. However, the Jacobean dialogue is re-distributed amongst the characters, so that, as an example, Desdemona says '(sexily to Cassio) I have a thing for you' (p. 272), a line that Emilia originally says to her husband Iago when she finds Desdemona's handkerchief (III. 3. 305).

In collage, a textile is taken out of its original context and given a new shape and identity while still holding traces of its previous identity; with Marowitz, texts rather than textiles are passed through a similar process, compromising any possibility of the characters having stable, discrete identities in their dealings with each other.

The playing with scale that takes place in collage also has an equivalent in *An Othello*, with the use of a sheet to represent the handkerchief in Othello's dream. This forges a connection between the handkerchief and the bridal sheet on which Othello murders Desdemona. It is on this sheet that Desdemona is spread out and the other characters 'gang-bang' her, except for Othello, who watches on in horror, and her father who supervises proceedings and counts his money (p. 277). When, in the middle of this, Desdemona turns to Othello and innocently asks him, 'Are you not well?' the play tips into an absurdist nightmare with echoes of Pinter's 1966 play *The Homecoming*, where Teddy's wife Ruth similarly matter-of-factly takes on the role of prostitute for his male relatives. The giant handkerchief then 'little by little' blots out Desdemona from view (p. 280), physically erasing her and suggesting an elusive link with how the handkerchief in Shakespeare's play also indirectly erases Desdemona by ostensibly testifying to her adultery.

Once outside the dream, the audience can still gain no firm foothold, as the narrative staggers on, with its linearity in tatters and Ludovico popping up with a warrant for Othello, 'ejecting you from the play' (p. 298), which, if it were enforced, would remove Othello before he can perform his defining act of wife murder.

Neill writes how:

Marowitz interrogates Shakespeare's *Othello* by juxtaposing modern idiomatic dialogue with passages lifted from the original text: thus, as the action unfolds, the Duke discards his antique eloquence to become a caricature of Southern white prejudice, suggesting a direct line of descent from Shakespeare's Venetians to twentieth-century segregationists.²⁵⁷

However, I would question whether any such intention can be laid at Marowitz's door, As he himself wrote:

It is a trap to reiterate mindlessly that human nature remains fairly constant and that, because the Elizabethan Age was one of expansion and exploration and our own time is too, there is an inescapable similarity between the 1980s and 1660s.²⁵⁸

It seems, rather, that Marowitz's juxtapositions in *An Othello* both open up and close the distance between two temporal and geographical locations. The modern insertions are used to derail the original script, allowing no neat correlation to be made between a twentieth-century and a seventeenth-century experience of racial identity, each produced by specific historical circumstances.

As Othello hesitates over his suicide, having smothered Desdemona, the white characters take matters into their own hand: Ludovico slits

²⁵⁷ Michael Neill, 'The Look of Othello' in *Shakespeare Survey 62: Close Encounters with Shakespeare's Text*, ed. by Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 104-22 (p. 104).

²⁵⁸ Charles Marowitz, *Recycling Shakespeare* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 58.

his throat and the Duke commandeers Othello's last words: 'And smote him thus' (p. 310). In the first nineteenth-century burlesque that I analysed – the anonymous *Othello-Travestie* – I argued that the retention of both Desdemona's and Othello's death risked tipping the play over to tragedy however hard the writer worked at insisting on its comedy, and that this risk led to the circumventing of their deaths in later burlesques. The peculiar nineteenth-century resuscitations of Desdemona, that are also a feature of other Shakespeare burlesques, make a re-appearance here, since in the final moments of the play she rises slowly and 'takes her place beside the Duke, Lodovico and Cassio' (p. 310), the three other white characters in the play. However, Othello's corpse is subject to different rules, which give his death an authenticity and his life a belated pathos: the other black man, Iago, drags it from the stage as one would have to with a real dead body, which can never stand again. This is done with a jarring tenderness, as Iago 'cradles him in his arm' and hauls him away 'with a curious kind of love'. In these final moments, then, the play wrenches itself into a tragic aesthetic. However, this is instantly undone by Marowitz leaving on stage Desdemona, the Duke, Lodovico and Cassio with 'slight smiles playing on their lips [as they] look from one another' (p. 310), in another example of that white desire to laugh black people out of the realm of tragedy.

***Cruel Tears* by Ken Mitchell (1974)**

Premiering not long after Marowitz's play, *Cruel Tears* is a far more conservative rewriting, both in following closely *Othello*'s tragic form, and in its treatment of the issues opened up by Shakespeare's text. It largely follows the structure of the original play but updates the action to 1970s' Canada. Written by white Canadian Ken Mitchell, with a vocal chorus by country and western band Humphrey and the Dumptrucks, it was first performed in 1974 at the Persephone Theatre in Saskatchewan.²⁵⁹ Perhaps Mitchell deliberately sidesteps the potential difficulties

²⁵⁹ The songs by Humphrey and the Dumptrucks can be heard at www.uoguelph.ca/shakespeare/multimedia/audio/m_a_6.cfm [accessed 15 March 2013]. The operatic potential of *Othello* was also explored a few years earlier by

of a white writer, in far more culturally sensitive times, handling the portrayal of a controversial black character by making his Othello – Johnny Roychuk – white. Johnny and the majority of the other characters are poor white truckers and their families, eking out a living on the margins of society.

While being a successful writer and academic, Mitchell himself does have a claim to marginality as he comes from a working-class farming family, an origin that is stressed in the short biography given at the beginning of an interview with Alan Twigg, where he is described as ‘a former pig farmer’.²⁶⁰ Marginality also comes in the form of Mitchell’s birthplace: Saskatchewan, an economically deprived region of Canada. Ric Knowles describes *Cruel Tears* to be:

Very much a product of its mid-1970s’ moment, a time [in Canada] when counter- (versus anti-) hegemonic nationalism and anti-centric regionalisms were the alternative movements of choice, often leaving little room for other kinds of resistance [...] militant regionalism was everywhere manifest.²⁶¹

In his preface to an anthology of fiction by prairie writers, Mitchell writes how many of the writers included ‘are attracted to Indian [Native American] culture at least partly because the heroic stance, testing and pride in the face of defeat are very much part of their [the non-Indian writers] vision, part of the prairie

producer Jack Good in his 1968 Broadway musical, *Catch My Soul!*, which has Iago played by Jerry Lee Lewis, is set on a commune, and loosely uses Shakespeare’s original script. A description of this musical can be found in Myra Lewis and Murray Silver, *Great Balls of Fire: The True Story of Jerry Lee Lewis* (London: Virgin Books, 1982), pp. 287-95.

²⁶⁰ *For Openers: Conversations with 24 Canadian Writers*, ed. by Allan Twigg (Madeira Park, British Columbia: Harbor Publishing, 1981), p. 377.

²⁶¹ Ric Knowles, ‘Othello in Three Times’, in *Shakespeare in Canada: A World Elsewhere*, ed. by Diana Brydoen and Irena R. Makaryk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), pp. 371-94 (p. 372).

character'.²⁶² Elsewhere, in the interview with Twigg, Mitchell says how in the prairies they are 'all newcomers' and even 'the native Cree were originally immigrants from the bush country of the east'.²⁶³ Here is an example of how regionalism allows little room for other kinds of resistance: in creating the myth of the land, with all its cruel, barren beauty, producing a regionally specific, rugged kind of people, differences between these people are elided. Whereas the trend of post-colonial writing has been to concern itself with how white people have dominated and exploited the original inhabitants of the lands they have settled, Mitchell's project appears to be to sidestep this by foregrounding the commonality of their experience.

The only mention of Native Americans in *Cruel Tears* is one line by the Iago character of Jack, when he is warning his boss Earl Jensen that his daughter Kathy is going to the poor part of town to secretly stay over at Johnny's, an area where there's a 'lotta DPs, yuh know, Indians' (p. 42).²⁶⁴ They are present in the place names, yet all but absent in the land. In this tale that depends on our empathising with white characters, living impoverished, limited lives marked by rare moments of beauty, there appears no room to see them as dominant inheritors of another people's land.

The truckers' boss, Earl Jensen, and his daughter are the only characters who are materially well-off, and it is Kathy whom young, handsome Johnny marries and ultimately murders. While Johnny is not black, he is ethnically distinct from the others as he is a Ukrainian immigrant, an issue flagged at his wedding where Johnny's relatives appear, do a colourful Ukrainian dance, and then disappear again which, while that might be how relatives tend to behave, is slightly odd dramatically, and suggests that Johnny's ethnicity is more of an add-on than something that is explored throughout the text. There is some limited racism expressed against his origins; Jensen, for example, bursts into song to

²⁶² *Horizon: Writings of the Canadian Prairie*, ed. by Ken Mitchell (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. xi.

²⁶³ For *Openers: Conversations with 24 Canadian Writers*, p. 165.

²⁶⁴ All quotations are taken from Ken Mitchell and Humphrey and *The Dumptrucks, Cruel Tears* (Vancouver, B. C.: Talonbooks, 1977).

warn his daughter about the ‘bohunks’ (North-American slang for a labourer from eastern or central Europe):

They drink and fool and tear around,
But the women sit home till they’re old
And worn right down. (p. 50)

However, this could as much be a complaint about all the truckers. As poor, abused Flora (the Emilia equivalent) says to Kathy:

Six months after Jack and me got married, he was comin’ home
smelling like cheap perfume [...] One minute you’re standing up to
your knees in rose petals [...] and the next, yer up to your ass in dirty
dishes and the old man’s whining he doesn’t have a clean shirt! To go
out boozing with the boys! (p. 68)

In an inspired exploitation of the handkerchief prop – here a precious, embroidered scarf that was given to Kathy by Johnny as a wedding present – Johnny uses this symbol of love and fidelity to strangle Kathy when he believes her no longer to be faithful. This goes further: as the scarf is Ukrainian, handed down through the female line of Johnny’s family, Kathy is, as Ric Knowles points out, ‘killed by the index of his [Johnny’s] ethnicity’.²⁶⁵

Yet despite this apparent symbolism at the denouement, what excludes Johnny from his peers, and is instrumental in his downfall and Kathy’s death, seems to be far less his ethnic identity than an abrupt economic and social change in his circumstances. Earl Jensen, having reluctantly accepted his new son-in-law, makes him foreman. As Johnny has to get tough with the other truckers about an unofficial break, the Iago character of Jack stirs their resentment for their old friend:

JOHNNY (*checking his watch*) Little break? This ain’t no government office, boys – it’s a truck depot! Now get movin’, eh?

JACK (*to the others*) See what I say? Give a guy a bit of power and first thing you know yuh got a little Hitler on your hands.

²⁶⁵ Knowles, p. 376.

Laughter. (p. 76)

Egged on by Jack and fuelled by his own drunken jealousy, trucker Ricky makes a pass at Kathy at a party, causing Johnny, made paranoid by his increasing social isolation to demand that things are settled between them by a race on the freeway. In the ensuing crash, Johnny discovers that Ricky has Kathy's scarf, and returns home to murder her.

How the handkerchief / scarf travels between the Desdemona, Emilia, and Cassio characters is a telling indicator of character and relationship dynamics in both Shakespeare's *Othello* and in this play. Jack gives Ricky the scarf, having got it from his wife Flora by half-choking her with it, in an ominous foreshadowing of what will happen to Kathy, and tells Ricky that it is a gift from Kathy who is 'stuck' on him (p. 104). That Ricky believes Jack, even though Kathy has rejected his advances in the past, casts Ricky more in the role of a deluded, immoral Roderigo figure than an honourable Cassio. This reduction of the number of ideal men to zero, fits into the tradition in country and western music of there being an uneasy tension between upholding patriarchal attitudes and an acceptance that it is women, not men, who are ultimately the stalwarts of morality and decency.²⁶⁶

Mitchell speaks of how he feels Canadian writing in general is characterised by writers who are 'only a voice for a people or a region'. In describing the powerful effect his own region, with its extremes of temperature and openness, has on its inhabitants, he says how you can feel that you are the only thing around but at the same time are 'dwarfed by the enormity of it all', so that 'a kind of tension exists [between] extreme significance and extreme insignificance, and that this has produced a form of drama that is 'almost approaching epic theatre'.²⁶⁷ This causes a tension in the play where the tragic form focuses attention on the protagonist Johnny, but the use of the chorus actually directs attention away from him and towards the prairie people as a whole.

²⁶⁶ Cue a burst of Tammy Wynette's 'Stand by Your Man'.

²⁶⁷ *For Openers*, ed. by Twigg, p. 167.

Downplaying the ethnic difference of the Othello character by having Johnny white and so not visually different also serves to move attention more onto what binds these people together, rather than separates them. The physical prominence of this chorus provided by Humphrey and the Dumtrucks is evident from Figure 17, a photograph taken of the original production.



Figure 17: A scene from the original production of *Cruel Tears* at The Persephone Theatre

(<<http://metronews.ca/news/saskatoon/972985/playwright-ken-mitchell-remembers-saskatoon-premiere-of-country-music-opera-cruel-tears/>> [accessed 30 July 2014] © Persephone Theatre).

The title of Mitchell's play, *Cruel Tears*, is derived from a line said by Shakespeare's Othello, as he looks down on his sleeping wife whom he is about to kill:

I must weep,
But they are cruel tears. This sorrow's heavenly,
It strikes where it doth love. She wakes. (V. 2. 20-22)

However, in Mitchell's play, these words are not said by one character but sung by this communal voice of Humphrey and the Dumtrucks:

We been through a lot, you and us,
We licked the winters and fought the dust,
[...]
'Why did they struggle, all of them years,
Breakin' their backs and cryin' cruel tears?
Looking for rain and chewing on dirt,
Schoolin' the kids so they don't get hurt.
That's what it's all about –
For the children.
The future.
Refrain If it ever comes.
(p. 14)

These cruel tears, then, it is established from early on in the play, are wept not only by an individual but also express the shared suffering of the prairie people. They are not only the backdrop for a tragic tale; they and their harsh land also embody the tragedy.

Unlike in the burlesques, where song strays into nonsense and pastiche, here song is used to convey emotion, to allow access into the hearts and minds of this community in order to create empathy. While the burlesques insist that tragedy inevitably becomes low comedy when the *Othello*'s Venetians are re-cast as the poor and excluded, *Cruel Tears* rather insists that this elevates the poor to that tragic status once preserved for the wealthy and prominent.

***Desdemona: a Tale About a Handkerchief* by Paula Vogel (1993)**

Vogel has an ambiguous relationship to marginality. While she is not only a woman but a lesbian, she is also a citizen of arguably the most powerful country in the world, the USA, and was the first out lesbian to win the Pulitzer Prize, in

1998.²⁶⁸ *Desdemona* had its genesis in the 1970s, with its first stage reading at Cornell University in 1977.²⁶⁹ However, it did not have its first full performance until 1993, as part of Bay Street Theatre Festival in New York.

Whereas Marowitz uses a form of double time, *Desdemona* is set in a indeterminate time and space dimension, described in the staging instructions as ‘ages ago’ and Cyprus (p. 4), but the character of Bianca speaks with a cockney accent, Emilia with an Irish accent, the money is pounds and pence, and upper-class Desdemona speaks with a modern idiom, for example when searching for the precious handkerchief, ‘Oh, where is that crappy little snot rag!’ (p. 7).²⁷⁰ A bored, spoilt princess, looking for kicks, she talks of how she wants to be ‘free’ and make her ‘own living in the world’, a view that her servant Emilia dismisses as ‘this new woman hogwash’ (p. 20).

Again, as with Carlin’s and Marowitz’s *Desdemona*, we recognise that character of the white liberal enthralled by the apparent exoticism of the black man, who becomes the victim of her and Othello’s mutual misrecognition: ‘I thought’, Desdemona tells Emilia, ‘if I marry this strange dark man, I can leave this narrow little Venice with its whispering piazzas behind – I can escape and see other worlds. (*Pause.*) But under the exotic facade was a porcelain white Venetian’ (p. 20). However, Vogel couches her enthrallment in a way that makes us sympathetic to Desdemona’s desires, wrapped up as they are in her own frustrated dreams of freedom, just as Ania Loomba suggests is also the case with Shakespeare’s *Desdemona*:

Her fascination [with Othello] indicates her desire to break the claustrophobic confine. Travel, adventure, and freedom being male domains, she first wishes ‘that heaven had made her such a man’ and then begins to love Othello ‘for the dangers I [Othello] had pass’d’ (I.

²⁶⁸ Jill Dolan, ‘Lesbian and Gay Drama’, in *Twentieth-Century American Drama*, ed. by David Krasner (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 486-503 (p. 498).

²⁶⁹ According to Ann Pellegrini, ‘Repercussions and Reminders in the plays of Paula Vogel: An Essay in Five Moments’, in *Twentieth-Century American Drama*, pp. 473-85 (p. 477).

²⁷⁰ All quotations from the play are taken from Paula Vogel, *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1994).

iii. 163, 167). Projected onto the outsider are all the fantasies of freedom and love, both of which are unable to be visualised from within her world.²⁷¹

The transplanting of the essentially modern character of Vogel's Desdemona into such a prison has the effect of highlighting the inhumanity and absurdity of one gender being able lawfully to impose their will on the other. In Shakespeare's play, the female characters belong to that alien world. We enter into it and to a certain extent take on its values in judging the action. We accept that the tragedy is not that Othello murdered his wife but that he murdered her by mistake, because he erroneously believed her to be unfaithful. The clear subtext is that if she had been unfaithful, there would be no tragedy.

This is the starting point for Vogel, who describes in the programme notes how her younger self 'wept for the Moor', her identification with his pain blinding her to the issue she is now raising with her play: 'Had Desdemona been sleeping with half the Russian Navy, would Othello have been justified in his self-pitying act of murder?'²⁷² Vogel's Desdemona has the bawdiness we already recognise from the nineteenth-century burlesques. But whereas in the burlesques this making Desdemona a sexual being places her in the arena of comedy, in *Desdemona* Vogel seems to insist that, whatever the extent of her sexual incontinence, this should not cause her to be banished from the protected confines of tragedy. The Desdemona she creates is no passive saint, nor is she a proto-warrior for women's rights, and certainly not for class struggle; she is a flawed human being who did not deserve to die. Vogel has not so much replaced the original Desdemona character than suggested that the original was a mask, a performance forced upon Desdemona in order to survive, and in the back room in which this play is set she allows this docile mask to drop.

Friedman writes how Vogel 'fashions a sexually transgressive character [Desdemona] out of [Shakespeare's] subversive clues [...] she probes the

²⁷¹ Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 55.

²⁷² Quoted in Friedman, p. 118.

“unconscious” of the text – the anxiety behind the Renaissance ideal of pure and passive femininity’ (an anxiety that became even more heightened in the Victorian era).²⁷³ Here in Friedman’s interpretation, as elsewhere in critical thought, Marxist and psychoanalytic theories merge: not only do irresolvable, suppressed tensions and gaping lacunae within a society’s ideology provoke the writer to embed, intentionally or unintentionally, ‘subversive clues’ in their texts that elusively flag these up, but the text itself is like an agonised patient, battling with an unruly unconscious that does not accept the thought confines that the conscious self is determined to submit to in order not to be confronted with an unacceptable reality: that its society has more holes in its internal logic than a Swiss cheese.

Vogel sets all the scenes in a back room of the palace where Desdemona and Othello are staying in Cyprus, the traditionally unseen quarters where the low-born womenfolk carry on with the hard, menial labour of preparing the food and doing the laundry while the men strut around on the main stage of life. Here, bored Desdemona passes time with her servant Emilia and the prostitute Bianca.

The play begins late in the action depicted in Shakespeare’s play, at Act 4, scene 1, with the arrival of Desdemona’s relative Ludovico from Venice, who will ultimately have the responsibility of restoring order out of tragic mayhem at the end of the play, although in Vogel’s play he is a lecherous old duffer whom Desdemona sees as her ticket out of Cyprus and out of her hateful marriage. It is Ludovico who witnesses Othello’s first act of violence against Desdemona, in Act 4 – the slap that Murray Carlin has his Othello deliver prematurely, and that in Vogel’s play happens off-stage, her reddened cheek the lingering trace of this act of male rage witnessed by the dignitaries of Venice. Much of the suspense, then, of the play is created by an audience’s knowledge of Shakespeare’s play, by imagining it running on a parallel stage to the one we are seeing, where Othello’s jealousy and resulting violence towards his wife is escalating at sickening speed.

As in Carlin’s play, the white male is absent from the stage, as is also the black male here, with the men being seen only through the eyes of an entirely white, female cast of three. Carlin’s Othello is preoccupied by another issue other than race: the camaraderie of men under threat by women, undermined by their

²⁷³ Friedman, p. 119.

presence. Iago 'wanted to bring Othello back to himself – to the Army. But [Desdemona] won't let him. *She's* always there. She never lets that black man out of her sight' (pp. 36-37). How camaraderie within one gender is undermined by their relationships with the other gender is also explored by Vogel, although here it is the camaraderie of women put under strain by their need to survive in a world ruled by ridiculous, but dangerous, men.

In Vogel's play, Othello is a penny-pinching, mean-spirited tyrant whom Desdemona spectacularly cuckolds when she sleeps with half the regiment, when in fine Shakespearean comic tradition she secretly trades places with another character, who in this case is Bianca at the local brothel. The man Iago convinces Othello that Desdemona has slept with, Cassio (a prissy near-eunuch in Vogel's play), is one of the few men with whom she has not actually had sex. Therefore, even the gentlemanly behaviour of Shakespeare's Cassio is dismantled by Vogel, since now it is not chivalrous motives that drive how Cassio acts but merely that he has no capacity for sexual desire.

Here, Desdemona's desperate search for her handkerchief is rendered futile by the vast heaps of linen, of sheets, pillowcases and underwear, through which she has to sift. This linen provides a pervasive theme throughout the play, of the intimacies of life made public in an oppressive, class-ridden culture where the servants are privy to all the aristocrats' business: 'I'm sure you know every detail about my lord', says Desdemona, and Emilia replies, shrugging, 'When the Master Piddles, a Servant holds the Pot' (p. 10). It is the eternal bind of the rich: if they are to have others service them, they make themselves vulnerable, exposed, almost childlike, the only solution being to regard those who do the servicing as not entirely human, so negating their watchful presence, carried to extremes in those grand houses where servants were made to face the wall if they happen to cross paths with one of the masters, making their identifying faces invisible.

Therefore, economic and gender, not racial, divisions poison the relationships between people in Vogel's play, although the connections between race and class are still present in Emilia coming from a country – Ireland – where famine and poverty forced many of its citizens into servitude abroad. Just as Desdemona is at the mercy of a man and must put on a look of demure sweetness to please him and not retaliate when she is slapped, so Emilia – a seething fury of resentment at the high-handed way she is treated by Desdemona – puts on 'a

sincere, servile face' (p. 15) when facing her mistress. Emilia's lying about the handkerchief, and her amusement as she watches her mistress desperately search for it, can be read as her clawing some power out of a mistress-servant relationship that seeks to deny her autonomy: she is able to keep hidden a part of herself, she knows something Desdemona does not know, and this time it is her, the servant, who controls the mistress's – increasingly frantic – actions.

In Shakespeare's play, Emilia's taking of the handkerchief and of her standing by, saying nothing, as Desdemona tries to find it, is problematic. As Vogel put it in her programme notes: 'Why did Emilia steal the handkerchief given to his [Othello's] wife, if she was such a devoted servant to Desdemona?'²⁷⁴ Could she really be so foolish as not to realise the peril her actions put Desdemona under, even when she witnesses Othello's fit of jealous rage when his wife is not able to produce this precious symbol of their union? By introducing class resentment, Vogel gives a motive to Emilia's betrayal. This resentment is also present in Shakespeare's original play, as discussed in my Introduction, but is only articulated by Iago.

Othello's assumption that Iago is still his loyal servant has its double in Desdemona's mistaken belief in Emilia in Vogel's play, a dynamic that provides ample comic moments of dramatic irony but is also another form of misrecognition that will lead to tragedy.

The brutal logic of the class system – that the lives of those at the bottom of the hierarchy are valueless in comparison with those at the top – plays out in the final scene of Shakespeare's play: Iago murders his wife but even as she dies her words concern not her own life but her mistress's – 'She loved thee, cruel Moor' (V. 2. 247) and all the others present are similarly pre-occupied, with Emilia instantly absent from their speech, a forgotten corpse. This neglect of Emilia is mirrored in the vast majority of Shakespeare criticism, both early and contemporary, despite her substantial stage presence as both an interlocutor and a silently observing servant, because the tragedy is constructed to take our attention away from her fate, and indeed that of the other lower-class woman, Bianca. Even for a new historicist critic like Lisa Jardine, Emilia's plight remains unexplored.

²⁷⁴ Quoted in Friedman, p. 118.

Jardine writes that she is concerned with using ‘the textual traces of early modern social relations as the point of encounter with early modern agency – specifically the agency of those whose point of view has tended to be excluded from dominant cultural production’.²⁷⁵

However, while she begins by pointing out that in *Othello*, there are ‘three women of three distinct social ranks [figuring] prominently in the plot’,²⁷⁶ Emilia’s death (or Bianca’s own silencing through her enforced departure under male armed guard) is not discussed, except in the context of Desdemona’s death: ‘Desdemona’s defamation has no substance at all; at the moment of her own death Emilia testifies to her mistress’s chastity.’²⁷⁷

Vogel’s play not only starts later than Shakespeare’s but also cuts it short, ending with the final scene of Shakespeare’s Act 4, with Emilia preparing Desdemona for bed on what will be – unbeknownst to them – their last night alive. We never witness Desdemona’s and Emilia’s murder, which will happen on that other imaginary parallel main stage. In their final moments together, as Emilia brushes Desdemona’s hair, a tenderness breaks through between the mistress and the servant who has looked after her charge since she was a child. As well as an act traditionally performed by a servant, this grooming harks back to a form of bonding that can be traced to even our pre-human state and seen in other primates. It is the fusing of servitude with loving intimacy that makes this a particularly compelling scene in the play, revealing the ambiguity of the relationship between Emilia and Desdemona. It is a moment we recognise, like the one between Carlin’s Desdemona and Othello, when the barriers that separate us are partially torn down and we are able – at least temporarily – to meet each other as people, fellow human beings.

David Savaran writes of how, ‘Paula’s method of critiquing, or if one prefers, deconstructing the work of her forbears comes from her reading of the theories of Bertolt Brecht and, even more significantly, of Victor Shklovsky, the

²⁷⁵ Lisa Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 19.

²⁷⁶ Jardine, p. 25.

²⁷⁷ Jardine, p. 31.

Russian formalist from whom Brecht purloined the Alienation Effect.²⁷⁸ In the case of *Desdemona*, Vogel uses the epic structure by dividing the action into, as she describes in her note to the director, ‘thirty cinematic “takes”’ and suggesting the director ‘create different pictures to simulate the process of filming: change invisible camera angles, do jump cuts and repetitions, etc’ (p. 4). The effect of this – much as Marowitz achieves with his double time / location – is to prevent the audience from identifying too much with the characters by reminding them that they are not watching real people. By showing the play’s workings – and, in this case, there is a second layer of distancing in that we are watching stage actors pretending to be film actors pretending to be real people – the audience is jerked out of this bourgeois illusion each time they start feeling too comfortable, and so are better able to focus on the socio-economic forces at play in the story, rather than being lost in a mist of empathy.

However, Vogel clearly recognises the power of creating psychologically dense and consistent characters and forcing the audience to respond to them at a deep emotional level, which is very different from Marowitz’s play, where any attempts to fully identify with the characters are thwarted by their inconsistent behaviour and unpredictable actions and responses. Even Vogel’s use of episodic scenes is tempered in its alienating effect by all the scenes taking place in one familiar room and with a very limited cast, so the audience is quickly able to re-orient itself. Vogel, therefore, steers a careful course where ultimately the play is held together by a focused tragic structure with a unity of action to ensure she has emotional impact. Its power is uneasily explored by an anonymous reviewer of *Desdemona*, Jane R:

There are instances, though I can't exactly say when, where I feel like ideas are being put into my head [...] Being married (and newly married at that), it is frightening to me when I realise that [...] I find myself considering what it would be like to be in Desdemona’s

²⁷⁸ David Savaran, ‘Introduction’ in *The Baltimore Waltz’ and Other Plays by Paula Vogel* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996), pp. ix-xv (p. xiii).

position, filling in for a prostitute, feeling trapped by her marriage, being afraid of her husband.²⁷⁹

A further influence on Vogel is Samuel Beckett. Vogel distinguishes Brecht from Beckett in that while Brecht ‘still believed in conflict in action’, Beckett opened up the idea of replacing this with ‘a conflict of perspectives’, and as such led the way for many women writers to see the potential of theatre.²⁸⁰ In *Desdemona*, only one perspective is given but we understand this as a conflict of perspectives because of our knowledge of Shakespeare’s original play. While this other, earlier play drives forward on its imaginary main stage with its several locations, the characters in Vogel’s text are trapped on an unchanging stage, made blank with white washing, among the circular, domestic work of cooking and laundry and servicing men. The sense we have at the end of the two plays catastrophically colliding is reinforced by Emilia’s brushing of Desdemona’s hair, counting out the strokes, as if counting out the seconds to their dual deaths:

Scene 28

Emilia brushes Desdemona’s hair. Desdemona leans back, tense, listening to the off-stage palace.

EMILIA Now, then – (*Emilia starts.*) One, two, three, four, five, six –

Scene 29

The same.

EMILIA Forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven –

Jyotsna Singh, XXXX in discussing Carlin’s play, writes that: ‘When Africans see themselves represented in the figure of Shakespeare’s Othello – and in numerous western interpretations of his character – they quite understandably resist the dichotomy of “civilization” and “barbarism” in terms of which Othello

²⁷⁹ Jane R., ‘Desdemona: Beyond Othello in Paula Vogel’s Feminist and Sexual Play’, <www.associatedcontent.com/.../desdemona_beyond_othello_in_paula_vogels.html> [accessed 11 July 2010].

²⁸⁰ Paula Vogel interviewed in Jonathan Kalb ‘American Playwrights on Beckett’, *Journal of Performance Art*, PAJ 85, 29.1 (2007), 1-20 (pp. 13-14).

is judged'.²⁸¹ However, for Vogel, as we have seen, deconstructing the play from a feminist position, the dichotomy she resists is that of saint/whore, in terms of which Desdemona is judged by Othello.

In order to focus attention on this, and on the wider issue of male control of women, it has been necessary for Vogel to aesthetically re-form Shakespeare's tragedy so that Desdemona's fate is no longer seen through the lens of the suffering this brings to her tragic murderer; rather, Desdemona herself, and Emilia too, are now in the spotlight of tragic protagonist. Not only is Othello banished entirely from view, but as an off-stage character he is removed further from the tragic arena by being a buffoon – the jealous old Pantalone figure that hovers below Shakespeare's noble Moor, and was revived in nineteenth-century burlesque, is here Othello's identity in its entirety.

Joanna Mansbridge writes how 'the earlier form of burlesque as satirical revision can be glimpsed in a play like *Desdemona: a Play about a Handkerchief*',²⁸² but the satirical elements of the play are never allowed – any more than the Brechtian elements – to derail its overall tragedy for the female characters. In this final scene where Emilia prepares Desdemona for bed, even gentle comedy is abandoned as we watch two women unable to escape out of a death trap created by a ruthless patriarchal society, neither of whom will see morning.

***Harlem Duet* by Djanet Sears (1997)**

This prequel to *Othello* by a black, British-born Canadian premiered in 1997 at the Tarragon Theatre's Extra Space before transferring to the Canadian Stage theatre in a production by Canada's oldest professional feminist theatre company,

²⁸¹ Jyotsna Singh, 'Identity, Postcolonial Theory and Contemporary African Rewriting of *Othello*' in *Women, 'Race', and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 287-99 (p. 293).

²⁸² Joanna Mansbridge, 'Popular Bodies, Canonical Voices: Paula Vogel's *Hot 'n' Throbbing* as Performative Burlesque', *Modern Drama*, 52 (2009), 469-89 (p. 471).

Nightwood Theatre.²⁸³ Perhaps predicatably for a figure who has existed at the margins of the margins, the black woman is absent from Shakespeare's original Jacobean play about race and gender. Sears has to insert black women into the text, and does this by producing a prequel that replaces the fantasy world that Shakespeare has his Othello claim to be his past.

Set in Harlem, the play slides backwards and forwards in time: as well as the main contemporary story of Columbia University lecturer Othello and the black girlfriend he abandons, Billie, we see the same two actors playing out doomed relationships in the 1930s' prohibition era (where they are known only as 'He' and 'She', and he is a black minstrel) and in the Harlem of the 1860s, where 'Her' and 'He' are former enslaved people, planning to make a new life for themselves in an idealised Canada and raise a family on an emerald hill. The non-specificity of the historical characters' names adds to the sense that they are a black everyman and woman; they are the past that is still alive in the souls of the modern day characters. While this multiplicity of stories suggest an epic structure in Aristotelian terms, rather than tragic, the effect of each black character committing the same error, of succumbing to his desire for a white woman and all that promises, gives the tales a form of tragic coherence, the sense of each of them replaying the same events.

While the play is centred on an apparent debate about the significance of race, fought out between the two contemporary characters, with Othello refusing to be defined any more by his African heritage, the structure of the play and its use of language overwrites this debate by insisting that race is indeed an identity that trumps the category of time and of class. The nineteenth-century former slave, the 1930s' Othello in blackface, and the twentieth-century academic speak with an identical lyrical voice, and each of their fates is sealed by the colour of their skin, or more precisely by their desire to abandon, to deny, the significance of their colour. This lyrical voice fuses a Jacobean and a traditional West-African

²⁸³ All quotations from *Harlem Duet* are taken from *Adaptations of Shakespeare: a Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, ed. by Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 285-317, from which details of where it was performed have also been taken.

use of metaphor and cadence that moves it away from the efficient, functional language of a play such as Carlin's, where a colonial language is used unproblematically to deconstruct a colonial mindset. In *Harlem Duet*, meaning – here a sense of what has been lost, suppressed – is also carried in the language, rather than merely via a language.

This insistence goes further, extending into practical issues of staging. Margaret Jane Kidnie writes of how, 'in an interview published after the premiere of *Harlem Duet* [...], Sears explains that a smooth handling of the historical shifts in performance is essential to the development of the play's engagement with race: "There [had to] be a way not only to have three time periods but to go back and forth through them, not to have a moving set and not have huge changes in the cyc[lorama]"', and that this was done by relying largely on lighting effects, mobile props and rapid, minimal costume changes.²⁸⁴ This of course reflects a widespread move in contemporary theatre to dispense with the hefty kitchen dressers and fireplaces of past naturalist productions in favour of a form of minimal staging that insists on a fluidity between different historical moments and geographical locations.

In *Harlem Duet*, these fluid shifts do not only happen between the three distinct time periods, but within these periods the narrative is disrupted: we see Othello and Billie when they are still happy together after we have seen her abandoned by him. When we return again to her alone, we read her sorrow and Othello's guilt differently with the benefit of what we now know about their past relationship.²⁸⁵ In addition, the voices of prominent black people – overwhelmingly male – from throughout modern black history are heard between scenes, setting the play in the larger context of black people's struggle for

²⁸⁴ Margaret Jane Kidnie, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2009). Kidnie quotes from Djanet Sears in an interview with Ric Knowles, 'The Nike Method', *Canadian Theatre Review*, 97 (1998) 24-30 (p. 25).

²⁸⁵ Experimenting with time is, of course, not new and its possibilities were perhaps most avidly explored in the last century by J. B. Priestley in the 1930s and 1940s in his 'time plays'. However, the degree to which these earlier plays moved fluidly and repeatedly backwards and forwards through time was constrained by the practical issue of having hefty, elaborate sets, as well as ideological issues centred on how time works.

visibility and justice, including Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan from the Nation of Islam, Martin Luther King and Anita Hill.

The structuring of the play has another related effect. Elizabeth Brown Guillory writes of how the ‘sense of dislocation – or living between worlds – created by the play’s structure is bolstered by Sears’s strategic use of sound design’.²⁸⁶ This contrasts with Carlin’s play where the structure is kept simple and linear, allowing a clear path where his Desdemona and Othello can explore their history and identity verbally, rather than its fractured nature being written into the form of the play itself.

