

Abstract

This essay examines C. S. Lewis's recently discovered essay on *Othello*, taking Lewis's comments on race in *Othello* as the basis for exposing modern critical short-sidedness when dealing with this play. Specifically, Lewis's comments on Othello's blackness underscore the problems of considering the character of Othello according to modern paradigms of race. Lewis's essay is then used to explain the power behind Laurence Olivier's film version of *Othello*, an adaptation where Olivier plays Othello in blackface.

C. S. Lewis's Lost *Othello* Manuscript and the Re-Presentations of Race

By J. Duke Pesta

During a graduate seminar on Shakespeare at Purdue University in the late 1990s, the class was required by the professor to watch a number of film adaptations of Shakespeare's works, including Laurence Olivier's 1965 version of *Othello*. In this academy-award nominated movie, Olivier plays the role of Othello in blackface, employing extremely dark makeup and exotic costumes to convey the character's "blackness" and African heritage. During the post-screening discussion, despite the fact that I had been profoundly moved by Olivier's performance, I remained silent as my fellow students voiced their collective moral outrage at the production. One student in particular, whose strident comments were representative of the class response, intoned:

What most angered me was Olivier's interpretation of Othello. Olivier, the whitest of white actors, portrays him as a black man trying to conform to the unquestionable "goodness" and "superiority" of Christianity, but who reverts back to savagery when told of Desdemona's supposed infidelity. At one point, very early in Othello's transformation, he rips off the cross from his neck, falls on his knees, and bows in a decidedly Muslim way. I found this profoundly racist and offensive—not least of all because Olivier had the audacity to think he could capture and portray on stage what it meant to be black in that or any other society.¹

By that time I had been in graduate school long enough to realize that there are just some forms of indignation that one must never question, however problematical their expression. So I kept my dirty little secret to myself and told no one how effective and compelling I found this white actor in blackface. I soothed my guilty conscience with the realization that I did, at least, *feel* guilty (my graduate seminar in theory had not been a total loss after all).

But the more I thought about it, the more I was plagued by Olivier's performance—*why* should this admittedly strange and unorthodox characterization have created such an impression on me? After all, my first response on seeing Olivier in

his make-up and costume was a mixture of contempt and horror. He looked ridiculous and out of place, and my sensibilities had been sufficiently refined to cause me to recoil in horror at the sociological implications of his Othello persona. What happened between Olivier's first shocking and distasteful appearance on screen and the end of the movie, when my contempt and horror had been transformed?

Over the years I've seen other versions of *Othello*, in the theatre and on the screen, but none has managed to stir quite the same emotions in me. Indeed, I have always found myself most disappointed with those interpretations of the play that were the most "realistic" or the most "correct." Thus, despite Laurence Fishburne's powerful presence and masculine dignity, I found his Othello cold and his non-European accent decidedly (and disappointingly) American. His was an urban Othello, a man of the streets, not a sojourner of "antres vast and deserts idle."² Then there was the stage version that cast a black Iago opposite Othello, these two actors being the only blacks in the cast. Clearly, as both casting and staging made clear, the director was more eager to explore the consequences of the "Uncle Tom" syndrome than she was to illuminate anything about Shakespeare's *Othello*. But such modern preoccupations seemed forced on the play, and in this production the casting of a black Iago had the opposite result from that intended. Any potential racial moral that could have been garnered from the play was ultimately undercut by the casting choice. I myself have taught the play numerous times since seeing Olivier's *Othello* but have never quite been able to articulate to my students what it is about Olivier's portrayal of *Othello* that so captivates me.

It was not until reading C. S. Lewis's brief and hitherto unknown essay on *Othello* that I found an intellectual justification for my visceral response to Olivier's performance.³ In this teasingly incomplete essay, Lewis did two things for me in particular. He explained what the character of Othello was not, and in so doing he exposed what many current academic and literary discussions of race, gender, and class are not. The essay begins with an almost unquestioned assumption in the current critical discourse on *Othello*: "More important than anything else about Othello is his blackness." But important how? Lewis continues:

The play is not based on "colour feeling" as we know it in modern America: but it is based on another and simpler colour feeling. There was in Shakespeare's time no anthropology to make men believe that black men had smaller brains or skulls of the wrong shape. There was no imperialism to make men think of them as members of subject races: no recent memory of Negro slavery make men think of them as the dregs of society.

An uncomfortable observation, one guaranteed to make many an *au current* academic cringe. Is Lewis an apologist of the worst sort or just naïve? Seen in the best light, do we have here an amusing example of the benign paternalism of pre-post-modern literary criticism, itself a justification for the critical revolution that has made such figures as Lewis passé in the first place? Or, seen in the worst light, do we have here a scathing indictment of a faded and insensitive worldview, a statement of complicity?

