OTHELLO

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

EDITED BY EDWARD PECHTER

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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William Shakespeare
OTHELLO

AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
SOURCES AND CONTEXTS
CRITICISM

Edited by

EDWARD PECHTER
CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
AND
UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

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For William S. Pechter, my big brother Billy.

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Preface

Here are four things that happened during October 2001, the month that I began systematically putting together this book: 1) *O* was playing at my local cineplex, in Victoria, British Columbia. The film is set in a southern American high school where Odin (called "O"), a black basketball star, is driven to murder his girlfriend, Desi, by his teammate, Hugo ("white girls are snakes, bro"), himself motivated by jealousy (his father, the team coach, pays more attention to O than to his own son). 2) The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation aired a stylish made-for-television film in which, when John Othello becomes the first black commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police, his best friend and fellow officer, Ben Jago, is so furious at being bypassed for the job that he goads John into murdering his (of course white) girlfriend, Dessie. 3) The local bookstores were featuring the new Salman Rushdie novel. Focused on the India-born Malik "Solly" Solanka, *Fury* opens in New York, to which Solanka has fled from London after finding himself poised with a knife over the sleeping body of his English wife, Eleanor. The first chapter includes a reminiscence of their steamy first night together, during which Eleanor had talked out her honors-thesis interpretation of *Othello*. 4) The student newspaper at the University of Victoria, my home university, carried an opinion piece about the events of 9/11. In the accompanying photograph, the author, a Ugandan-born Indian Muslim in the Education Faculty, holds a clearly visible copy of *Othello*.

We might dismiss these events as accidents of time and place. *O* had been scheduled for release years earlier, but the Columbine shootings worried the distributors into a delay. British television audiences had seen the police drama months before Canadians, while U.S. audiences had to wait until 2002, when it was aired by PBS. Few people would have seen the 9/11 piece who weren't connected with my home university. Then too there is the subjective element: buy a Mazda and you're amazed to see how many Mazdas are on the road. As someone with a long professional career devoted to literary interpretation, I may be overly given to imposing coherent patterns on the blips that happen to coincide on my radar.

But with all allowances for coincidence and subjectivity, *Othello*

seems to be in the air. It was certainly in the air during 1994 and 1995, when Americans (indeed, people all over the world) were obsessed with the O. J. Simpson murder trial: many people, academics and otherwise, were intrigued by the resonance they heard between *Othello* and the "crime of the century," as it was then breathlessly called. Moreover, *Othello* has generated powerful interest independently of—and earlier than—the Simpson story. During the past twenty-five years or so, *Othello* has become the Shakespearean tragedy of choice, replacing *King Lear* in the way *Lear* had earlier replaced *Hamlet* as the play that speaks most directly and powerfully to current interests. Robert Scholes, helping to design a new capstone English course for grade twelve, selects *Othello* as the one obligatory Shakespeare play because "the issues of cultural conflict are in the foreground" (136). Writing without direct pedagogical interests and for a different audience, Mitchell Greenberg sees much the same thing: *Othello* has a peculiar power "to haunt us as an uncanny projection, from the past, of our conflicted present" (1).

Conflict, though, is not unique to *Othello*; we need to be more specific. During the period of *Othello*'s ascendancy, literary and cultural analysis has been transformed by feminist, African American, and postcolonial critics, to whose central concerns the play seems directly to appeal. *Othello* focuses on marriage as a domestic relationship, where the most intimately private experience is nonetheless shaped by the pressures of society and political power. The play is preoccupied with questions of gender difference, the expectations of men and women for themselves and about each other, including those that underwrite and undermine marriage. It is preoccupied with racial difference as well. Its protagonist is an alien to white Christian Europe, what we would now call an immigrant, whose visible racial difference seems to be the defining aspect of his identity, the source of his charismatic power to excite interest and to generate horror. As a result, according to Thomas Cartelli, "*Othello* is well on the way to replacing *The Tempest* as a favored field of debate and contention both for scholars and critics of Shakespeare, and for the increasingly numerous workers in the field of postcolonial studies" (124). Or as Mythili Kaul puts it, introducing a collection of new essays by black writers on the play, "all the contributors" see *Othello* as "of utmost relevance today in terms of" a variety of "pressing contemporary issues," including "politics, colonial exploitation, cultural relativism, and, above all, race" (xii). These concentrations on gender and racial difference coincide with appalling intensity in the play's final image: Othello and Desdemona, the "old black ram" and "white ewe" Iago summoned to Brabantio's imagination at the beginning, locked in a perverse embrace on the marriage bed revealed finally as the place of murder.