Despite the strong female friendships in *Harlem Duet*, sharing the same gender is none the less shown to be a fragile connection that can be splintered by race and rivalry over men. Both Billie and Othello’s new lover, the white academic Mona (a play on the name Desdemona), consider themselves as feminists, but the sisterly loyalty this should create is roundly mocked by Billie. When Othello says that Mona wanted him to be the one to tell Billie he is getting married to Mona, so she doesn’t hear it from someone else, Billie replies sarcastically, ‘Being a feminist and everything – a woman’s right to know – since we’re all in the struggle’ (p. 304).

That the inequalities of race and poverty can undermine any female solidarity has perhaps been most eloquently summed up by black activist Audre Lorde, who slammed fellow white feminists at the Second Sex Conference in New York in 1979:

Poor women and women of Color know there is a difference between the daily manifestations of marital slavery and prostitution because it is our daughters who line 42nd Street. If white American feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting

²⁸⁶ Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, ‘Place and Displacement in Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet* and *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*’, in *Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History: Migration and Identity in Black Women’s Literature*, ed. by Elizabeth Brown-Guillory (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), pp. 155-70 (p. 162).

difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color?²⁸⁷

The struggle for Billie, ‘She’ and ‘Her’ is to free themselves from the corrosive presence of white women. What they cannot bear is what they see as the defection of each of their men to the other side, when they choose these white women, with fatal consequences; that is these female characters’ particular nightmare of history from which they cannot escape. Ubiquitous as the spectral presence of white people is – their pale faces looming from the covers of beauty magazines, their petty legislation preventing Billie’s sister-in-law from practising as a beautician because she does not have the qualification for doing Caucasian hair, their theatres making the character called Him ‘black up’ for his acting role, their perverse justice putting a noose around He’s neck for loving his mistress Miss Dessy too much – their actual presence is excluded from the stage. All the characters who appear are black, except for Mona, and she does not fully appear: all we see of her is ‘*brief glimpses of a bare white arm and a waft of light brown hair*’ (p. 297), and her disembodied voice, firstly off-stage and then on the intercom for Billie’s apartment.

Commenting on this absence in an interview about her play, Sears says:

I remember there was one negative review of *Harlem Duet* where the reviewer spent a paragraph and a half talking about the white woman who did not appear in the play, and I’m thinking, that’s interesting, that’s curious, since the play isn’t about white people I think that the review reflected her own discomfort with seeing herself as other, or not central to this story.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ Audre Lorde, ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’, available at <

<<http://www.muhlenberg.edu/media/contentassets/pdf/campuslife/SDP%20Reading%20Lorde.pdf>> [accessed on 11 October 2013].

Sears's comment is equally curious, because a paragraph and a half does not seem an overly long amount of time to talk about something that is noteworthy – inspired even – about the play: that white people appear only in that dismembered form, that Mona is turned into a body part, not a complete human being, as enslaved people were themselves dehumanised by being seen only as bodies to be worked. Surely this play is very much 'about white people', and Billie's need to exorcise them from her consciousness.

In the same interview, Sears has described how the genesis of her play came from her watching as a child a blacked-up Laurence Olivier playing the part of Othello on film, reprising his theatrical performance.²⁸⁹ This was 'the grit in the oyster' that would later produce the pearl of *Harlem Duet*. In her play, the character 'He' dreams of freeing himself from black-minstrel roles, to have access to those tragic Shakespearean roles: 'I'll not die in black-face to pay the rent. I am of Ira Aldridge stock. I am a classical man. I long to play the Scottish King. The Prince of Denmark. "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune..." Or ... Or ... "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will" ...' (p. 312). Again, a black man is demanding to be let into the arena of tragedy, as Aldridge did before him. (That the editors of the anthology felt the need to have an asterisk by Aldridge's name, to let readers know that he was a 'major nineteenth-century black actor' is a telling indication of how history writers have until recently neglected major break-throughs by members of excluded groups.)

This is a play haunted and formed by the invasive presence of white people. It also, in its very execution, struck a powerful blow against this presence. Fortier and Fischlin note that *Harlem Duet*, despite being written so recently, is celebrated as the first play at a major Canadian theatre to have a black director and an all-black cast. Presumably it was decided that having an arm and a wisp of one's light brown hair on stage did not constitute being a cast member, but instead placed the possessor in a half-cast/half-stagehand limbo. Sears was also the first

²⁸⁸ Mat Buntin's 2004 interview with Djanet Sears

<http://www.uoguelph.ca/shakespeare/i_dsears.cfm> [accessed 18 July 2010].

²⁸⁹ In 1965, directed by Stuart Burge.

black Canadian woman to have a play published, the semi-autobiographical *Afrika Solo* in 1990.²⁹⁰

Sears departs further from Shakespeare's text than any of the other rewritings in this chapter. So far does she drift from the mothership that another reviewer, in *The New York Times*, can describe the plot as: 'a young black teacher at Columbia University called Othello has just walked out on his wife, Billie, to marry a colleague, Mona. After that, you are free to forget Shakespeare.'²⁹¹ The question, then, has to be asked: in what way does Sears's play draw on Shakespeare's tragedy? Certainly, language is directly lifted from *Othello* and melded with the diction of Sears's characters – for example, 'There's magic in the web of it. Little strawberries' (p. 289) – and the foundations for Othello's murder of Mona are neatly and ominously laid: we are told that Othello will be heading the department's summer school courses in Cyprus, a position that everyone expected Chris Yago to get; accusations abound of affirmative action gone mad. However, far more than this, *Harlem Duet* offers an exploration of the immense strain that the Othello character is under – Sears's own and Shakespeare's – that unites them even in historically different circumstances, so that it is feasible that Columbia's summer school may well end in as great a bloodbath as does Shakespeare's play.

Mona offers Othello access to a white man's world, a world in which identity no longer has to be constantly agonised over, fought over, a world in which one can, apparently, just be. As Othello says to Billie, 'I'm so tired of this race shit, Billie' (p. 300), and then later: 'I am not my skin. My skin is not me' (p. 305). The sense of guilt and betrayal involved in leaving Billie, in quashing his previous identity – these sacrifices that he makes in order to be with Mona – are worth it for Othello because of what she appears to represent.

²⁹⁰ Discussed in Jacqueline Petropoulos, 'Performing African Canadian Identity: Diaspora Re-invention in *Afrika Solo*', *Feminist Review*, 84.1 (2006), 104-23 (p. 120).

²⁹¹ D. J. Bruckner, 'A Tortured Duet with History', *The New York Times*, 21 November 2002 <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/21/theater/theater-in-review-a-tortured-duet-with-history.html?ref=d_j_r_bruckner> [accessed 29 August 2013].

As Elizabeth Hanson describes it, in her analysis of Shakespeare's play, 'in Othello's Venice, marriage [...] works both to delimit and, at least in Othello's case, to promise passage to a tribal "inside" [...] a zone whose inhabitants not only possess power and distinction, but know one another without a system of exchange or the reading of signs'.²⁹² Hanson's analysis owes a debt to Frantz Fanon. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon imagines the black man who, having internalised white European racism, yearns to escape his blackness and believes he can achieve this by being loved by a white woman. If he can have that then:

I am loved like a white man.

I am a white man.

Her love takes me on the road that leads to total realization. ...

[Fanon's own ellipses]

I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.²⁹³

This 'white whiteness' suggests an un-inscribed blankness, a blissful erasure – an emptying out – of difference, as is also suggested by Hanson's 'zone'. Looking back on the nineteenth century, Ira Aldridge seems not to have been immune to its allure, revealing how even a person committed to black rights found it hard to expunge this colonisation of the mind. Lois Potter quotes from a memoir of the actress Mrs Madge Robertson, who had played Desdemona to Aldridge's Othello,

²⁹² Elizabeth Hanson, 'Brothers of the State: *Othello*, Bureaucracy and Epistemological Crisis', in *Othello: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Lena Cowen Orlin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 125-47 (p. 134).

²⁹³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 63. First published in 1952. The presence of Franz Fanon in Djanet Sears's work, also in regard to how Fanon 'erases the Black woman from the picture', is discussed in detail by Peter Dickinson in his article 'Duets, Duologues, and Black Diasporic Theatre: Djanet Sears, William Shakespeare, and Others', *Modern Drama*, 45 (2002), 188-208.

and described how Aldridge always picked out the fairest actress he could, regardless of talent, to play Desdemona, and ‘the fairer you were the more obsequious he was’.²⁹⁴

It is to reach this white whiteness that Shakespeare’s *Othello* seems to replace his identity with an exoticised, packaged version of itself that, as Fanon recognised, appeals to the white female, only to have that last fragment of who he is – the handkerchief his mother gave him – apparently carelessly tossed aside and for him to conclude that this new world he has entered into, which he thought was real, is a mirage.

Sharon Friedman summarises the socio-historical context for *Harlem Duet*, Vogel’s *Desdemona* and for Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*:

Theatrically, these playwrights employ many of the conventions of feminist adaptation of classical texts established by the late 1980s in women’s theater groups and other experimental companies. They foreground the women’s plight, depict female relationships, and refocus plot to reveal the ‘high cost of patriarchal values’ that several feminist scholars see embedded in Shakespeare’s tragedies.²⁹⁵

This seems to cause a certain tension in *Harlem Duet*, where the story of Sears’s modern-day *Othello*, and of He and Him, has a clear tragic arc leading to their demise, explicitly linked with Shakespeare’s tragedy, but the aesthetic structure of the play focuses attention on the anguish of their black female partners, particularly on the modern-day Billie. This crystallises the tension between feminist and post-colonial perspectives on *Othello*. Unlike in that other tragedy

²⁹⁴ Felicity Nussbaum, ‘The Theatre of Empire, Racial Counterfeit, Racial Realism’, in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840*, ed. by Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 71-90 (p. 89).

²⁹⁵ Sharon Friedman, ‘The Feminist Playwright as Critic: Paula Vogel, Ann-Marie MacDonald and Djanet Sears Interpret *Othello*’, *Feminist Theatrical Revisions of Classical Works*, ed. by Sharon Friedman (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), pp. 113-34 (p. 113).

built around sexual desire, *Romeo and Juliet*, where the dual tragic protagonists are destroyed essentially by the same forces, in *Othello* something of a zero sum game operates, where increasing the empathy for Othello's lover as a woman cruelly treated by a man undermines the tragic focus on Othello.

This fault-line between race and gender reaches an extreme, of course, in Vogel's play, where Othello is entirely banished from our empathy. It also seems to be increasingly affecting reactions to Shakespeare's own play. Joyce Green MacDonald, for example, in her discussion of teaching *Othello*, explains how her students' 'sympathies for Desdemona's defiance of paternal control have sometimes morphed [...] into contempt for Othello. Some students see Othello's murder of Desdemona as the exercise of an extreme version of Brabantio's patriarchalism'.²⁹⁶

The potentially competing demands of race and gender struggles to gain power for their group is neatly summed up by Sears's Othello in his resentful interpretation of the triumphs of black feminism: 'women wear the pants that Black men were prevented from wearing' (p.304).²⁹⁷

***Otieno* by Trevor Michael Georges (2010)**

The claustrophobia of Vogel's play, partly created by having the characters hemmed in by towering piles of linen, is also key to the atmosphere of black British writer Trevor Michael Georges's *Otieno*, a play that unambiguously follows the structure of tragedy, placing the Othello character of Otieno firmly back in that spotlight. It was produced by Metta Theatre and premiered at Southwark Playhouse in 2010, with Georges in the lead role.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ Joyce Green MacDonald, 'Black Ram, White Ewe: Shakespeare, Race and Women', in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by Dymphna Callaghan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 202-8 (p. 204).

²⁹⁷ *Harlem Duet*, p. x.

²⁹⁸ The script is still being developed for a further production by Georges and so is not currently available.

Set in Zimbabwe on the eve of the 2008 general election, here the eight characters are not imprisoned by sheets and corsets, with all their metaphorical burden of female domesticity and sexual intimacy, but by President Mugabe's off-stage war veterans who have them trapped, surrounded, on a white-owned farm that the veterans intend to confiscate. As Sam Marlowe puts it in his review in *The Times*, while 'the raw, rapid-fire dialogue is S's own [...] it riffs on the imagery and motifs of the original',²⁹⁹ with the language fully exploiting both a Bantuesque lyrical eloquence and the brutal tongue of a hardened soldier, to produce a play that echoes the polyvocal quality of the original.

In a country with a history marred by entrenched racial prejudice and hostility, the force of extreme circumstances brings about a form of colour truce for these Zimbabwean characters, because whether black or white they all have a shared interest in protecting the farm that provides them with a livelihood, be it as farmers or mercenaries employed in its protection. This extends to an uneasy comradeship between them, holed up as they are together, where previous divisions are suppressed. Racist language is largely absent from the play; even when the white farmer, Howard, discovers Otieno has married his daughter, Diana, he restricts himself to accusations of Otieno using voodoo magic to seduce her. White prejudice against Otieno's colour appears to be the elephant in the room that Howard and fellow white farmer Vick will not explicitly voice, because survival for all the characters is contingent on their colour (four of them are black, four of them are white) being neutralised.

The play is also structured so that race is less of an issue than in Shakespeare's *Othello*: Otieno is not visually different from all the others, and even the man he suspects his wife to be having an affair with is no Cassio-like, well-born white man but one of the other black characters, and of a lower social position than Otieno.

Otieno himself expresses his bemusement that Diana could love him only in terms of her being young and innocent, whereas he has a bloodstained past and

²⁹⁹ Sam Marlowe, *The Times*, 2 June 2010

<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=1&did=2047714261&SrchMode=1&sid=6&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1292336770&clientId=48828> [accessed 24 June 2010].

is 'old and ugly', as he repeatedly says, almost like a mantra. This is the only post-colonial writing that draws on this important source of Othello's insecurity in the original play; *Cruel Tears*, *Harlem Duet* and *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona* specifically remove any age disparity, as if to ensure that any lingering comedy of the old cuckold is erased.

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the increasingly deranged Othello speaks to Desdemona as if she were a whore in a brothel and Emilia the brothel keeper. In the equivalent scene in S's play, Otieno interrogates Diana as if she were in police detention, forcing her to sit with a harsh light in her face. It is an attempt to elevate himself from the role of apparently cheated-on, humiliated husband to in-control law enforcer, taking the relationship out of a feminine, domestic realm in which neither Othello nor Otieno seems at ease into the male, military world they know and understand, as recognised by Carlin in his play. The mutual exclusivity of these worlds, how each threatens to obliterate the other, is emphasised even more in *Otieno*; Otieno's marriage to Diana triggers his longing to abandon his life and livelihood as a mercenary, to disband his group of men, so that he can become worthy of what he sees as her purity. It is significant that for both Otieno and Othello the person who leads them to kill their wife, dragging her into that brutal military sphere of summary execution and in the process annihilating their own chance of domestic intimacy, is an emissary from that violent, male world, the point visually rammed home in *Otieno* since Ian, the Iago equivalent, is literally blood stained and soiled throughout the play. Therefore, antagonism and mutual misunderstanding between male and female identities are shown to play as equal a part as race in the tragic denouement.

As I discussed in my Introduction, Shakespeare's Othello is unique amongst his tragic characters in that he is not a ruler or a prospective ruler; his fall is not inextricably linked to the fall or profound alteration of the state. He is, rather, an employee of the state, a useful employee, but one who can be replaced, as happens at the end of the play when Cassio is directed to take over Othello's position. He is defined by how he acts, not who he is, and that gives his identity a particular kind of fragility. He was once enslaved and to that humiliation he could return. The power he has as a commander of a Venetian fleet and then as Governor of Cyprus can, and does, melt away with the stroke of a pen on official parchment. Georges's Otieno finds himself in a disturbingly similar place.

Amongst his band of mercenaries, Otieno is king and has earned the gratitude and affection of his white employers, but everything is provisional on the continuation of civil unrest, on his services still being required.

However, unlike *Othello*, the life of Otieno can be read as an allegory for the fall of the state, specifically President Robert Mugabe's. As Georges says in a video presentation, when he and the rest of the cast worked on *Otieno* they became increasingly aware that the play was about 'the life of a nation'.³⁰⁰ When we watch Otieno's disintegration, we see not only a mercenary in the confined world of a remote farm under siege, but also the tragedy of Mugabe, one of Africa's great leaders, now descended into paranoia and brutality, bringing desolation to those he swore to protect. A constant reminder of his presence is given by the radio broadcasts the characters listen to, punctuating the linear narrative, as both the state and the farm draw closer to disintegration.³⁰¹

While Shakespeare's *Othello* was written just as Britain's colonial ambitions began, Georges's is written in its still-bloody aftermath. In Zimbabwe now, the schism is not so much between political and cultural power, but between political and economical power. Since 1980, the once politically excluded black majority now ostensibly rule the country, but much of the wealth and land still belongs to white people. Once the circuit of political, economic and cultural power is disrupted, a situation has an inbuilt volatility.

What is striking about Georges's play, in contrast to Sears's or Carlin's, is that here white people are seen as the victims of persecution. While the voices on the radio might insist upon the justice of confiscating land from wealthy whites, the play is structured so that our sympathies are for the beleaguered characters trying to cling onto their farm. The logic of the play, built as it is on the storyline of Shakespeare's *Othello*, dictates that the only space left for the war veterans is as the replacement for the Turks in *Othello*, and so they must be offstage and out

³⁰⁰ <www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=541636935940&ref=mf> [accessed 17 June 2013].

³⁰¹ Blessing-Miles Tendi, in *Making History and Mugabe's Zimbabwe: Politics, Intellectuals and the Media* (Berne: Peter Lang, 2010), gives an in-depth account of the conflicted views of Zimbabweans when it comes particularly to the issue of the justice or injustice involved in ZANU PF's policy on the taking over of white farms.

of range of our empathy for their own desperate plight. They are located psychically in the play as, simply, the enemy.

In *Otieno*, the Venice of order and prosperity and the Cyprus of war and chaos are not separated by geography; they exist in the same place. Venice is the past, to which the characters can never return, and Cyprus is their precarious present. In the same video, Georges explains how, in contrast to other projects he has researched, such as the slave trade or the banana boats coming to Europe, in Zimbabwe, it feels as if ‘the blood from all the pain and dilemmas of Africa has not dried yet’. The play’s present has the quality of a hyper-present that gives the characters no firm foothold, with the country’s history in a state of being wiped out and rewritten by Mugabe’s government, so that the past is doubly lost to the characters, and where each hour in any of their lives could be their last. In contrast to *Harlem Duet*, where the recorded voices we hear between scenes are filtered through time, forming an intricately webbed history of black resistance and celebration that is now perceived in retrospect, in *Otieno*, the radio broadcasts are incoherent in their immediacy, unfiltered, with this confusion mirrored by the poor reception that causes the voices to cut out or be drowned by static.

In Shakespeare’s *Othello* and the rewritings I have discussed, from the burlesques onwards, legal structures both protect and confine the lives of its citizens; in *Otieno*, the arbitrariness of the law of any time or country beneath its illusion of permanence, of representing an eternal morality, is exposed by its being shown here abruptly to cease to work. At the end of the play, Diana, Diana’s childhood friend Bamidele (a merging of Bianca and Emilia) and Ian all lie dead, but there is no talk of how the law will deal with these murders. The remaining surviving characters, except Otieno, simply pile into a truck and flee to escape the war veterans already invading the farm. Without a functioning legal system to structure their existence, the characters are forced to create their own society, their own pseudo-army, to scrape together their own rules and morality based on self-interest and survival.



Figure 18: A scene from *Otiemo* at Southwark Theatre
(<http://www.mettatheatre.co.uk/archives/otieno/> [accessed 2 March 2010]).

Much of the action in the Southwark Playhouse production is obscured by a chthonic darkness, with characters stumbling around the farmlands by the light of a torch, falling over corpses, misrecognising comrades for enemies, while inside the farm the electricity generator constantly breaks down because of the chronic fuel shortages caused by Mugabe's reckless policies (see Figure 18). The atmosphere is emphasised by the set, where the stage is a featureless landscape of shifting red sand that clings to the actors' sweating bodies so that they appear to be half sucked into the earth. A pile of red Zambezi beer crates is used to form temporary structures – a table, a chair, a bed – before they are thrown into chaos again. The spectre of darkness that shadows one individual in Shakespeare's play – Othello – here appears to descend upon the land as a whole.

As such, Georges, in this play that tackles an episode in African history where, in an upturning of historic power relations, black Africans are persecuting whites, could be accused of replicating the white myth of Africa as a dark and timeless place if the illumination brought about by the rational linearity of European enlightenment is snuffed out, just as Othello in his bedchamber snuffs

out the candle and then white Desdemona's life ('Put out the light, and then put out the light!' (IV. 2. 7)).

However, what Georges really seems to be doing is to create a form of colour-blind empathy in this most racially charged of situations, with his focus simply on a group of characters whose identity in this particular intense situation shrinks only to a shared terror in facing the violent loss of the only home they have ever known. This proves an effective backdrop to a tragedy that is ultimately about Otieno's gargantuan need to feel that he is home at last, by achieving domestic happiness, and thus his rage when he believes Diana has carelessly destroyed that dream.

Conclusion

In his seminar on 'the Gaze', Jacques Lacan explains to his students the anamorphic technique that Hans Holbein the Younger used in his painting *The Ambassadors* (1533) in order to produce the death head that is only fully recognisable when it is viewed from particular angles. He holds up a piece of paper with an image on:

By chance, you see the blackboard at an oblique position in relation to the piece of paper. Suppose that by means of a series of ideal threads or lines, I reproduce on the oblique surface [the blackboard] each point of the image drawn on my sheet of paper. You can easily imagine what the result would be – you would find a figure enlarged and distorted according to the lines of what might be called a perspective.³⁰²

The skull, unlike the rest of the painting, is not trapped in its Renaissance context; it can exist in any time or space dimension, can be any age, class or gender, and

³⁰² Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 85-86.

this process of anamorphosis by which it is revealed can act as a productive metaphor for rewritings of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

This can be seen particularly clearly in Vogel's *Desdemona*, with the 'ideal threads' being the direct correspondence between the scenes in *Othello* and the scenes in her play. Because she approaches *Othello* from the oblique angle of a back room, a place into which only the women in the play ever step foot, the result is a revealing distortion of the original that lays bare, in this case, how these characters are imprisoned by class and by gender. But the same process of enlarging and distorting elements that are present in the original text of *Othello*, so that they leap out at the audience, can be seen in all the rewritings. While in the nineteenth-century burlesques, what uniformly grins back at us is a grotesque comic caricature of a black man, in the plays in this chapter a range of faces take flesh upon the skull – black, white, male and female – all of them ultimately tragic. This appropriating of Shakespeare's *Othello*, while preserving enough of the structure of the original for the connection to be obvious, allows for Shakespeare's play to be seen in a new light where its seventeenth-century zeitgeist and the zeitgeist of the new play are simultaneously illuminated and deconstructed by the presence of the other.

Holbein was commissioned to paint *The Ambassadors* by the man on the viewer's left, French Ambassador Jean De Dinteville. It is perhaps puzzling why he would want a painting that displays to such gorgeous effect the wealth and power he and his friend the bishop Georges de Selve possess, only to undercut this by the sinister absent presence of the death head, offering a stark reminder that all worldly possessions count as nothing when we shift to that other plane. A similar need to have one's comfortable position at the centre questioned, problematised, seems to be behind the desire by the powerful, particularly since the Second World War to let in previously marginalised voices, accompanied by the rising and often intense pressure of these groups to be heard. While in the case of De Dinteville, this could be interpreted as the traditional Christian disquiet over wealth – a kind of indemnity clause, whereby you are able to show off your possessions while also making it clear that you know these fripperies are ultimately worthless when it comes to the eternal soul – in the twenty-first century the doubts that plague the straight white Christian male relate less to a fear of the

next world and more, as I have argued throughout this thesis, to what has happened in this one.

All the rewritings of *Othello* in this chapter reference the dislocation brought about by slavery, colonialism and imperialism. Carlin's *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona* has one character of African descent, born in the Caribbean because his ancestors were enslaved, and the other of European descent born in Africa because of her ancestors' colonising ambitions, now both finding themselves on a stage in London, the centre from where British imperialism began. Marowitz's *An Othello* has African-Americans with their lives still blighted by prejudice a century after the end of slavery. Mitchell's *Cruel Tears* is about downtrodden people who either themselves, or their ancestors, are European immigrants. Vogel's *Desdemona: a Tale about a handkerchief* is set in an unreal world, an amalgam of the original setting of *Othello* of sixteenth-century Cyprus and possibly a form of present-day, multicultural England with its modern idiom, money in pounds and pence and its melting pot of Irish, cockney and (off-stage) black characters. The struggles in Sears's *Harlem Duet* are between two sets of immigrants – one of whom, in the first instance, brought the others to the Americas to be their slaves. Georges's *Otiemo* has white Zimbabweans, who are yet again from European descent, now being forced out of the country they once dominated. This dislocation goes further: many of the writers have set their plays in places they are not from: Carlin in England, Vogel in an imaginary pre- and post-colonial hybrid Europe, Sears in the USA and Georges in Zimbabwe.

In 1963, as the British Empire was in the process of collapsing, Malcolm X, building on Frantz Fanon's theories, spoke of how the colonisation of the mind lingered on long after the enslaved are technically free, so that there are still 'modern house niggers' in the United States.³⁰³ For him, the 'house negro' differed from the 'field negro' by his identifying with his oppressor:

³⁰³ A recording of Malcolm X's speech, made on 9 November 1963, is available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znQe9nUKzvQ>> [Accessed 17 June 2013]. It is striking that while enraged against the white man for excluding the black man, his male language none the less excludes the female.

They loved their master, more than the master loved himself [...]. If the master got sick, the house negro would say 'What's the matter, boss, we sick?' We sick! He identified himself with his master, more than the master identified with himself.

The enduring appeal of Shakespeare's *Othello* partly rests on how it reveals the mental contortions brought about by loving your oppressor, this condition that Malcolm X in the twentieth century saw as the condition of the 'house negro' which can also be seen reflected in the intimacy of a marriage, with its conflation of loving, honouring and obeying, and in the intimacy between any servant, whatever their colour, and their master or mistress. Even better for dramatic intrigue, in *Othello* both Othello and Desdemona are the victim and the oppressor simultaneously: she because she is white, wealthy; he because he is a man and so her 'lord' and ultimately her executioner. In the plays in this chapter, we see an attempt to untangle this by writers who now live in a more liberated world, but whose identity is still branded by their forebears' experience of exclusion and ridicule, whether that was from being black, a woman, black and a woman, a poor white immigrant or a Jew.

Chapter 3 My Own Rewritings of *Othello*

‘Now adayes they put at the end of everye Tragedie (as poison into meat) a comedie or jigge’ complained a sixteenth-century theatre goer,³⁰⁴ revealing that the nineteenth-century taste for a tragedy followed by a burlesque stretches back through English drama. In my own practice for this PhD, I decided to produce just such a Victorian-style evening of entertainment by writing my own full-length tragic version of *Othello*, *The Turn*, and following this by a burlesque skit, drawing on my research in this thesis to explore how each aesthetic form works upon its material. However, in its writing, *Ponte Dell Tette*, refused to stay in the territory of burlesque, settling instead into a form of tragi-burlesque, in perhaps an indication of how, for a post-colonial writer, or audience, to perceive of lives destroyed by prejudice as purely comic seems almost impossible.

The Turn and *Ponte Dell Tette* form Chapters 4 and 5 respectively. But, first, in this chapter I describe the process that I went through in writing them.

The Turn

Jennifer Wallace describes how in the early seventeenth century it seems that ‘the drama of various [Shakespeare] tragedies would end with a funeral procession drawing upon established funeral practice [and that] these reminders of common rituals – the funeral ceremony, the dance – supposedly brought the audience back to a comforting sense of normality which had been disturbed during the course of the play’.³⁰⁵ Wallace describes the procession as leaving the stage and passing through the audience. This custom seems also to offer an extreme form of authenticity that might actually disturb further rather than reassure; in these tragedies, where Shakespeare creates a new psychological depth for his

³⁰⁴ Quoted by Jennifer Wallace in *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.60.

³⁰⁵ Wallace, p. 61.

characters, so real do they seem that when they die on stage, they do not simply get up again to take their applause but are borne away into the real world sealed in a coffin more generally reserved for a real corpse. It is the polar opposite to the burlesques when the departed refuse even to remain dead until the denouement.

To varying degrees, the post-1960 tragedies that I analysed in Chapter 2 attempt to enhance the emotive power offered by tragedy's intense focus by similarly creating characters that have such an authenticity that we could almost believe they too live, and therefore their corpses would have to be borne from the stage. Ironically, Marowitz, who for the majority of the play rejects psychologically coherent characters and emphasises the fiction of the stage, none the less ends with the sight of Othello's corpse being dragged from the stage by Iago in an echo of those Jacobean funeral processions. In writing my own tragedy, that explores tensions between Islam and the west, I also wanted to enhance its emotive power through having a realist aesthetic, disrupted only by the presence of one character who seems to exist slightly out of time – Rubbia, whom I shall describe later.

In rewritings of *Othello* from the nineteenth century onwards, it has been Othello's ethnicity, rather than his religion, that has been foregrounded. Rewriters of the play have settled overwhelmingly on having Othello as a sub-Saharan African, which is understandable in the context of the last two centuries when the live issue has been the enslavement of Africans and its abolition, colonialism and its aftermath. The Jacobean had different concerns. As Vitkus writes, such an audience watching the play might have been reminded of:

The story of *The Sultan and The Fair Greek*, an exemplary tale of Islamic cruelty that features an Ottoman emperor (usually Amurath I or Mahomet II) who must choose between masculine, military 'honour' and his attachment to a Christian slave, Irene, with whom he has fallen in love. The story was dramatised on the London stage in at least four different versions during the sixteenth and seventeenth century.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁶ Vitkus, p. 99.

What I find striking here is that the roles are reversed from those in *Othello*, with the slaves being white. As Vitkus earlier describes:

The English had reason to feel trepidation about the imperial power of the Ottoman Turks, who were conquering and colonising Christian territories in Europe and the Mediterranean. [...] By the beginning of the seventeenth century, at the same time as they were developing the trade in African slaves, the English faced the problem of their own people – men, women and children – being captured and enslaved by ‘Turkish’ privateers operating in the Mediterranean and north eastern Atlantic. [...] Europeans were both colonizers and colonized. [...] during the siege of Malta in 1565, one English diocese established a form to be used in common prayer, which asked God ‘to repress the rage and violence of the infidels who by all tyranny and cruelty labour utterly to root out not only true religion, but also the very name and memory of Christ our only Saviour.’³⁰⁷

This period was on the cusp, though, of a shift when, as Debra Blumenthal writes, ‘the slaves directly captured in warfare progressively were outnumbered by shiploads of sub-Saharan Africans and Canary Islanders sent by Portuguese and Italian traders based in clearinghouses along the Atlantic coast’.³⁰⁸ This marked the beginning of an increasingly vast trade in West Africans that obliterated all other forms of slavery.

Therefore, whereas in productions and rewritings of *Othello* since the nineteenth-century, the emphasis has been on the Othello character experiencing his blackness as a badge of oppression and exclusion, for a Jacobean audience the experience was presumably more of his simultaneously representing a regularly

³⁰⁷ Vitkus, pp. 77-79. Vitkus found this prayer and other similar ones reprinted in *Liturgical Services of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. by William Clay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1847), pp. 519-23.

³⁰⁸ Debra Blumenthal, *Enemies and Familiars: Slavery and Mastery in Fifteenth-Century Valencia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 267, quoted in Emily Weissbourd, “‘I Have Done the State Some Service’: Reading Slavery in *Othello* through *Juan Latino*”, *Comparative Drama*, 47 (2013), 529-51 (p. 531).

abused and frequently enslaved outsider but also a threatening external force in a world where Christianity's grip was increasingly tenuous. This must have been reinforced by the fact that Cyprus had already fallen to the Turks in 1573, some thirty years before *Othello* was written, so the relief of its characters at the Turkish fleet having been so effortlessly dispatched by the storm would have had a certain dramatic irony for Shakespeare's first audiences.³⁰⁹

How Muslims are regarded in contemporary British society, and elsewhere, has striking parallels with Shakespeare's context. On the one hand, as a visibly Muslim immigrant, you are vulnerable to racial abuse and exclusion; on the other hand, Islam globally is increasingly seen as the sole force that offers a credible military threat to western nations, in the guise of Islamist militancy. Prayers are once again being uttered, in national newspapers, that we will be delivered from the threat brought about by returning jihadists from Syria and Iraq. Some are still teenagers, appearing giddy with the power that their roles in a new so-called caliphate have brought them, where they have presumably gone from being told to tidy their bedrooms to lording it over cowed inhabitants in desert cities.

Robert Gordon writes about Tom Stoppard's 1966 play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* that 'much of the humour [...] lies in the deliberate mismatching of Elizabethan form with contemporary experience and from the yoking together of a late twentieth-century idiom with Elizabethan political action and social values'.³¹⁰ I would suggest that Stoppard's play was written from a cultural perspective that was more certain of its distance from Shakespeare's time – of a sense of forward progression to an increasingly more emancipated period – than we are now. In the last few years, in many parts of the Muslim world, such as Nigeria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Egypt, women's freedom, in particular, has reversed with sickening speed. Their situation is a stark reminder of the extent to which women have been historically excluded and abused and how easily all of us might return to that state, with the most disturbing visual symbol of this being

³⁰⁹ A succinct description of this Venetian loss is given in *Dictionary of Wars*, ed. by George Childs Kohn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 517.

³¹⁰ Robert Gordon, 'Introduction', *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Jumpers and The Real Thing*, ed. by Robert Gordon (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 11.

the woman hidden in a burka – its head to toe blackness making her appear as an empty space – that muffles her voice and starves her of sunlight.

The fear that women's rights in the west are also being eroded by conservative Islamic forces is expressed emotively by women who have experienced sharia law first hand, such as the Somali-born Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the Egyptian-born Nonie Darwish, whom I draw on in creating my character of Dahlia in *The Turn*. Both now live in the United States. Darwish left Egypt back in 1978 and warns that 'to live [as a woman] under sharia law is to live in the world's largest maximum-security prison'.³¹¹ That women themselves have played a limited role in that is testament to what I have explored in this thesis: the huge tensions involved in being intimate with your oppressors, where to rebel is to lose all. Therefore, in a move that Darwish describes as a 'If you can't beat them, join them' sentiment, 'a large number of Muslim women have discovered they can achieve power and respect by supporting sharia and radical Islam.[...] Some become as radical, if not more radical, than men'.³¹²

That incongruity Stoppard derived from the juxtaposing of different periods is recognisable in the jihadis' use of social media where we have such incongruities as a group of radical preachers hosting 'an online conference for scores of Islamist radicals to give their backing to Islamic State', with its medieval systems of punishment, on a video chat site innocuously called Paltalk.³¹³

In wanting to explore the broader juxtaposition of people existing together while having wildly different cultural belief systems, I decided to write a play set purely in London and look in particular at how those on the far left of the political spectrum have made various accommodations with forms of Islam that are radical in their very conservatism and roundly rejected by more moderate Muslims who often find themselves at the sharp end of Islamist incursions on how others should lead their lives.

³¹¹ Nonie Darwish, *Cruel and Usual Punishment: The Terrifying Global Implications of Islamic Law* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. x. Ayaan Hirsi Ali's book that takes a similar stance is *The Caged Virgin* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

³¹² Darwish, p. 89.

³¹³ Reported by Shiva Malik in the *Guardian*, 9 September 2014, p. 4.

I chose to reverse the ethnic make-up of the original play, and have a white man in central place, in order to find in him an equivalent for the tensions that cause Shakespeare's Othello to unravel. Muir is a socialist revolutionary in his late 40s, back in Britain after decades in Latin America. He is a kind of George Galloway figure, committed to fighting a tide of Islamophobia. However, he is thrown into paranoia and intense insecurity by his isolated position, and his obsessive love for a young Muslim girl, who plays with submissiveness and the veil.

