

Abstract

Up until recently, C.S. Lewis' commentary upon Shakespeare was believed to be limited to two essays ("*Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem?*" [1939] and "Variation in Shakespeare and Others" [1942]), a passage in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* [1954]), and references scattered throughout his *corpus*. The apparent scarcity of Shakespeare criticism could easily create the impression that, compared to Dante, Spenser, or Milton, Lewis has little to say about Shakespeare. But recent archival discoveries disprove this impression. Extensive commentary upon Shakespeare (heretofore virtually untouched) appears in Lewis' personal copies of individual Shakespeare volumes, which are housed in the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College and the Magdalene College Library, Cambridge. Lewis' copies of *Othello* are a case in point. The Cambridge Library copy contains four pages of dense factual notes written in the flyleaves; the Wade Center copy features a 770 word interpretive essay elaborating this thesis: "More important than anything else about Othello is his blackness." In my analysis of the latter essay, I find that Lewis considers Othello's first appearance on stage as the play's most crucial moment: his startling appearance, like a subliminal message, stamps a certain set of impressions upon audiences' imaginations. These, in turn, prime and program audiences' imaginations to expect precisely the unpredictable behavior Othello manifests over the course of the play. Thus Lewis's essay is a reader-response critique, though otherwise consistent with his theory and praxis.

Rare Commentary From C. S. Lewis on Shakespeare: The Recently-Discovered *Othello* Essays

By Michael W. Price

Mention the name Clives Staples Lewis (1898-1963) to a group of Shakespeareans, and you're likely to receive two responses. Most will think of C.S. Lewis the writer of children's stories and Christian apologetics; author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which has sold 65 million copies in 30 languages (with sales on the rise); and author of a range of books which, collectively, has sold over 200 million copies world-wide. Others will call to mind the Oxford (1925-1954) and Cambridge (1954-1963) don, one of the dominant voices in mid-twentieth century literary criticism who published such towering works as *The Allegory of Love* (1936), *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942), *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century (Excluding Drama)* (1954), *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961), and his posthumous *Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (1964).

Chances are that almost none will say, "Oh, yes, the author of Shakespeare criticism." There is a reason for this. If you were to comb Lewis' entire *corpus*, you would find only three brief pieces devoted to Shakespeare: "*Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem*" (1939); "Variation in Shakespeare and Others" (1942); a passage

devoted to Shakespeare's poetry in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century (Excluding Drama)* (1954), and a smattering of references scattered throughout his writings.¹ Indeed, compared to all that Lewis had to say about Dante, Edmund Spenser, or John Milton, he appears conspicuously silent about Shakespeare.

This silence is particularly deafening when we consider the material Lewis was responsible for teaching. In his capacity as tutor of English literature at Oxford, Lewis taught a sequence of seven courses spanning from *Beowulf* to 1830. "Shakespeare and the English drama were an integral part [of this curriculum]," so much so that "Elizabethan and Jacobean drama occupied a whole term or more" of the seven-course sequence.² Indeed, Lewis knew Elizabethan and Jacobean drama so well that on one occasion he spontaneously "rattled off" the titles of some 20-30 plays, jokingly assigning them to a student as pleasure reading over one Christmas break.³

If Lewis were an English teacher for thirty-eight years (and an avid reader even before becoming a teacher), and if his curriculum included Shakespeare, then it stands to reason that he was not only familiar with Shakespeare, but familiar enough to write about him, just as he was familiar enough with Dante, Spenser, or Milton to write about them. Thus it seems surprising that he *didn't* write extensively about Shakespeare.⁴

Or so it has seemed until recently. It turns out that within Lewis's personal copies of individual Shakespeare volumes (housed at the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College and Magdalene College Library, Cambridge), he penned extensive flyleaf commentary and marginalia. More specifically, Lewis bequeathed thirty-four Shakespeare volumes to Magdalene College, Cambridge; of those, four are heavily annotated: *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *Othello*.⁵ Lewis's copy of the Everyman *Othello* in the Wade Center is also heavily annotated. Up until recently, this manuscript material has gone virtually unnoticed. However, I would like to focus upon the *Othello* material specifically, bring it to the light of day, and offer some preliminary commentary upon it. I will comment briefly upon the Cambridge manuscript, then devote the bulk of my discussion to the Wade Center manuscript.