This book inevitably reflects the intense current interest in *Othello*—in fact, enthusiastically embraces it—by including many critical commentaries that emphasize our concerns with race, sex, and gender. But this edition also includes a generous selection of earlier commentary and is designed to represent the continuities as well as significant ruptures between recent and traditional interpretations of the play. Earlier audiences of *Othello* would not have understood, let alone shared our kinds of interests in the play, and we have generated these interests in most cases without much conscious knowledge of critical or performance traditions. But these traditions matter, perhaps more than we think; they shape our desires and our understanding in ways of which we may be imperfectly aware. Current audiences and readers of *Othello* cannot exercise their interpretive freedom "just as they please," but "under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." Marx, whose remarks about history near the beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* I have just quoted, concludes from this argument that the "tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (15). This gloomy claim may be especially relevant to *Othello*, which is in large measure about the dead weight of inherited prejudice. But *Othello* furnishes glimmers of transcendence as well, and this edition provides readers with historical material that is not only grimly determining but also "edifying" in Richard Rorty's sense of the term—that is, useful for building new kinds of ideas.

The book follows the standard format of Norton Critical Editions. After the text of the play comes "Sources and Contexts," which prints the sixteenth-century narrative Shakespeare used for the plot of *Othello* and for many of its details. This section also includes a detailed discussion of various topics—Moors, Turks, blacks, Venetians, marriage and domesticity, fathers and daughters, female sexuality, and so on—through which the original audiences would presumably have engaged the play. Then comes "Criticism," including substantial excerpts from interpretive responses to *Othello* from its origins to the present. The book ends with a group of bibliographies for readers who want to go into greater detail about material included earlier in the book, or to expand their critical interests into related territories.

I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a grant that facilitated the work for this book. A fellowship from the Folger Shakespeare Library, in Washington, D.C., allowed me to do much of the final research in the rich and friendly environment for which that institution and its staff are well known.

My thanks go to David Pechter for lending me his laptop, to Lesley Pechter for line editing and proofreading, and to Alan Galey for research assistance beyond my requests or expectations. Conversations with Farouk Mitha, in the Education Faculty of the University of Victoria, helped make this book less parochial. My English Department colleagues—especially Kim Blank, Evelyn Cobley, Arnie Keller, Terry Sherwood, and David Thatcher—provided encouragement and useful suggestions. Andrew Hadfield kindly sent me advance proofs for his *Literary Sourcebook*. Michael Neill let me see draft discussions of *Othello*'s date and text for his forthcoming Oxford edition of the play. Holly Carver, executive director of Iowa University Press, gave me free access to material in my *"Othello" and Interpretive Traditions*, where some of the discussion in this Norton Critical Edition is developed at greater length. Finally, thanks to everyone at Norton for their professionalism and helpfulness—especially to Carol Bemis, who was there with me from the beginning, and to Kurt Wildermuth, whose intelligence and diligence are everywhere present in this book.

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A Note on the Text

This edition is based on the text printed in the First Folio (1623). Additions and emendations adopted from the First Quarto (1622) are not signaled in the text, but are specified in the Textual Notes printed after the Textual Commentary at the end of the play. All other interpolated material is placed within square brackets. The footnotes specify many of the earlier editors to whose learning and intelligence I am deeply indebted, keyed to the bibliography printed below—but perforce not all. Working on Shakespeare entails obligations beyond practical acknowledgment and (standing on the shoulders of sometimes anonymous giants) beyond even conscious knowledge.

Readers who want a sense of the complications involved in editing *Othello* and Shakespeare in general will want to look at the Textual Commentary (p. 119). A preliminary word is in order here, though, about two matters—stage directions and scene locations. In many cases where an action seems to be called for, the early texts include either no stage directions or imprecise generalities located indifferently somewhere in the vicinity of what appears to be the appropriate line. Beginning with Nicholas Rowe in 1709, editors have expanded upon these perfunctory practices, systematically repositioning, elaborating, and inventing stage directions to serve the needs of readers for whom the ability to think in terms of theatrical performance could not necessarily be taken for granted. I have continued in this tradition of editorial intervention, reproducing (and sometimes relocating) the stage directions added by earlier editors and inventing some of my own, as well as calling attention occasionally in the explanatory notes to stage actions that might seem to be suggested by the text. "Suggested" is the key word: "here are some things that might be done on stage at this point, among many other things—including nothing." Reading theatrically means acknowledging a long and continuing stage history in which Shakespearean texts have generously accommodated performers who have felt free to shape them to the exigencies of their particular situations.

Scene locators also begin with Rowe, again to accommodate readers; but the situation here is much more complicated because—as Peter Holland argues in a piece to which I am much indebted—Rowe

was trying to accommodate his playgoing contemporaries as well. Theatrical performance had come to differ significantly from the kind Globe (or Blackfriars) audiences experienced when *Othello* was new, and scene location was one of the most significant of the changes. Where the eighteenth-century stage had developed a fairly sophisticated set of scenic properties and conventions in order to localize the action, distinguishing between inside and outside and between various external environments, Shakespeare's stage had effectively no scenery at all. The action took place in an unspecified place that could be inferred from the circumstances and that would (when required) be specified in the dialogue. The resulting flexibility allowed for "split scenes," where the action could shift back and forth between different places. In 3.4, for example, the "place is nowhere specified, only implied by character and action. Thus although much of the dialogue seems to assume an 'interior' and private setting, there is no discrepancy created when Cassio is told to 'walk here about' . . . and Bianca enters 'going to [Cassio's] lodging' " (Ross). In 4.2, similarly, the "scene starts indoors (cf. 28), and in some productions in Desdemona's bedroom. Later Roderigo wanders in [172], and it seems to be outdoors: one of the advantages of unlocalized staging" (Honigmann). "The truth is," as Edmond Malone puts it, after describing in detail the "great difficulties in ascertaining the place" of 4.2, that "our poet and his audience, in this instance as in many others, were content, from want of scenery, to consider the very same spot, at one and at the same time, as the outside and inside of a house."