In Muir, I look at how a sympathy with Islamist groups amongst sections of the left is not merely pragmatic but is an emotive response that has its roots far back in western culture. George Galloway, for instance, in his autobiography, writes how the *Guardian* called him "the left's Lawrence of Arabia" and, as with T. E. Lawrence, there is that sense of him being in the thrall of an enticing foreign culture.³¹⁴ Galloway went on his first trip to Lebanon in 1977, and reminisces how: 'The trip was a marvellous, life-changing experience in my life, with exotic Arabic music in the cafes and the whiff of revolution in the air. For a young man who thought like me this was bliss.'³¹⁵ Two years earlier, working for the Labour party in Dundee, Galloway had nailed his colours to the Palestine cause, and, with alarming ruthlessness, 'went to work putting to flight the small pro-Israel pocket within our local Labour movement'.³¹⁶

My character Muir has spent most of his adult life in Latin America, defending indigenous people against capitalist interests and the ever-present rapacious interference of the United States' government. His view of this government is in line with how Hugo Chavez, the former Venezuelan president, described US President George Bush at the 2006 UN General Assembly: 'Yesterday the Devil came here, right here, right here, and it smells of sulphur still today [...] Talking as if he owned the world.'³¹⁷ As Chavez speaks he crosses himself and looks up to heaven for divine assistance, amid shocked laughter. Like

³¹⁴ George Galloway, *I'm Not the Only One* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 28.

³¹⁵ Galloway, p. 34.

³¹⁶ Galloway, p. 30.

³¹⁷ Video footage of Chavez's speech is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lOsABwCrn3E> [accessed 4 December 2013].

the morality play from which Shakespeare's *Othello* springs, here too is laid out by Chavez a simple binary opposition of good and evil. It is from this context that Muir returns to Britain, having been forced to leave Ecuador by a reckless act, and finds a homeland where this neat duality becomes blurred.

In London, he has a chance meeting with an old girlfriend called Dahlia, a very wealthy Egyptian moderate Muslim who is campaigning to be an independent MP. Dahlia lives in the ordered, prosperous world of Little Venice but it is East London, the chaotic Cyprus of the play, where she hopes to gain a seat. She needs someone white to infiltrate the fascist meetings of her electoral rival, to find some dirt on him. Therefore, while Othello the Moor sides with the Venetians against a Moorish invasion, so Muir seeks to undermine a movement that is politically abhorrent to him and yet made up of people who are ethnically the same as him. Like the Turks, we never see this off-stage fascist party, which has been repackaged into having a glamorous image by its own young turks, particularly the charismatic new leader, Ethan Hart.

The fascists use a pro-women card to garner support, launching a campaign against a key imam in the constituency who, in line with Muslim tradition, does not allow women to attend mosque. Since Muir regards himself as a defender of women's rights – through his socialist politics – not himself to be critical of this, and other examples of unequal treatment of women, involves a form of cognitive dissonance. However, a strain is only really put on his fragile sense of identity when he falls in love with Dahlia's eighteen-year-old daughter Zara.

I chose the name Zara not only because it was age-appropriate for an eighteen-year-old Egyptian but as a homage to an earlier French, eighteenth-century play that also explores clashes between Islam and the west, Voltaire's *Zaire*, which appeared in a translated form in London in 1736 as *The Tragedy of Zara*.³¹⁸

³¹⁸ Aaron Hill, *The Tragedy of Zara: As it is Acted Out at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane by His Majesty's Servants* (London: J. Watts, 1736). David Maskell discusses the popularity of this translation and Voltaire's original *Zaire*, in 'Europe, Alterity and Fear in French Classical drama: Past Plots and Contemporary Controversies', *El design teatral*

Zara plays with submissiveness and the veil as part of a struggle to establish her own identity in opposition to the big personality of her liberal mother. This submissiveness is a rebellion and does not reflect the actual power that her youth, beauty and wealth give her. Her love for Muir, with his romantic tales of resistance in far-flung parts, is similarly born to a large extent from a youthful desire to kick over the traces, by having the man that her mother desires. Her mother is the equivalent of the Brabantio figure, but I decided to make him female and Muir's former love, to make explicit what appears to be hinted at in Shakespeare's play: that part of Brabantio's rage also comes from a sense of betrayal and jealousy because Othello was his friend, whose company he cherished. Muir has had a life time of strong women who challenge him, and is drawn rather to the apparent passivity and youthfulness of Dahlia's daughter, much to Dahlia's rage.

Growing up in the 1960s and 70s, in a traditional Scottish working class community, Muir's childhood concepts of masculinity had to undergo a radical rehaul when he entered revolutionary politics, and his indoctrination has not been fully successful; part of him still yearns for the traditional relationships between men and women. If Muir were able to address honestly what motivates him he would admit that there is something sexually exciting in having a submissive partner, particularly when he now feels emasculated in the rest of his life. The only job he can get is temping as a security guard at Canary Wharf, so he is a uniformed lackey for the banking sector who can be dismissed at a moment's notice.

While many rewritings of *Othello* have dispensed with the fact that Othello is much older than his wife, I have foregrounded this as it is an essential part of Muir's vulnerability, causing him ultimately to identify himself as a farcical, lecherous old cuckold and so needing to destroy the person who has brought him to that position: Zara.

In *The Turn*, then, I want to explore how people on the extreme left reconcile their politics with a religious belief system that even in its moderate forms is in tension with much of socialism's underlying principles. While both

d'Europa, ed. by Edició de Victor Molina and John London, *Escenes Europees*, 2 (2013), 59-81 (pp. 66-69).

belief systems emphasise the importance of a shared humanity and egalitarianism, the treatment of particularly women and the LGBT community under sharia law is at odds with socialist struggles to protect these and other historically repressed groups' rights. Then there is also the issue of socialism's traditional suspicion of religion as being used by those in power to keep their oppressed citizens' sights set on the afterlife and so not too troubled about the unjust system in which they live on Earth. And the insistence of the Abrahamic religions on texts written centuries earlier as carrying an eternal truth is in antithesis to the socialist assertion that all so-called eternal truths are an illusion created through ideology to fool people into seeing the current situation as largely unalterable, rather than a historically specific moment vulnerable to revolution.

Having been involved in the past with the most active left-wing group in Britain, the Socialist Worker Party (SWP), I have felt betrayed, and wanted to address, that particular party's willingness to support both Islamist movements and defend the continued implementation of a limited sharia law in Britain, while appreciating that the motivation for these moves has largely been concern at anti-Muslim sentiment at home and a desire to champion any anti-imperialist force abroad. My interest in the position of women in Islam has also been fired by having a Muslim ex-husband and by giving theatre workshops from 2011-2013 in a girls' state school in Tower Hamlets, Mulberry School, where the students are all Muslim.

In an indication of how the SWP's alliance with Galloway's Respect party alienated other left-wing groups, the Socialist Equality Party, writing in the aftermath of SWP's eventual split with Respect in 2007, condemns this in the fullest terms and quotes a frustrated SWP member, John Rees, as saying that 'the coalition "alienated not only the white working class but also the more radical sections of the Bengali community [in Tower Hamlets], both secular and Muslim, who feel that Respect is becoming the party of a narrow and conservative trend in the area'.³¹⁹

³¹⁹ Socialist Equality Party, 'Britain's Respect-Unity Coalition Split: The Collapse of an Opportunistic Bloc', *World Socialist Web Site*, 15 November 2007 <<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2007/11/resp-n15.html>> [accessed on 20 August 2014].

Following the break, the SWP still defended sharia law. Richard Seymour, at that time a leading member of the SWP, condemned ‘scare stories’ in national newspapers about the growth in sharia courts, describing them as ‘hysteria’ and ‘an expression of the Islamaphobia that has been cultivated in the west as an obnoxious cultural counterpart to the war on terror’.³²⁰ Shortly after Seymour’s split with the SWP, he wrote an article on his blog that gets to the heart of the kinds of contradictions that I imagine threaten my character Muir’s fragile mental state:

If you have never, as a socialist activist, found yourself defending a line you later regretted, kept quiet about something you shouldn’t have, rationalised away a feeling of unease, then you’re either deluded or a fucking liar.³²¹

The first example Seymour gives of this was ‘not making my objection to our hosting of the antisemitic crank [Gilad] Atzam’. That the SWP could entertain someone like Atzam, who despite being a Jewish Israeli has made the most unhinged comments about Jews is an example of how anti-Israel sentiment can so easily merge with virulent anti-Semitism. However, Seymour still defends SWP’s struggles against ‘Islamophobia’, while, in a further indication of how much this issue has split the left, writes with distaste that ‘some sections of the Left would be happy to capitulate to the Muslim-bashing under the rubric of a vulgar, idealist “atheism”’.

It is my character Muir’s state of barely being able to hold together a coherent personal and political identity that makes him peculiarly vulnerable to the Iago character of Qaseem. In my rewriting of *Othello*, I take at face value the proto-Marxist justification that Shakespeare’s Iago gives for his behaviour, as a

³²⁰ Richard Seymour, ‘Living under an Alien Law’, *The Socialist Worker*, 12 February 2008 <<http://socialistworker.co.uk/art/13885/Living+under+an+alien+law>> [accessed on 20 July 2014].

³²¹ Richard Seymour, ‘The Actuality of a Successful Capitalist Offensive’, *Lenin’s Tomb*, 29 March 2013 <http://www.leninology.co.uk/2013_03_01_archive.html> [accessed on 20 July 2014].

significant part of his motivation. In a play that is about socialism, I have one character who experiences subtle and overt humiliation and exclusion every day in his role as servant and driver in Dahlia's privileged household. His lack of access to credit thwarts his ambitions to make something of his life, and so, like Iago, Qaseem plots and schemes to control the lives of all who thought they were better than him, in order to enact his own mini-revolution.

In this, I am pursuing another aspect of Shakespeare's play that, like Islam, has been neglected in rewritings of *Othello*: how Shakespeare has taken this strange Vice-like figure and half-filled up the spaces of pure empty mischief or evil with a historically specific rationale for his actions that would lend itself to a socialist reading: Iago does not accept his low-class position, played for a fool by the ruling classes. He refuses to be a 'duteous knee-crooking knave' (I. 1. 44).

This neglect is perhaps understandable: because of the history of both colonialism and patriarchy, the domination and murder of a wealthy white woman by her black, formerly enslaved, husband has divided and enthralled us for over four centuries, rather than has the machinations of a servant who appears superficially simply to play the role of a cartoon villain. However, an early critic to recognise Iago's exciting potential as a political revolutionary was William Hazlitt. Writing in 1818, he describes Iago as 'a true prototype of modern Jacobinism who thinks that talents ought to decide the place', rather than birth, with the term 'Jacobin' in Hazlitt's time referring both to revolutionaries in France and their supporters in England.³²² However, since Hazlitt, Iago's unhappiness at his treatment has been dismissed by critics, who have instead tended to insist on Iago's 'motiveless malignity'.³²³ Even left-wing critics have

³²² William Hazlitt, 'Mr Kean's Iago' in his *A View of the English Stage* (London: R. Stodart, 1818), reproduced in *Othello: Critical Essays*, ed. by Susan Snyder (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), p. 12.

³²³ The term 'Motive-less malignity' [sic] was originally used by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in a note he jotted down in his copy of *Othello*, which is detailed in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 5 Lectures 1808-1819: On Literature*, ed. by R. A. Foakes, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), II, 315, quoted by Honigmann, 'Introduction', p. 34. Honigmann points out that Coleridge himself was 'almost certainly indebted to others for the idea', perhaps E. H. Seymour.

broadly been resistant to seeing Iago in terms other than as pure evil. Germaine Greer sees the character of Iago as being unambiguously created out of the figure of Vice, and that the whole point of evil is that it is ‘absurd, unmotivated and inconsistent’. She goes on to say that ‘Such a character is Iago, whom generations of scholars have struggled to psychoanalyse without success’.³²⁴ Terry Eagleton similarly writes that:

The other great Shakespearean example of an evil which seems to lack all purpose is Iago [...] who offers various motives for his aversion to the Moor, just as Shylock does for his antipathy to Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*. In both cases, however, the stated reasons seem oddly unequal to the virulence of the hatred. [...] It is tempting, then, to find the root of Iago’s hostility to Othello in his nihilism.³²⁵

However, to be kicked and spat upon in the street, as has been Shylock’s treatment by Antonio, or to be used and then cast aside by your master, as is the lot of the servant classes, has been enough in the past to inspire whole populations to revolt against their oppressors, risking their lives for an ideal of revenge. Similarly, the character of Iago proves himself to be more of an idealist than a nihilist. As Hazlitt describes it, ‘Iago runs all risks for a trifling and doubtful advantage.’ A doubtful material advantage, that is, but not a psychological one. Likewise, Shylock the moneylender is actually less interested in money than any of the other characters, refusing a mountain of ducats for a chunk of human flesh that is beyond monetary value to him.

Iago sees through the smoke and mirrors – through the ploy of those in power to keep those marginalised believing that their abused status is natural and right – and he turns the charade upside down to become the puppet master himself, at least for a few brief, heady days. Once the bed is piled high with corpses, it is game over for Iago. But even then he rebels and will not play ball:

³²⁴ Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 45.

³²⁵ Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (New York: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 85.

the Venetian worthies demand answers; they want to unpuzzle this bloody puzzle, to place Iago in the role of the interrogated in their makeshift court, but Iago, who has persistently spoken when his rank demanded his silent obedience, will now not speak; he meets them with silence and stillness, will not open his mouth or play again: 'Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word' (V. 2. 300-01).

Stephen Greenblatt, in *Shakespeare's Freedom*, writes in relation to Iago's contempt for the knee-crooking knave that 'such is the caste to which Iago officially belongs, but he will not accept the designation'.³²⁶ A more Marxist reading would be that he does not so much reject membership of his caste but that he is enflamed on behalf of his caste at how those on the inside treat them, and determines to enact a mini-revolution, where master and servant change places.

It comes down to whether we see Iago as still belonging to his caste even if he does not behave as that position apparently dictates that he should. How voluminous is his caste, in the sense of how far can he stray in how he behaves and still be said to belong to it? What does his caste actually constitute, or is it more positional? It is interesting how 'position' is the word we use for the employment people have, foregrounding as it does that we are defined not by so much by our labour *per se* but by our labour relationship to others. Can the position of a servant still be that when it is she or he who orders the master? It is this I play with in my character of Qaseem.

In *The Turn*, London is encased in ice. Snow flattens time so that the footprints of different humans and other animals, who passed by at different times, appear simultaneously in the same place, before the next fall of snow erases them all. I wanted to play with the idea of time collapsing, of 'Jacobean' walking the streets of contemporary London, that is, men and women who live by codes of family honour, dress and avoidance of shame that are even more severe than in the sixteenth century. The character of Rubbia, the young girl Dahlia rescues from the streets and brings into her home, has aspects of both Shakespeare's Emilia and Bianca, but has no real equivalent in Shakespeare's *Othello*, which is intended to give her an air of being out of joint in the play, of

326 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 58.

having wandered into the action. Coming from a devout Pakistani family, the long black dresses that Rubbia wears allow her to appear simultaneously as a twenty-first century teenager and someone belonging to an earlier period. As befits her slightly phantom-like status even when alive, after she is dead she remains to haunt the living characters.

Her ghostly presence torments the Cassio figure of Modi so badly that he seeks refuge in an extreme form of his religion that promises him peace. He concludes that the only reason he was in a position to seduce, and subsequently reject, Rubbia – an act that destroys her – is because of the lax contemporary attitude in the west that allows men and women to mix freely. Rejecting, then, his western lifestyle, he embraces Islam. However, since this leads him to refuse to be involved with his friend Zara when she comes seeking his help, he is then implicated in another death: Zara's at the hands of Muir.

It is no chance that Rubbia dies in the fast-falling snow while homeless and huddled up to that bastion of colonialism, the Royal Albert Memorial. Shakespeare uses ghosts – in *Hamlet*, in *Macbeth* – to reproach the living. Rubbia is a silent reproach for what excluded women have suffered. She is what pricks our conscience and will not entirely disappear. By having her appear to be un-pinned from time, I am insisting on a shared identity among women throughout history.

Like so many of the post-1960 rewritings of *Othello*, I found the natural form for this play – the form that felt inevitable also because of my emotional connection to the material – was that of the linearity and climax of tragedy. However, I wanted to reveal how the oppressive forces of patriarchy destroy not only women but men as well. In doing this, I decided to follow closely the structure of Shakespeare's *Othello*, so that Muir, as the Othello figure, is kept in the role of tragic protagonist, rather than this position taken by either of the young female characters, however unpleasant their deaths. The focus of *The Turn* rests on his mental blindness, which leads to the destruction of himself and all that he cares about.

Ponte dell Tette

In writing what became a tragi-burlesque skit, I found myself experimenting with the borders of pain and laughter and the shutting off of empathy that had fascinated me in analysing the nineteenth-century burlesques from a twenty-first century perspective. My first thought was to hybridise the burlesque form by combining it with that commedia dell'arte descendant, the Punch and Judy Show, as there is something engrossingly sinister about lines of children laughing at displays of domestic violence. I have vague memories of such shows from my own childhood – sitting on damp sand looking up at a tower of gaily striped cotton, the crocodile and the sausages, and the red-nosed puppets confined on their tiny stage, half-falling out of it before being grabbed back. And how it all left me emotionally cold.

Something about that confinement amid the boundless blue horizon of the sea seemed appropriate for a rewriting of *Othello*. I wanted to recreate in some way that scene when the characters have just made it to Cyprus, having almost been swallowed up by the ocean: Desdemona giddily teasing Iago in those witty jests that nineteenth-century editions of the play cut out, and then the reunion between her and Othello, that elation at being in love and apparently free of the constraints of Venice.

However, then I remembered the Ponte dell Tette in Venice (The Bridge of Tits) and this bridge in all its hilarity and cruelty was too perfect a setting to miss for a burlesque skit, where those who represented order and patriarchy – the City Fathers of Venice – sought to regulate and tax female disorder. The Bridge of Tits is somewhat neglected in academic literature, although Linda Wolk-Simon does describe how enforcing prostitutes to line up on this small bridge bare breasted was ‘an officially sanctioned deterrent to the greater scourge of sodomy’, in the hope that it could turn men’s eyes in a different direction.³²⁷ Venice had a twin reputation for both prostitution, with the sixteenth-century diarist Marin Sanudo putting the number of prostitutes at around ten per cent of the entire

³²⁷ Linda Wolk-Simon, “‘Rapture to the Greedy Eyes’: Profane Love in the Renaissance”, in *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, ed. by Andrea Bayer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 43-57 (p. 46).

population, and for homosexuality.³²⁸ Connected to this, Alison Bing and Robert Landon suggest the breast baring was also to prevent female courtesans cross-dressing as men.³²⁹ Here, then, is a crude attempt to iron out ambiguity, to provide an incontestable display of gender.

The enforcement is also, of course, an attempt to distinguish prostitutes from ‘respectable’ women in Venice. In a period when fashion dictated that the general female population had a plunging neckline, a prostitute’s dress needs to plunge even more. Symbols imposed to distinguish a group’s difference are surely always required more when, in reality, their difference is increasingly not apparent. Melissa Ditmore writes how ‘starting in at least 1416, prostitutes [in Venice] were required to wear a yellow scarf to identify themselves’.³³⁰ By the sixteenth-century, this arbitrary symbol had been replaced by one – in the displays on the Bridge of Tits – where the gap between the symbol and what it represents almost closes. Yet despite the efforts of the City Fathers to control these women, while simultaneously taxing them, the very name, the Bridge of Tits, sends up the decree, so that simultaneously the women are humiliated but also the pious leaders of the state made to look ridiculous.

In my tragi-burlesque, I incorporate the Ponte dell Tette by having carnival cut-outs – as ubiquitous at the seaside as the Punch and Judy shows, where you put your head through the empty hole to give yourself an instant new identity, whether human or another animal, that you half inhabit but with the joins adding to the amusement. This is, in effect, the reverse of a traditional mask, since now the body is a mask and the face is real, a mobile slither of a particular human. It is an amusement that does not work when you are alone; your comical identity is for spectators to see as you cannot see yourself. I find connections to this and *Othello*, where I described the leitmotif as ‘to be read, and re-read and re-read’.

³²⁸ Marin Sanudo’s estimate in 1509 is referred to in *The Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*, ed. by Melissa Hope Ditmore (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), p. 515. James Smalls describes the emergence of a homosexual sub-culture in Venice in his *Homosexuality in Art* (New York: Parkstone Press, 2012), p. 74.

³²⁹ Alison Bing and Robert Landon, *Venice & The Veneto* (London: Lonely Planet Publications, 2012) p. 103.

³³⁰ *The Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*, p. 516.

My carnival cut-out fills the stage and consists of the bridge and a line of prostitutes. It is through the empty holes where the women's faces should be that the actors in *Ponte Dell Tette* push their own. Therefore, while the characters in the nineteenth-century burlesques have a frenetic energy, in my tragi-burlesque, they have an enforced stillness, so that the actors' energy fights against this physical constraint. While made ridiculous to the audience, they demand to be taken seriously, to be seen as they see themselves – not archetypes, not gulls but humans trying to wring as much satisfaction as they can out of their short and mortal existence. But to contrast with their confinement, there is a free and wheeling female gorilla, who tries on different identities through clothing, steals vacuum cleaners and is unaware of human codes of behaviour. She has a borderline existence between character and audience, and can see the other characters but they are unaware of her. Since this is an actor in a gorilla costume, her face is an unmovable mask, and yet I wanted to experiment with how she can show compassion despite this limitation.

By confining my play to Venice, I am staying within that first act of Shakespeare's *Othello* with its comic theme of the two lovers secretly courting and marrying under the nose of the young woman's jealous old father. As do Djanet Sears and Paula Vogel, I rely on the audience's knowledge of Shakespeare's original play to give the characters' words a dramatic irony, innocent as they are of their bloody future, where father, daughter and new husband will all be dead within a couple of days.

However, even without the knowledge of how the play is about to lurch into tragedy, this comic set-up has its own dark shadow: that the intense bond between a widowed father and his only daughter, whom he has looked after since birth, is destroyed so utterly that they never see each other again. It is the jarring of comedy and tragedy within this that I decided would be the focus of *Ponte Dell Tette*, where patriarchy – a structure that organises whole cultures and has one of its extreme forms in the Islamism I explore in *The Turn* – is seen in microcosm in that most intimate and literal example of the rule of the father.

Thinking of how Brabantio has segued into Shylock in rewritings of *Othello*, most explicitly in the *Shylock* burlesque of Griffin and Christy's Minstrels and Charles Marowitz's *An Othello*, I decided to introduce the parallel father and daughter relationship of Shylock and Jessica into my tragi-burlesque, to create a

Venice where both Shakespeare's tragedy and his so-called comedy exist simultaneously in the same physical space. In *Othello*, we never see Brabantio again after the senate scene, and hear only that he died of a broken heart. In *The Merchant of Venice*, however, we continue to see the deserted father Shylock, and Warren Chernaik writes how his loss has been highlighted further by production decisions:

Most recent productions of *The Merchant of Venice* have presented Jessica's desertion of her father's household and religion as a central motivating factor prompting Shylock's revenge against his enemies. The tradition begins with Irving's celebrated Victorian production, which includes an interpolated scene depicting Shylock's return to his deserted house.³³¹

Jessica and Desdemona are dragged by their desires in two opposing directions, both times away from their father but Desdemona flees the centre in pursuit of an extravagant stranger, while Jessica quits the excluded position brought about by her Jewish faith to elope with one of those 'curl'd darlings' that Desdemona so firmly rejected.

In *The Turn*, and the twenty-first century, Islam represents a puritanical threat, which is a direct swing round from the period when Shakespeare wrote *Othello*, when Islam was synonymous with sensuality, with Desdemona escaping by gondola 'to the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor' (I. 1. 124). In *Ponte dell Tette*, as almost universally in both burlesques and tragedies of *Othello*, the appeal of that association is made clear, as Desdemona eavesdrops on conversations between her father and Othello, and shares a tale of naked Moors dancing in the snow with the audience. However, more than that, Desdemona tries to work out where her desire comes from, as does Jessica.

The idea of Shylock and Othello appearing in the same play is not new. Louis Harap describes how in *The Shakespeare Water-Cure* by 'The Larks', copyrighted in 1883, 'Leading Shakespearean characters [including Shylock] are

³³¹ Warren Chernaik, *The Merchant of Venice* (Devon: Northcote House Publishers, 2005), p. 66.

recuperating at a water-cure spa, after the ordeals through which Shakespeare has put them',³³² while Othello is, inevitably, the minstrel waiter. He enters singing:

Othello, de gay and festive nig
Who has lost his rank and title,
And yet doesn't give a fig.³³³

Harap describes this as offensive, and so it is, but here again is also that familiar burlesque anarchy – the rejection of the value of those hierarchies by which society seeks to order us, placing one of us half-naked on a bridge, another with a crown thrust on our head. The military can be seen as an ideal of an organised society, in that rank is perfectly laid out, with none of the ambiguity that is part and parcel of the ordering of a real society, so that everyone knows their exact status in relationship to everyone else, and this is clearly indicated visually in the uniforms worn, which are indeed uniform with the function of binding the wearers into one unit, but still allowing precise differences. Othello is both part of that absolute military system and extravagant, that is outside any system, so that he can marry into the highest circles with no less than the Duke of Venice's blessing while still be crudely dismissed as 'the thick lips' by a servant such as Iago. When Othello is cast out of the military, he is therefore utterly without place.

In this, Othello is different from Shylock whose existence as a Jew is as codified as that of the prostitutes, with the Jews also forced to identify themselves by their clothing and have their lives, and particularly their choice of trades, severely circumscribed.³³⁴ I would also add that Shylock is forced to live in a

³³² Louis Harap, *The Image of the Jew in American Life: From Early Republic to Mass Immigration* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1974), p. 214.

³³³ Quoted by Harap, p. 214.

³³⁴ Alexander Maxwell, in *Patriots Against Fashion: Clothing and Nationalism in Europe's Age of Revolutions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 51-56, tracks the complex changes to these rules regarding badges, hats and turbans in red and yellow in Venice and elsewhere. While Othello might have been an extravagant and wheeling stranger in Venice, Maxwell writes that in earlier centuries, in Hungary and Aragon,

segregated area of the city, except that Shakespeare's Venice does not appear to contain the ghetto.³³⁵ However, with that codified life does come some sense of a community. Shylock has his fellow Jewish friend Tubal, his daughter before she absconds, his wife, although now dead. Othello appears to have nothing other than his very recent union with Desdemona – no attachments, no community.

Seeing how Othello can merge into Brabantio, and Brabantio into Shylock, and Shylock into Othello – since, despite what sets Shylock and Othello apart, they are still both foreigners, objects of suspicions, who chance their arm and duly pay for it – I have two actors constantly swapping between the three parts, so each part is played by both of them, thereby suggesting these connections while simultaneously undermining the inner coherence of each of the characters. Their identities are indicated by a black mask for Othello, a red hat for Shylock and a grey beard for Brabantio. These two actors are older males, since of course while Othello might be cast in the role of the ardent young lover, he is a character whose age is closer to that of the two fathers, Brabantio and Shylock.

Because of that image I had a long time ago of two white male Jacobean actors, playing Othello and Desdemona weeping over their own eclipse, I wanted to have only white male actors in my tragi-burlesque. Both female parts are played by one very young man, or even a teenager, his face covered in the white pancake that symbolised women in Renaissance theatre, and a blonde or dark wig respectively to signal whether he is playing Desdemona or Jessica.

Modern audiences associate men dressing up as women as being the stuff of pantomime so it is impossible to recreate the experience that a Jacobean audience would have, when female characters were always played by boys. When men dressing up as women became funny in the modern, camping-it-up sense is an interesting question. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Andrew Carlson suggests that in Griffin and Christy's *Othello* burlesque 'Desdemona's reference to her figure

Muslims were also forced to wear badges, and, not to be out done, that Islamic governments used turbans and hats to identify Christians and Jews.

³³⁵ Donatella Calabi in 'The "City of Jews"' gives a detailed description of the physical construction of the ghetto and how it constrained the lives of its Jewish inhabitants, in *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, ed. by Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid (Baltimore: the John Hopkins Press, 2001), pp. 31-51.

was probably humorous to an audience watching a man',³³⁶ but in what precise way would be hard to reconstruct. Tim Carroll, a director I work with at The Factory, has forged a style for men to play women in his all-male *Twelfth Night* that premiered in 2012 at Shakespeare's Globe, London, which successfully creates a constrained, feminine identity that is not ridiculous; Mark Rylance moved stiff-bodied and with little shuffling steps in his portrayal of the pampered Countess Olivia. How the feminine will be portrayed in my tragi-burlesque when we can see only the actors' faces and hear their voices will need to be explored in rehearsal.

In wanting Othello to be played by a white actor, I am influenced by a shift in contemporary thought that questions the until-recent almost universal orthodoxy that Othello should be played by a black man. For example, Roberto Cuppone in his discussion of his version of Othello, *Otello, Tragicommedia dell'arte*, which premiered at the 2009 9th Venice Biennale, directed by Michele Modesto, writes:

No actor, either white or black, has the physique du rôle to incarnate this paradox [of the character of Othello], on his face both melanin or makeup, both nature and artifice inevitably appear as an approximation, or even an ideology or a smug lie. Othello can only be a mask of prejudice, practiced or suffered. A fixed idea, a stereotype, like all classifications, both comic and tragic together. [...] For an actor, however, no trick is possible. Perhaps the most effective way of representing him is with a mask.³³⁷

It is not clear whether Cuppone is claiming that this is a tribute to the slippery, untameable character that Shakespeare has created, or as a recognition that Othello is not an actual black man but a construct of a black man created by a white, wealthy Jacobean playwright. However, he clearly is saying that it is more

³³⁶ Andrew Carlson, 'Oteller and Desdemonum: Defining Nineteenth-century Blackness', in *Theatre History Studies Volume 30: African and African American Theatre Past and Present* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), pp. 176-86 (p. 178).

³³⁷ <www.labiennale.org/en/theatre/archive/festival/program/otello.html?back=true> [accessed 23 February 2014].

accurate to problematise his identity rather than suggest a seamless fit between black actor and black character.

Shakespeare's ability to enter the mindset of the excluded, be they black, women, Jewish, disabled or otherwise scorned is such as to provoke Maya Angelou to declare recently that as a child she was convinced Shakespeare 'must be a black girl', so deeply did she respond to his writing, particularly his understanding of how it feels to be an outcast.³³⁸ That said, as Hugh Quarshie remarked fifteen years ago: 'If a black actor plays Othello does he not risk making racial stereotypes seem legitimate [...] namely that black men [...] are over-emotional, excitable and unstable?'³³⁹ Such doubts were actually expressed about the first major production to have a black man play Othello, the West Indian Rudolph Walker in 1984 at The Young Vic, after that long period since Paul Robeson when it had returned to being a white man's role. Lois Potter writes how a couple of reviewers expressed unease, with one – Brian Masters from the *Evening Standard* – writing how Othello came across as 'more stupid than good, suggesting the very prejudice which the production overtly wishes to condemn. As he is played by a black actor ... the irony is even more uncomfortable'.³⁴⁰ Quarshie will play Othello himself at the RSC in 2015, but with Iago also played by a black man, Lucian Msamati, with all the radical implications this will bring to Iago's lines.³⁴¹

The playing with the idea of Othello's blackness as a performance to be worn leapfrogs back over the post-colonial rewritings I covered in Chapter 2 to the burlesques of Chapter 1: to Doucelmone alienated by the black masks her harlequin fiancé Cruello wears, to the exaggerated red lips and caricatured black

³³⁸ At a talk Angelou gave at Randolph College in Lynchburg, Virginia, in January 2013.

³³⁹ Hugh Quarshie's words are quoted in Celia Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth: Inter-Racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 214.

³⁴⁰ Lois Potter, *Othello* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 168.

³⁴¹ Mark Brown, 'RSC Casts its First Black Iago for Next Year's Stratford-staged *Othello*', the *Guardian*, 3 September 2014

<<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/sep/03/rsc-cast-first-black-iago-in-next-years-othello-stratford>> [accessed 3 September 2014].

face of Othello in the burlesques that followed, with the ephemerality emphasised in *Othello the Second* by the white actor within the play washing his face clean of the burnt cork, or by Anson Dyer incorporating his preparation for his cartoon – the painting of his Othello’s face black – into the fabric of his animation by filming that too. Ira Aldridge in his memoirs, referring to himself in the third person and describing the reception he received in Dublin in 1831, was all too aware of the draw his skin held for his audience, writing that ‘his “sable suit” gave him additional interest in the eyes of the warm-hearted Hibernians’, as if they saw his colour as a set of clothes that he could put on or take off.³⁴² That this fascination with blackness as a performance goes deep into western culture appears evident from the medieval illustration of Christ’s black-faced tormentors in my Introduction.

The Othellos created by black playwrights in those post-colonial versions, meanwhile, focus on the protagonist’s authenticity as a black man, the felt experience of being black, seizing on Shakespeare’s insights into this internal perspective, when he is not seeing Othello through the eyes of his own white society who half-expect his colour to come off upon their fingers.

In some relatively recent rewritings and stagings of *Othello*, Othello is not always even a man, or even entirely human. In the same year as Cuppone’s production, over in Germany, director Jette Steckel was doing her own deconstructing of Othello’s identity at the Deutsches Theater Berlin by not only having the character played by a white woman but having the actor put on a gorilla’s mask to express Othello’s deterioration into insane jealousy. As theatre critic Andrew Haydon writes:

Steckel’s approach is arresting – and not only because it makes this white Englishman squirm, being about as far as is possible from the ways in which we choose to examine racism in Britain. There’s a fair part of me that did just keep thinking “Can you do that?”, as regards

³⁴² Ira Aldridge, *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius* (London: Onhwyn, 1850), p. 14.

the casting of a white person as Othello, and again when one learns that there's a gorilla costume involved.³⁴³

While going further along the controversial line than any English-language productions of Shakespeare's play, this was not actually a first in Germany: back in 1976, Peter Zadek took irony to its limits when he had Othello in a King Kong costume for his production in Hamburg, 'scratching himself for lice', as Julie Hankey describes.³⁴⁴

Having Othello played by more than one actor also has a precedent. Singaporean Ong Keng Sen's multilingual and multimedia *Desdemona*, which premiered in 2000 at the Adelaide festival, before going on to Germany and Singapore, has Othello played as both a woman and an old man.³⁴⁵ Here, then, Othello is actually split into two separate identities rather than, in my tragi-burlesque, the same identity being shared between two actors.

Masks, of course, do have a particular appropriateness for Venice, as it is the image of masked revellers dancing through a watery city with ever-shifting reflections and mists that gives a sense of a place that evades any essence. This, in turn, is the right atmosphere for a burlesque that plays with the elusiveness of identity. I initially, therefore, decided to have Othello represented by a black mask, although this was largely also for practical reasons, since the actors need so rapidly to switch between parts. However, I kept returning to the idea of wanting Othello in blackface because I have been fascinated by its long history, and wanted to try its effect in my work. I decided finally to have Othello in black make-up that he has to keep quickly washing off and reapplying, ever more clumsily, as if it is a disguise falling apart.

³⁴³ Andrew Haydon, 'Othello – Deutsches Theater', *Postcards from the Gods* <<http://postcardsgods.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/othello-deutsches-theater.html>> [accessed 2 February 2014].

³⁴⁴ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by Julie Hankey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 85.

³⁴⁵ A recording of *Desdemona* is available online at <<http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/desdemona-ong-keng-sen-2000>> [accessed 11 February 2014].

As Susan Snyder writes, comedy ‘renders impotent the imperatives of times and law, either stretching them to suit the favored characters’ needs or simply brushing them aside’.³⁴⁶ I fully exploit this in *Ponte dell Tette* where the characters apparently touch each other even though this is physically impossible from where they are positioned, and Othello appears to freefall through the centuries, rather than be fixed in the sixteenth century, even managing to meet Heiner Müller in the 1970s’ and so recount one of Müller’s amusing anecdotes about the GDR, which I found in an interview that he gave shortly before he died to Alexander Kluge. I particularly liked this tale as it works as a multi-faceted metaphor of controlled, confining linear structures collapsing under the weight of disorder and bodily pleasures.³⁴⁷

Robert Rodriguez writes how the TV show that invented the laughter track was *The Hank McCune Show* in 1950, which rapidly flopped. However, a technical director called Charlie Douglass realised the potential of this if delivered in a more subtle and nuanced form and so ‘accumulated a bank of assorted laughter samples’.³⁴⁸ It is these same samples that are used today. Therefore, when we sit alone in our living rooms we are encouraged to laugh by the suggestion that we are surrounded by others who are laughing. Not only are these others absent but the vast majority will be now dead. The peculiar dislocation of this appealed to me, and I decide to incorporate it into my tragi-burlesque, so that the characters not only have to fight against the absurd elements of *Ponte dell Tette*, but an intrusive laughter track that demands we find funny what is tragic for those involved.