The Cambridge material is inscribed within the 1923 Arden *Othello*, edited by H.C. Hart.⁶ It consists of four pages of dense print, each page divided into two columns. Cambridge librarians speculate that Lewis wrote this commentary when he was an undergraduate at Oxford.⁷ This seems a reasonable hypothesis in light of the nature of Lewis's remarks. Lewis's commentary here is primarily factual, not interpretive. He seems to be establishing for himself the basics for understanding the play. For example, it includes a straightforward summary of the plot of both the play and one of its sources, Cinthio's *Hecatomithi*. Its longest section is entitled "Language Places," containing 170 entries, each a word or phrase singled out for special attention. As one such "language place," Lewis cites Iago's memorable description of sexual intercourse as "making the beast with two backs." He similarly includes a section entitled "textual places," forty-seven entries, each having editorial significance. At other points in this dense flyleaf material, Lewis speculates about discrepancies between readings in the First Folio and First Quarto, the transmission of the text, its possible date of composition, and the relative validity of editorial claims made by such textual editors as Edmund Malone, John Dover Wilson, and

M.R. Ridley. The material also includes two textual transmission diagrams.

Unlike the Cambridge flyleaf material, the Wade Center flyleaf material consists of a lengthy, interpretive essay. Seven-hundred and seventy words long, it develops this thesis: "More important than anything else about Othello [the protagonist] is his blackness." What is it about Othello's blackness that so captivates Lewis? Lewis argues that Othello's blackness is important because of the ways it impacts audiences' imaginations (as opposed to their "intellects"—an important distinction).

Perhaps it would be more precise to say, "because of the way his *black skin* impacts audiences' imaginations." Indeed, so striking is Othello's black skin that Lewis goes so far as to claim that Othello's first appearance on stage *is the most crucial moment*. He argues, "we [the viewing audience] must concentrate with a primitive sharpness of vision on 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." We will deal with the reference to the black face and red lips momentarily. For now, let us note that Lewis focuses upon the viewers' first visual impression of Othello's outward appearance. To recapture that moment in November 1604, when the play was first staged (before a court audience), Lewis would have us try, as best we can, to view Othello's appearance in our mind's eye exactly as the Jacobean court audience actually beheld Othello with their own eyes. Pretending as though we are Jacobean playgoers, we witness Othello's first steps on stage. From this point of view, what aspects of his appearance would we notice? How would we react?

Lewis speculates that to white audiences unaccustomed to seeing blacks, the sheer strangeness of Othello's appearance would be both fascinating and alarming, especially as his blackness and build are contrasted against the smaller, white-skinned men surrounding him. Indeed, the sight of this entourage might even cause audiences to imagine armed guards escorting a dangerous prisoner or a team of animal-tamers collaring an exotic yet ferocious beast. No matter how the audience perceives this giant, black-skinned man, though, the important point is that Othello's appearance is so striking that audiences could not possibly overlook it or downplay it. Indeed, when Lewis argues that Othello's stage presence is "not to be got over," he may also mean that audiences, conceptually, would not be able to make sense of this strange new entity. The Moor simply does not fit the categories to which they are accustomed.

Lewis's essay also has a second, related argument. He contends that if, at this juncture, Othello's monstrous appearance is portrayed *just right*, then this hulking giant's stage presence will, like a subliminal message, stamp a certain set of impressions upon audiences' imaginations. What are those impressions?

At first, the sight of Othello's blackness would presumably terrify viewers because they were accustomed to seeing the devil represented as a black person. Thus, at the first sight of this "monstrous" black man, audiences' imaginations would be jolted into action; indeed, their imaginations would start to churn, conjuring up ideas about mankind's most fearsome enemy. Then they would tar Othello with them. But as soon as Othello begins to speak, two unexpected things happen: first, he delivers an eloquent, magisterial speech; and second, he reveals that he is the descendent of kings:

In a word, he is a man of integrity, not iniquity, a man of dignity, not servility. And as this formerly-fearsome devil rematerializes as a nobleman, Shakespeare is betting that the sheer strangeness of this change would surely confuse audiences: after all, how can Othello be both black yet kingly, so barbaric-looking yet so civilly-behaving?

Indeed, this sudden and surprising mixture of contraries is so potent, Lewis argues, that it could even reverse audiences' most-deeply seated prejudices. Take, for example, the stereotypical "foaming, furious" Turk. Othello happens to resemble a Turk because he is black and "monstrous." Thus when audiences first glimpse Othello, they would tend to dredge up all the fears they harbor about Turks and pin them on him.

Othello now represents both the devil and the Turk. But it's not quite as simple as that. Othello's nobility and civility complicate matters, threatening to derail this chain of associations. Lewis believes that Othello's lordliness would so impress audiences that it would cause them to recategorize this "foaming, furious" Turk as a "chivalrous" Turk. "The idea is fascinating," Lewis writes; it suggests "a vague picture of unknown and possibly dangerous splendour." Though "the creature is noble in its own way," he continues, it is "none the less perilous or mysterious for that."