Lewis's real point, of course, is that we must disavow ourselves of our own

prejudices, to the degree that we are able, before we can legitimately seek to reveal the prejudices of others, especially those of a culture long past. This is perhaps the one critical dictum most ignored by modern critics, and this more than anything else makes Lewis' observations so relevant (and discomfiting) today. Lewis continues:

At Othello's first entry we should have our minds quite clear both of modern arrogance about backward races and of modern enlightenment and the brotherhood of man. We must concentrate with a primitive sharpness of vision in the physical fact: a group of men coming in by torchlight and in the midst of them, monstrous, not to be got over, the staring black face and red lips—a figure equally suitable for some crude kind of mumming farce or . . . tragedy about Christian maidens imprisoned . . . far over seas.

The main point of *Othello* really isn't race at all, or at least race as we understand it. Rather, the play is a strange amalgam of things that stand outside the limiting categories that have been shaped by modern racial discourse. As Lewis asserts, "This play is not the story of a girl who married below herself, but of a girl who married a sort of ogre or hobgoblin." The generic elements of romance and fairy tale provide a necessary caution to reductive and simplistically sociological readings. Lewis points out, I think rightly, that for Shakespeare, Othello's blackness is a stock convention that the dramatist immediately complicates and moves beyond:

And then, at once, Shakespeare begins doing more. . . . The Black Man begins talking. He is the descendant of kings. Not "chiefs" as a modern might call them: the Elizabethans have no pictures of Kraals . . . or "native" villages in their minds. They are more likely to base ideas on Prester John and an Ethiopian of Heliodorus, and even the African kings of Ariosto, and even Melchior.

Indeed, in a standard fairy-tale twist, it turns out that the "monster" attracts as much as it repels: "The creature is noble in its own way: none the less perilous or mysterious for that. But the idea is fascinating: it has the attraction of a good giant, or a chivalrous Turk."

In explaining what *Othello* is not, namely an exemplum of modern racial strife, Lewis offers a useful corrective to critical approaches that remove *Othello* from the complicated cultural context of its own day, a cultural context still very mysterious to us, despite the "revolution" of historicism. Indeed, one of the great ironies of the type of historicism applied to literary studies today is the fact that so little of it is actually historical. Don't get me wrong; superficially at least we know more than ever about the Elizabethans and the world that produced their theater. We cite more anecdotes and have recorded more gossip, we have reclaimed more and more minutiae from the margins and the periphery and formulated more and more complicated theories of conspiracy and subversion. We have discerned "invisible bullets" and exposed the obvious (to us) transvestite and homoerotic substructure of the Elizabethan theater. And because we take as axiomatic the notion that we can never

really know another culture, let alone a culture long past, we increasingly allow ourselves the license to re-fashion the Elizabethans according to our own political imperatives. After all, we are told, what else do we have?

But has our focus on the arcane and the speculative, the micro-history so favored by literary critics, blinded us to the larger historical context, outside of which so many of us find answers to questions that reveal more about us than about the Elizabethans? Take, for instance, Stephen Greenblatt's famous essay on Caliban in *Learning to Curse* where he argues that Caliban is a brutally colonized and eventually co-opted native, and *The Tempest* an example of the type of narrative implicated in the process of empire-building. Greenblatt's essay seems to begin in the most historical manner; in the first few pages he manages to work in Peter Martyr and Pope Leo X, Montaigne and Las Casas, Cicero and Ugo of Siena.⁴ But his analysis of these figures, and of the historical circumstances of their interaction, is sparse, generalized, underdeveloped, and un-contextualized. After this dazzling but anecdotal beginning, Greenblatt moves into his discussion of *The Tempest* with a rhetorical ease and elegance that sweeps the reader along to his grand conclusions.

But despite Greenblatt's micro-historical facility in teasing significance from the anecdotal, *Learning to Curse* ultimately suffers because it disingenuously fails to take account of the bigger picture. Greenblatt never really discusses Elizabethan ontology, an ontology that held a very real place for angels and devils, spirits and goblins, and even God Himself. Greenblatt's arguments are all based on the notion that Caliban is exclusively and entirely like us, and as such, Prospero's treatment of him is "inhuman":

Shakespeare does not shrink from the darkest European fantasies about the Wild Man; indeed he exaggerates them: Caliban is deformed, lecherous, evil-smelling, idle, treacherous, naïve, drunken, rebellious, violent, and devil-worshipping. According to Prospero, he is not even human: a born devil, 'got by the devil himself / Upon thy wicked dam' (1.2.321-22). *The Tempest* utterly rejects the uniformitarian view of the human race, the view that would later triumph in the Enlightenment and prevail in the West to this day. All men, the play seems to suggest, are not alike; strip away the adornments of culture and you will *not* reach a single human essence.⁵