In a chance final encounter between Jessica and Shylock, when their faces pop up in two cut-outs next to each other, we see their shock at meeting. Then

³⁴⁶ Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare’s Tragedies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 58.

³⁴⁷ The interview is available at: ‘Conversations with Heiner Müller’, Alexander Kluge: Cultural History in Dialogue http://muller-kluge.library.cornell.edu/en/video_transcript.php?f=121 > [accessed 21 May 2014].

³⁴⁸ Robert A. Rodriguez, *Top of 1950s’ Most Wanted: The Book of Rock & Roll Rebels, Cold War Crises, and All-American Oddities* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005), p. 2.

how they force themselves to ignore each other, treat each other like strangers. I want the audience to appreciate momentarily the pain of that, before they are subjected to a final burst of the laughter track, segueing into the screech of a wilderness of monkeys.

Chapter 4 *The Turn* (playscript)

The Turn

A Tragedy

by Catherine Rosario

Characters

Muir

Zara

Qaseem

Rubbia

Dahlia

Modi

/ indicates characters talking over each other.

London during a freezing winter, in the near future.

At ground level is a bedroom with a bed, a chair and a wardrobe, and a living room with a settee, arm chair, and a table and chairs. The furniture should be bland, as the rooms stand for several different bedrooms and living rooms, sometimes simultaneously. The wardrobe needs to be accessed from the back, so that different contents can be put in, depending on whose wardrobe it is.

On a platform above these rooms are the canal and towpath, with a bench. It is lit according to the time of day. The canal is indicated by a band of blue light.

Act 1

Loud sound footage of a violent race riot.

Scene 1

Dahlia's living room. Evening.

ZARA (*age 18, of Egyptian origin, in tight jeans, heels, a big coat and a black head scarf*) and MUIR (*white, Scottish, working-class, age 46*) walk into Dahlia's living room, with a dusting of snow on their coats.

ZARA Mum! Mum!

No reply.

MUIR Looks like she's not in?

ZARA No.

MUIR If you could tell her I passed by?

ZARA I will do.

Pause.

ZARA Would / you like a coffee?

MUIR I'll head off.

Pause.

ZARA I'll / tell her then.

MUIR That would be nice. A coffee would be nice.

MUIR walks up to her.

MUIR Warm me up.

ZARA wraps her arms around him.

MUIR Jesus – no, I meant the coffee. Would warm me up.

ZARA leaps away, hiding her face.

MUIR Zara.

ZARA I'm sorry.

Pause.

MUIR reaches for her hands, pulls them away from her face.

MUIR We can't. It would be ...

ZARA pulls away her hands and goes out of the room.

MUIR Zara!

No answer.

MUIR leaves.

Scene 2

The canal.

MUIR walks away from Dahlia's house. He stops, turns, looks up in the direction of Zara's bedroom window. QASEEM appears (Pakistani origin, working class, age 28).

QASEEM You mooning up at Zara's bedroom there?

MUIR What? No, course not.

QASEEM She's beautiful, in't she?

Muir says nothing.

QASEEM Reckon she likes you.

MUIR For Christ sakes, I'm old enough to be her dad.

QASEEM But you're not her dad.

MUIR So are you still okay for Thursday?

Qaseem Yeah, I'll be there for you, compadre, me and the guys.

Muir Thank you.

Qaseem And next time – yeah – like I said - next time don't insult me by asking.

Just tell me. Say, Qaseem, I want you there. Yeah?

Muir I'll remember.

Qaseem So you don't have to worry about a thing. As soon as you ever – if that is – if you ever have to press that button, we spring into action. Your back's covered.

MUIR Great. I really appreciate this.

QASEEM You're a brave man, Muir, I know Dahlia is so made up you're doing this.

Scene 3

The canal. Sunset.

RUBBIA (Pakistani origin, working class, age 15) wanders along the canal. She is dressed in a black dress that almost reaches the floor and her hair is covered, in a strange fusion of Islamic and Jacobean dress.

Scene 4

Dahlia's living room. Night.

DAHLIA (*wealthy Egyptian background, age 39, elegantly, seductively dressed*) and MUIR, *both slightly drunk, laughing. There's a bottle of expensive wine on the table.*

MUIR I was black.

DAHLIA Poor Muir.

MUIR Utterly black. Covered in the most god-awful filth from head to toe. It's not funny. There's something disconcerting 'bout a ceiling landing on your head. While you're peacefully sat having yer dinner. I was dazed. Waiting for the moon to come hurling down after it. My lasagna was ruined. Beyond redemption.

DAHLIA It sounds like a complete dump. Move out. Come and stay here. Rubbia can share with Zara. They won't mind.

MUIR Yer all right.

DAHLIA Just for the time being. Come on. Why slum it when you can be here in Little Venice, looking out over the canal, watching the swans skidding over the ice?

MUIR The landlord's getting it done tomorrow.

DAHLIA It would be a way of repaying you.

MUIR For what?

DAHLIA For what you're doing – risking your neck for me.

MUIR Oh, that.

DAHLIA If you won't let me pay you, at least I can put you up. Until you find your feet.

MUIR Yer all right.

DAHLIA Then let me pay you.

MUIR I don't want yer money.

DAHLIA Fine.

MUIR I didn't mean it to – come out like that. It's kind of you, Dahlia, but / not what

DAHLIA What *do* you want, Muir?

They stare at each other.

MUIR Me? I dunna want anything.

DAHLIA No?

MUIR Well, I want to get those bastards as much as you do. Uncover their dirty little secrets. There's not gonna be a Fascist MP in London. That is not acceptable.

DAHLIA I know I can get that seat. People respond to me. When I talk to them. They trust me – they know I don't want anything for myself from this. I'm not tainted by association with any party. They see I'm ... I'm ...

MUIR Pure?

DAHLIA Shut up. A new voice. No vested interests. Able to lead them out of these bitter, senseless divisions. None of the others have got anything like my mix of support – whites, Muslims from the entire spectrum, rich, poor. Giving up their time to campaign for me. The main parties can't defeat Hart – no one wants to listen to them anymore. But I can. I can do this, Muir I know it.

MUIR Wow. You're good.

DAHLIA Shut Up.

MUIR Seven weeks to get some dirt on them. That has to be do-able.

DAHLIA But I will never forgive myself if something happens to you in the process. They could kill you. They're complete thugs.

MUIR Is that right? Well if it ends up curtains for me I know I can rely on you for a good send off. Yeah, actually, I can see you now - wearing one of those hats with a little black veil.

DAHLIA Do you think it would suit me?

MUIR Oh, yes. But don't get ahead of yourself. These guys are pussy cats compared to what we were up against in Ecuador.

DAHLIA Oh, you big, brave brute of a man.

MUIR growls.

MUIR Though I did always try to stand near the back.

DAHLIA laughs.

MUIR Not that that helps much when you're a six foot 2 Scotsman at an indigenous people's uprising.

DAHLIA laughs again, pulls down the neck of MUIR's sweater. There's a gunshot wound.

DAHLIA Does it still hurt?

He winces, pulls away.

MUIR What yer doing?

DAHLIA I'm sorry. / I

MUIR You can't just maul me like that.

DAHLIA Maul you? I was only – is this a joke? My God. Why are you / so

MUIR I'm sorry.

DAHLIA I think we need to clear the air.

MUIR Do we?

DAHLIA Yes. We do. There's this huge elephant in the room.

MUIR There's no elephant in the room.

DAHLIA Well, I think there is.

MUIR Well, my understanding is for there to be an elephant in the room, all parties have to be aware of its presence.

DAHLIA We both know there is a huge fucking elephant in the room, so stop being so bloody awkward.

ZARA walks in. MUIR is struggling not to look at her too hard. DAHLIA notices.

ZARA Hey.

DAHLIA You look frozen. *(DAHLIA goes over, pulls off her coat, rubs her hands.)*
Your hands. How was Mia?

ZARA Good.

DAHLIA She a bit happier?

ZARA Yeah. I'm hungry. Is there any of that bamia left?

DAHLIA Her mother didn't feed you?

ZARA No she did. Is it in the fridge?

DAHLIA Yeah, bottom shelf.

ZARA leaves.

DAHLIA She looks like I used to look, doesn't she?

MUIR I was thinking she looked like Asif.

Another tense moment.

MUIR Snowing again. Reckon the Gulf stream's been turned off. It's the new Ice Age.

DAHLIA I think someone would have told us.

MUIR Maybe no-one likes to. They're still arguing about who's gonna break the bad news.

DAHLIA Well, if it is the new Ice Age, no doubt wolf skins will be provided.

MUIR Such faith. Reckon us commoners will be expected to get on with it – or spontaneously evolve thick fur. Thinking about it, I could become very genetically desirable. Dunno if you remember but I have a pretty impressive chest rug.

DAHLIA I do. Verging on an evolutionary throwback, I'd say.

MUIR Steady on. Jesus, d'yer reckon porn'll revert to that 1970s' look? That would be a blow for mankind.

Scene 5

The canal. Morning.

QASEEM walks towards Dahlia's house, talking on his phone.

QASEEM Hass, this is a winner. This is gonna make us. Guys love Manga; women love their fridges and shit. So ain't that yelling at you that the future is domestic appliances Manga-style? Yeah? Iconic. Ironic. The name came to me last night. Wait for it: Mangamatic. Yeah? Yeah? ... Oh, yeah, Qaseem knows his shit. I can see'm now: a line of gleaming ovens and on each one – wrapped right round the oven, yeah? – a half-naked, doe-eyed chick and a guy standing over her. Then like you know the cartoon bubble, yeah? In the guy's cartoon bubble: 'Cook my dinner, bitch!' ... Yeah, but ... Hass, it's like I said, it's ironic. Irony, yeah? Fuck ... Well, then don't tell your dad what it's for ... Say it's for that masters course. Hass, we need money to get this fledgling bird off the ground. Yeah? Otherwise, we're - we're grounded. ... Trust me, yeah. Just trust me. (*Puts on a 'Godfather' accent*) I'm gonna make us so rich, your old pa will see his son's a fucking genius ... Yeah, fine. Think about it. But don't leave it too long, yeah? There's others who'd chew my hand off to get in at this

development stage ... No, fine, but you'll spend the rest of your life cursing - why didn't I go in with me mate, Qaseem? Why did I let that chance ... Yeah, take your time. Brood it. But get this: Bosch are interested in coming in on it ... I'm not shitting. Bosch, yeah...No way, I'm not saying no more until you show me you're with me. Committed. I ain't having you stealing it ... Okay, well look, you do your ting and I'll call you later. You take care, yeah? Later.

Scene 6

Dahlia's living room / Zara's bedroom. Morning.

ZARA is in her bedroom in her underwear, putting on her bra. It is white and spotted with strawberries. She pulls clothes out of her shambolic wardrobe.

QASEEM appears outside with a ladder. He climbs up it. He watches ZARA with his hand down his jeans.

DAHLIA walks into her living room with MODI (Iraqi origin, middle-class, aged 20, dressed like a student).

DAHLIA You don't know how much I appreciate you doing this for me. I find it so tedious myself. Zaza! What are you doing?

ZARA Coming!

MODI Just one thing I wanted to – um – clarify. Didn't you get given a megaphone?

DAHLIA Yes, that was so sweet of Murat. I've already had a go with it.

MODI But I can't find it on the list of donations.

DAHLIA It's only a megaphone.

MODI Undeclared donations can get us into trouble.

DAHLIA Undeclared donations? It's a battered old piece of crap.

MODI It's an undeclared piece of crap. Well, it was. I've added it to the list, if that's okay? If there is anything else, can you tell / me. Please?

DAHLIA God, this is all so petty. Not you, Modi. Not you. I know you're only doing – but the bureaucracy. Hindering our every move. Meanwhile those Nazi shits are goosestepping round the East End like it's fucking 1939.

MODI I know. It's – it's frustrating. Has Muir been able to uncover anything yet?

DAHLIA Give him a chance. *(calling)* Zaza!

ZARA Yeah, in a minute!

MODI No, I / wasn't

DAHLIA He's only been to a few meetings.

MODI Yeah, sure.

DAHLIA He's – I guess – embedding himself at the moment. Is that the word?

You know getting them to feel relaxed with him. You can't move too fast.

QASEEM climbs down the ladder and exits.

MODI Yeah, no, I wasn't suggesting that like he should have got these great scoops yet or anything. God, he – more than anyone – must know what he's doing. How to pace it. He's so amazing, isn't he? What he's had to do to just survive. For all those years. He lives it, doesn't he? I mean he's there on the front line. Well, was there. I mean not just talking the talk?

DAHLIA He told me last night - said he's thinking of going back.

MODI But he can't. They'll kill him, won't they?

DAHLIA Zara, what the hell are you doing up there!

ZARA is almost dressed.

ZARA Okay!

DAHLIA I thought you said you had a lecture at nine!

ZARA I'm done!

DAHLIA She's going to make you late.

MODI My first one's at ten. We'll be fine anyway. We'll make it for nine. He can't go back, can he?

DAHLIA Only if he's totally insane. Anyway, meanwhile he's our man in Havana. Hopefully he'll have something on them soon.

MODI If what we're doing gets out ...

DAHLIA If you do everything by the book, you get nowhere. Believe me.

ZARA walks into the living room. MODI looks at her with devoted eyes.

DAHLIA Ah, you're down.

ZARA *(kissing Dahlia)* Bye, Omi.

DAHLIA Bye, darling.

ZARA I'm seeing a film tonight.

DAHLIA Okay, but go. Go. You'll be late.

Scene 7

The canal.

MODI and ZARA walk by the canal.

MODI So what's the film?

ZARA It's a Chinese one. Came out a few years ago – *Ju Dou*, or something?

Supposed to be like a Chinese *Black Narcissus*.

MODI Oh, has it got nuns in it?

ZARA Nuns?

MODI Well – um – *Black Narcissus* – it's set in a nunnery.

ZARA Oh, right. No, this is in a village laundry house. But it's all about sexual obsession and people going mad and killing each other. Does that happen in *Black Narcissus*?

MODI I think things do get quite heated.

ZARA Right. Yeah, *Ju Dou* sounds pretty bleak. Kind of tragic.

MODI Hey, it's not the one where Ben Stiller puts in a cameo performance complaining that his underpants have been over-starched?

Zara (*laughing*) No, actually – no – it's not a laundry house. It's a dye-house. You know, where they – like – dye stuff. So d'you want to come along?

MODI Well, yeah, I could probably make it / but

ZARA I'm going with Mia, and Zak might come too.

MODI Okay - yeah - sounds great. Sex and death on a Tuesday evening. Excellent.

Scene 8

Dahlia's living room / Rubbia's bedroom.

QASEEM walks into Dahlia's living room, holding a broken bracket.

QASEEM I'm going to have to get a new bracket for the gutter. See, this one's really had it. Maybe the weight of the snow.

DAHLIA If you can sort it out, that'll be fantastic. Now, Qaseem, I'm on a bloody tight schedule today. First we're going to have to do the usual trek over to the East End. I've got the follow-up meeting at that mosque at 10.30. Then

I'm meeting some of the supporters for lunch round the corner from there. That's at 12.30. Then all the way back here to pick up Rubbia. Shouldn't take more than an hour and a half at that time should it – if you put your foot down? I'm taking her to see Lansdowne College. It's by Hyde Park. We need to be there for four.

QASEEM Lansdowne College?

RUBBIA emerges out of the duvet that has entirely hidden her. She has on a long nightdress. She opens her wardrobe, with its few sombre clothes, pulls out a baggy sweater and puts it on. She leaves the room.

DAHLIA Three weeks is long enough for her to be drifting around the house like a lost soul. She needs structure. It looks impressive. An hour and a half?

QASEEM Sounds about right. So it's private?

DAHLIA It's private all right – you should see the fees. But the last thing Rubbia needs right now is to be thrown into some rough comp in Paddington.

QASEEM That's what she used to though, isn't it? I'm sure she'd survive / fine

DAHLIA She's been used to some horrific stuff. Doesn't mean she has to put up with it anymore.

QASEEM No, course not. I didn't / mean

DAHLIA I want her to have a new start in life. To be happy.

QASEEM You're so kind to her. I hope she appreciates it. I'm sure she does. She's a sweet girl.

DAHLIA She saved my Zara.

QASEEM Yeah. Brave girl.

DAHLIA So now she can have the best. Then after I need you to drive me to my studio and Rubbia back home. At least I should be able to squeeze in a few hours' work there. So that's the schedule. Right, I'll only be a few minutes. You wait here. Make yourself a coffee if you want. God, this bi-election is taking over my life.

QASEEM Suppose that's like – to be expected?

DAHLIA Yes, yes, but, Qaseem, if you could understand how time can be so precious. And I'm gonna have to go over to Venice at the end of next week. That'll be another ball-ache. The curator is such an opinionated, ridiculous prima donna of a creature. She talks like they're her bloody

sculptures, not mine. My God. I'm feeling what the fuck does it matter even, when there's an election to win.

Exit DAHLIA.

RUBBIA enters holding a cup of tea, not noticing QASEEM.

She sees him, heads back for the door.

QASEEM Hey, now, don't do that. I'll feel offended.

QASEEM gets between her and the door.

QASEEM Are you too grand now to be in the same room as the likes of me? Now we're going to Lansdowne College.

RUBBIA I'm not dressed.

QASEEM You don't need to be shy with me. Aray, we're all like family here, in it?

RUBBIA Please let me pass.

QASEEM Aray, ohki na ho. [*Come on, don't be stuck up*]

RUBBIA Let me pass.

RUBBIA tries to step round him.

QASEEM Not dressed? That shouldn't worry a little whore like you, should it?

RUBBIA pushes past him, spills her tea down his sweater.

QASEEM Look what you done. Stupid bitch.

RUBBIA You were in my way.

QASEEM I'm so sorry, madam.

Pause.

QASEEM Lick it off.

RUBBIA backs away from him.

RUBBIA You can't talk to me like that.

QASEEM laughs, pulls out a handkerchief, wipes his sweater.

QASEEM I was joking, all right. You not got much sense of humour, heh? Still, I'll forgive you. I could forgive you anything, pretty thing.

He takes her tea off her and puts it down, strokes her face and lets his hand slide over her breasts. She fights him off.

RUBBIA What you doing? Leave me alone.

QASEEM Don't be silly now.

He tries to kiss her.

RUBBIA You're disgusting.

QASEEM Disgusting? I'm disgusting? A dirty slut like you telling me I'm disgusting?

RUBBIA You leave me alone or I'll tell Dahlia.

QASEEM What – you threatening me? Yeah? Now you listen, little slut. Jende [*whore*]. If you cause any trouble for me, I will erase your face. Yeah. You understand? I know people – yeah –for a few hundred quid will throw acid in your face. Erase you. I won't hesitate. (*Pause*). Don't want you, anyway. Used goods. Sloppy seconds? No, no. You keep your filthy mouth shut. Okay, rundi [*slut*]? You might think you can run but – run as far as you like – yeah, run as fast as those little whore legs can take you – I will find you. So keep it zipped.

QASEEM goes to the table and kicks over a chair.

QASEEM Fucking too grand for me. You now too, huh? And that patronising bitch. Think when you're Qaseem time means nothing? That my time means nothing. Oh, but Dahlia's time. Now that's so precious.

He kicks over another chair.

QASEEM Pick 'em up. Now. We don't want her thinking there's been an – an unpleasant scene in here. Do we?

RUBBIA doesn't move.

QASEEM She'll be back any moment.

RUBBIA doesn't move.

QASEEM Pick them up.

RUBBIA doesn't move.

QASEEM If she sees them ...

Dahlia (*off-stage*) Right I'm ready for the off.

Both QASEEM and RUBBIA scramble to put the chairs back up, taking one each.

DAHLIA enters.

Dahlia (*to Rubbia*) Oh, you're up. Any plans for today, honey?

RUBBIA Think I might take a walk down the canal.

DAHLIA Remember, we're going to the school. Be back here for 3.30, okay?

RUBBIA Yes, Dahlia. I'm gonna get dressed.

DAHLIA Okay, well, we're off now. So we'll see you later.

RUBBIA Yes.

Exit RUBBIA.

DAHLIA She's having one of her down days. I can see it in her eyes.

QASEEM Maybe this visiting the school thing is worrying her?

DAHLIA You're probably right. It's always a bit – isn't it? New places. Did she say anything to you about it?

QASEEM Um, no, but I / thought

DAHLIA She can't spend her days drifting up and down the canal forever. Once she's settled, she'll love it. And she'll have Hyde Park for her wanderings then. I can see her now, in the summer time, lying in the deckchairs giggling with her new friends. Maybe, she'll even agree to stop wearing those funny quaint little clothes. I've never seen anything quite like them. Have you? God, I hope they don't tease her.

QASEEM They're a bit strange.

DAHLIA It's like they belong to another time. What with her and then Zara in that headscarf but then her jeans so tight you can see her crotch.

QASEEM gives a modest, embarrassed cough.

DAHLIA Well, you can. They're both crazy girls. My God, we have to go.

Scene 9

The canal. Night.

RUBBIA is wandering along in her long black dress and coat in the direction of DAHLIA's house. MUIR is behind her, walking faster. He catches up with her.

She jumps.

MUIR I'm sorry – didn't mean to startle you.

RUBBIA That's okay.

MUIR You off home?

RUBBIA Yes. Are you – coming to Dahlia's too?

MUIR Aye. She's having me round for like a late supper. And Modi.

RUBBIA looks flustered at the mention of MODI's name. MUIR notices.

MUIR He's a nice lad.

RUBBIA says nothing. MUIR smiles and she smiles shyly back.

RUBBIA Yeah. *(Pause.)* Do you think she's going to win?

MUIR Well, she's giving it her best shot. You looked lost in thought back there.

RUBBIA Yes.

MUIR What were you thinking?

RUBBIA I don't know . . .

MUIR What?

RUBBIA I was feeling sad that I can never know what will happen – what this city will be like in a hundred years' time. I've been walking all the way to the zoo and I want to know so badly what it will look like in a century. Maybe all the animals will have broken out and be roaming round Regents Park. Maybe the whole city'll be destroyed and be in a forest. But I will never be able to know.

MUIR I dunno, hundred years – reckon you could still be alive to see. With some clean living.

RUBBIA Well, 150 then.

MUIR Yeah, that's stretching it. Hey, I wanna know too. Cryogenics has to be the answer.

RUBBIA Is that when they freeze you and defrost you later?

MUIR Yeah. Or just yer head if you're going for the budget option. Though what yer supposed to do with only a head I've no idea. Mind, it's beginning to feel like we're already in a huge great cryogenics tank. Do yer not think? This endless white blankness. Even the sound of our feet gone. Does it not feel to you sometimes like everything's stopped? It's strange after coming from the tropics. Time strides along there. Yer hair and yer toe nails grow fast as triffids. And the sun falls below the horizon that quick. I can't get used to how slow the sunsets are over here.

RUBBIA Do you miss it badly?

MUIR So much, Rubbia. It was my home. Felt like. Perhaps – well, perhaps from that I can understand a wee bit like how it's been for you?

RUBBIA Yeah?

MUIR Maybe.

RUBBIA I – I . . .

MUIR Yeah?

RUBBIA I know I hardly know you but I can talk to you. I don't know why but I can talk to you and I feel – I feel safe.

MUIR Ah, Rubbia, that's one of the nicest things anyone's ever said to me. Yer know that?

QASEEM appears from the direction of Dahlia's house.

QASEEM Hey.

RUBBIA starts to walk quickly away.

MUIR Rubbia?

RUBBIA Bye.

QASEEM Sweet kid.

MUIR She is. Dunno why she suddenly took off like that.

QASEEM She's in her own little world that one.

MUIR I suppose that's how she deals with all the crap she's had to go through.

QASEEM Yeah, well, I'm finally off home.

MUIR It's so late. Dahlia works you too hard.

QASEEM Leafleting. Some of those council blocks are bloody scary, in it? Fuck, I had one guy chasing me down the stairwell saying he's gonna stick my Paki leaflet where the sun don't shine.

The canal is in sudden darkness.

MUIR Jesus.

QASEEM Power cut.

MUIR Fuck, I can't see.

QASEEM Well, no, there's a power cut.

MUIR But how long? I can't see.

QASEEM Calm down, bruv.

MUIR goes towards Qaseem, slips and falls.

MUIR Jesus.

QASEEM crouches down by him.

QASEEM They'll be working away at getting them back on.

MUIR Rubbia! Rubbia's out here somewhere.

QASEEM She'll be fine. It's not too bad. Look at the stars!

MUIR Rubbia!

The street lighting comes back on.

QASEEM There! See when we think we're most alone, that's when we're least. All these dudes in some control room somewhere tearing about fixing it for us. 'No, Baz! The yellow button. Press the yellow button! Terry: the lever.'

MUIR I dunno what made me so – I never used to be like this. I’m sorry. Jesus, when I think of what I went through in Ecuador and then some sodding little power cut ...

QASEEM You got nuttin to apologise for. There’s Rubbia.

MUIR Yeah. Yeah, I’ll catch up with her.

Scene 10

Rubbia’s bedroom. Evening.

RUBBIA is crying.

ZARA (*off-stage*). Rubbia!

RUBBIA wipes away her tears.

ZARA Are you in here?

RUBBIA Yeah.

ZARA Can I come in? I wanna know how your first day went.

RUBBIA Okay.

Enter ZARA.

ZARA So how was it?

RUBBIA Good.

ZARA What happened? What did they do to you?

RUBBIA Nothing. It’s nice – everyone was really nice to me.

ZARA But you’re upset.

RUBBIA It’s not the school.

ZARA What then?

RUBBIA Zara, I think I want to be on my own.

ZARA No, please tell me.

RUBBIA I want to be on my / own

ZARA Please. You’re upset.

RUBBIA I really liked it. And I wanted to tell my sister about it.

ZARA Your sister?

RUBBIA And it’s been like almost half a year now, hasn’t it – so I thought – I thought maybe she’d have forgiven me. I went round to her flat. She wouldn’t talk to me. Told me to go away.

ZARA What a cow. She’s got nothing to forgive you for.

RUBBIA Don't call her that.

ZARA But you did nothing wrong.

RUBBIA I did.

ZARA No.

RUBBIA Then her husband turned up as I was on the doorstep and he called me a
whore.

ZARA It's not fair.

RUBBIA I brought shame on the family.

ZARA No you haven't. They can't behave like that. They're not in Pakistan now.
Poor Rubbia.

RUBBIA I don't think they're ever going to take me back.

ZARA It's not like this is – like we're in the sixteenth-century or something.

RUBBIA I have no family. They're not going to forgive me. And it *is* shameful.

Sometimes I'm able to see how shameful was my behaviour. And them
knowing, them imagining us together in bed. When my dad – when he was
so angry – what picture had he got of me – of us – in his mind?

ZARA You did nothing wrong.

RUBBIA But you wouldn't have done what I did, would you?

ZARA Well, but that's my personal decision. Something I've decided for myself.

It's not like someone else has the right to make that decision for me – or
for you. To tell us what we can or can't do. And – honestly – it doesn't
make me feel I'm somehow better than you or anything, because I – well,
because I wouldn't.

RUBBIA I see him, Zara. At night I see him still. But – but it's like we're two other
people. But us as well. We're in Sweden. I'm Swedish too. I'm blonde and
quite old – like almost thirty. Tobias looks the same as before but – yeah
– older. And it's not now; it feels like the nineteen seventies. We're in
this car and driving through a wood and it's summer and we've got picnic
chairs on the back seat – brown and orange, flower patterned. And we're
both – we're both so happy. Free. I can feel this happiness like nothing
I've ever known.

RUBBIA starts to cry. ZARA puts her arms round him.

ZARA You're a strange creature.

RUBBIA Am I?

ZARA Yes. He'll come back for you.

RUBBIA It's too late. I don't want him anymore.

ZARA I think you do.

RUBBIA No.

ZARA I'm so sorry.

RUBBIA says nothing.

ZARA Can I be your sister? Your big sister? Then you can tell me everything instead of her.

RUBBIA Yeah?

ZARA Yes. We're your family now. My friend Lucy has this thing whenever someone annoys or upsets her, she kind of shrugs and says, 'How rude' and dismisses them. Like dismisses them out of her head.

RUBBIA looks at her like she's insane.

ZARA I'm not saying – obviously what's happened with you – it's not like you can ... But I admire the way she does that. Nothing shakes her belief in herself. Don't you think? Just – how rude.

RUBBIA Like – my family don't want anything to do with me anymore. How rude.

ZARA Well, no, but ...

RUBBIA You're funny, Zara.

ZARA First thing I'm gonna do as your big sister is go over to – where is he?

RUBBIA Tobias?

ZARA Yeah.

RUBBIA Malmo.

ZARA Yeah, go over to Malmo and beat him up.

RUBBIA laughs.

ZARA No-one treats my Rubbia like that.

RUBBIA But – but my family - don't speak bad of them like that. Please. They're good people. It's their way that's all.

ZARA Good people? Why d'you want to defend someone who've hit you, forced you to flee, not cared you were living on the streets? Not cared if you died.

RUBBIA Don't – don't, Zara. Leave me alone, yeah? For a / while.

ZARA Don't be angry with me. It's / only that

RUBBIA I know.

Scene 11

Dahlia's living room. Early evening.

MUIR is in the living room. DAHLIA comes in, talking on her phone and carrying a tray with two tiny cups of coffee and a bowl of dates. MUIR takes the tray off her.

DAHLIA You're a complete star. ... No, you are. Thank you so much. You know, actually, let's go for 10,000. Don't you think? Err on the side of ... Yeah ... yeah. We get through them so fast. I'll see you tomorrow, then. Bye, bye, thanks again. *(To Muir.)* That was Arlene. Who you met last week? She's a real trooper. Without people like her, I wouldn't have a hope. Her energy! She must be about seventy but she's incredibly youthful looking, isn't she?

MUIR I guess so. In a Miss Haversham sort of way.

DAHLIA gives him a playful slap. MUIR takes a sip of his coffee and gasps.

DAHLIA So you were saying – about the mosque?

MUIR Jesus!

DAHLIA Too strong for you?

MUIR Oh, no, it's perfect.

DAHLIA I can top it up with water?

MUIR No, no. Just need to get into the brace position before taking the next sip. Least it'll keep me awake on me shift. Yeah, the fascists' latest thing is getting this petition going, claiming / this is

DAHLIA Another example of women's oppression under Islam. That ridiculous imam has walked right into this. How backward can you get? What was he thinking of banning women from entering his precious little mosque when he's supposed to be one of the progressive ones. He's really trying my patience. I / feel like

MUIR Don't. Don't do anything. The last thing you need is to start alienating imams.

DAHLIA So now we have the Nazis as champions of women's rights.

MUIR But as luck would have it, Alex Hardy, yer main man behind the mosque campaign, it seems has a bit of a past as a wife beater. At least that's what

Tony was hinting. I didn't want to push for details case I got his suspicions up.

DAHLIA No need. Once we've got a name and something to go on Modi can squirrel out the rest on that computer of his. I can see the headline now. Fantastic. Specially with it hot on the heels of the Jewish cemetery thing. This is what we need. A steady flow of revelations right up to the bi-election.

MUIR I'll call Modi. Tell him what I've got. But of course what we really, badly need is to get something not on the old guard but this new breed – the Young Turks. Particularly Ethan Hart himself. If we can't manage that – there has to be a serious danger they'll get that seat, no matter what their Neanderthals are up to.

DAHLIA Hart's not having that seat. That is going to be my seat.

MUIR Fighting talk. That's the spirit, Dahlia, but the more I see of the guy, the more worried I get. He's really having a field day on you not living in the constituency – enjoying the high life in Little Venice.

DAHLIA For God's sake, it's not like I'm the only one. How about Jack Straw? Represents a dark, satanic mill town and lives in leafy, rural Oxfordshire. I do – at least – live in the same city.

MUIR Yeah, but you'd hardly know it was. And satanic? I'd be careful how you describe ... well, I'd watch your choice of words.

DAHLIA You know what I meant.

MUIR Yeah, but Dahlia you do have a habit of sounding off without thinking, and that's gonna get you into trouble. Specially when you're on that megaphone. And, anyway, the point is Straw isna up against some blonde bombshell with charisma by the shitload. Jesus, when I see him at the meetings striding to the front, I could almost fancy him myself.

DAHLIA Muir.

MUIR He's a bastard of the first order but he's got something magnetic about him. The way he convinces people their squalid hatreds and petty resentments are something grand, noble – the British people fighting to their last breath to regain Albion for their children. A lost land. Mists, castles, deep forests.

DAHLIA Frolicking deer.

MUIR Stolen from us.

DAHLIA It worked for Hitler.

MUIR Exactly. It worked for Hitler.

DAHLIA My therapist as well, come to think of it.

MUIR You've got a therapist?

DAHLIA Of course I've got a therapist.

MUIR A Nazi therapist?

DAHLIA No, no but he uses that same thing – what he calls the Hero's Journey archetype. You know, so I can convince myself my life isn't a fiasco but a quest – defeating those who seek to thwart me.

MUIR Yeah? Maybe I should have his number.

ZARA walks in.

MUIR Your life isn't a fiasco, anyway. I can't think of anyone whose life is less of a fiasco than yours. Jesus, Dahlia, what more do you want?

ZARA I'm off to Modi's.

DAHLIA Okay, darling.

ZARA Qaseem's been lurking around on that ladder again.

DAHLIA He's fixing the gutter.

ZARA He was right by my window.

DAHLIA That's because the gutter is above your room, darling.

ZARA I think he might have been peeking in. You know, when I was getting dressed. (*ZARA looks over at Muir. MUIR looks away.*) I thought that last time too, didn't I say that, yeah?

DAHLIA Zara, darling, you're developing a very rich fantasy life.

ZARA Oh, fine, then. I don't care if he wants to perve at me in my underwear.

Exit ZARA.

DAHLIA God.

MUIR So – um – they're still just mates, her and Modi?

DAHLIA Apparently. I have to say I find this chastity thing quite trying. I guess I should be pleased but I think I'd prefer it if she was sleeping with a nice young man like Modi – maybe then she wouldn't need to get her rocks off having torrid fantasies about the staff.

MUIR Dahlia.

Enter QASEEM.

QASEEM (*to Muir*) Hi, compadre. (*To Dahlia*) Well, that should have fixed it. I had to replace a section of the fascia, as well. It was all rotten.

DAHLIA Thanks, Qaseem. That's great.

QASEEM I was afraid I'd run out of time, but the days are getting a bit longer, eh?

The light's only now starting to fade.

DAHLIA Yes, I suppose so.

QASEEM If that's all, I guess I'll be heading off.

DAHLIA Yes, you go.

MUIR Everything well with you?

QASEEM Good, yeah. Meeting still on for Monday?

MUIR Yeah.

QASEEM We'll be there. The keystone cops.

MUIR laughs.

MUIR You're a good one, Qas.

QASEEM Ah, come on.

MUIR You don't want to stay? Dahlia's made some wonderful coffee.

DAHLIA pulls a – 'for God's sake, don't persuade him to stay' face behind Qaseem.

QASEEM No, I'll – be getting back home. Safi will be wondering where I am.

MUIR Yeah, course.

QASEEM Bye, then.

MUIR See youse.

DAHLIA Bye. So tomorrow eight o'clock.

QASEEM No problem. I'll be here.

Exit QASEEM.

DAHLIA Don't you find it irritating the way he keeps calling you 'compadre'?

MUIR No, I quite like it.

DAHLIA He is rather a ridiculous man, though, isn't he?

MUIR Obviously, you think so. Still, you don't mind him running you round all day and fixing your leaks.

DAHLIA I do actually pay him for that.

MUIR Oh, yeah, he's 'the staff' of course.

DAHLIA That was a joke. But as it happens I don't see anything shameful in paying someone to drive me around; the only time I get to catch up on stuff is in the back of that car.

MUIR You don't need to sneer at him, though.

DAHLIA I don't. Why are you attacking me like this?

MUIR Because it sticks in my craw how you treat him. Well, how you speak about him.

They glare at each other.

MUIR Fuck it. Ignore me; it's my own guilty conscience.

DAHLIA What do you mean?

MUIR Forget it.

DAHLIA No, what? Guilty conscience about what?

MUIR Let's move on.

DAHLIA What have you done to feel guilty about? Something to Qaseem?

MUIR But I have to say, for an avowed socialist, you do have some faintly dubious attitudes.

DAHLIA Don't try and sidetrack. And there's nothing unsocialist about paying someone a fair wage to do work for you.

MUIR And private school for Rubbia.