A devoted and accomplished historian, Malone understood that scene locators were misleading. Nonetheless, following the practice of all his predecessors going back to Rowe, Malone included them in his 1790 edition (4.2 is said to take place in "A Room in the Castle"), as have most subsequent editors to this day (though often hedged about with square brackets or apologetic explanations, or relegated to the notes). This may be editorial inertia, against which many current editors, one following the other, like to inveigh; but inertia can be good as well as bad, and the reassuring familiarity provided by scene locators, especially in a text designed (as is this one) for a nonspecialist audience, might be argued to outweigh the disadvantages.

But this is by no means clear. Is it strictly true, as Lawrence Ross claims, that "no discrepancy" arises from Desdemona's "walk here about"? To be sure, since the earlier impression was not fixed or definite (we see no scenery, read no "A Room in the Castle"), the words are not experienced as a *contradiction*. Nonetheless, the exterior location does come on us as a new and surprising—discrepant—discovery. Shakespeare could have easily enough written his way out

of this situation, but didn't, I believe, because he wants us to be emphatically aware of the exterior location: that Bianca emerges on her own into public space defies what we now call gender norms—a topic of paramount importance in the play. The play thus does more than take advantage of a convenient flexibility—it exploits the flexibility to achieve a significant dramatic effect.

There are many other instances in which Shakespeare has taken advantage of the unlocalized stage (perhaps better called the variously localized stage); here are three early on in the action. *One:* at the beginning of the play, we discover the location, a Venetian street at night, as part of a brutally sudden process that also locates the play's subject as bestial intercourse. The alarming effect is thrust upon us in the same way as it is on Brabantio, "with like timorous accent and dire yell / As when, *by night and negligence*, the fire / Is spied in populous cities" (1.1.72–74; emphasis mine). The emphasized locution bothered William Warburton in 1747 (see note to line 73), as well it might (eighteenth-century discomfort is frequently worth respecting): the phrase conjoins a sense of time and place with a sense of unpreparedness, as though merely to find oneself in a Venetian night scene entails anxiety and some inexplicable culpability—arguably the effects reinforced by the withheld and precipitously revealed location. *Two:* an audience at the beginning of act 2, not yet knowing it is in act 2, since the continuity of the action would create no decisive break between the simultaneously exiting Iago and the entering figures, would, before it can determine that it is located at (say) "A Seaport in Cyprus," be likely to hear the violent sound effects of the storm as produced by Iago's final words in act 1: "I have't! It is engendered! Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light" (1.3.394–95). *Three:* Having failed (apparently) to tempt Cassio into salacious thoughts about Desdemona, Iago tries a new tactic: "Come, lieutenant, I have a stoup of wine, and here without are a brace of Cyprus gallants that would fain have a measure to the health of black Othello" (2.3.24–27). "Here without" must come as a bit of a surprise. There has been no reason to assume a change from the Herald's speech just earlier in 2.2, with its strong effect of exterior location. (In fact, 2.3 is, in all editions of the play prior to Theobald's in 1733, printed as a continuation of 2.2 rather than as a new scene.) To be sure, the fact goes by too quickly to have much significant consequence, but the play isn't done. "Where are they?" asks Cassio about the same gallants only a moment later (39). He can hardly have forgotten; apparently he is trying (desperately) to buy time before agreeing—against his better judgment, but he seems to have no choice—to what we know to be Iago's plot to destroy him. And now, in Iago's response, the play reminds us with renewed emphasis of the interior location: "Here at

the door; I pray you call them in" (40). By abruptly revealing and then confirming an interior location, the play produces a notable discrepancy and (my main point) a functional one. Making us suddenly aware of Cassio's physical enclosure, it reinforces the sense that he is willy-nilly enmeshed inside the plot Iago is spinning to destroy him.

In all these cases, we are dealing with effects that (like gender norms) seem central to the play: entrapment, guilt, an irresistibly powerful Iago. In all these cases, scene locators would destroy or (minimally) diminish these effects. The point need not be exaggerated. The meanings reinforced by these effects are amply available without them. Nonetheless, I came in the course of producing this edition reluctantly to the conclusion that scene locators, no matter how qualified or inconspicuous, do more harm than good, so I have not written them into the text that follows.

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