These, then, are the impressions that Shakespeare wants the captivated audience to bring to the council scene. There, when Brabantio accuses Othello of bewitching his daughter, the references to witchcraft, spells, and the "practices of cunning hell" would resurrect all the original, fear-creating associations with which the audience began. And having now been exposed in rapid succession to three portrayals of Othello, shell-shocked audiences at this point might well wonder, who (or what) is this "monstrous" person?

Indeed, being jolted this way and that bewilders audiences, complicating the ways they imagine Othello. But this bewilderment, Lewis argues, is precisely the effect Shakespeare seeks. As a matter of fact, Lewis insists that this complex of associations "is the impression which he [Shakespeare] counts on as his starting point in the minds of his audiences." Virginia Mason Vaughan, author of *Othello: A Contextual History*, concurs: "The effect of Othello depends" she writes, ". . . on the essential fact of the hero's darkness, the visual signifier of his Otherness."⁸ To summarize, then, Lewis argues that Shakespeare causes Othello to shift shapes rapidly, indeed so rapidly that viewers are forced to scramble to keep up with him. In their confusion and haste, they may perhaps conclude that this unpredictable shifter of shapes is likely to exhibit equally-unpredictable behavior as the play progresses.

And that would achieve an important goal: right at the play's beginning, audiences' imaginations would be primed and programmed to expect precisely the unpredictable behavior Othello manifests over the course of the play. For like planting a subliminal message, Shakespeare has intimated to them the play's course and conclusion right at the start: without knowing it, the audience knows what to expect.

Thus Lewis's essay is a reader-response kind of critique. In a nutshell, it maps the stages by which Shakespeare portrays Othello's blackness so as to achieve a specific sequence of imaginative responses.

At this stage I think it is important to point out a few features of Lewis's argument which are characteristic of his critical praxis. First, he considers most important the original audience's response, not ours. It is as though we, coming later, are to emulate that audience, observing conventions and admiring Shakespeare at work. As Lewis writes in *An Experiment in Criticism*, "we become these other selves. Not only . . . to see what they are like but . . . to see what they see, to occupy, for a while, their seat in the great theatre."⁹ Second, Lewis attempts to reconstruct the original audience's response by reestablishing the historical context and then surveying the responses that would and would not have been within the realm of possibility within that context. He believes that an audience at a certain time and place can respond only in ways that are available at that time and place. If certain responses were not available, then audiences could not have had them.

By applying this premise, Lewis devotes the first half of this 770 word essay to ruling out seven reactions to Othello's blackness that early Jacobean audiences could *not* have had. Most of them are prejudices about blacks that only twentieth-century white audiences might project on Othello because they live after the era of the African slave trade. For this reason, Lewis stresses that we must disabuse ourselves of these prejudices if we are to avoid the pitfalls of anachronism, and, instead, to appreciate the play as the original audience did. Accordingly, this is his essay's logic: we today should not respond to Othello's blackness by imagining him as this, this, this, this, this, or this, but like this. Colin Manlove, among others, has called attention to Lewis's fondness for this kind of reasoning, which he labels "arguing to the missing term."¹⁰ This kind of induction may sparkle in other settings, such as police investigations. In literary criticism, however, this method of reasoning can be so mechanical and unfeeling that it eclipses an artwork's brilliance.

Three other features of the essay deserve our attention. First, the essay's argument unfolds in a spiral, not a line. It repeats itself. Perhaps repetition is inevitable when, in a burst of inspiration, you compose an essay with a fountain pen but have no access to a word processor to tidy up recursive reasoning. But there's more to it than that. The essay is repetitive in a peculiar fashion. It is as though Lewis were himself practicing the kind of repetition he so brilliantly outlines in his essay, "Variation in Shakespeare and Others." That kind of repetition, which Lewis calls "variation," consists of developing an idea by restating it over and over again in a series of images, proceeding laterally rather than linearly. By this method, the writer circles ever closer to the mark, like a spiral turning inward or an airplane circling the airport waiting for its turn to land.

Second, when Lewis is establishing the historical context and surveying the kinds of responses that would and would not have been conceptually available to the original Jacobean audience, he makes claims that, in light of more recent scholarship, are not only questionable but categorically inaccurate.