DAHLIA I'm not letting politics get in the way of Rubbia's future.

MUIR I'm curious. Can you please explain to me what you have in common with a family on the breadline on an East End council estate?

DAHLIA I want everyone to have a decent education. I will fight for that. But in the mean time, Rubbia is not being sacrificed.

MUIR Sacrificed? For Christ sakes we're talking about her going to the local state school, not taking her up a mountain and slitting her throat.

DAHLIA So you'd take her away from where she's happy?

MUIR Dahlia, I wouldn't want to do a single thing to – that would take away a second's happiness from that poor kid. But I do think she could have been as happy at a local school.

DAHLIA Stop attacking me, you're always attacking me. What have I got in common with a family on the breadline? Well, what have you got in common with a bunch of Ecuadorian Indians? It didn't stop you, though,

did it? What could be better – running round the jungle, playing the hero.

Like bloody Tarzan.

MUIR Wrong continent.

DAHLIA Same white man's dream.

MUIR It was self-interest. If the Amazon goes, it's curtains for all of us. And it wasn't all fun. I did get shot / at several

DAHLIA Yeah, and if people are forced to live cramped, reduced, no-hope lives, we're all – all of us are diminished. I want to change that. I could make my sculptures and forget everything else. But I don't. I give up my time, my – my creative energy to be part of a change – I can change this city.

MUIR What a saint.

DAHLIA slaps him.

MUIR I told you to ignore me.

Pause.

MUIR I slept with Safi.

DAHLIA What?

MUIR says nothing.

DAHLIA This is a joke?

MUIR No.

DAHLIA You don't even know her.

MUIR No, I do.

DAHLIA Well, when have you ...?

MUIR Qaseem invited me round to his place. He invited me round and I repaid his hospitality by sleeping with his wife. I happened to bump into her a few days after I'd been there. She was carrying heavy shopping. I helped her home with it. Then – yer know – helped her with the unpacking and we ended up in bed.

DAHLIA How does that work?

MUIR I'm baffled myself. One minute it was, where d'yer put yer Rice Crispies? And the next . .

DAHLIA It's not funny. If Qaseem finds out ...

MUIR I know it's not funny. He won't. How would he?

DAHLIA I don't care what he does to you, but what about poor Safi?

MUIR There's no way he'll find out.

DAHLIA What the hell were you thinking of? She's not even pretty.

MUIR laughs.

MUIR Classic Dahlia.

DAHLIA What was it? A sympathy fuck?

MUIR Jesus, Dahlia. Though perhaps, you're right. Yeah. Yeah. A mutual sympathy fuck.

DAHLIA Why?

MUIR says nothing.

DAHLIA Why?

MUIR Because we were cold?

DAHLIA For God's sake.

MUIR Because we were cold and nothing seems to be able to take away this hideous fucking numb emptiness.

DAHLIA Oh, poor Muir. So you thought you'd have another man's wife?

MUIR Yeah. That's it. Yeah.

A pause.

MUIR I have to go. Bye.

DAHLIA Stay.

MUIR Don't wanna be late for me shift.

DAHLIA Be late. Who cares?

MUIR walks to the door.

DAHLIA Why do you feel empty?

MUIR Bye.

DAHLIA Muir?

MUIR For all the usual reasons.

Scene 12

Modi's room. Evening.

MODI and ZARA are sitting at either end of his bed, with books and papers spread out around them. There's a half-eaten fruitcake on a plate. ZARA is writing on her laptop; MODI has a laptop on his lap but is staring at ZARA.

ZARA looks up and MODI quickly shifts his eyes, so he's staring at the wall instead of her.

MODI Just thinking either me or that wallpaper's got to go.

ZARA What?

MODI Oscar Wilde. When he was in some dingy guest house in France. Dying. Alone and broke. 'Either me or that wallpaper's got to go'.

ZARA If he was alone, how did anyone know he said that?

MODI True. Maybe the priest dropped by. Or the fishmonger. Anyway, he died shortly afterwards, so he weren't jesting. Wonder how long he'd have lasted in this hole?

ZARA It's not that bad. I like it. At least it's your own place. You're not stuck with your mum.

MODI No, just stuck with three wasters who molt in the shower and can't keep their hands off my Dundee cake. Maybe I could just paint over the wallpaper. What colour should I go for?

An American voice comes out of ZARA's netbook: 'You've got mail. Hey, who could it be from?'

MODI Doesn't that annoy you?

ZARA No. Go for white.

ZARA goes back to the computer. She laughs.

ZARA Zak is so dumb.

MODI *(trying to hid his jealousy)* Yeah? What's he saying?

ZARA Oh, nothing.

She goes back to her screen, laughs again.

MODI Aren't you supposed to be writing about Anish Kapoor and his cannon balls?

ZARA Aren't you supposed to be writing about Proust?

MODI Yeah, shall we swap? I've realised a bit tragically late that stiff, dapper little men with canes leave me cold.

ZARA Really? *(with a coy smile)* They sound quite exciting to me.

MODI laughs, looks flustered.

ZARA Right. Focus.

MODI Me too.

They both start writing.

MODI God, I'm seeing Proust everywhere. Haunted by him. Sometimes it feels inappropriate. How are the cannon balls coming along?

ZARA pulls a desperate face.

MODI Another slice of Dundee cake, perhaps?

ZARA Yah, can I have a tea as well?

MODI Yeah. Anything for you.

ZARA rolls her eyes.

MODI I mean it.

They stare at each other.

MODI I'm talking about . . . refreshments. Obviously.

Scene 13

Dahlia's living room. Night.

DAHLIA and MUIR are on the settee, drunk, laughing. On the table is a bottle of wine, a bottle of brandy and a tea pot with mint stems poking out of the top of it.

DAHLIA I'm just imagining it – you all eyeing each other over.

MUIR pretends he's in a meeting, looking suspiciously around him.

Muir (*addressing imaginary people*). Are you for real or are you . . . Jesus . . . a spy like me? (*to Dahlia*) I'll be talking to some piece o' shaven-headed scum and be thinking, Or has he just been to the barbers to go undercover? Maybe he's from Channel 4 and lives in Islington and lies awake at night worrying if he'll get planning permission to excavate his basement. And all the time – course - he's wondering about me.

MUIR pretends to be eyeballing someone.

DAHLIA But it has to make it more dangerous for you, Muir. It must.

MUIR It makes it more difficult, that's for sure. They're all clammin' up. But on the big plus side, it's got to be tearing them apart from the inside. Not knowing who's an imposter . . . Once the trust goes . . . it's the most efficient way to destroy an organisation.

DAHLIA You must find it bloody hard doing this – after what happened in Ecuador. I worry about how / it might

MUIR What d'yer mean?

DAHLIA Well, there are certain parallels.

MUIR There's no parallels.

DAHLIA You were – you were all betrayed. Surely you can see there's / a certain

MUIR But he was one of us who grassed us up.

MODI walks into the room. He's sober.

DAHLIA Well, but – well, that's similar, isn't it? When you're sitting in one of those meetings pretending to be a supporter while all the time / you're a

MODI looks uncomfortable.

MUIR There's no similarity. I see no similarity. I'm not betraying anyone. A betrayal can only be when – you go against what you believe, yer friends – for some sordid piece o' the pie. Completely different. I don't want anything. Nothing. Nothing for myself. Don't – you're saying that I'm like that bastard turncoat, that / bastard

DAHLIA No, of course I'm not. For God's sake. I only mean that it must give you a sense of how – oh, I don't know. Forget it. You want some more tea, Modi?

She picks up the pot, feels it.

DAHLIA It's gone cold. I'll make / some more

MODI No, no, don't worry. Thank you but I was thinking I should be making tracks.

MUIR That, Modi, is what breaks us. What has always broken us. The mystery of how the few can rule the many. Because there's always – yeah, always someone. Villagers taking a cut from the loggers. Well, okay, they have poverty as an excuse. Hunger. Fair enough. But then there are turncoat bastards enough who aren't hungry. Right up to yer man El Presidente.

MODI I thought he was okay. Left wing . . .

MUIR Yeah, he started off okay, but he's soon backtracking, watering down agreements, turning a blind eye to murder, destruction. Being a yes man to the US like all the rest o' them. Jesus, it's getting that Iran is the only country left that has the balls to tell the US to fuck itself.

DAHLIA Oh, yeah, and it's such a joy to live there that that'll be why the people are all revolting.

MUIR You mean a bunch of middle-class, pampered students financed by the CIA are revolting.

DAHLIA Oh, come on.

MUIR How you can be so naive as not / to see that

DAHLIA What I can see is a bunch of hypocrite medieval men – punishing women with the lash, public stoning. My God, it makes me feel sick.

MODI looks between DAHLIA and MUIR, embarrassed by their escalating rage at each other.

MUIR You're so irredeemably bourgeois, Dahlia. You don't see that for normal Iranian people, to have a strong leader who ensures they're able to eat – who has the courage not to let their country be / consumed by

DAHLIA Don't – you don't know what you're talking about. I've lived through it. As a child in Cairo, I saw those same kind of fundamentalist bullies start to get the upper hand. I saw my mother being spat at in the street for not wearing a headscarf. I saw them destroy our life.

MUIR Yes, Dahlia, no doubt a very nice fancy life too - swimming pools, embassy parties, your mother floating round in glamorous dresses, knocking back cocktails. But – face it - a life built on other people's suffering.

DAHLIA Don't you talk about my mother. My family. You don't know anything. You sanctimonious shit. And it's all going tits up again. You'll be defending the Islamic State twats next.

MODI Think I'll be off. I've – er – got a lecture tomorrow at nine, and it's kind of getting late. Can you tell Zara I'll drop by for her?

DAHLIA Sure, course I will.

MODI Funny she's not back yet?

DAHLIA Nearly one. *(On her phone)* Where the hell are you - it's nearly one? . . . Right. Good . . . Bye. *(To Modi)* Just a few minutes away, apparently.

MODI Oh, well see you tomorrow. Thanks again for dinner.

DAHLIA Bye.

MUIR See youse.

Exit MODI.

MUIR Never seen anyone make such a swift exit.

DAHLIA says nothing.

MUIR Maybe we should stick to the things we agree on?

Still nothing.

MUIR I shouldn't have spoken about your family. You're right, I got carried away.
I'm sorry?

DAHLIA It was the same at Cambridge. That resentment of yours. It blighted everything. Us.

MUIR That's not true.

DAHLIA It wasn't Asif who split us up; it was you. I couldn't bear it anymore.
That – that – resentment. And then there was Asif always laughing,
always – not condemning me.

MUIR I didn't condemn you.

DAHLIA Yes, you did.

MUIR I could never feel normal there. I was always, always aware that I was
acting. Whatever I did felt like – was an – act.

He pours himself a large brandy.

MUIR The way everyone was so nice to me – oh, yes, we must be nice to this
mature, working-class student, this poor chap brought up on one of those
dreadful Glasgow housing schemes. That calm superiority, that absolute
conviction that they were better than me. God, the pure relief when I was
sent down. What a pretentious expression that is 'sent down'. How I
loathe them and that cosy fucking world.

MUIR pours Dahlia another glass of wine.

MUIR I'm sorry.

DAHLIA What for?

MUIR For myself mainly, it would seem. (*Pause*). For everything. I'm sorry that
I'm such an awkward bastard. I'm sorry it never worked out for us. I'm
not always this awful – you seem to have always caught me at bad times.
Yer'd not have recognised me in Ecuador I was that mellow.

DAHLIA Yeah?

MUIR When I was first out there – after the day was done, drinking a cold beer,
listening to the night sounds, my head lifting off from the sheer . . .
pleasure. I sometimes thought what if you were there with me.

DAHLIA Oh, yeah?

MUIR It's true.

DAHLIA Then it's funny that I never heard from you again.

MUIR Jamie came over to see me. He told me you and Asif were having a baby.

Pause.

DAHLIA When I saw you – walking along by the Thames – it was as if nineteen years folded into itself and was gone.

DAHLIA reaches up to kiss Muir. MUIR moves away.

MUIR Dahlia, it wouldn't work.

DAHLIA You don't know that.

MUIR It wouldn't work and I couldn't survive that.

DAHLIA You don't know it wouldn't work. Just kiss me and stop being so fucking stubborn.

MUIR We'd tear each other apart. I couldn't survive that. Dahlia – Jesus – I'm on this edge as it is. That's what it feels like.

DAHLIA You're making excuses. Why are you doing that?

MUIR Please understand.

DAHLIA No, I don't understand.

A pause.

MUIR Since I've been back. I'm living it more – far more – here than I was out there.

A shivering ZARA comes in, unnoticed. She's about to speak, but then stops and listens.

MUIR Things that seemed inevitable there – now they . . .

DAHLIA What?

MUIR says nothing.

DAHLIA Muir?

Muir (*pulling down his shirt to show his gunshot wound*). It's not the loggers who did this. Least not this time round. It's Luis' family. It's them who want me dead. Dahlia, he was my best friend and he grassed on us, led us into an ambush. My best friend. It felt like he had to pay for it. You see that? Yeah? Five lives were lost on that day. So now they want me dead – his father who used to take me fishing on the river. His mother who called me her gringo son.

DAHLIA I thought 'gringo' was an offensive term.

MUIR Well, she's a woman with a great love of irony. Did yer not hear what I said I done?

DAHLIA You didn't say it.

MUIR They won't believe it was their Luis, but it was him. I had it from his own lips.

DAHLIA notices ZARA standing there, staring at Muir.

DAHLIA ZARA

ZARA I just got in.

DAHLIA Leave us now.

ZARA doesn't move.

DAHLIA Go to bed.

ZARA goes out.

Scene 14

The Canal. Afternoon.

RUBBIA wanders along the canal.

Scene 15

Muir's living room. Night.

MUIR is Hoovering the carpet.

The door bell rings. He turns off the hoover and goes to answer it.

Muir (*off-stage*). How did yer know where I live?

Zara (*off-stage*) I looked in mum's address book.

They walk into the living room.

ZARA Last night – I didn't mean to listen.

MUIR How much did you hear?

ZARA Not much.

MUIR Why are you here, Zara?

ZARA I don't know.

MUIR laughs.

MUIR Do you often turn up at people's flats, not knowing why yer there?

ZARA No – I – I don't. I just had to see you.

MUIR Why?

ZARA I was sorry for you for what had happened.

MUIR Jesus. Maybe you should save yer pity for the ones who are dead.

ZARA I felt it – how you loved your friend.

ZARA walks up close to Muir.

MUIR I think you should go.

ZARA Muir –

MUIR You should go.

ZARA doesn't move.

MUIR I'm asking yer to leave.

ZARA nods, turns, walks towards the door.

MUIR Zara.

ZARA Yes?

MUIR Don't do this again. Okay?

Exit ZARA. MUIR stares after her for a long time.

He starts to Hoover again.

Scene 16

The Canal. Evening.

It's snowing. MODI and ZARA are walking towards Dahlia's house. MODI stops.

MODI I'll head off now.

ZARA You don't want to come in for a coffee?

MODI No, I can't be late for my mum's dinner. She'll hit me over the head with a
saucepan.

ZARA laughs.

MODI It's a traditional Iraqi expression of displeasure. You wouldn't understand
the nuances of it. Just wanted to make sure you didn't get buried in a
snowdrift. Well – bye.

ZARA Bye.

MODI turns away.

Zara throws a snowball at his retreating back.

MODI Hey!

MODI throws one back at her. They begin a snowball fight.

*MUIR appears from the direction of Dahlia's house. ZARA looks at him
awkwardly. He throws a snowball at her. ZARA hesitates and then throws one
back at him. It hits MUIR in the face.*

MUIR I can play dirty too.

MUIR grabs ZARA, lifts her up in his arms and goes to the side of the canal, swinging her backwards and forwards over the water.

ZARA (*laughing hysterically*). No! No!

MODI stands awkwardly by.

MUIR leans forward an, uses his back to screen it from Modi, kisses ZARA on the lips.

He puts her down and strides away.

MODI God, what was he doing?

ZARA *doesn't answer.*

MODI He could have dropped you. I can't believe he did that. Zara?

ZARA Yeah?

MODI I can't believe he could do something so stupid.

ZARA Yeah. You got to get to your mum's, haven't you?

MODI says nothing.

ZARA Bye, Modi.

ZARA walks away in a dreamlike state.

MODI starts to walk away. He stops, slumps on the bench.

Scene 17

DAHLIA's living room.

DAHLIA is packing a laptop into an overnight bag. There's a suitcase by the door. ZARA walks in, still dazed. DAHLIA chucks her a takeaway menu.

DAHLIA Zaza! Can you order some Chinese. I'll have the chicken – um

ZARA Szechuan?

DAHLIA No, the lemon one.

ZARA Boiled rice?

DAHLIA Yeah, yeah.

ZARA Hey, look. Lettuce surprise. I might have that. It's got in brackets 'mince meat'. That kind of ruins the surprise, doesn't it?

She starts to giggle.

DAHLIA Are you alright?

ZARA Yes. Why?

DAHLIA You seem a bit – I dunno know – giddy?

ZARA Oh, I've been having a snowball fight.

DAHLIA With Modi?

Pause.

ZARA Yeah.

DAHLIA Zara, honey, I've not got much time.

ZARA Where are you going?

DAHLIA Venice. My God, don't you listen to anything? I'll be back the day after
tomorrow.

ZARA Oh, yeah.

DAHLIA You look after Rubbia well, yeah?

ZARA Course.

DAHLIA Can you order something for Qaseem too?

ZARA What shall I get him?

DAHLIA Ask. He's in the kitchen.

ZARA goes out and comes back in.

ZARA He's not there.

DAHLIA Probably off having a fag. Get him prawn balls. That's what he had last
time, I think.

ZARA How about Rubbia?

DAHLIA Oh, she's out on one of her wanderlusts.

Scene 18

The Canal.

QASEEM is smoking, watching MODI on the bench. He walks over to him. Offers him a cigarette. MODI takes it.

MODI Thanks.

QASEEM joins him on the bench.

QASEEM I saw what happened with Muir.

MODI Yeah?

QASEEM Waving her about like that. Could have killed her. Drowned her. Or least
frozen her to death. In this water, how long she'd have lasted? Madness.

MODI Yeah.

QASEEM pulls out a bottle of whisky, offers it to MODI.

MODI No thanks.

QASEEM shrugs, drinks from the bottle.

QASEEM Though she didn't seem to be complaining.

MODI says nothing.

QASEEM He's going to steal her from under your nose.

MODI Don't know what you chatting about.

QASEEM Oh, come on.

MODI What you chatting about? We're friends, me and Zara. And him – he's pushing fifty. There's no way.

QASEEM No way? You believe that?

MODI says nothing.

QASEEM So why you looking so crushed?

MODI says nothing.

QASEEM I only wanna help, bruv. Give you a bit of advice.

MODI Oh, yeah? You an expert on women or something?

QASEEM No woman wants a poodle.

MODI I ain't no poodle.

QASEEM You're getting all street on me. But you're still a poodle.

MODI Shut up.

QASEEM For as long as you're her poodle, you ain't gonna get nowhere. And time's running out, my friend. Mr fucking hero is on the scene. You've got to move fast. Come on, you're freezing – have some of this to warm you.

MODI No.

QASEEM Why? Don't want to share with me? That it?

MODI No, it's not that.

QASEEM Or you can't take your liquor? Is that it? Oh, dear.

MODI's phone rings.

MODI Yeah, sorry mum. I was about to call. ... I know. I've got held up.

QASEEM is grinning at him.

QASEEM Is mummy's little boy late?

MODI I'll be there – be about half an hour. ... Yeah. Sorry. Start without me, yeah? ... I said I'm sorry. *(to QASEEM)* Shut up.

QASEEM I'm only teasing.

MODI takes the whisky from QASEEM, has a slug of it.

QASEEM You gotta get her jealous. If she knows you got someone else, she'll want you – ache for you. That's women for you. That's the way their fucked up minds work.

MODI Zara's not fucked up. She's / the most

QASEEM Sleep with Rubbia and see how Zara comes running. She won't be interested in some bragging old white / guy then.

MODI What did you say?

QASEEM You not seen how Rubbia looks at you? What's wrong with you? And she's sweet. Sweet and willing. We know that, in it? She won't hold out on the goodies. Yeah?

MODI That's – that's ...

QASEEM You're a young man. Strong. Handsome.

MODI What?

QASEEM You should be getting it. It's not right. Rubbia's willing, I know it. And it's not like you're taking from her anything she hasn't already lost, now is it? So you get some, Zara gets jealous. It's a win-win situation.

MODI Yeah? How about Rubbia?

QASEEM What do you mean? It's what she wants. She knows the score. She knows you're in love with Zara. Everyone knows that.

MODI I'm not.

QASEEM No? Well, all the more reason to have some fun with Rubbia. Why not? Or she don't do it for you? I think she's cute. You're a lucky bastard. If she had the hots for me, I wouldn't be standing around with my finger up my ass. (*QASEEM's phone rings*). (*Suddenly submissive*) Dahlia ... yes, sorry, I'm out on the canal only. Sorry ... Really? Thanks, yeah, no, I am starving, actually ... Yeah, I'm coming. Straight away. (*To Modi*). Apparently, there's a Chinese delicacy back at the house with my name on it. (*He hands Modi the whisky*). You better have this. I'm driving her to the airport.

MODI No, I'll only end up drinking it and getting . . .

QASEEM You know what? I think that could be what you need. No more poodle, yeah?

MODI You think she likes him?

QASEEM I think your sweet Zara is getting off on the idea of having something her omi wants so bad. God, the way Dahlia looks at him, I'm waiting for his pants to burst into flames.

MODI No, she's not like that – Zara – and / Dahlia, she

QASEEM Got to split. (*MODI tries to give him back the whisky.*) Keep it.

MODI grabs QASEEM.

MODI She's not like that, right?

QASEEM Calm down, bruv. I'm only trying to help, yeah? That's all. Do what you want, yeah. None of my business. Fuck, I was only trying to ... forget it.

MODI I know you were. I'm a bit ... tense at the moment. Not to do with Zara. No, it's – um – I'm trying to write an essay on Proust. It's not going well.

QASEEM Yeah? My advice: dig up something fruity on him.

MODI Fruity?

QASEEM Slap that in the first paragraph. Grab their attention. And cut the waffle.

MODI Thanks. Good advice.

QASEEM My pleasure.

QASEEM starts to walk away. He turns back.

QASEEM You got her number? Rubbia's?

MODI No, why would I?

QASEEM Give us your phone.

MODI What?

Qaseem puts out his hand. Modi gives it to him. Qaseem copies a number from his own phone onto Modi's and rings it. He hands the phone back to Modi.

MODI What you doing?

QASEEM You're calling her.

Qaseem walks away. Exits.

MODI What? Hey, Rubbia, um, sorry, um. Just calling to say hi really. Yeah, and um ...

RUBBIA appears by the canal.

Rubbia. Hi.

Modi turns, jumps.

MODI Rubbia! How come ...

RUBBIA I'm on my way to Dahlia's. Home. Didn't know you had my number.

MODI No – um. You wanna join me.

RUBBIA hesitates. She shyly walks up to him. She sits next to him.

Scene 19

DAHLIA's living room.

MUIR is standing in the living room with his coat on.

MUIR I've tried so hard not to.

MUIR goes up to ZARA, holds her, kisses her.

MUIR Have to have this. Jesus, so much.

They kiss more, fall on the couch.

MUIR Can we – can we go upstairs? The ghost of Dahlia seems to be hovering
over us.

ZARA And half an hour ago, Qaseem was sitting right here eating his prawn balls.

MUIR I'm sensing it. It's off-putting.

They laugh, slightly hysterically.

MUIR Can we? Go upstairs? I shouldn't ask that. God, ZARA God.

ZARA I've tried so hard, but I can't stop thinking of you. Can't.

They start to make love on the couch.

Scene 20

RUBBIA's bedroom / ZARA's bedroom.

Rubbia and Modi are on the bed, very drunk.

RUBBIA So will you call me that?

MODI You really want me to?

RUBBIA Yes.

MODI Okay.

RUBBIA So?

MODI But – this guy is some hillbilly white rapper?

RUBBIA Yeah.

MODI So why you wanna be called after him?

RUBBIA Because I like his music. Because no-one could mistake the name as belonging to me. Don't you think it would be nice to have a name that didn't belong to you? To slip free of – that.

MODI Are you making sense? I don't think you are.

They both start laughing.

MODI How can you have a name that doesn't belong to you? Doesn't the fact that you've got it mean it does belong to you?

RUBBIA I missed a chance when I started at Lansdowne. I could have done it then, said this is my name, the name I use. Been a new person. I wish I had. But can you call me it?

MODI Yeah. If you want.

RUBBIA It's good at Lansdowne. I thought they'd – I don't know - but they seem to like me.

MODI I like you too. Strange creature.

RUBBIA 'Strange creature'? That's what Zara called me. Have you been talking about me to Zara?

MODI Only nice stuff. Strange, beautiful creature, you are. I like you.

RUBBIA You like Zara.

MODI I like you. Lil' Wyte.

They both start laughing.

MODI Gorgeous dark Lil' Wyte.

They touch foreheads.

MODI Lil' eskimo.

They rub noses. They kiss. They break away. Rubbia stares at Modi.

RUBBIA Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

MODI What?

RUBBIA That's what the Christians say. The Catholics.

MODI I'm not sure they say it at this precise moment, do they?

RUBBIA Don't you think it's so peaceful, 'the hour of our death'?

MODI I hate to lower the tone but this is doing nothing for my hard-on.

RUBBIA Sorry.

They start to giggle, kiss.

MODI (*about the haunting music*) This music is a bit – um -

RUBBIA They're And Also The Trees. They're very big in Germany.

MODI Where German music taste leads, the rest of us follow. How about some Bavarian folk music after to lighten the mood?

RUBBIA Yeah, you could borrow some lederhosen.

MODI You have lederhosen, ma'am?

RUBBIA Yes, I've several pairs in my wardrobe. Catering for most gentlemen's sizes.

MODI They don't creak do they? I won't wear creaking lederhosen. No.

RUBBIA It's so mournful this song. I love it. Don't you?

MODI I love this.

MODI pulls the duvet right over their heads so they disappear from view.

MUIR and ZARA go into her bedroom, half-dressed. And Also The Trees can be heard faintly.

ZARA Rubbia must be back. I never heard her. I hope she didn't see us.

MUIR Something about her – reminds me of Mr Tumnus. Yer know in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe?

ZARA Yeah?

MUIR Something decent and pure and vulnerable about her. That was my favourite book when I was a kid.

ZARA It was?

MUIR I was so excited when it was gonna come on the telly. Jesus, what a disappointment. These spoilt posh kid actors who were so podgy it was a miracle they ever fitted in the wardrobe. Never mind got out the other side.

ZARA God, you know, I felt you. I read it too and I felt you in the story. Before ever I even knew you. You were there.

MUIR What?

ZARA In Narnia. You were.

Scene 21

Zara's bedroom / Rubbia's bedroom. Dawn

MUIR and MODI get dressed. Although they are in the same space they are not present to each other. RUBBIA and ZARA are asleep in bed.

MODI glances down at Rubbia and leaves.

MUIR kisses ZARA, smooths back her hair and leaves.

Scene 22

Dahlia's living room. Morning.

ZARA comes in in her nightdress, with a mug of tea, a big smile on her face. She's holding Modi's scarf. She drops it on the chair. RUBBIA appears in her nightdress, hungover, with a glass of water, also with a big smile on her face. They suddenly notice each other.

ZARA Hey.

RUBBIA Hey.

ZARA God, you didn't – um – see anything here last night?

RUBBIA What kind of thing?

ZARA Um (*giggling*) me and Muir having sex on the couch?

RUBBIA What?

ZARA You know how I feel about him.

RUBBIA Yes, but ...

ZARA See – I'm like you now. I get it now. All that chastity bollocks means nothing when you meet ... it's like you and Tobias. When you know you belong together.

RUBBIA Your mum will go nuts.

ZARA We tried to fight it. We can't. Yeah, I know. It has to be a secret, okay?
For now.

RUBBIA Course.

Pause.

ZARA He killed someone.

RUBBIA Muir?

ZARA Yeah.

RUBBIA Is that good?

ZARA No, it was his friend - this friend that betrayed them and they were ambushed by the loggers' men and kind of got murdered. Some of his comrades. It's really hurt Muir – that he had to do it.

Pause.

RUBBIA He didn't have to do it. Did he?

ZARA Yes, I think he did. In that – context. We can't – it's somewhere we can't understand. Least not yet.

RUBBIA says nothing.

ZARA I feel like such a kid next to him. What he's seen. Been through. I can't believe he wants to be with me.

RUBBIA You're beautiful. And rare. Every man wants to be with you.

ZARA Rare? That's a strange word. Anyway, I'm not. Rare. I'm ordinary. I don't have an amazing talent or anything. Not like mum has.

RUBBIA But you are. Sometimes I see you caught in light.

ZARA What?

RUBBIA Like the first time I saw you. I guess I hadn't eaten for a couple of days, so I was a bit – dazed. But when I saw you in that circle of white girls, I thought you were an angel. Because of the light. I thought they were slapping and kicking an angel.

ZARA Funny creature.

RUBBIA sees Modi's scarf on the chair. She picks it up.

ZARA It's Modi's. I found it on the stairs, which is a bit puzzling.

RUBBIA (*Grinning*) Yeah.

ZARA What? ... You and Modi?

RUBBIA Aren't you pleased?

ZARA Course I'm pleased. I think you'll be brilliant together. Like I said you got that same kind of kooky way of seeing things. So you and him – you didn't?

RUBBIA Yes, we did.

ZARA Already?

RUBBIA Already? How about you and Muir?

ZARA Yeah but that's ... yeah, no. Wow. Oh, what a night. I hope mum's having as much fun in Venice.

RUBBIA My head hurts.

ZARA You should phone Modi. Tell him we found his scarf.

RUBBIA smiles shyly.

RUBBIA Yeah. Later maybe.

ZARA We don't want him getting a stiff neck. Tell you what, I'll call him.

RUBBIA Zara, don't ...

ZARA I'm just gonna tell him we've got his scarf. (*She rings Modi. To Rubbia.*)

No answer. You must have worn him out. Oh, Modi, hey. .. Did I wake you? Sorry. Sorry. No, it's just I found your scarf. Hey, you sound torn. Was it a big night last night? ... Yeah? Anyway, your scarf's here when you want it. ... Whenever. I found it on the stairs. Bit odd. How could it have got there? ... Mmm. A mystery. Yeah. ... Oh, Rubbia's here. (*Rubbia giggles, mouths 'No'*). If you wanna say hi? (*RUBBIA hits her with a cushion and reaches for the phone.*) Oh, okay ... well, speak to you later. Bye. (*To Rubbia.*) He said he's late for something. He had to ... um ...

Rubbia is totally crushed.

RUBBIA Yeah.

RUBBIA gets up.

ZARA Where are you going?

RUBBIA To make a tea.

Scene 23

Muir's living room. Night.

MUIR and ZARA. He's wearing his security guard uniform.

ZARA How are you?

MUIR Banjaxed.

ZARA Banjaxed?

MUIR Done in.

ZARA I don't know how you managed to work after last night. I've slept all afternoon.

MUIR Yeah, well, I don't think my colleague Kasper found me much company.

ZARA Kasper?

MUIR He's a German shepherd.

ZARA Really? How did he go from that to being a security guard?

MUIR What? No, Zara, he's a German shepherd dog.

ZARA (*Giggling*) Oh.

MUIR Yer want a coffee?

ZARA I've disobeyed your orders, haven't I? Coming here. You told me never to come here gain.

MUIR Yeah, I did, didn't I? My orders have been flouted. 'Flouted'? Is that right. Sound funny. God, I'm tired.

ZARA comes up to him. They kiss. MUIR pushes ZARA down onto the couch.

Scene 24

The Canal. Evening.

MODI is walking reluctantly towards Dahlia's house. He stops, hesitates, turns and starts walking away. QASEEM appears.

QASEEM Modi.

MODI Hi.

QASEEM You forgotten something? Looked like you were coming to call on a certain lush little minx, 'fore you did that about-turn. Of course: the flowers.

MODI Don't call her that.

QASEEM Sorry. Does she need to be spoken of with respect now she's yours? Modi's new girlfriend.

MODI She's not.

QASEEM Nothing went down? I'm disappointed. It was looking so promising.

MODI Please just piss off. I'm not in the mood.

QASEEM grabs him.

QASEEM Don't talk to me like that, you prick.

MODI You got me lashed. I'd never have / done

QASEEM I got you lashed? How old are you? You're not a fucking six year old, are you? I got you lashed? No wonder mummy has to keep checking on you.

MODI shoves him roughly away, starts walking. QASEEM goes after him, grabs his coat.

MODI What the hell ...?

QASEEM Was she very cross that her naughty boy didn't show up for his dindins? Too busy fucking a little whore?

They fight. At first they seem an equal match but then QASEEM hits MODI hard several times until he's dazed, trying to crawl away. QASEEM scoops him up, holding him the same way as MUIR held ZARA and swings him backwards and forwards over the canal.

QASEEM Hey, I'm getting a touch of déjà vu here. Are you?

He leans over and kisses MODI on the lips in a mocking imitation of how MUIR kissed ZARA. MODI struggles to keep his face away from him. Then QASEEM laughs and drops him on the ground.

QASEEM Prick.

He walks away.

Scene 25

The canal. The following night.

RUBBIA walks over to the bench. She stands staring at it and then walks away.

Scene 26

MODI's room. Afternoon.

ZARA and MODI come into the room.

ZARA What happened to your face?

MODI Oh, I got in a fight.

ZARA You? Who with?

MODI Doesn't matter.

ZARA But why?

MODI Why?

ZARA Yes.

MODI A man made a disparaging comment about my lederhosen. I had to ask him to step outside.

ZARA Your lederhosen?

MODI What can I do for you?

ZARA What's wrong?

MODI Nothing's wrong.

ZARA I've been calling you all day. Even your voicemail's turned off.

MODI Yeah, I'm trying to focus on my essay. Trying to unearth something – um – what's the word? – 'fruity' about Proust.

ZARA You're being weird. I'm worried about Rubbia. I thought she might be with you.

MODI No. Why would she be?

ZARA Why would she be?

MODI The problem when you live in such palatial surroundings is visitors can escape your notice but (*he looks in the wardrobe*) no, I'm pretty sure she's not here.

ZARA Stop it. It's not funny. She didn't come home last night. Her phone's turned off too.

MODI She'll have stayed over with a friend.

ZARA What friend?

MODI I don't know.

ZARA Why wouldn't she have told me? And I phoned the school, she's not been in today. Mum's home tonight. I don't know where she is. She was upset. Because you didn't call her.

MODI You know how she likes to wander.

ZARA I thought maybe you'd finally called and she was over here and you were having such a wild time that ...

MODI Have you gone to look for her?

ZARA Where? I searched along the canal, but where. Where else?

MODI Didn't she used to sleep rough near Covent Garden? We could try there.

ZARA Oh, God.

MODI She'll be fine. Just with a friend probably. But let's go and ask around.

MODI gets his coat.

ZARA But – I need to get a photo of her.

MODI I've got one.

He gets out his phone, finds the photo. ZARA takes the phone off him.

ZARA God, her eyes. She adored you.

MODI That's crap. She hardly / knows me

ZARA But how she's looking at you.

MODI I'm not in the photo.

ZARA How she's looking at you while you took the photo, dumb head. Why did you do that – sleep with her and then not want to talk to her?

MODI I wish I hadn't.

ZARA What – slept with her or not called?

MODI The first one.

ZARA She was so happy yesterday morning. Don't you want to be with her?

MODI I know I've been a shit. But I can't make myself feel something that I don't.

ZARA But she's so lovely.

MODI I know she is.

ZARA So why don't you want to be with her?

A pause.

MODI Why? Because she's not you.

Scene 27

Dahlia's living room. Night.

DAHLIA is slumped on the couch in her living room with a glass of wine.

Zara (off-stage) Rubbia! Rubbia!

MODI and ZARA come in.

DAHLIA Rubbia's not in. Where've you been? No message. Or from Rubbia. Got back home and it felt like the Marie Celeste.

ZARA Sorry, I should have called. How was Venice?

DAHLIA Modi! What happened to your face?

MODI I was in a fight.

DAHLIA You? Really. No, not you. What about?

ZARA He's not telling, mum. I already asked.

MODI It was nothing. So Venice was . . .