According to Prospero, Caliban is not even human! As if the fact were exclusively the product of Prospero's tyrannical imagination and not woven into the very fabric of the play in particular and Elizabethan ontology in general. Nor, of course, does Caliban himself shy away from his dubious ancestry. And how very ironic that a critic of the postmodern era can argue that the Elizabethans did not believe in absolute essences! If anything, Caliban's "uniformitarian" assertion at the end of *The Tempest* that he will "seek for grace" suggests the possibility that something exists beyond "the adornments of culture."⁶

But just because Greenblatt, in his seemingly detached mode as critic, may not believe in God, or in fish-like creatures born of witches and devils, he denies the

distinct possibility that many Elizabethans believed in them. But Shakespeare's play is quite clear in portraying Caliban as something other than completely human, in the same way that Ariel is not human, despite moments of very human behavior and feeling. In essence, what Greenblatt and other "historicist" critics do is to self-fashion the Elizabethan theater into something politically expedient for today's academy, however ultimately a-historical the construction. This does not mean that we should return unquestioned to works like Tillyard's *Elizabethan World View*, but if "historicist" scholarship is going to be truly historical (and not merely polemical), it must not disregard macro-history and what we do know about the Elizabethans and their theater.

This is the second major function of Lewis's essay on Othello, a character who, like Caliban and Shylock, has been transformed by critics into something that would have been unrecognizable to Elizabethan audiences. Even in an essay this brief and incomplete, Lewis continually calls the reader's attention to the larger paradigms in which Shakespeare was working. Speaking of that scene in Act 1 where Othello and Desdemona are brought together at the Sagittary Inn, Lewis observes:

We see them together for the first time: the fair, gentle, foolish, loving lady and the heroic, far-adventured blackamore, with his flash of tooth and eye. Neither here nor in later scenes where we see them embrace, must there be any physical disgust. Nor, on the other hand, must there be any watery stuff about her being quite right to love his mind rather than his face. There must be a good old ballad . . . the theme is Beauty and the Beast or the Princess and the Goblin, or Freya promised to the giants.

The story of Othello is archetypal in the sense that he can never be reduced to his race, or his costume, or his gestures. To force Othello into a modern paradigm of race would be akin to reducing the giant in the Jack and the Beanstalk story to a negative stereotype about tall people. But then again, the same forces that have twisted Elizabethan drama into a perverse parody of itself have also succeeded in stripping the allegorical depth and power from fairy tales by subjecting them to narrowly political interpretations. Such misapplied political pressures account for the fact that Disney has not produced a "real" fairy tale in years.

And this, I think, explains why I found Olivier's *Othello* so compelling. The bombastic, frenetic, and outlandishly costumed Olivier, in deep blackface, with grossly exaggerated features and lips and hideously rolling eyeballs, captured precisely the image of Othello that Lewis lays out. Starting from this almost fairy tale extreme, an image that first caused me to recoil, trained as I was to expect an almost cinematic realism, I was increasingly won over by the "beast's" humanity, nobility, and grandeur, until the fairy tale, as most fairy tales do, became so much more. Lewis also articulated for me the reasons why I felt that this white actor could play such a powerful Othello:

Production should not evade Othello's colour by making him look like an Arab. In my opinion, it is not as important (in itself) to have a real Negro in the part. Burnt cork strikes the proper

note. If this note is properly struck at the outset most of the questions about Othello's behavior will never arise. Obviously, he may do *anything*. The changes from rapturous love to reasonless jealousy and back again to nobility are a hurdle only to intellect: to the imagination, they are all explained by Othello's appearance.

Lewis is right, I think, in asserting that this view of Othello, a view I can't help but feel is closer to how the Elizabethans saw Othello, is accessible only to the imagination first. It is precisely this imaginative component, however, that is lost when political concerns dictate our response to literature.

At this point, it's tempting to return to the anecdote about graduate school that opened this paper and find some witty, new-historical way to tie this whole presentation together. But in deference to Lewis and his brand of historicism, I think I'll just stop here.

Notes

1. Except for some grammatical alterations designed to facilitate meaning, this is the quote exactly as it was transcribed.

2. *Othello*, 1.3.142. Cited in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington (Longman: New York, 1997).

3. All citations of this brief, unpublished essay are from the same transcription made of the original by Michael W. Price.

4. Stephen J. Greenblatt, "Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century," *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

5. Greenblatt, 26.

6. Greenblatt, 26.

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