Most fundamentally, Lewis assumes that members of James's court (as well as London playgoers more generally) were unaccustomed to encountering blacks, indeed, so unaccustomed that the sudden appearance of one onstage would trigger a cascade of mind-blowing imaginative responses. But he is simply wrong. Blacks

had been in England before 1604. As a matter of fact, there may have been too many blacks, for in 1601 Queen Elizabeth granted a license to a seaman to transport “all” blacks out of England.¹¹

Lewis also declares that Jacobean audiences could not have perceived Othello “with contempt or disgust” because at that moment in European history, “there was no imperialism to make men think of them [i.e., blacks] as members of subject races.” “No imperialism in 1604”? Vaughan again proves Lewis wrong. She writes, “By the time Shakespeare began writing *Othello*, . . . any familiarity most Londoners had with ‘blackamoors’ probably came from slaves and servants, not from ‘men of royal siege,’” as Othello describes himself.¹² Third, on the subject of Othello’s blackness, one other problem presents itself, one we’ve already broached and one likely to have made you uncomfortable. It’s this: If you plan to study this essay, then you must brace yourself for the fact that Lewis consistently refers to Othello as a thing or object: twice Othello is cited as “the Black Man”; twice as “a figure”; twice as an “object”; once as “a thing”; once as “the creature”; and most painfully of all, once as a “monstrous” figure with “the staring black face and red lips” and another time as the “blackamore with his flash of tooth and eye.” And it only gets worse. Lewis describes Desdemona as “a girl who married a sort of ogre or hobgoblin” and paints their relationship as “The Beauty and the Beast.” Although Lewis hastens to add, “I do not mean that Shakespeare makes no more of it than that,” the sheer weight of the accumulated evidence to the contrary might be said to tell a different tale.

On the other hand, there are perfectly good reasons to exonerate Lewis for his manner of referring to Othello. Perhaps these kinds of references are meant to reinforce Lewis’ argument that Othello’s blackness made him a strange new entity, indeed an entity so strange that his unfamiliarity would necessarily cause audiences to step back and approach him as an object to be studied and comprehended. Or, by approaching the play as myth, we find that Othello’s blackness takes on archetypal significance more than racial prejudice. Seen in this light, the story becomes “Beauty and the Beast” gone awry, a fairy tale turned tragedy. Nonetheless, all the references to Othello as “a thing” can grate on one’s nerves so badly that the distraction may very well thwart one’s attempts to read the essay neutrally.

I would like to conclude by juxtaposing the two flyleaf manuscripts. The Cambridge flyleaf material features certain kinds of analysis—studying word pairs and phrases, comparing and contrasting the play with one of its sources, adjudicating variant readings, summarizing plots, etc. These modes of analysis, I think, constitute the kind of spadework that precedes the task of assembling details and insights to build an interpretation. This line of reasoning would support the hypothesis for an early date. The Wade Center manuscript, on the other hand, seems to represent the fruit of long reflection, the kind of synthesis that follows spadework and analysis. I cite these differences not to obsess over whether this one came first, and that one came second, or that this one outshines the other. Rather, I submit that we should view the two essays side by side, as the two paintings that comprise a diptych. Doing so allows us to view the two manuscripts as the reflection of two different moments in Lewis’s mind, moments that reflect this mysterious and beautiful thing we love and call interpretation.

Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, "Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem?" *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 88-105. C.S. Lewis, "Variation in Shakespeare and Others," *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 74-87. C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century (Excluding Drama)* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1954), pp.498-509. Colin Manlove has ably discussed these three essays on Shakespeare in *Reading the Classics With C.S. Lewis*, ed. Thomas L. Martin (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 2000, pp.123-139.

2. Manlove, p.123.

3. Manlove, p.47.

4. R.T.R.I., "C.S. Lewis and His Arden Shakespeare." *Magdalene College Magazine and Record* (42) 1997-1998, p. 48. I am deeply grateful for the gracious assistance of Mrs. Aude Fitzsimons, assistant librarian of the library of Magdalene College, Cambridge. I also gratefully thank the master and fellows of Magdalene College, Cambridge, for permission to cite the *Othello* manuscript in their keeping.

5. R.T.R.I., p.48.

6. *The Works of Shakespeare: The Tragedy of Othello*, third edition, ed. H.C. Hart (London: Methuen, 1923).

7. "C.S. Lewis and His Arden Shakespeare," p. 50. Lewis was an undergraduate at Oxford from December 1916, until November 1917, when he was called to the war. After World War I, Lewis resumed his studies, which span from January 1919 to June, 1923. During this latter period he aged from 20 to 24. If Lewis indeed wrote his commentary in his 1923 edition of the Arden *Othello*, then he would have done so during his last year as an undergraduate. This would make sense, since in 1923 Lewis was studying for his exam in English literature. He took his exam in June 1923, and scored a first.

8. Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Othello: A Contextual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.51.

9. C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p.139.

10. *Reading the Classics with C.S. Lewis*, p.134.

11. Vaughan, *Othello: A Contextual History*, p.58.

12. Vaughan, *Othello: A Contextual History*, p.59; *Othello* 1.2.22. Further perspective upon Othello's blackness is provided in Imtiaz Habib, *Shakespeare and Race: Postcolonial Praxis in the Early Modern Period* (Lanham: University P of America, 2000).

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