DAHLIA Oh, it was a complete bitch. That whore curator understands zilch about sculpture's relationship to the landscape. Not even the most rudimentary – she – this is the best – she actually had my Horse Dawn facing west. I had to point out that it wasn't their arses that were supposed to be communing with the dawn.

MODI That's sloppy.

DAHLIA And then she tried to blag her way out of it by suggesting she was introducing an element of play. Then when she saw she was on a hiding to nowhere with that, she lashed out at me, said they were too ‘weakly abstracted’. That I’d failed to achieve the essence of horseness. I actually think she might be having some form of mental disintegration: waving your arms around to that extent isn’t normal behaviour even for an Italian. Anyway, at least I’m back. Losing over two days like that from the campaign. Me and Qaseem shared a special moment on the way back on the motorway.

ZARA Yeah?

DAHLIA I was watching the road ahead. Watching it dissolve into grey snowflakes, weightless as ash, and thinking about my dinner, and also – I’m afraid – thinking uncharitable things about the back of Qaseem’s head – odd we don’t have a proper word in English – or Arabic for that matter – for something as important as the back of the head, like – I don’t know – how about ‘neve’? ‘The last she saw of him was his retreating neve.’ Because that’s what we really see, isn’t it? Not a retreating back. We’re not looking at their back, are we, Modi, when someone leaves us? Someone we might never see again.

MODI No, I suppose – yeah - back of their head probably more. You’re right.

DAHLIA So whirling snowflakes, back of Qaseem’s head, and then a barn owl – I guess, like me, needing its dinner - plunged past the windscreen and up into the sky above the meadows. In the dusk, a hefty white bird scouring a white meadow. And Qaseem said, ‘That’s beautiful. Look at it.’ And I thought – yes – that’s something I can never compete with. All it’s done is be white and fly above something white but it’s blithely achieved more than I can ever reach. Even if my horses’ arses do point in the right direction.

ZARA Mum, we don’t know where Rubbia is.

DAHLIA What do you mean?

ZARA She didn’t come home last night.

DAHLIA Last night? She’s been gone all this time?

ZARA We think she’s probably with a friend.

DAHLIA What friend? Why wouldn't she have let you know? Did you phone the school?

ZARA Yes, she didn't go in.

DAHLIA My God. She's – so when did you last see her?

ZARA At about six yesterday evening.

DAHLIA And she didn't come home?

ZARA No, well I'm sure she didn't.

DAHLIA You don't know?

ZARA I actually – um – did stay the night at a friend's.

DAHLIA Who?

ZARA Just a friend. But, anyway, Rubbia's bed had her stuff on. Yesterday evening. Her clothes, music. I was up in the room with her and she was telling me she's gonna throw them out.

DAHLIA Why? Has something happened? My God, her family haven't found her, have they?

ZARA No. No.

MODI looks pleadingly at her.

ZARA I think – maybe – she was feeling down. I don't know.

DAHLIA But why?

ZARA When I came back in the morning, her stuff was still there, not been moved, so she couldn't have slept in her bed. I don't think she could have. I'll check now – see if anything's moved.

DAHLIA You were supposed to be looking after her.

ZARA I know. I'm sorry, omi.

DAHLIA Yes, well that's not much help, is it? Why didn't you call me?

ZARA leaves the room.

DAHLIA She seemed to be getting happier.

MODI says nothing.

DAHLIA I really thought she was ... what could have happened?

MODI says nothing.

DAHLIA Something must have upset her. Must have. Don't you think?

MODI It could be that she's – um – just forgot to call. And – um – she's ...

DAHLIA But wanting to throw out all her things. No – something is seriously wrong here.

ZARA comes back in.

ZARA Everything's still all over the bed.

She's holding one of Rubbia's strange dark dresses. She presses it against her face.

ZARA Where's she gone?

DAHLIA We need to phone the police. I'll do 999.

ZARA 999?

DAHLIA She's fifteen years' old, ZARA

Scene 28

The canal.

QASEEM is walking along, while on the phone. He passes a snowman with a carrot nose and a skipper's cap.

QASEEM Hass, you're being way too hasty. Yeah? We'll talk this through. I can't now – got to be somewhere. We could be the kings of electrical appliances Manga style! I'll call you later, yeah? ... No, you don't mean that. You're panicking, that's all ... Bruv, no, you'll regret this your whole life, know that? ... Come on, Hass. Aray, chances like this don't come by twice ... It's gonna make us so fucking rich. Be brave, man. Have vision ... We'll talk about this later, yeah? Later ... I said we'll talk about this later ... Don't ... You're not thinking straight ... Yeah? Yeah? ... Forget it then. Fuck you. Ass-hole. Kuteh ka bacha [son of a dog]. Fucking pathetic. Messing me around ... Yeah, well, Amma bhosri kaa teri chuntain khol doon gaa [Ass-hole, I'm going to fuck your mother]. You're pathetic ... That right? I'm so scared. Oh, please don't. Ass-hole. Teri nashayi bhain too lun par cocain sot kar anokhey kism da choopa lawa [I'm going to put cocaine on my dick and get a special blowjob from your junkie sister]. Yeah? Suck my dick. Ass-hole.

QASEEM puts away his phone. He veers back to the snowman and punches it, knocking off its head. QASEEM drops down with it, punching the head again and again. He gets the carrot and stabs the bashed-in head repeatedly with the carrot. He stands up and pisses over the head.

He pulls himself together and walks on.

Scene 29

Dahlia's living room.

MODI is on the couch. He knocks back Dahlia's glass of wine and quickly fills it back up to the same level.

DAHLIA (*off-stage*) Thanks again, Officer. Bye.

ZARA comes in, followed by DAHLIA.

DAHLIA I can't believe it. It's all right to leave a kid sleeping rough. Do nothing to help her. But if you take her in, give her a home, get her somewhere decent to go to school, suddenly you're a criminal.

ZARA They weren't saying / that

DAHLIA They were saying that – that I'm holding Rubbia illegally.

ZARA No, but that thing about – you know like we should have let Social Services know. I guess they had a point.

DAHLIA So now I'm gonna get a grilling from them. Shame they didn't care more about her when she was sleeping in a doorway. If this gets out, my opponents will have a field day. Meanwhile – no doubt – Rubbia will come drifting through that door, once she's got bored of doing her little match girl act.

ZARA That's not fair.

DAHLIA That girl is in love with sorrow.

ZARA No, it's just that people keep treating her bad.

ZARA glares at Modi. *The doorbell rings.*

ZARA I'll go.

Both Zara and Dahlia head for the door.

Zara (*off-stage*) Muir.

Dahlia (*off-stage*) Muir, we're in a right state here. Rubbia's missing.

Muir (*off-stage*) Zara told me. I just got off work. Thought I'd come straight over.

They come back into the room. MUIR is in his security uniform. He sees Modi.

Muir (*to Modi*). You should be ashamed of yourself. What happened to yer face?

DAHLIA What are you talking about?

MUIR D'yer not know? This wee bastard got Rubbia drunk and slept with her.

DAHLIA What?

MUIR Then dropped her like she were a piece of trash. Isn't that correct?

MODI says nothing.

DAHLIA Modi? No. That's not true.

MODI It wasn't like that.

DAHLIA So what was it like?

MODI We both got back here a bit drunk / and

DAHLIA What?

MODI We were both – well – quite drunk, and when we got back ... um ...

DAHLIA I don't believe this. So now it's not just illegal fostering, but under my roof there's been plying a minor with intoxicating liquor and – what – fucking statutory rape. My God.

MODI But she – it's not like she's never drunk before. Or never – or never ...

DAHLIA You can be on the sex offenders' register for this.

MODI What?

DAHLIA She's only fifteen. It's where you bloody belong. No wonder the poor kid's disappeared. After what's happened to her before, how could you?

MODI I'm sorry.

MUIR I think you should go.

MODI I'm so sorry.

MODI gets up. He looks desperately at Zara. She says nothing.

MODI I want to help. To find her.

MUIR Get out.

MODI It's not your house.

DAHLIA He's right. Get out.

MODI walks towards the door.

MUIR Despicable.

MODI Least I didn't sleep with a girl young enough to be my daughter.

MUIR Shut up.

Modi (*to Dahlia*). Me and Rubbia weren't the only ones at it under your roof on Friday night. Ask Zara again who the friend was she stayed with last night. The friend who was so important she left / Rubbia

ZARA No.

MODI Left Rubbia crying to go and – and fuck him.

MODI walks out.

ZARA She said she'd be all right. She told me to go.

DAHLIA Go where, Zara?

Pause.

ZARA To Muir's. He was cooking me this special Ecuadorian dish that takes all day to make - enchocados. I didn't want / to not

DAHLIA What?

ZARA Enchocados. I've said that right, haven't I, Muir?

MUIR says nothing.

ZARA Muir?

MUIR Um – encocados.

DAHLIA You slept with my daughter?

MUIR Dahlia ...

DAHLIA Did you sleep with my daughter?

MUIR Yes.

DAHLIA She's a child.

ZARA I'm eighteen. I'm an adult. Please, don't be angry, mum. I tried – we tried not to but – we didn't want to upset you.

DAHLIA Some eighteen year olds are, indeed, adults. You, darling, I'm afraid are not one of them. (to Muir) All the times you were round here, you were leching after my daughter?

MUIR I'm sorry. But you have to see we've done nothing wrong.

ZARA Mum, we're free agents.

DAHLIA Free agents? What a ridiculous child you are. (To Muir) Get out. I can't look at you.

ZARA Mum.

DAHLIA Get out.

MUIR (to Zara) It's probably better if I do leave. Dahlia's had – um – probably best to – will you let me know any news of Rubbia?

DAHLIA That's none of your business any more. You stay away from my family.

ZARA You can't talk to him like that.

DAHLIA I'll talk to him how I damn well want in my own house. Don't you dare tell me what I can and cannot do. You can go upstairs.

ZARA What – you’re sending me to my bedroom? How many times, mum, I’m not a kid anymore. Whatever you think.

DAHLIA ‘Oh, we’re free agents’. If you could only hear how ridiculously pompous you sound. In that stupid, prim headscarf of yours.

ZARA Yeah, well, sorry but while I respect your right to go around with your tits spilling out, it’s not something that appeals to me.

DAHLIA slaps her.

MUIR Jesus. Are you all right, Zara?

ZARA Yeah. I want to go with you. Can I?

DAHLIA Yeah? Go with him, then. Go on. Go.

MUIR You can’t behave like this.

Dahlia No?

DAHLIA slaps MUIR across the face.

ZARA Can I? Can I stay with you?

MUIR Um – yeah. Course. Course you can.

ZARA Let’s go.

MUIR How about your things? Clothes?

ZARA I can buy some more. Let’s go.

DAHLIA Yeah, well not on that bloody credit card of yours you won’t be. Because I’m cancelling it.

ZARA Fine. Muir wouldn’t want me to use it anyway. Would you?

Pause.

MUIR No.

ZARA Let’s go.

MUIR Okay. Right.

ZARA I guess there are some things I need. *(To Muir)* I’ll be quick.

DAHLIA So. Get them.

ZARA glances anxiously between the two of them and dashes off in the direction of her bedroom.

MUIR braces himself for more of a tirade. DAHLIA just eyeballs him. There’s a dangerous silence.

The landline phone rings.

MUIR Um – it might be news.

DAHLIA picks up the phone.

DAHLIA Hello ... What do you want, Modi? ... Yes, well, your apology won't bring Rubbia back, will it? ... If you want to look for her, that's your business but I want nothing to do with you. ... No, Modi, I don't want to hear it. Good bye... I said good bye.

MUIR Rubbia has to be the main issue, yeah?

DAHLIA says nothing.

MUIR I know you're very upset, but the priority has to be finding Rubbia and the work we're doing nailing the Nazis. We can't let them get into power. They're lethal. You know that. We have to – we can't let this get in the / way of

DAHLIA Do you still have a brain or does your dick make all your decisions for you now?

MUIR The bi-election / is so close

DAHLIA You never found out anything worthwhile anyway.

MUIR What? I found out about Alex Hardy. I found out about that gay-basher's cottaging history. Blair and Lyon's conviction for desecrating Jewish cemeteries. All this has pretty fucking seriously damaged them. How can you say I've done nothing worthwhile? Yeah, okay, nothing on Hart yet. Because – well, the guy seems untouchable. If he's done anything he's covered his tracks pretty bloody well. But I can get there.

DAHLIA I even began to wonder if there was some kind of double agent thing going on.

MUIR Double agent?

ZARA comes back in with a suitcase only half zipped-up.

DAHLIA Well, they're your kind, aren't they?

MUIR My kind? Them? What d'yer mean?

DAHLIA I don't know. White. Thugs.

MUIR That isna worth responding to. I've seriously damaged their chances. You need at least to recognise that / whatever else has

DAHLIA What I need to – should have – recognised is that you're a bloody pervert.

ZARA He's not a pervert.

DAHLIA Leching after my teenage daughter.

ZARA Or a thug.

DAHLIA No? He killed someone. I'd call that pretty thuggish. You know that, Zara? Of course you do; you were eaves-dropping as usual. Do you actually know what you're getting into?

ZARA You're angry, mum. We expected this. You're lashing out in all directions when really all this is about – isn't it – all it's about is that you wanted him. We both wanted him and he chose me. I'm sorry.

DAHLIA Get out. Deluded fool.

ZARA Come on. Let's go.

MUIR *picks up the suitcase; it's very light.*

MUIR Is there anything in here?

DAHLIA Yes, go with him. Leave me alone.

ZARA *(to Muir)* A few things. I was trying to be quick.

MUIR Yeah.

ZARA *and MUIR leave.*

DAHLIA *(shouting after them)* And whatever happened to your chastity vow?

QASEEM *comes in.*

QASEEM I wasn't aware I'd taken one?

DAHLIA What are you doing here?

QASEEM Well, you called me. About Rubbia. Have the police been round?

DAHLIA Yeah.

QASEEM What did they say?

DAHLIA They sat around leisurely asking me a lot of irrelevant questions and then finally arranged for a search to be put out.

QASEEM And you obviously gave them a full description and a recent photo of her?

DAHLIA Well, of course it was a recent one. I've only bloody known her six weeks.

QASEEM Right.

DAHLIA *pours another glass of wine.*

QASEEM I think you need something stiffer than that.

QASEEM *goes out and comes back with a large brandy and the bottle. DAHLIA drinks it in one. QASEEM fills it up again.*

QASEEM Why was Muir carrying a suitcase?

DAHLIA *says nothing.*

QASEEM Dahlia?

DAHLIA He's sleeping with my child.

QASEEM Who?

DAHLIA Muir?

QASEEM Muir? No way.

DAHLIA He is.

QASEEM No. But – that's disgusting. He's old enough to be her father.

DAHLIA I know.

QASEEM The bastard.

DAHLIA begins to cry. QASEEM sits down next to her. He tentatively puts his hand towards her shoulder; DAHLIA subtly pulls back.

QASEEM It's gonna be okay.

DAHLIA Just eight hours ago I was in Venice, having a god-awful time and longing to be here. Back with my – and now they're gone. They're all gone.

QASEEM Thought Modi was here?

DAHLIA What do I care about him? But anyway he's left too. I threw him out. He slept with Rubbia. Used her and then dropped her. That's why she's disappeared.

QASEEM I can't believe it. He seems such a nice, well-brought up guy.

DAHLIA All gone.

QASEEM I can't believe it of both of them. I'm not gone.

DAHLIA No. You're not. No.

QASEEM I'm here, yeah?

DAHLIA Least I can trust you. Zara's – she's gone to stay at his. This is absurd.

QASEEM Hey, hey. Give it a few days, she'll be back.

DAHLIA I won't have her back. Not after this.

QASEEM Come on.

DAHLIA I couldn't look at her again.

QASEEM That's how you feel now. Give it a bit of time.

DAHLIA And that lecherous pig.

QASEEM You're just upsetting yourself more.

DAHLIA But I'm not – I'm not gonna be the one to go to her . . .

QASEEM No. Course not. Why should you? She'll be back, sorry little tail between her legs. And we'll find Rubbia, yeah? The police are out there – and we're gonna drive and drive until we find her. So she will be found. Everything's gonna be okay. Once you've finished your brandy, we'll go, yeah? Or – why not take it with you?

DAHLIA No, I'll just finish it off.

QASEEM Take it with you. Safi used to do that. We'd drive into central London and I'd fix her a gin and tonic – slice of lemon, ice, the works – I'm not one of these Pakistani husbands that don't let their wives drink – and she'd sit drinking it while I drove. Some good music on.

DAHLIA knocks back her drink.

QASEEM Regents Park. Mayfair. Marble Arch. In those days, I was never without a lemon in my glove compartment.

DAHLIA Yeah? Let's go. How in this huge frozen city are we ever going to find her? Oh, God. She's out there somewhere in this bitter cold.

QASEEM We will. We'll find her.

DAHLIA Let's go.

QASEEM I think he slept with my wife as well as your daughter.

DAHLIA Muir? Why – why would you think that?

QASEEM Safi denies it. Said he was helping her with her shopping only.

DAHLIA There you are then. She wouldn't do that to you. Not Safi.

QASEEM You barely know her.

DAHLIA She wouldn't do that. She seems such a sweet woman.

QASEEM Yeah. Yeah, she is. You're right. She wouldn't.

DAHLIA You know what, I'll get another photo of Rubbia, so we can ask people.

QASEEM Good idea.

She goes out of the room.

QASEEM You're a lying bitch.

Act 2

Scene 1

Muir's bedroom / Muir's living room. Morning.

ZARA and MUIR are in bed. ZARA is stroking a leopard skin stole.

MUIR It's real?

ZARA I know it's a bit gross but it must be 100 years old, so ...

MUIR So given immortal life as a – scarf.

ZARA My grandmother called it a stole. It's so amazing to feel, don't you think?

MUIR Yeah, it is.

ZARA I love stroking it. It belonged to her mother. She told me how her mum was wearing it the night she took her to the cinema for the first time when she was seven. To watch Bambi. And it was one of these open air cinemas where girls walked round selling garlands of jasmine and there were lots of rowdy English soldiers in the audience, and my teita was scared of them and cuddled up into the stole. But her mother said she shouldn't be. Shouldn't be scared. They wouldn't hurt her. I loved trying to imagine my teita as a scared little girl. She was very glamorous. Though pretty wrinkled. The skin on her hands always made me think of moths' wings.

MUIR begins to kiss ZARA.

MUIR I used to want so much to know what your hair looked like. To be able to touch it. Now I can.

ZARA Sometimes when I see girls wearing the niqab, I'm jealous of them. I want to wear one too. Hide myself away from every man, so only you can see me.

MUIR kisses her hungrily. She responds.

MUIR So what happened?

ZARA Huh?

MUIR With the soldiers? Did things kick off?

ZARA Oh, no. They started to cry.

MUIR Really?

ZARA When Bambi's mother was shot.

MUIR They cried?

ZARA Yeah. My teita was crying and when she looked around with her sight all blurry, she saw some of them were crying too.

MUIR Isn't there a certain incongruity in sobbing about a dead wild animal while wrapped in a dead wild animal?

ZARA I suppose so. I've never really thought of it like that. But that's how we live, isn't it?

MUIR How we live?

ZARA We can only feel pity for a few things. The rest we don't see. Otherwise we'd be a raw, bleeding thing. If we felt for everything. Wouldn't we?

MUIR I suppose so.

They kiss.

ZARA Tell me again about the fish that breathe air. In Ecuador. Will you?

MUIR Have I told you about the fish that breathe air?

ZARA You were telling my mum about them, and I / was listening

MUIR Was listening.

The both laugh.

ZARA Mum was right about that: I was always eavesdropping. When you were telling her – the things you were telling her, I'd be standing there and I could suddenly – I was there like in the strange beauty of the world. Rubbia can always feel that. But I can't. Just sometimes, everything sharpens, grows bright. Shines. I felt it when you told her about those fish. Prehistoric giants swimming deep in the big green river – the Amazon – that name. But then if the – if the ...

MUIR Oxygen levels get too low ...

ZARA Yeah, they loom up, lumber out of the water, take gulps of air.

MUIR They don't exactly lumber out of it...

ZARA I so wanted you to be telling me, not her. About everything. Like when you talked about the Intangible Zone, about the tribe who lives naked deep in the jungle as if it's the stone age, as if time has ended or not / began.

The doorbell rings.

ZARA Might be Qaseem with news of Rubbia.

She leaps out of bed, pulls on her jeans and sweater.

MUIR Zara, it could be anyone.

ZARA At eight on a Sunday morning?

She goes out.

Zara (*off-stage*) Modi.

Modi (*off-stage*) I had to come. You never answer my messages. You head off in the other direction if you see me at uni. This was the only / way I can

ZARA How did you know I was here?

MODI walks into Muir's living room, followed by ZARA. He's unshaven. His bruises are yellowing.

MODI Mia told me. Is he in or at work?

ZARA In. Modi, I don't think this is a good idea.

MODI Why? He don't let you have friends round?

ZARA He's still really angry about what you did to Rubbia. This is his place.

MUIR (*from the bedroom*). Is it Qaseem?

ZARA No. It was – nobody really.

MUIR gets out of bed and reaches for his clothes.

MODI Well, that seems a pretty accurate description of my current status.

ZARA Please go.

MODI I need to talk to you. Please don't turn your back on me. I've been searching and searching for her. I've seen such piteous ... But not her. No-one's ever seen her. More than two weeks. Zara, I think – I think she might be dead.

ZARA She's not dead.

MODI What if she is?

ZARA No, she's not dead.

MODI No?

ZARA She'll be somewhere. We're gonna find her.

MODI I so wish I hadn't ...

MUIR leaves his bedroom.

ZARA I know you do.

MODI Don't turn your back on me. I can't bear it.

ZARA Look, if you go now, I'll call you.

MODI You won't, though.

MUIR comes into the living room, unseen.

ZARA No, I promise I'll call you. Now please go before / Muir comes

MUIR What do you want?

MODI I came to see Zara.

MUIR Yeah?

MODI What – is that not allowed?

MUIR Zara can see who she wants. But she doesn't want visits from the likes of you. Look at her. You're upsetting her.

ZARA It's okay, MUIR

MUIR No, it's not okay. What the hell does he think he's doing?

ZARA No, Modi is still my friend. I'm not ... I can't do that. Blank him like this for ever. I'm sorry. I can't.

MUIR Friend? Some friend he's been to all of us. Not only does he use Rubbia but then instead of letting us talk to Dahlia properly – at the right / time – he

MODI I'm sorry.

MUIR Yeah, well Zara's sorry that now her mother isn't speaking to her. Hangs up whenever she calls. I'm sorry that I've lost one of my oldest friends.

MODI So do you really think if you'd only been able to get the timing right, Dahlia would have been slapping you on the back?

MUIR Well, it wouldn't have been such a fuck-up as it was.

ZARA It was me. I said the wrong things.

MUIR says nothing.

ZARA I did, didn't I?

MUIR Well, I guess – yes – you could have perhaps handled it better. I mean I did wonder why you were going on about my encocados. And perhaps mentioning your mum's tits falling out wasn't the most tactful comment. But – but we were caught on the hop.

ZARA So I don't think it's fair to blame Modi. And, after all, you doxed him in too.

MUIR Doxed him in? What is this? The school playground? And you're defending him now, are you?

MODI Muir, I want to ask you something?

MUIR What?

MODI Have you never – not even when you were young – slept with a girl then not wanted to ... pursue it?

MUIR doesn't answer.

MODI Never?

Still MUIR doesn't answer.

MODI Cause I don't think I'm the first one to have ever done that. And I know it was wrong of me but I'm paying for / it and

MUIR No – everyone else is paying for it. You're a lowlife piece of shit and I want you out of my home.

Modi *(to Zara)* Will you call me?

ZARA *says nothing.*

MUIR You seem such a bland, nothingy kind of lad. But in fact your poison – sheer poison – whenever – wherever – you turn up, there's this.

MODI *(to Muir)* Yeah? Well actually I used to think you were great. Your opinion of me would once have mattered. But now I see what you really are: a dirty old man. A fantasist. A bully. So nothing you say can touch me. *(to Zara)* You don't wanna say you will in front of him. I understand. I'll go.

ZARA Don't / call Muir that

MUIR So does this touch you?

MUIR hits Modi hard in the face, knocking him over. Blood pours from his nose.

ZARA runs to him.

ZARA Modi! *(to Muir)* What have you done?

MUIR Jesus, I ... I didn't ...

MUIR slumps down on the sofa.

MODI staggers up.

MODI I'm all right. Zara, let's get out of here.

ZARA What?

MODI You can't stay with him. He's – he's crazy. He's fucking dangerous. Come with me.

ZARA doesn't move.

MODI You seen what he did.

Still she doesn't move.

MODI Let's go.

ZARA You provoked him.

MODI Let's go.

MODI Zara, please.

ZARA We were ...

MODI Come with me. It's not safe for you here.

ZARA shakes her head.

ZARA I think you better go.

MODI Come with me.

ZARA No.

Modi looks pleadingly at her. He sees it's useless.

MODI If you need me, you know where I am. Yeah?

ZARA *says nothing.*

MODI Yeah?

Still nothing.

ZARA Yeah.

MODI walks out the door.

MUIR Zara?

ZARA walks off in the direction of the bedroom.

ZARA Leave me alone.

ZARA leaves. She walks into the bedroom, puts on some music at full volume and lies on the bed.

MUIR leaves the living room.

Muir (*off-stage, shouting over the music*) Let me in. Please.

ZARA I wanna be alone.

Muir (*off-stage*) Don't go all Greta Garbo on me, hen. I'm sorry.

ZARA I dunno who Greta Garbo is and I'm not your hen.

Muir (*off-stage*) It's a Scottish term of endearment.

ZARA I don't care. I don't like it.

Muir (*off-stage*) If you won't let me in, can you at least turn down the music so
we can talk to each other?

ZARA No.

Muir (*off-stage*) If you can call it that. Jesus, it sounds more like bloody noise to
me.

ZARA Who are you, my dad?

MUIR winces.

The doorbell rings.

Muir (*off-stage*). Jesus.

The bell rings again.

Muir (*off-stage*). I'm coming! Fuck.

QASEEM and MUIR walk into Muir's living room.

QASEEM Is everything okay?

MUIR Aye.

QASEEM There's blood outside. A trail of it in the snow. It led to your door. Made me think of Snow White.

MUIR No-one bleeds in Snow White, do they?

QASEEM No – yeah I mean the story with rose petals in? Red petals in the snow. Which one is that?

MUIR I dunno. It's Modi's blood. I lost my temper. It was stupid of me. Modi came round and I lost it.

QASEEM I can't blame you.

MUIR I shouldna have hit him, though.

QASEEM No, don't be too hard on yourself. If I knew my woman had been sneaking around with some other dude I'd feel entitled to get a bit aerated.

MUIR What?

QASEEM I thought – shit – I thought that was why you ...

MUIR Zara's not seen him. Hasn't seen him since the blow-up at Dahlia's.

QASEEM No, right. Sorry, got the wrong end of the stick. Actually, the reason I came by was / to tell you that

MUIR Yer saying you've heard they've met up or something?

QASEEM I got the wrong end of the stick.

MUIR Have you heard summat?

QASEEM Look, it was probably totally innocent.

MUIR What have yer heard?

Pause.

MUIR Qaseem?

QASEEM It wasn't what I heard. It was what I saw.

MUIR And what was that?

QASEEM It was nothing really. I shouldn't have said 'sneaking around'; that ain't what it was like. Sure it wasn't.

MUIR What did yer see?

QASEEM I saw Zara. Up on the canal.

MUIR What – by her mum's house?

QASEEM Yeah. And Modi was there. They met. I mean I dunno if it was by chance or they'd arranged it. They didn't notice me. Well, I was on the other side.

MUIR So they what – talked?

QASEEM Talked. Yes.

MUIR And?

QASEEM Well, you know that bank – there's a grass bank, next to the tow-path?

MUIR Aye.

QASEEM They were laughing – messing about - and they lay down on it.

MUIR Lay down on it?

QASEEM But this was definitely innocent. Definitely. Because what they did – what they were doing was making angels in the snow. You know / when you

MUIR I know.

QASEEM I mean they're still kids, I guess, really. Not old-timers like us, yeah? I shouldn't have said 'sneaking round'. They weren't sneaking around. Enjoying the snow only.

MUIR Aye. She told me she hadn't seen him. Why would she say that?

QASEEM I dunno, compadre. Maybe – maybe she thought you'd be angry. Maybe she was right.

MUIR Yeah. It's my fault. I've no right to ... making angels?

QASEEM Yeah.

MUIR sits down on the settee. He looks dazed with pain.

QASEEM Muir, look, what I came round for was to say Rubbia's been seen.

MUIR Been seen?

QASEEM This guy's come forward. Said he was certain it was Rubbia he bought a meal for. Her face, her clothes, everything.

MUIR When?

QASEEM Said he saw her the day before yesterday. She looked hungry so he offered to buy her something to eat. Took her to a place in Edgware Road. Yeah, well, you can guess what he was really after but his story is he was trying to persuade her to go home.

ZARA comes into the room.

QASEEM And she seemed to be agreeing to it but when he came back from paying the bill she'd gone.

ZARA Rubbia?

MUIR Yeah.

QASEEM Least we know she's okay. I've gotta get off. Dahlia needs me to drive her. She wouldn't be too happy if she knew I was here.

MUIR I know – look – thanks for coming. We appreciate it.

QASEEM Just wanted to drop by and let you know.

ZARA Thank you.

QASEEM No problem.

QASEEM leaves.

ZARA I was so afraid – afraid she was dead.

MUIR Thank Christ. That has to be her. He was sure. The man was sure. Though I hate to think of her alone with him.

ZARA Which place on Edgware Road? Has he gone?

ZARA runs out after Qaseem. She comes back in.

ZARA Says he doesn't know which. A café. He'll find out and call us. We have to go there.

MUIR We will.

ZARA See what they know. What they remembered.

ZARA goes over to Muir. They hug.

MUIR I'm sorry. Dunno what got into me.

ZARA Yeah. It's okay.

MUIR I just – lost it.

ZARA Let's not talk about it. Not now. Rubbia is all right.

MUIR Yeah.

ZARA If only we knew where she was. If only she'd come back.

MUIR But at least we know she's all right. And she's a survivor. She's a tiny wee thing but a survivor.

ZARA Is she? Or is it only that she's survived this far? I'm gonna phone Modi. Tell him. Okay?

MUIR Yeah. sure. And, Zara, I don't want you to feel forced to have to lie about who you see. It's your business.

ZARA I haven't lied.

MUIR No?

ZARA No.

MUIR Okay. Doesn't matter.

ZARA I haven't.

MUIR It's my fault, I've been ...

ZARA It doesn't matter now.

She kisses him and phones Modi.

ZARA It's switched off. Modi, hi, hope you're ok. Look, Muir's really sorry and we've got good news about Rubbia. She's been seen. Day before yesterday. She's been seen, MODI On Edgware Road. She's okay. We're going to find her. Okay, bye then. *(To Muir.)* We can't wait to hear from QASEEM Let's go now. Go in all the cafes and see if anyone can tell us anything.

MUIR ZARA

ZARA We have to. We've got a – a lead.

MUIR We will. We'll go now. But don't get your hopes up too much.

ZARA I know.

MUIR It was two days ago.

ZARA I know. Let's go.

MUIR Nowhere will be open yet.

ZARA So we'll be there when they do.

Scene 2

Dahlia's living room. Evening.

DAHLIA and QASEEM. DAHLIA is peeling and slicing apple.

QASEEM Was that wise?

DAHLIA No, but it felt bloody good. Enough, I suddenly thought 'enough'. I'm not being talked down to by some jumped-up bigot. Telling me I'm not a proper Muslim 'cause I don't cover my head. I have more spirituality in the lobe of my left ear than he has in his entire body. My God, all he needs is a hook instead of a hand, and he'd be a doppelganger.

QASEEM Yeah, and a parrot.

DAHLIA A parrot? No, I mean for Abu Hamza.

QASEEM Oh, yes, see what you mean.

DAHLIA Who the hell does he think he is?

QASEEM The top imam of the largest mosque in the constituency you're after?

DAHLIA Yeah, well, if people are stupid enough to listen to him I don't want to represent them. I'm not colluding in my own oppression. My God, I've been colluding in my own oppression. Not any more. I've done with trying to appease him. It's attitudes like his that have messed up Rubbia's life. And how about my art? If people like him were running the show, I could forget it.

QASEEM I don't think they mind that abstract stuff much, do they?

DAHLIA It's actually semi-figurative. But that's not the point. That's only what I'm doing now. I might want to enter the purely figurative. I've been thinking for a while of returning to the human form.

QASEEM You might get away with it.

DAHLIA Yeah, well how about the human form complete with a huge dick?

QASEEM That might be tricky.

DAHLIA (*waving her fruit knife around*) So don't you get it? – that's what I'm saying. I live in a country where I've got artistic freedom – can go with it where I want – fuck – can go myself where I want - so why the hell am I sucking up to people who want to take that away? Well, no more I'm not. They can fuck off.

QASEEM Can you stop waving that thing at me? And shouting in my face?

DAHLIA *looks surprised.*

DAHLIA I'm upset.

QASEEM Yeah and I'm your whipping boy?

DAHLIA No, of course not.

A pause.

DAHLIA I'm sorry.

QASEEM Okay.

DAHLIA Whipping boy? Of course, you're not. Don't say that.

QASEEM Okay.

DAHLIA You're the only one who's stood by me. I'm sorry. You know what I'm like. I get ...

QASEEM I know, Dahlia.

He reaches out to her, touches her arm. This time she lets him.

Scene 3

The Canal. Evening.

MUIR is standing staring at a snowy bank.

He lies down on the bank, makes an angel in the snow.

Scene 4

Muir's living room / Muir's bedroom. Night.

QASEEM is drinking beer on Muir's couch.

Muir (*off-stage*). I can't believe she spoke to an imam like that. Is she nuts?

QASEEM She's having a hard time.

MUIR I know that. But still ...

QASEEM Yeah. Not wise. Now her supporters are down on her too. Thought Arlene was gonna lamp her when she came round. Well, I guess they've been busting their arses for her and now they think she's blown it. On top of the other thing, of course.

MUIR What other thing?

QASEEM You dunno? Few days ago, it somehow got out into the papers that Dahlia's been involved in illegally fostering a child, and drunken, underage orgies going on at her gaff. And that now the child is lost.

MUIR Jesus.

QASEEM Social services and the police have been round about the underage sex stuff. Dahlia's just had to keep denying it.

MUIR But how did it get out?

QASEEM Well, there's only one person who could have told them, in't there? Our young friend Modi.

MUIR But why would he? It'd be getting himself into trouble.

QASEEM Probably wan't thinking that way. Just burning to get even with Dahlia for the way she's cast him out. It's not exactly done much for her campaign.

MUIR She's gonna lose. Jesus. What if Hart wins that seat? I was that close to getting in with them enough to have something on him.

QASEEM Yeah, I know you were.

MUIR Fuck.

QASEEM You can keep doing it, can't you? You don't need Dahlia's permission. Even if it's not Dahlia winning the seat, there's that pompous Labour tit that'd have a bit more of a chance if there was dirt on Hart.

MUIR True enough.

QASEEM Something to think about. I can still provide the protection.

MUIR Ah, yer know I don't think that's necessary. It's really kind of you ...

QASEEM The keystone cops. C'mon, you know you need us. We don't want your pretty face getting re-arranged. What would your new missus think of that?

MUIR Pretty? It's a bloody long time since I've been pretty.

QASEEM Can't be bad coming home to her every night.

MUIR Or morning sometimes with the shifts. But, yeah – yeah, it's lovely. I'm a lucky bloke.

QASEEM You bloody well are. God, after a lifetime of them butch feminist women, it must be heaven to have someone like Zara.

MUIR What d'yer mean?

QASEEM That's what it's like, in't it, on the Left? Or's that only what it looks like from the outside? Yer know women wearing the boots. Demanding all sorts of shit. With menaces.

Muir (*smiling*). Well that's one perspective on the women's movement.

QASEEM So not yours then?

MUIR I think if men and women don't have an equal relationship it impoverishes both of them.

QASEEM Yeah? Well, then shouldn't you be there with Hart? They're standing up for women's rights, yeah? Or am I getting it all wrong?

MUIR No, they're using these issues to divide working people, to make them fight amongst themselves for the few resources allowed them, rather than see who the real enemy is, who's really got them crushed under their boot.

QASEEM Fair enough. Still, don't you like the way she's so soft and – like – submissive.

MUIR How she dresses ... is ... that's up to her.

QASEEM Though that submissive thing – with Muslim girls – it's funny really
'cause underneath, they're not actually like that. No way.

MUIR Yeah and that's great. Got real strength.

QASEEM The bottom line for them is, as long as no-one finds out, then – sweet –
who cares?

MUIR What?

QASEEM Not Zara – I don't mean her. But, you know this whole shame thing. It's
shame about getting caught, in it? They're happy to let heaven see their –
you know – pranks. Long as it's not their husbands. Tell you what, those
countries where they have their women in burqas – they've scored a real
home goal there. Those women can get up to all sorts under cover.

MUIR What are you saying, Qaseem?

QASEEM Me? Nothing. Just chatting. Sorry.

MUIR Zara is one of the most honest people I know.

QASEEM God, yeah, I didn't mean Zara.

MUIR I'm glad to hear it.

QASEEM I think you make a great pair and I bet that's what she loves about you
that you don't want her as a little meek shadow, you don't want to – to
dominate her.

MUIR says nothing.

QASEEM Moving on. Yeah, that Hart and his bunch of Merry Men. I have to say I
can see where they're coming from in a way.

MUIR What?

QASEEM Must get a bit galling when your kids go to a school and it's a sea of
brown faces. I'd be marked if it was my country, I reckon.

MUIR It is your country. You've probably been here for more years than I have.
That's the whole point – none of us have a unique claim on this land.

QASEEM I was born here. Ain't my country, though.

MUIR So where is?

QASEEM Nowhere. Think I'm me own country. See, when all's said and done, I'm
only out for myself. You know that, Muir, don't you? No loyalties.

MUIR You don't mean that.

QASEEM Don't I?

MUIR I'm seriously thinking I might go to the next meeting. There's someone there, as well, yer know? A young lad. A basically decent, working-class lad who's been persuaded that this is the only way he can go. I've not got his number and I'd like to get it so that once all this bi-election business is over, I can try and talk to him. I mean talk to him as who I really am. The things you've been saying – I can see how easily people can be ...

QASEEM Get him back from the Dark Side?

MUIR Something like that.

QASEEM Think you've got much hope?

MUIR I can influence people. I've – I've influenced people. In Ecuador, they listened to me.

QASEEM I bet they did, bruv. I can see it. Look, I'm gonna head off. I'm keeping you up.

MUIR Yer sure? Don't want another?

QASEEM No.

MUIR See you then.

QASEEM Yeah. Look, before I go, though, I have to tell you Dahlia is convinced it's – well, it's you not Modi who tipped off the press about the goings-on in her house.

MUIR Me?

QASEEM For – you know when you called to try and patch things up? – and she called you a dirty pervert again.

MUIR Well, it wasn't like I didn't expect a certain level of antagonism.

QASEEM And said she's like to cut off your balls with a blunt knife.

MUIR Yeah, but... How could she think I'd do a thing like go to the papers? Is that what she thinks of me?

QASEEM She's upset.

MUIR Yeah. That fucking Modi.

QASEEM Yeah. Well. I'm sorry, yeah, it's a mess. But we'll get through it. Right? It'll all be happy families again soon.

MUIR Yer sure about that?

QASEEM Just give Dahlia a bit more time.

MUIR Zara misses her.

QASEEM Yeah.

Muir seems overtaken by emotion.

QASEEM You all right?

MUIR Yeah?

QASEEM Muir?

Muir recovers himself but speaks shakily.

MUIR I had a rough time of it, yer know, in Ecuador – before I left? And trying to make my way back here has been ... Sometimes – I'm ... I feel lost, if I'm honest.

QASEEM Yeah, well, it must be ...

MUIR I thank God I've got Zara to keep me sane. Jesus. Know what, Qaseem? I don't think I could survive without her. I don't. It's crazy but I don't think I could. Not now I have her. I dunna know how she's saved me. But she has.

QASEEM You're lucky, bruv. Look, I'm heading off. Let you cosy up with your lovely woman who ain't going nowhere. Later, yeah?

MUIR Yer know what, Qaseem, yer make yourself out like yer only there for yourself.

Qaseem What?

MUIR That 'I think I'm my own country' stuff. But yer not – you been a good friend to Dahlia and to me.

QASEEM Come on.

MUIR It's true.

QASEEM You'll have me choked up. I'm off.

QASEEM goes towards the door. MUIR follows him.

QASEEM S'all right. I'll see myself out.

QASEEM leaves.

Muir *(to himself)*. More than either of us deserve.

QASEEM comes back into the room.

QASEEM You shouldn't have said that to me.

MUIR Sorry?

QASEEM Cause you making me feel bad.

MUIR Why?

QASEEM Cause ...

MUIR Why?

QASEEM I don't want anything to go wrong for you.

MUIR I know that.

Pause.

MUIR Qaseem?

QASEEM I told you before that everything was innocent between Zara and Modi.

MODI Yeah?

QASEEM But that's ...

MODI What?

QASEEM I mean on Zara's side – definitely, I'm sure it is. But Modi – you gotta watch him. I wouldn't be a good friend if I didn't - there's something I've not told you. Shit. You gotta watch your back. He's a handsome, slippery bastard. We both know that.

MUIR What yer trying to say?

QASEEM Look ... maybe I'm ...

MUIR Tell me.

QASEEM Not many nights before you and Zara first ...

MUIR Yeah?

QASEEM Both him and me were at Dahlia's. It was the time of that last blizzard. Dahlia said we should stay over, not venture out in it. Modi slept on the couch and me on the rug. But I'm woken by Modi, muttering and raving - sleep talking – saying, saying ...

MUIR Saying what?

QASEEM 'I have to have you again, Zara. Have to. You're torturing me'.

MUIR What?

QASEEM I'm sure this was only fantasy – I'm sure she came to you untouched by him. But that's what he was muttering and murmuring. On and on. How he craved her. At last I reached out to shake him, to shut him up, but he grasped my hand, rolled off from the sofa and knelt over me.

MUIR Stop.

QASEEM Kisses me hard.

MUIR Stop.

QASEEM Lays his leg over my thigh.

MUIR Stop it! No!

In the bedroom, ZARA stirs, sits up, looks scared, dazed. She falls back to sleep.

QASEEM Calm down. Fuck, it was only a dream of his. His imagining only. I'm sure. All I'm saying is be careful. I'll go. I've said too much.

QASEEM goes towards the door.

QASEEM Can't do right.

QASEEM leaves.

MUIR leaves in the direction of his bedroom.

MUIR enters his bedroom. He looks down at Zara. Touches her. She stirs, again half-wakes.

ZARA Muir. You coming to bed?

MUIR says nothing.

ZARA You okay?

MUIR Yeah.

ZARA Come to bed.

MUIR Yeah.

She clasps him tight, falls back asleep.

Scene 5

The canal / Qaseem's living room. Evening.

DAHLIA is on the towpath. She takes out her mobile, Makes a call.

Qaseem's mobile rings in his living room. QASEEM comes in, locates the ringing to the couch but can't find his phone. He's throwing off the cushions, hunting.

QASEEM Shit shit shit.

He realises it's under the couch. Retrieves it on his knees.

QASEEM Dahlia.

DAHLIA I've got some bad news.

QASEEM Yeah? What's happened?

Pause.

QASEEM What's wrong?

DAHLIA They've found Rubbia.

QASEEM They found her? But ...

DAHLIA She's dead.

QASEEM How?

DAHLIA She was found by a park warden early this morning.

QASEEM Oh, God.

DAHLIA He found her curled up by the railings of the Albert Memorial. They think – they're pretty sure, she froze to death. It was so cold last night. They'll be a post-mortem, obviously.

QASEEM is silent.

DAHLIA Qaseem?

QASEEM Poor Rubbia.

DAHLIA Yeah.

QASEEM Are they sure it's her?

DAHLIA starts to cry.

QASEEM Maybe it's not her.

DAHLIA I went to identify her. They asked her parents to first but they refused.

QASEEM says nothing.

DAHLIA I thought you should know. Maybe you can tell Zara too. She needs to know too, I think.

QASEEM Sure. Course.

Dahlia (*struggling to speak*). I have to go. Um, yeah.

DAHLIA ends the call. She stands crying by the canal.

QASEEM stays on his knees for a long time.

He gets up.

Qaseem (*yelling*) Where the fuck's my dinner got to?

No reply.

QASEEM Safi!

Scene 6

Muir's bedroom. Night.

MUIR and ZARA are in bed. MUIR is looking at a piece of crystallite on a leather thong.

ZARA Do you like it?

Muir (*kissing her*) I love it. Put it on for me?

ZARA puts it round his neck.

ZARA It's crystallite. The woman at the stall said it's special not because it's rare but because it's everywhere. It's what our planet's made out of. And all the other planets. I think. She didn't seem that sure about the other planets. (Pause.) I guess she was just trying to sell it.

MUIR No, she's right – about preciousness being ... yeah.

ZARA Yeah? Muir, you won't leave me? Ever?

MUIR How could I?

ZARA I couldn't bear to lose you too.

MUIR But yer'll leave me one day.

ZARA No, I won't. No, how could you think that?

MUIR Yer will.

ZARA No, Muir, don't say that. I won't. How could I?

MUIR says nothing.

ZARA I won't.

MUIR Okay. You won't.

ZARA I couldn't ever leave you.

MUIR Okay.

They kiss.

MUIR You've been so bloody brave and strong about Rubbia.

ZARA No, I haven't.

MUIR You have. (*About the necklace*) This isn't ever coming off.

ZARA No, I've never been that. Rubbia was. I've been remembering how she saved me from those horrible white girls.

MUIR Zara.

ZARA Like she had no fear. She was suddenly there shoving them off me and there was something in her eyes so fired they all backed off – sneering but they backed off. She put her arms round me and said it was going to be okay – she's gonna take me home. I remember her clothes smelt. Smelt of dirt and damp, and her eyes looked huge, unreal. I was almost afraid of her too.

MUIR Afraid of Rubbia?

ZARA Yes. For a moment. When we got home, she turned at the doorway and walked away. Mum – she was well shocked to see the state I was in. I told

her what had happened and she ran out into the street, ran and caught up with Rubbia and brought her back.

MUIR holds her.

ZARA She was my sister. I always wanted a sister. She saw things no-one else did.

And now she's dead.

MUIR I'm so sorry.

ZARA She once said she'd always be with me. Like a real sister. But now she's gone and she's never coming back. Is she?

MUIR kisses her.

ZARA Is she? I want her to come back.

MUIR holds her.

ZARA We can never leave each other. Please. Never.

Scene 7

The canal. Night.

DAHLIA is walking home. She senses she's been followed, quickens her pace.

The silhouette of a man approaching her. It's MUIR.

DAHLIA You gave me a fright. What the hell are you doing?

MUIR I want us to talk.

DAHLIA Yeah? Well, I don't want to talk to you.

MUIR Rubbia's dead, for God's sake. Zara is extremely upset. She needs you.

Pause.

DAHLIA Then she can phone me.

MUIR She tried. You wouldn't speak to her. Then the last time you were very insulting to her.

DAHLIA That was before – before Rubbia. I won't be next time. You can tell her.

MUIR No?

DAHLIA No.

MUIR Because she can't face phoning you now. Having that again.

DAHLIA If she needs me. she needs me. I'm not letting some scum like you mean I turn my back on my own daughter.

MUIR Thanks, Dahlia.

DAHLIA Can I go now?

MUIR I've every right to have a relationship with Zara. I think your anger is ... unjust. What have I ever done? You left me, if you remember. All those years ago. Then when we met this time I never in any way suggested I wanted to have a relationship with you again. Did I? You needed help nailing the Nazis. I agreed to help. I did help. What wrong have I done to have to constantly take this vitriol from you? I am not scum. Yes, I love your daughter. I don't consider I have to make any more apologies for that.

DAHLIA Can you say you felt nothing for me? This time.

A pause.

MUIR No, I couldn't say that.

DAHLIA My therapist saw straight through it. You lost me and you're trying to regain what you lost – that time when we were so in love, young, alive – through having Zara.

MUIR Your arrogance never ceases to amaze me, yer know? And I really think your therapist is unwise to be colluding in it. It was almost twenty years ago. I've had several far more significant relationships since you / and what

DAHLIA How do you measure significance?

MUIR What we had – for me – it remains in the past. I love Zara for who she is. Not because she has a resemblance to you at that age. I think you need to move on too.

DAHLIA Me arrogant? Listen to yourself. Giving me advice. Oh, I've moved on all right. I never wanted you. Ever. Not even back then. With your stupid posturing.

MUIR Good.

DAHLIA And it can only be someone as deeply deluded as you who could possibly mistake Zara's little infatuation for real love. She doesn't love you. She's fascinated by you. Like – I happily admit – I was. But that's all it is. Look at you. You'll be fifty in four years' time. You're all washed up. They don't want you back there and what are you here? A security guard. Protecting Canary Wharf of all places. Talk about working for the Man. Wearing your silly, officious uniform, living in a dump because it's all

you can afford. How long do you seriously think Zara is going to be fascinated by that for?

MUIR says nothing.

DAHLIA How long? She's probably fed up of you already. Planning her next conquest. She's a dark one – my daughter – as I discovered.

MUIR I am so tired of ...

DAHLIA What?

MUIR We're two human beings. Zara and I are two human beings who love each other. Nothing else. All that divides – could divide – us, it doesn't matter. Because we won't let it. It doesn't touch us.

DAHLIA says nothing.

MUIR I'll ask Zara to call you.

MUIR walks away.

DAHLIA begins to cry, walks towards her house.

Scene 8

Dahlia's living room. Morning.

There's a packed suitcase in the room. QASEEM comes in.

QASEEM Dahlia? Hello?

DAHLIA *(off-stage)*. Yeah, I'm ready.

DAHLIA comes into the living room, carrying her laptop and an overnight bag. She puts the laptop in the bag.

QASEEM No regrets?

DAHLIA Regrets? Less than twelve hours from now I'll be with the desert lilies and the lizards in the shade of a Joshua tree. Alone. My skin'll feel sun again. I'm going to get sunburned for the hell of it.

QASEEM Not all alone. Didn't you say this shack thing came with a dog? A dog can be good company. The best.

DAHLIA Yeah, I'm not that keen on the usual four-legged kind. But they sent me a photo of her. Said she's half wild but likes to drop by for dinner, and is very fond of grilled chicken. She's a little brown thing with only three legs and somehow I felt a surge of bonhomie towards her. I think we're going to have a great week together.

DAHLIA stops packing her laptop.

DAHLIA I don't need to take this.

She pulls it out again.

QASEEM Are you ready?

QASEEM starts to wheel the suitcase out of the door.

DAHLIA I had no choice. I would have lost. Split the vote. Helped get Hart in. And that would have been – hideous. Best to bow out now. I've asked my supporters to vote for Marcus Bridge.

QASEEM Thought you couldn't stand the guy.

DAHLIA He was the only one who didn't bring Rubbia into it. When they tried to draw him on it, I saw how sickened he was at the idea of making political capital out of the death of a child.

DAHLIA suddenly looks weary.

DAHLIA So – it's over.

QASEEM It's a disgrace that you've had to ... you'd have been a fantastic MP.

DAHLIA Thank you.

QASEEM Oh, I gave Murat back his megaphone.

DAHLIA Good. My God, he's so precious about that thing.

QASEEM Apparently it's got sentimental attachment.

DAHLIA How can you be sentimentally attached to ... Whatever. Let's go.

QASEEM I know what it's like. For you. When you have a dream and it's ... and you can't have it.

Dahlia (not listening, looking at her laptop). Mmm? Maybe I will take my laptop.

QASEEM I've been trying to get this little business idea off the ground for ages.

But I don't have the few thou I need for it. It's called – great name – wait for it: Mangamatic.

DAHLIA (still not listening) Sounds good. No. I'll leave it.

QASEEM Just a few thou.

DAHLIA Yeah – it's frustrating. Qaseem, when I get back from Los Angeles, I think I have to patch things up with Zara.

We see Qaseem's rage at his own dream being brushed aside.

QASEEM Right.

DAHLIA Phone her as it looks like she's not going to phone me again. I need this space first but then I think I'm going to call her. I can't lose her. I miss her. I miss her. I'm not letting her relationship with that man tear us apart. She's my daughter for God's sake.

QASEEM Yeah? Good stuff.

DAHLIA walks out. QASEEM follows her with the suitcase.

Scene 9

Muir's living room / Muir's bedroom. Evening.

QASEEM and MUIR come in to the living room. MUIR's been beaten up.

MUIR Qas, I'm all right.

QASEEM You're not all right.

MUIR Zara!

QASEEM You shoulda let me take you to A & E. She not in?

MUIR She went to her friend's. Thought she'd be back by now.

QASEEM Get you checked over.

MUIR A brandy will do me. Maybe she's asleep.

MUIR goes out, goes into the bedroom, sees the empty bed. He goes back into the living room.

QASEEM fetches the brandy. MUIR sits down painfully on the couch.

QASEEM I was wondering – did you ask her about that thing? You know with Modi? Whether there'd ever been anything between them? Before, you know?

MUIR Yeah. Yeah.

QASEEM And?

MUIR She said no. And I believe her.

QASEEM Great. Yeah.

MUIR gets out his phone, calls, puts it away again.

QASEEM Switched off?

MUIR Probably no signal. She'll be on the tube. She'll be back soon.

QASEEM I'm sure you're right. About Modi. Just his deluded wet dreams. Yeah.

Muir (*about his beaten-up face*). You really think he was behind this?

QASEEM Who else could it be? And let's face it we know he's capable of it. After what he did to Dahlia – going to the papers and shit. No, it was him who did this to you. Had this done to you.

MUIR I suppose they could have found out somehow. I dunno. No, you're right. They were so sure. So good old Modi strikes again.

QASEEM And they even knew you had a panic button on you.

MUIR Aye.

QASEEM How could they have known that unless Modi told them? Fuck, I'll never be able to forgive myself for not being there for you.

MUIR It's not your fault. How could yer have known?

QASEEM No, but ...

MUIR You know that lad I mentioned before? The young, impressionable one.

QASEEM Anekin.

MUIR Anekin?

QASEEM The one you wanna rescue from the Dark Side.

MUIR Right. Good one. *(Pause)* Well, he gave me the best kicking of all of them. Yer not drinking?

QASEEM I'll have a quick glass.

MUIR Have you heard from Dahlia?

QASEEM Yeah, I have actually. She called to say she's not coming back this weekend after all. Gonna stay on for another week.

MUIR So she'll miss the bi-election? Makes sense. It's a real shame her having to / step down.

QASEEM Shit.

MUIR What?

QASEEM There's something I need to say.

MUIR What?

QASEEM I've been so afraid to tell you, but you saying how you know Zara's telling the truth, that's she's had nothing to do with Modi – nothing like that – means I feel easier about saying this.

MUIR Saying what?

QASEEM I went round to see Modi. After I dropped Dahlia off at the airport. I was raging, watching Dahlia walking away through check-in, looking so defeated. That he could have ruined her chances like that. Perhaps let the

Nazis get in. That he made everything go as bad as it could go between you and Zara and her. The spite of it. After what he's done to Rubbia. So I thought I'd pay him a visit.

QASEEM stops.

MUIR So you paid him a visit?

QASEEM Yeah, I went to that house he lives in. He's got the front room downstairs.

MUIR Yeah?

QASEEM It was the middle of the day but the curtains were drawn. But not properly. There was a thin gap and through that gap I glimpsed a girl. I couldn't see enough to say who it was but it could have been – I had this terrible fucking fear it could be Zara.

MUIR What?

QASEEM Hear me out.

MUIR What yer trying to say?

QASEEM It wasn't – I mean only looked like her.

MUIR Right. So ...

QASEEM Hear me out. I started ringing the doorbell, hammering on the door.

Modi appears in only his trousers. He don't look happy once he sees who it is and tried to shut the door in my face but I got past him, saying I'd seen Zara in his room. He was denying it, trying to pull me back down the hallway. Then he said really loud like, like a warning to whoever was in the room: 'Come on, Qaseem, no one's in there. I was sleeping.'

MUIR So why the fuck are you telling me this?

QASEEM Hear me out, yeah? I got him off me and barged into the room. It was empty. And Modi standing behind me with this relieved grin on his face. And he said, 'Looks like yer got your knickers in a twist over nothing, so now piss off.' And there's a giggle. Someone giggling in the wardrobe. And he said, 'All right, you got me. I've got a girl in here. It's not a crime.' I said, 'Is it Zara?' He said 'Course not.' 'And I said, 'So why she's hiding in the wardrobe?' And he said, 'Well, hell, maybe she doesn't want anyone to see who she is.' Which had a certain logic. Seeing as what she was up to. Anyways, I had no chance to argue more as he gave me a hard shove out of his room.

MUIR It wasn't her.

QASEEM No. It couldn't have been. As you say, she wouldn't do that to you. And there's a way for sure we can know it can't be her. But only you can put my mind at rest.

MUIR What d'yer mean?

QASEEM As I was getting bundled out, I saw a bra on the carpet. With an – well – an unusual design, I'd say. Least, I've never seen one like it before in my pretty fucking extensive experience. See, you can tell me Zara hasn't got one like that. Then we'll know it couldn't have been her. Muir?

MUIR Yeah?

QASEEM Then we'll know for sure, yeah?

MUIR It wasn't her. What the fuck are you talking about?

He grabs hold of QASEEM.

QASEEM Okay, okay. Just wanted to put your mind at rest.

MUIR It wasn't her.

QASEEM I know. It couldn't be. Forget it. It was some other girl. Good news, really, cause it looks / like Modi's

MUIR What was it like?

QASEEM Forget it. We know it's not her.

MUIR What was it like?

QASEEM So it looks like Modi's moved on.

MUIR Tell me.

QASEEM As you / said

MUIR Tell me for Christ sakes.

Pause.

QASEEM It was a white bra, spotted with strawberries. So it's not hers, right?

MUIR No!

MUIR hurls himself at Qaseem.

MUIR Yer lying!

MUIR starts attacking Qaseem.

QASEEM Why would I lie?

MUIR Yer lying.

QASEEM You know I'm not.

QASEEM escapes from his grasp.

QASEEM You know I'm not. Because why would I? Because how could I possibly know what underwear your woman wears?

MUIR throws his glass. It shatters on the wall.

QASEEM But more than all that you know I'm not lying because – you know it's true. You've always known it's true. Inside. You've seen them together. How tight they are. I hoped so much for your sake it wasn't, but ...yeah.

MUIR says nothing.

QASEEM For her, this was just a rebelling thing, in it? Being with this white man. A white man well old enough to be her dad. This bit of rough, who come from nothing. Who's even got this exotic tang of – you know – violence and struggle in far-flung parts. Something to boast about to her friends, And best of all, stealing her from under the eyes of mummy dearest. It's like the headscarf thing, in it? Anything to piss off Dahlia. You can hardly blame her with a mother like that. How else can she compete? With Dahlia, the famous sculptor. Dahlia who takes over every place she steps foot in, every frigging conversation.

MUIR She loves me.

QASEEM She's using you. I'm sorry but that's the way it is, bruv. I can't bear to watch you making a fool of yourself any longer. I can't. She's with him.

MUIR No.

QASEEM She's already getting bored with this particular little rebellion, so now she's back with him, who's even a bit of a bad boy himself now. They're from the same world. That class of people who reckon everyone else is just there to service them, to be used and binned without a second thought. Who don't give jackshit 'bout you. They use people like they're nothing. Always have. Always will. And I hate to – I can't – stand by and see this happen to you. You don't deserve it.

MUIR breaks down.

ZARA walks in.

ZARA What's wrong? What's happened to you? Who did this to you?

MUIR says nothing.

ZARA Qaseem?

QASEEM I'm heading off.

QASEEM leaves.

ZARA Who did this to you?

She starts to kiss MUIR's swollen, bloodied face. He pushes her off.

ZARA Muir?

MUIR Leave me alone.

ZARA I don't understand.

MUIR Don't you?

ZARA No. Who did this to you?

MUIR Your boyfriend.

ZARA My boyfriend?

MUIR Not personally. Runt like him.

ZARA I don't know what you mean.

MUIR Modi set the fascists on me.

ZARA No, he wouldn't do that.

MUIR Well you would defend him, wouldn't you? Seeing as you're fucking him.

ZARA What? No. How can you think that? Why? No, that's – why would I? I'm with you. Someone's been lying to you. Is that – that's not what Qaseem told you? He wouldn't. Why would he tell you that? He looked so shifty. Mean.

MUIR I've got proof.

ZARA What proof? Is this Qaseem? Then he's lying. I would never do that. Never.

MUIR walks out. ZARA follows him.

MUIR walks into the bedroom, opens the wardrobe and starts pulling out Zara's things. He finds the bra spotted with strawberries, crumples it in his hands. Then he pulls out her suitcase and starts stuffing clothes into it. ZARA comes in. She comes up behind Muir and puts her arms around his back. He pushes her off.

ZARA What are you doing?

MUIR Packing for you.

ZARA What have I done?

MUIR Yer know what you've done.

ZARA I've done nothing. I've never even seen Modi since that time he came round.

MUIR You're lying.

ZARA It's true. It's true. Please believe me. Don't do this. Someone's lying to you. Don't make me leave. *(With a sudden revelation)* Is it Qaseem?

MUIR stops packing.

MUIR You're saying yer've had no contact with him whatsoever since that day?

ZARA Nothing. Well – except – I did phone him. After we heard that Rubbia died.

MUIR You never mentioned you had.

ZARA There was nothing to mention. His phone was switched off again.

MUIR So – you didn't leave a message.

ZARA I left a short message. Yes.

MUIR Why did you call him?

ZARA I felt sorry for him.

MUIR Yer felt sorry for him?

ZARA I knew how he must be feeling.

MUIR Oh, yer knew how he must be feeling.

ZARA Stop this. I'm not getting interrogated. I've done nothing wrong. I don't have to drop my friends for you. He's suffered enough.

MUIR Has he? So what did you say - on yer message?

ZARA I said if he wanted to talk about it – about Rubbia – to call. But he never did.

MUIR Yer expect me to believe that? He came round here begging to talk to yer. Now yer saying he didn't even bother to return yer call?

ZARA I don't know why. But he never did.

MUIR At uni – yer don't see him at uni?

No. He's dropped out or something.

MUIR This is all bollocks.

ZARA Fine. Believe what you want. I've done nothing.

MUIR looks at her.

MUIR Are you telling the truth?

ZARA Yes. Yes. Why do you think these things?

MUIR It's not true?

ZARA No.

MUIR takes a step towards her. He sees the bra. With a howl, MUIR hurls himself at Zara, shaking her. She struggles to get from under him.

ZARA No! You're hurting me!

MUIR breaks down, starts to cry.

ZARA That – why did you ...?

MUIR Why have you done this to me?

ZARA What have I done?

MUIR Get out.

ZARA stands there.

MUIR Get out!

She leaves, not taking the suitcase.

Scene 10

Modi's room. Afternoon.

MODI walks into the room, followed by ZARA in her coat. MODI has a beard.

ZARA You never called me back.

MODI No.

ZARA So how are you?

MODI I'm good. Yeah. I'd offer you a cup of tea but I'm heading out in a minute.

Got to be somewhere.

ZARA Oh. Well, can I sit down?

She goes to sit on the bed.

MODI I'm heading out.

She doesn't sit.

ZARA I never see you round uni any more.

MODI I'm taking a break from studies.

ZARA Yeah? What – you might ...?

MODI Don't know yet.

Pause.

ZARA Ethan Hart won.

MODI Yeah.

ZARA They're animals. They beat up Muir.

MODI Well, that's not cricket.

ZARA Modi, why are you being like this?

MODI says nothing.

ZARA Muir's finished with me. He thinks I'm having something with you.

MODI Right. Where are you staying then?

ZARA Mia's. I don't know how he could think that. Says he's got proof and everything. How can he have proof for something that hasn't happened? I reckon it might be Qaseem, making him believe this. He was there when I came in and he looked strange. So meanlike. I don't why he'd do that, though. Why would he try and cause more trouble than there already is? My family's always been good to him.

MODI Your family's always treated him like a lackey.

ZARA Don't be horrible.

MODI Guess the worm's turned. The worm's finally decided – enough. Enough of being ordered about. Enough of being patronised. Enough of sometimes being allowed up at the table only to be slapped down again. I was thinking only this morning – that night a month or so ago. The night of the blizzard when him and me both had to stay over at yours. I slept on the couch and he slept on the floor. It never occurred to me that this man who's my elder should actually be the one on the couch. (*Pause.*) And now he's in charge, playing us all. That must be giving him the most massive hard-on. Sorry. Inappropriate.

ZARA What do you mean?

Pause.

MODI Like ...

ZARA What?

MODI Like he got me pissed – persuaded me to sleep with Rubbia. Step 1.

ZARA He did that? Why didn't you tell me?

MODI Because ultimately it's pathetic for me to say it. Yeah, he did that but – as he so eloquently put it himself – I'm not a fucking six year old. He's done us all over one way and another. And now it's just him and your mum, in't it?

ZARA We have to stop him.

MODI Look, sorry, I don't mean any disrespect here but your family is nothing to do with me now. I don't know why you've come here but I can't help you.

ZARA Why are you being so cold?

MODI Because I'm not comfortable with you being here. Because – no – I don't want you sitting on my bed. Because this is how it was all able to happen, wasn't it? Qaseem, yes. Me, oh, yes. But ultimately what allowed me to

end up in bed with Rubbia is that – that we could. I see that now. That it's not right for young girls to be wandering about at night on their own, for people of the opposite sex to be together alone like that – even without liquor involved. But add getting lashed into the equation and it's ... It's a disgusting world that allows it, that teaches us no respect for each other.

ZARA You sound like ...What's happened to you, Modi?

MODI No dignity. And the results are all around us in this dirty country yeah?

Yeah? In the filth all around us. Well, I reject that now. That life. I don't want it.

ZARA How about us? Or me and Zak. If it was like that – we couldn't have our friendships.

MODI Genuinely innocent friendships between men and women are rarely possible; and certainly wasn't between us. Least not on my part. I adored you. And you know that. I spent night after night fantasising about you. I suspect Zak does too. So can we finally give up on this stupid, naive pretence about our friendship that never fooled anyone except perhaps you? Not even you. You like having a little devoted fan club, don't you?

ZARA No. That's not ...

MODI You're with Muir now. You're his now. Go and make it up with him.

ZARA I'm not his. I'm not anyone's.

MODI doesn't seem to be listening anymore. He's staring at the wall.

ZARA This isn't you.

MODI I want peace.

ZARA Something's happened to you. Why are you talking like this?

MODI doesn't reply.

ZARA I'll go then.

She reaches the door, hesitates.

ZARA Modi?

MODI I see her – RUBBIA. I wake and she's there. Her eyes as grey and hollow as the sockets in a skull but she's made of flesh. Her hair thick with ice. And she's shivering.

ZARA What do you mean?

MODI And I know, if I look at her, look at her fully – properly – her eyes will
hurl my soul to hell. (*Muttering mechanically*) And fiends will snatch at it.

ZARA Modi.

He's not listening.

MODI I want peace.

She goes towards him, reaches out to him. MODI flinches away.

ZARA leaves.

Scene 11

Muir's living room / Muir's bedroom / the canal. Night.

MUIR comes into the living room, followed by ZARA in her coat. He's wearing his security guard uniform.

ZARA You're not wearing the necklace anymore.

MUIR No. (*Pause.*) This is a bit late for social calls.

ZARA I had to come.

MUIR What, to pick up your stuff, finally? You're just in time. I was about to
trash them.

ZARA Can I get it?

MUIR Be my guest.

ZARA leaves the room, goes into the bedroom. She gets her suitcase out of the wardrobe. It's stuffed with her clothes. She shoves in the rest of them. MUIR comes in, watches her. ZARA finds the leopard skin and starts to cry.

MUIR Will you stop sobbing into that dead cat and leave?

She pushes it into her suitcase, zips it up.

ZARA I don't deserve this. Not from you. I've let ... people down because...

Rubbia – that night – she was so sad and I left her alone at home because
all I could think of was being with you.

MUIR Leave.

ZARA I've done nothing to you.

MUIR No?

ZARA No. Believe me.

MUIR I wish I could. I wish I could still be the same gullible fool who did.

ZARA You weren't a fool.

MUIR Oh, yes, I was.

ZARA Do you still love me?

MUIR laughs.

MUIR No.

ZARA Did you ever love me?

Pause.

MUIR No.

ZARA That's not true.

MUIR Well, you're the expert on truth.

ZARA I was out in Hoxton this evening.

MUIR Sorry?

ZARA Hoxton.

MUIR Am I supposed to care where you go?

ZARA And this man came up to me, started yelling at me, his spit going in my face. He called my headscarf a paki rag. Tore it off and threw it on the ground. And there were people seeing it happen but they looked away. No-one did anything. When it was those girls, the street was deserted. Until Rubbia came and helped me. But this time there were people and they did nothing.

MUIR Why are you telling me this?

ZARA There's this atmosphere growing now. Turning into something. Something evil. We can feel it. Like my friends too. It's since the bi-election. I'm not going to stop wearing it. I'm not being intimidated into ... But I'm scared.

MUIR Why the fuck are you telling me this?

ZARA I love you. I never did anything. It's Qaseem lying. I never did anything. I never did. I need you to make me feel safe again. Please. I want to fall asleep next to you again. Safe.

MUIR Your – difficulties are nothing to do with me now.

ZARA's face crumples.

ZARA That's – that's what Modi said.

She bites her lip, realising her mistake.

MUIR Modi?

ZARA looks scared.

MUIR I'm going into the living room. I want yer packed and gone.

MUIR leaves.

He comes into the living room, struggles to get control of his emotions.

ZARA leans against the wardrobe, slides to the floor.

MUIR suddenly leaves the living room.

He comes back into the bedroom. ZARA gets to her feet.

He gives a cry of rage and pain and hurls himself at her. He flings her against a wall. She struggles. For a moment, MUIR relaxes his grip, bows his head. ZARA thrusts him away and runs for the door. He grabs her by her headscarf-covered hair just as she's almost out and throws her onto the bed. He jumps on top of her, rips open her coat, her top, his mouth on her breasts and his hands round her neck.

ZARA I'll go. I'll go. Please.

He starts to strangle her.

Zara (*choking and tearing at his uniform*). No, no. Please. I'll keep away from
you. Let me go.

He tightens his grip.

ZARA You'll never see me again. I promise.

MUIR Tell me yer with Modi and I'll let you go.

ZARA I'm not.

MUIR Tell me. Yer owe me that. I can't be lied to.

ZARA I'm not with him.

MUIR Don't lie. I can't bear it. I need to hear it. From your own lips. Then I'll let
you leave.

ZARA says nothing.

MUIR Say it.

ZARA I won't. It's not true.

MUIR slaps her face.

MUIR Say it.

He slaps her again.

MUIR Say it.

ZARA If I ...

He slaps her again.

MUIR Say it.

ZARA If I say it, you'll – you'll let me go?

MUIR says nothing.

ZARA If I do?

MUIR You admit it. Whore.

He strangles her brutally.

MUIR No-one's having you. No more.

Her struggles become weaker, and then stop. MUIR lies on her, not moving.

MUIR Zara?

She doesn't stir. He starts to shake her.

MUIR Zara Zara.

Still she doesn't move.

MUIR Oh, Jesus. Oh, Jesus. *(to Zara)*. You shouldn't have come back. Tormenting me.

He gets out his phone, calls Qaseem. QASEEM appears by the canal, his phone ringing.

MUIR I've killed her.

QASEEM You killed her. Killed Zara? This is a joke?

MUIR No.

QASEEM *(For a moment, Qaseem looks about to be sick)*. Killed her.

MUIR She was tormenting me. She didn't have to come back. Could have sent someone else to get her stuff. She's been laughing at me with Modi. They've been fucking and laughing at me.

QASEEM doesn't reply.

MUIR Haven't they?

QASEEM Fools.

MUIR She said it was you lying. But that's not true.

QASEEM says nothing.

MUIR Is it? That's not true. I've the proof. Got proof.

QASEEM says nothing.

MUIR Tell me yer not lying. Tell me.

Still nothing.

MUIR Tell me.

Still nothing.

MUIR Tell me.

Still nothing.

MUIR Tell me!

QASEEM ends the call, stays standing by the canal.

MUIR Jesus.

He throws the phone down. Turns and looks at Zara. Hugs her limp body.

MUIR Zara.

He backs away from her. Sits on the bed, facing away from her.

MUIR Jesus.

MUIR gives a howl, drops his head in his hands.

QASEEM walks away along the canal.

Ends.

Chapter 5 *Ponte Dell Tette* (playscript)

Ponte delle Tette

Or

Bridge of Tits

A Tragi-burlesque

by Catherine Rosario

Cast

Actor A Desdemona / Jessica (white male in his late teens, in white-face, and blonde, jewelled wig / dark, pearled wig)

Actor B Othello / Shylock / Brabantio (white older male, in blackface / red hat / grey beard)

Actor C Othello / Shylock / Brabantio (white older male with very different features to Actor B, in blackface / red hat / grey beard)

Actor D Gorilla (female in a gorilla costume, and wearing over the costume frilly underwear, a seductive dress, feather boa and stilettos.

None of the other characters are aware of the gorilla but the gorilla is aware of them.

Shylock sings throughout in a light-opera style, except for his last word. All the other characters only speak.

On the stage is a life size 2-D cut-out of a Venetian Bridge, the Ponte dell Tette or 'Bridge of Tits', with five cut-out bare-breasted sixteenth-century prostitutes lined up on the bridge, with holes cut out where their faces should be. The furthest women on the right and left also have two arm holes. There is a table in front of the furthest woman to the left on which is a bowl of water and a large sponge. This bridge was where prostitutes were required by the Venetian City Fathers humiliatingly to stand naked to the waist, waiting for customers.

There is the sound of monkeys chattering and howling. The noise reaches a crescendo. DESDEMONA's face (Actor A in a blonde, jewelled wig) appears in the furthest hole to the right.

DESDEMONA (*to audience*) My maid once told me, as we strolled over the Rialto Bridge, how in Scotland, when Anne of Denmark married King James, around the hoity-toity carriage – O, and as she was telling me, we saw a fine-dressed man spit upon a Jew, right there on the bridge. Yes. I told him not to – I told him, 'The quality of mercy is not strained; it drops all over the place and ...' well, I can't remember exactly what I told him, but he stopped doing it. And the Jew – he gave me a bow. (*She demonstrates. Solemnly remembers.*)

The sound of canned laughter. Throughout the play, this canned laughter jars with what is being performed, finding only cruelty and unhappiness funny. As DESDEMONA says the next lines, she has to fight to be heard over classic striptease music, as the GORILLA bounds on stage and starts to strip.

So my maid told me, as we walked on under the mad dog of the midday sun – and my head a little dizzy and my heart a little thumpy from me accosting a stranger like that - she told me in Scotland when Anne of Denmark married King James, around the carriage they had – (*Desdemona stops, takes a deep breath, looks excitedly at the audience*) four naked blackamoors dancing in the snow. Yes. Poor stiff, bare ... feet.

And when I stopped on the hot street in the greeny stink of the canal and cried to think of their frozen feet, my maid – she's dead and buried now my maid in a distant grave – she said, 'Now Miss Desdemona, you're getting beside yourself again.' It is a wild, terrible place – Scotland. Least that's what she told me. Mist most mornings. Not like our mists lying gentle over the canals like a soft mattress stuffed with pretty birds and

gondoliers. But ones that ice your throat and blindfold the sky. So now I see it in my dreams, beneath the white blind sky the untouched, stumbly snow. And lochs. Lochs is how they call their lakes. (*She lingers over the word:*) Loch. And in one, in the deepest and the blackest loch, there is a green-eyed monster who doth about its neck wear a tartan scarf.

She looks ecstatic. The half-undressed GORILLA sits down in the audience and starts grooming people for nits.

Four blackamoors. All naked and dancing. God forgive me for what I desire.

As DESDEMONA speaks, she puts her arms through the holes.

She places her hands together in prayer and rolls her eyes heavenward.

Canned laughter.

As her head disappears, OTHELLO's head (Actor B in blackface) appears in the furthest face hole to the left.

OTHELLO (*to audience*) So I escaped my slavery. Ran, ran, on screaming feet til I fainted in a grove of leafless trees. Grass tickling my nose, the crickets in a mechanical frenzy of want. Wafts of distant woodsmoke. It made me think of home. Of walking along the seashore where I never walked, in the red sunlight.

He stops, sighs.

Canned laughter.

OTHELLO Above me those miserable black branches clotted by abandoned black nests. So lonely I could die.

More canned laughter.

OTHELLO But instead of dying, at Mother Army's knee I learnt how to thrust others (*OTHELLO thrusts his hand with a huge gun out of one of the arm holes*) into the undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns. I became a mercenary. Rose through the ranks.

The GORILLA leaps up, the striptease music starts again, and she continues her to strip while OTHELLO is speaking.

Yeah – too right – a fragrant rose amongst the rank armpits. Soldiers are sweaty bastards, whereas me – ask anyone, 'Othello', they'll tell you, 'The guy can wash'. But they're good craic – soldiers. And any one of us would take a bullet for another. (*Taking away his hand holding the gun*)

Now I've kind of settled in Venice. I'm a General. General Othello. Get that! (*Puts on serious voice*). 'General Othello, if you'd step this way, please, there have been some worrying developments on the Western Front.' Doing the State some service. Representing their interests here and abroad. Kicking ass. But before here I've hobnobbed – Lord, well pretty much everywhere. You name it. The year is 1592. Or is it 1987? I've lost my moorings. Well, it is Venice. It can't be 1783 because no-one's wearing those towering white wigs tottering with feathers or entire bloody fruit bowls. (*Looking sickened.*) Rotted with beetles. (*He gives a shy smile.*) Here in this heaven-blown city afloat on slime, I've met my soul's joy.

He looks wistfully in the direction that SHYLOCK's face then appears (Actor C in a red hat), pushing his face through the central hole.

Well, not him.

He quickly lowers his head, while still in the face hole. SHYLOCK does not see him. The GORILLA has now flung off all her clothes and stilettos. She shimmy back stage, leaving them strewn around.

SHYLOCK (*to audience, singing*) You call us misbelievers, cut-throat dogs,
And spit upon our lovely Jewish togs.

Canned laughter.

SHYLOCK And now you want something from me?

From me-eee-o?

Now you want some moneeey from me?

(*Rolling his eyes like a pantomime villain*) Well, we'll see.

(*Then switches to an obsequious voice.*) 'A few thousand ducat?'

Fuck that.

As his face disappears, OTHELLO breathes a sigh of relief.

OTHELLO He didn't see me. If he sees me – Lord – then he'll be ...

He stops as he hears the sound of a vacuum cleaner. DESDEMONA's face appears again in the furthest right hole, sees OTHELLO, looks flustered, as does he. Her face momentarily disappears as she turns off the vacuum cleaner. She and OTHELLO gaze at each other adoringly. Her face appears in a closer hole. They look heady with excitement. Her face appears in the central hole. They look about to collapse with desire.

BRABANTIO's face (Actor C, in a grey beard) appears in the hole next to Othello. He doesn't notice DESDEMONA. Both she and OTHELLO leap out of their skins, look very guilty. DESDEMONA shifts back to the furthest hole.

BRABANTIO (to Othello) So, Othello, old chap.

OTHELLO Brabantio?

BRABANTIO These natives ... the ones whose heads do grow beneath their shoulder.

OTHELLO Oh, yes?

BRABANTIO And do each other eat?

The GORILLA sprints across the stage holding a vacuum cleaner, the flex trailing, and exits.

OTHELLO No, um, the ones who do each other eat are the cannibals. They haven't got heads that do grow beneath their shoulders.

BRABANTIO They haven't?

OTHELLO No.

BRABANTIO So what are they called? The one's / whose heads do

OTHELLO They don't have a name.

BRABANTIO No name? How can they have no ...?

OTHELLO Rather, they never told me what their name was. But they were very polite. Exquisite manners. Would never dream of eating you.

BRABANTIO How do they wear a hat?

OTHELLO A hat? They don't. No.

BRABANTIO What do they do when the sun torments them?

OTHELLO They carry parasols.

OTHELLO's eyes meet DESDEMONA's. BRABANTIO follows them and see his daughter. He scowls at her.

BRABANTIO I see, I see.

OTHELLO Lacy ones.

DESDEMONA turns the vacuum cleaner back on and her face disappears.

BRABANTIO looks a little suspiciously at OTHELLO.

BRABANTIO Then I suppose there's the ones whose heads grow out of their backsides needing specially designed underwear?

OTHELLO looks nonplussed. Then BRABANTIO laughs. OTHELLO joins in doubtfully. The sound of canned laughter. BRABANTIO has an unreadable expression.

BRABANTIO We seemed to have really hit it off. Don't we? You and I? See, I know I can trust you. Trust – loyalty: these are wonderful, rare things. As rare as a silent parrot. A childless Pope. A shipwrecked rhinoceros.

OTHELLO Yes.

BRABANTIO Brothers almost. (*Pointedly:*) Both of us declined into the vale of years.

BRABANTIO's cheering fists appears out of the arm holes.

As BRABANTIO speaks, OTHELLO reaches down to bowl of water in front of him. He starts to wash the black colour roughly from his face, using the sponge.

BRABANTIO Othy and Brabantio

Together forever-io.

He gives OTHELLO a hard stare. OTHELLO does not reply. Looks nervous.

BRABANTIO moves from his hole to one further along, peering around him. He now moves to the far right hole. His hand holding a sponge loaded with black paint appears, and he pulls of his beard and starts rubbing it over his face, making it black, as he keeps talking.

BRABANTIO My daughter has a terrible habit of lurking.

OTHELLO looks panicky at the mention of Desdemona.

OTHELLO Really – yeah – I – um – hadn't noticed.

OTHELLO (*gabbling*) I think I've never mentioned I am a great friend of Mr

Heiner Muller. Or I should say Herr Meiner Muller. I mean Herr Heiner Muller.

As OTHELLO and BRABANTIO speak, the GORILLA appears looking suddenly embarrassed by her nakedness, covering herself up with her hands. She grabs her underwear and pulls it on, and exits.

BRABANTIO That vacuum cleaner collects more dust than it sucks up. Teenagers for you. And when she is not lurking, she is disappeared. Where is it she goes? I should hang clogs on her to still her.

OTHELLO The celebrated East German playwright.

BRABANTIO Never heard of him, or there.

OTHELLO He told me a most amusing story. It involves a collapsing tower and sex.

BRABANTIO (*perking up*) Oh, yes?

The sound of the shriek of monkeys as their faces disappear.

OTHELLO's face (now the blacked-up Actor C) appears in the furthest hole to the right, and SHYLOCK's face (now Actor B who has the black make-up washed off and wearing a red hat) appears in the hole next to him. He is animated.

Shylock (*Singing*) No, no, no, no.

General Othell-eo.

Signor Big Shot Blackberry werry,

So important-eo eo, so important-eo. Ho ho!

OTHELLO Shylock – now Shylock, / I really think

SHYLOCK You say you're in the pink

But we're really in the same sink

In this really quite appalling Venetian stink.

OTHELLO Oh, yeah? Yeah? I'd hardly call someone who gets the invites to dinner from high and mighty all sorts – the Duke of Venice him very self I supped with last night – I would hardly call such a person an alien. Does an alien get to partake of stuffed partridge in a palace? I / don't think so.

SHYLOCK It's true, they sardine us Jews in a ghetto

While you hobnob and glug amaretto

And swan around on Easyjettio

But once your services aren't required

It'll be, 'Wham bam, thank you, Black Sam, you're fired'.

OTHELLO Again, I say kindly let me pass.

SHYLOCK is suddenly deflated. OTHELLO gives him a look of sympathy.

OTHELLO It know it must be painful - very painful. Like a blubbing wound that won't stop.

SHYLOCK Be boppity bop bop bop.

OTHELLO Losing your daughter. I feel your pain as my own.

SHYLOCK Do you fancy a loan?

OTHELLO But you can't keep pursuing me all round Venice.

SHYLOCK Honestly glad to be rid of that menace.

Wouldn't even have her round for a spot of tennis.

Slathering over a Christian's squeaky horn.

I wish she'd never been born.

Taking off in a pair of my slacks!

Why would I have her backs?

No, no, no.

I had a turquoise ring and she took it.

was given me by my dear wife who's now kicked the bookit.

Jessica sold it for a monkey that does ladylike swoons

I'd never have traded it – no, not for a wilderness of baboons.

OTHELLO Each time you track me down, Sirrah, I hear this same tale. I'm be-
going.

OTHELLO disappears. SHYLOCK looks crestfallen. His face disappears. More canned laughter. JESSICA's head (played by the boy Actor A in a dark, pearled wig) appears in the furthest hole to the left, with a stuffed monkey sitting on her head. She stares out defiantly – grins – and then throws a pair of men's trousers out into the audience. The GORILLA sprints by, grabs the monkey off JESSICA's head, and starts cuddling it like a baby. Then she flings it into the audience, picks up the trousers and puts them on. Is delighted with the fit. JESSICA pats her head, realises the monkey is gone.

JESSICA Mookey! Where are you?

She disappears in a panic. OTHELLO appears in the far right hole, starts laughing. As if he can't stop. The GORILLA is parading around, trying out masculine postures, as OTHELLO speaks.

OTHELLO (to audience) So, Heiner says – he tells me, blowing that bloody cigar smoke into my eyes – how in East Germany they built these tower blocks where the flats are so small there's only one corner where you can fit a bed.

The stage rapidly goes dark as if night has suddenly fallen. We can barely see OTHELLO and the GORILLA.

OTHELLO So everyone has their bed one above the other. Nineteen – twenty stories.

DESDEMONA's face (Actor A) appears in the furthest hole to the left, barely visible. OTHELLO can't stop laughing again.

OTHELLO And if a good proportion of people fuck at the same time – stacked like the tallest club sandwich ever to have graced a cricket match – the whole building shakes. They’ve sent in the stress analysts and they’ve worked out if everyone (*he is engulfed in laughter, can hardly get the words out.*

DESDEMONA starts giggling too.) A whole tower block could collapse.

OTHELLO makes DESDEMONA out in the gloom.

OTHELLO Who is it?

DESDEMONA Me.

OTHELLO A strumpet?

DESDEMONA No! It is me. Your Desdemona.

The GORILLA is now tapping at the cut-out of the bridge, as if trying to work out what it is made off. She starts looking behind it. She disappears behind it.

OTHELLO I cry you mercy, then, I took you for that cunning whore of Venice. No – that’s later. What? (*Confused, unravelling*) Ah, but then what are you doing on this Bridge of Tits, where only slutty, naked objects of highfalutin ridicule should be. Whorish grubbers waiting for their customers. Huh? Answer me that.

DESDEMONA The what? Me? No, I am not on that bridge. No.

OTHELLO does not reply.

DESDEMONA Are you well, my Lord?

She pokes her hand holding a torch through the armhole, and turns on the torch. Shines it at OTHELLO.

DESDEMONA You seem – altered? You look a bit like – Papa, all of a sudden. You are still my dear Othello? My noble Moor. Say you are.

OTHELLO (*recovering himself*) Oh, yes. Still in my sable suit, still a purveyor of fine black devils for your consumption. Your pretty munching. Your sweet spitting out.

DESDEMONA Touch me.

Despite being too far away on the stage to physically be able to touch, it is clear from the ecstatic expressions on their faces that they are touching.

OTHELLO I have something - for you. It’s all I have from my mother – she gave it to me. All I have.

DESDEMONA’s other hand appears through the other arm hole, clutching a black handkerchief embroidered with strawberries. She looks down at it.

DESDEMONA O! I will never lose it. I swear by this Bridge of Tits and every tit upon it.

OTHELLO But you just said you're not on the Bridge of – never mind. There's magic in the web of it. The handkerchief. A sibyl that had numbered in the world the sun to course two hundred compasses, in her prophetic fury sewed the work. The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk, and it was dyed in mummy which the skilful conserved of maidens' hearts. Precious black mummy.

DESDEMONA Gosh, I shall hardly dare blow my nose upon it.

OTHELLO I will send a gondolier for you at rosy-fingered dawn. He'll bring you to me.

DESDEMONA nods, looks very excited.

DESDEMONA How masterful you are.

OTHELLO I'll make sure he's fat and smells as I know what a grubby-fingered slut you are.

DESDEMONA looks frightened.

OTHELLO Perdition catch my soul, but I do love thee. And when I love thee not, chaos is come again. My lovely slutty, pure Desdemona.

He blows her a kiss. She hesitates and then blows one back.

As they disappear with the torch, the stage slowly fills with pink dawn light, as we hear BRABANTIO's cries.

BABANTIO (*anguished, off-stage*) Desdemona! Desdy! Dessy-boo!

Canned laughter.

BRABANTIO's distraught face (Actor B in a grey beard) appears in the far-left hole. Simultaneously, the GORILLA's face appears in the centre hole. She looks at BRABANTIO curiously.

More canned laughter.

BRABANTIO's face disappears and SHYLOCKS's face (again Actor B, now in a red hat) appears in the same hole. The GORILLA again looks interested.

SHYLOCK (*to audience, singing*) Hath not a Jew eyes,

Organs, and steak and kidney pies?

And if you poison us, we cries – yes? And then we dies?

And don't us Jews, like youse, like a luxury coach trip to Stonehenge?

And don't us Jews, like youse, when we're wronged want ... revenge?

JESSICA's face appears in the hole next to his. The look at each other in shock.

The GORILLA looks at both of them. After a long moment:

SHYLOCK (Tender, for the first time not singing) Jessica.

But JESSICA looks through him as if he is not there and disappears. She appears at the far-right hole, but still determinedly looking away. The GORILLA looks between them, as if at a tennis match. We see a flicker of pain on JESSICA's face, and then she disappears for good.

SHYLOCK's face collapses in despair and loneliness.

Canned laughter.

SHYLOCK disappears. The GORILLA stays where she is. Bach's 'Ebarme dich, mein Gott', Aria 39 from 'St Mathew's Passion' begins. The stage goes dark. A bar of moonlight pierces the black, lighting up from high above the empty stage, a falling black handkerchief. It floats down to the floor.

Canned laughter drowns out 'Ebarme dich' and segues into a screech of monkeys.

Ends.

Conclusion

A dog lies down on the grave of his master and starves to death there. We had to wait for [Pierre] Janet to demonstrate that the aforesaid dog, in contrast to man, simply lacked the capacity to liquidate the past.³⁴⁹

These words by the psychiatrist Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* have a strange irony, given that the whole of Fanon's book appears to be an exploration of human beings essentially trapped by their history, mentally colonised by a past that has cast black men as the receptacle for all that white men are ashamed of. Perhaps we have not lain down and died but the past seems far from liquidated. As I have explored in this thesis, much of the twentieth and twenty-first century has been marked by previously excluded groups excavating their own past, searching for traces of it hidden within mainstream historical records.

Even if we had no knowledge of any history at all we are, of course, still formed by the past. Even if dogs do not know of their long-term collaboration with human beings over the centuries, it is still because of that history that they are born into the state in which they find themselves, where rather than running with a pack, their master is of a different species to them. But by our conscious effort of retrieving the past, we make ourselves doubly formed by it. Hence the need to make sure that what we retrieve, whether by 'we' we refer to women, descendants of the colonised, or any other group, nurtures and develops our present image of ourselves. In this climate where history is perhaps more contested than ever, we are even more aware that not only do we not know what the future will be like but we do not know what the past will be, in its constant state of flux and reinterpretation, as if it is an unstable land, where it is hard to find a firm foothold.

³⁴⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 121. First published in 1952.

As I have explored in Chapter 2, many post-1960 adaptations of canonical texts play their role in the destabilisation of the past, in order to reconstruct it to create a history for a particular excluded group. Essential to this is to recognise a continuity between past and present, which is perhaps shown at its clearest in Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet*, where time dissolves with a change as ephemeral as the lighting, and the two main characters have their reincarnation, or rather pre-incarnation, in different locations and previous time periods, as characters with specific identities but none the less the generalised names of She and He and Him and Her, played on each occasion by the same pair of actors with each times their lives blighted by their ethnicity.

A similar urge can be seen in the earlier 1911 play by Christabel Marshall, *The First Actress*, that, as I described in Chapter 2, imagines Margaret Hughes' performance of Desdemona, although this time the continuity is of gender.³⁵⁰ At the end of the play a long line of famous actresses, described as 'Visions of the Future', visit Hughes in her sleep, beginning with Nell Gwynne and ending with 'an Actress of To-Day', whose final words are: 'Brave Hughes – forgotten pioneer – your comrades offer you a crown' (ff. 20-21), which is then produced by the nineteenth-century Desdemona Mrs Siddons.

The trashing of history relies on having a cohesive history to trash. It is therefore hard to take this approach when you belong to a group that is still in the early days of constructing its own telos. Whereas historically dominant groups have had centuries to do this and so can now play with their identities, everything is speeded up for those who were once, and are still, excluded. Already they are expected to problematise their identities or risk seeming somewhat quaint and gauche.

That contemporary continental literary theory has concerned itself so much with the deconstruction of history and identity can be seen as problematic by allowing these dominant groups to absolve themselves of the past although living in a present in which much of the power and money has landed in their laps because of that very past, while simultaneously undermining the efforts of other groups to forge a sense of common purpose and solidarity. Jacques Derrida writes: 'We are given over to absolute solitude. No one can speak with us and no

³⁵⁰ *The First Actress*, London, British Library MS LCP 1911/14.

one can speak for us; we must take it upon ourselves, each of us must take it upon himself'.³⁵¹ These are hardly the words to get us running to the barricades

However, the abandoning of essentialist ideas of identity does also liberate us from the past that can otherwise confine us to the identity of humiliated victim. Back in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir insisted that: 'On ne naît pas femme: on le devient', translated in the most recent English edition of *The Second Sex* as 'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman'.³⁵² Judith Butler has found a compromise between this existential position and our felt experience of having an essential identity by describing gender as 'the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being'.³⁵³ The advantage of this is that while it recognises a continuity of the category of 'woman', moving through time, by emphasising the contingency of how that character performs it reinforces how we need not be imprisoned by past performances.

The fragility, though, is that rather than having a core identity, we can only maintain ourselves in relation to others, and so by the same token can be undone by them. 'One does not "do" one's gender alone' writes Butler later. 'One is always "doing" with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary'.³⁵⁴ Desiring to have a transformative relationship towards social norms that otherwise painfully confine us is a paradoxical and dangerous project, as Butler explores, because 'the "I" becomes to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether when it no longer incorporates

³⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 57.

³⁵² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 293. First published in French in 1949. Although de Beauvoir does seem to be constantly seeking a meeting place between this famous assertion and her other belief that historically the subjugated position of women *is* tied to their biology (as I return to later in this Conclusion).

³⁵³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 45. First published in 1990.

³⁵⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

the norm in such a way that makes this “I” fully recognizable’.³⁵⁵ To put it another way, the Cartesian model of thinking posits an ‘I’ that is able to regard the world objectively, but if we are constituted by social forces, then there is no separate ‘I’; in unravelling the social norms that form us, we unravel ourselves.

When it comes to *Othello*, Stephen Greenblatt writes that Othello’s ‘identity depends upon a constant performance, as we have seen, of his “story”, a loss of his own origins, an embrace and perpetual reiteration of the norms of another culture’.³⁵⁶ Butler would suggest a flatter structure, not one where there is a hierarchy between an authentic origin and an inauthentic performance, but where there is only the performance, created in and requiring the actual or imagined presence of others. What we see in the tragedy of *Othello* is the performative and therefore vulnerable nature of identity explored throughout the play, and highlighted from the beginning. Othello literally gives a performance in the senate, lengthily delivered without interruption, creating an illusion of him having an inviolate identity that is then dismantled over the course of the play: ‘I will a round unvarnished tale deliver’ (I. 3. 91), he announces, before giving a highly varnished account of his lifetime adventures in love and war.

In rewritings of *Othello*, I have analysed how tragedy seeks to distance its characters from what makes us animal, and comedy delights in these associations, and how white thought has historically associated those who are marginalised, whether they are women, not white or simply poor with an animal and comedic identity. Right back to Shakespeare’s own *Othello*, to be described as an animal, as both Othello and Desdemona are, is in that moment to be robbed of tragedy and thrown into a pit of laughter: ‘Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe!’ (I. 1. 87-88), shouts Iago to Brabantio with glee. The following quote is a twentieth-century example of how these attitudes still endured:

Extreme jealousy is essentially the passion of a diseased mind [...] that belongs to lower and more animal organisms [and so

³⁵⁵ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 3.

³⁵⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), p. 245. First published in 1980.

Shakespeare] accentuated the suggestion of racial inferiority by ascribing to Othello the ‘thick lips’ and ‘sooty bosom’ of the negro.³⁵⁷

In an indication of how *Othello*’s influence has always stretched well beyond the circle of literary interest, this chillingly was written by a Dr W. C. Sullivan, writing in his capacity as Superintendent of Rampton Criminal Lunatic Asylum (now known as Rampton Secure Hospital), as man with absolute authority over other human beings – the inmates.

However, it is not only white males who have made these connections with the animal: twentieth-century high-profile members of marginalised groups have also affirmed them. When it comes to how women are understood, in *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir speculates how right back when we were ‘primitive hordes’, the ability to bear children historically left women trapped by their bodies like an animal, and this is a confinement from which we are still emerging. A woman’s body condemns her to domestic labour ‘which locks her into repetition and immanence; day after day it repeats itself in identical form from century to century; it produces nothing new’. In contrast to this, man found transcendence from his animal state through using his mind to invent, and in the process recognises himself as moving forwards in time: ‘he posits ends and projects paths to them. [...] he spills over the present and opens up the future.’³⁵⁸

Derek Walcott, writing in the 1970s a couple of decades after De Beauvoir, when women and black people were increasingly infiltrating these legendary preserves of abstract thought, affirms that this way of conceptualising the world is not only male but has historically been distinctively white:

Our bodies think in one language and move in another, yet it should have become clear, even to our newest hybrid, the black critic who accuses poets of betraying dialect, that the language of exegesis is

³⁵⁷ W.C. Sullivan ‘Shakespeare’s *Othello* as a Study of the Morbid Psychology of Sex’, *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 508 (1919), 1175-1180 (p. 1177).

³⁵⁸ De Beauvoir, p. 75.

English, that the manic absurdity would be to give up thought because it is white.³⁵⁹

The image that writers such as de Beauvoir, Walcott, and W.C. Sullivan create is of white, male thought providing an escape from the body, a separation from what makes us animal. However, the value of this very form of detached thinking has been progressively deconstructed and shown to be lacking. The interest has shifted rather to our complex relationship with our physical selves and the limited and limiting nature of human attempts to impose a rational, linear structure on our bodily interactions with time and space.

Enlightenment is now sought amongst those who were once excluded – amongst the queer. The word ‘queer’ originates from the Germanic *quer*, ‘oblique’, and has an original sense of any deviation from the normal, then imposed upon a specific group – homosexuals – as a slur, who next claimed the word as something positive, and now finally coming to mean in the relatively new discipline of queer theory, once again a process of being out of joint with societal norms but with this now seen as offering a privileged perspective. Ong Keng Sen, in an interview with William Patterson, expresses this idea when he says how from an early age, ‘I was already very aware [...] being gay, that everything you are doing is political’.³⁶⁰ However, being ‘queer’ is not reserved for being gay; it is any identity that places you on the outside, so that unlike those people comfortably positioned in the middle the forest, you from your vantage point *are* able to see the wood for the trees.

As Calvin Thomas rather self-defeatingly remarks in his introduction to *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality*, having

³⁵⁹ Derek Walcott, ‘What the Twilight says: An Overture’ in ‘*Dream on Monkey Mountain*’ and *Other Plays* (London: Jonathan Cape), pp. 1-40 (p. 31).

³⁶⁰ William Patterson, ‘Being Affected: An Interview with Ong Keng Sen of TheatreWorks Singapore’ in *Theatre and Adaptation: Return, Rewrite, Repeat*, ed. by Margherita Laera (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). Google ebook <http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=SY3EAwAAQBAJ&dq=theatre+and+adaptation+return+rewrite&q=ong+keng#v=snippet&q=ong%20keng&f=false> [accessed 20 August 2014].

identified himself as a white, North American heterosexual: ‘It may be difficult to imagine how any theoretical work that takes straightness as its object of scrutiny could generate much interest.’³⁶¹

In this brave new world, then, queer is queen, and has proved to be a word so potent that the straights want it back, although at the same time concerned that they might be seen to be trying to, as Thomas expresses it, ‘arrogate, confiscate or seize queer theory’s varied, conceptual tools and put them to straight use’.³⁶² The peculiar combination of deference and superiority (who but the powerful is able to ‘confiscate’ rather than steal?) seems to sum up the interesting contemporary position of the dominant group.

Throughout my research of *Othello*, I have constantly been drawn to the theme of centre and margins, and the associations of these two poles with light, order and linearity versus a chaos and darkness and animality that in its anti-order problematises the very concept of polarities, of the structure of binary oppositions. I explored the aesthetic expression of these poles in the competing forces of tragedy and an absurdist form of comedy.

The nineteenth-century burlesques of *Othello*, in spite of being written by white men, use a form of anti-order that has been associated with the feminine and those who are not white European. However, the grand narratives they unravel are not so much their own as those still frail and newly formed narratives of resistance and nobility created by black people in their emancipatory struggles, and their white supporters. In the post-colonial period, until very recently, adaptations of *Othello* by black writers and women have tended to fall back on the masculine tragic form, with an identifiable linear path leading to a defining climax, because such groups are still in the process of myth-making, and so adopt the forms that have served the dominant culture so well for centuries. The irony, therefore, of those at the centre seeking to deconstruct and problematise their myths, while those at the margins are seeking to construct theirs, is that each adopts the aesthetic forms associated with the other.

³⁶¹ Calvin Thomas, *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality* (Urbana, IL.: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p. 3.

³⁶² Thomas, p. 3.

Not only is a form of anti-order and a revelling in the body associated with those who are excluded and oppressed but also there is in contemporary thought the idea that this very form offers liberation for them, voiced by such critics as Mark Fortier, here describing the experimental work of Heiner Müller:

Müller writes of the ‘rebellion of the body against ideas’. Or ‘the thrusting on stage of bodies and their conflict with ideas’, specifically the bodies of oppressed groups against the hegemonic and oppressive ideas of western male culture. Unlike Brecht, Müller does not see in enlightenment rationalist values a history of liberation, but rather a long history of intellectual injustice through the hegemony of the word. Irrationality, disorder and the senses promise more political liberation than the strict control of the senses.³⁶³

However, this approach has its pitfalls, as can be seen in the case of Ong Keng Sen’s *Desdemona*. Helena Grehan attended the last rehearsals for it and describes how, despite being ‘breathtakingly beautiful as well as incredibly engaging’,³⁶⁴ the actual production ‘did not offer any openings, gaps or linkages that would allow the spectator to become an active participant in the creation of the work’s meanings’.³⁶⁵ In other words, no one knew what was going on. In a response from Ong Keng Sen, printed within Grehan’s article, he counters her criticisms by describing the varied reception it received: ‘Adelaide audiences were uncertain/ambivalent; Singapore audiences were unforgiving; and Hamburg audiences gave it seven ovations.’³⁶⁶ Therefore, *Desdemona*’s very attempt to prevent itself from being too easily opened up for consumption by a vampiric western culture made it most consumable for that very same post-modern-loving

³⁶³ Mark Fortier, *Theory / Theatre: an Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 36. He is quoting Müller from ‘The Walls of History’, *Semiotext(e)*, 4 (1982), 36-76 (p. 65). The expression ‘hegemony of the word’ has the clear biblical connotations of the Word producing and ordering Creation, where before there was an undifferentiated darkness.

³⁶⁴ Helen Grehan, ‘TheatreWorks’ *Desdemona*: Fusing Technology and Tradition’, *The Drama Review*, 45 (2001), 113-125 (p. 117).

³⁶⁵ Grehan, p. 122.

³⁶⁶ Ong Keng Sen’s response reproduced in Grehan, p. 118.

audience; it was only in Germany that it received ovations. The subaltern has entered Spivak's 'circuit of hegemony' by using the currency of its very subalternness, which in this new economy of thought has attained a precious value.

Shakespeare's *Othello* has had an extraordinary political journey: this most prominent tragedy in the western canon to have a black protagonist is the likeliest contender in the English-speaking world for the first play to have a female actor following the exclusion of women from the stage, and the first tragedy to be performed by a black actor. It was championed by abolitionists needing a tragic black hero, burlesqued by those who wanted to destroy its potency, and since the 1960s has been seized upon for explorations of race and gender in a post-colonial world, both in its original form and in diverse rewritings produced throughout Britain's former empire.

As I have explored in my own practice, it clearly has considerable untapped potential for theatrical explorations of religion at a time when clashes as old as the Crusades now once again dominate what we call 'the world stage', bringing in their wake scenes of Jacobean horror. The play also lends itself to a rewriting that further explores *Othello* from a Marxist position, which could place the revolutionary Iago centre stage as the protagonist.

Other possibilities continue to offer themselves for this play with its vertiginous identity and power swings. One of the highest-profile trials of the last decade is that of Oscar Pistorius, who was cleared of the murder of his girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp, but convicted of culpable homicide. Pistorius is both a feted and wealthy paralympic athlete and a man whose disability is claimed by his defence team to have made him feel extremely vulnerable to attack, hence his shooting at a supposed intruder through his bathroom door. Those who believe he shot Steenkamp intentionally have also suggested that this disability led Pistorius to feel equally vulnerable in his personal life and therefore behave as a jealous lover. Here, then, can be seen the basis for building another kind of Othello character, and the potential for a rewriting that could explore the impact of disability, both directly and through the perceptions of others, on the protagonist. The court case is additionally striking because in former apartheid South Africa, we have a judge, Thokozile Masipa, who is a black woman, having total power to decide the judicial fate of a defendant who is a white man (but who none the less is from a still-excluded minority because he, unlike his judge, is disabled). The

momentousness of this is expressed by a former colleague of Masipa, called Normavende Mathiane, who told CNN reporters that, ‘This is a woman from the dusty streets of the township. Today she is trying a white boy ... I never thought that would happen.’³⁶⁷

Returning to my rewritings, in *The Turn* I make implicit links with how women were dominated by men in the past – in this case in Jacobean society – and how they are treated in many contemporary Islamic cultures. The aim of my play has a clear political function, to add to those voices that claim that women’s hard-won liberation in Britain and elsewhere is under threat because of too much sensitivity given to a particular patriarchal religious faith, and this will be to the detriment of both women and men. In doing this I fell back on ‘the hegemony of the word’ to create a world that had a clear logic, linearity and order, reaching a tragic climax. Muir was not destroyed by a meaningless slip on a piece of fruit, while engaged in a boxing match, but because of a complex history of patriarchy that placed unbearable tensions on his mental state.

Othello is also striking in that, while it has a vast reach in the ideological and physical battle of Christian and Islamic civilisations, the particular battle between Venetians and Turks that is the very reason for the characters being holed up together in Cyprus is a non-event because of a sea storm, which also very nearly drowns the protagonist. *Othello* then shrinks to the most domestic of all Shakespeare’s tragedies, where husband kills wife. In my tragi-burlesque *Ponte Dell Tette*, I look further at how patriarchy orders our lives by foregrounding the relationships that can express patriarchy in microcosm: father and daughter, husband and wife. As such I am able to look at how love and power intersect. By seeking consciously to let go a little of the hegemony of the word, to push against the borders of logic and the confines of space and time, I wanted to create a sense that the specific ways that we have organised our world are not natural but strange. I did not want to do that taming of Shakespeare’s monsters

³⁶⁷ ‘Oscar Pistorius: South African Judge Decided Athlete’s Fate’, by Richard Allen Greene and Brent Swails, *CNN News*
<<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/10/world/africa/oscar-pistorius-judge-masipa/index.html>> [accessed 10 September 2014].

that is in danger of happening in rewritings, where their slippery identities are pinned down like so many dead moths.

Drawing on the comic absurdities of the nineteenth-century burlesques, I experimented in how I could deconstruct while, like Marowitz's *An Othello*, not entirely lose tragic heft – with 'heft' in its sense of both a rightful heaviness, and the motion of lifting upwards – which gives weightiness and transcendence to its protagonists. To continue to walk the tightrope between the sincerity of tragedy and the anarchic laughter of absurdist comedy – and make the falling part of the performance – is the direction my playwriting is now taking. The research I have done for this PhD has been the springboard at least to help me up to the rope.

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