Racism, Misogyny, and the *Othello* Myth

Inter-racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee

CELIA R. DAILEADER

CAMBRIDGE

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RACISM, MISOGYNY, AND THE *OTHELLO* MYTH

Through readings of texts spanning four centuries, and bridging the Atlantic – from genres as diverse as English Renaissance drama, abolitionist literature, Gothic horror, and contemporary romance – Daileader questions why Anglo-American culture's most widely read and canonical narratives of inter-racial sex feature a black male and a white female and *not* a black female and a white male. This study considers the cultural obsession with stories patterned on Shakespeare's *Othello* alongside the more historically pertinent, if troubling, question of white male sexual predation upon black females. Daileader terms this phenomenon "Othellophilia" – the fixation on Shakespeare's tragedy of inter-racial marriage to the exclusion of other definitions and more optimistic visions of inter-racial eroticism. This original book argues that masculinist-racist hegemony used myths about black male sexual rapacity and the danger of racial "pollution" in order to police white female sexuality and exorcise collective guilt over the sexual slavery of women of color.

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To Gary Taylor
for taking me there

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Before black men were lynched for alleged sex with white women, white women were burned alive for alleged sex with a devil described as black. For this we cannot blame racism: though the rhetoric of demonism would be incorporated into racial discourse as it developed, the black devil figure pre-existed the large-scale contact with and enslavement of African peoples that generated racism as a hegemonic, pseudo-scientific discourse. The color of the medieval and early modern devil was allegorical. Indeed, the devil himself – from a secular point of view – is allegorical. I do not believe he exists, and neither do, I daresay, many of my readers. If the historical phenomenon in question is not racism, then, what is it? The devil is an ideological fabrication, yet droves of real women died owing to alleged relations with him. To call it misogyny is only the beginning. Here is some anecdotal evidence:

> The Devil's penis was the obsession of every Inquisitor and the "star" of nearly every witch's confession. The women invariably said it was cold but there was disagreement on other details . . . Most reported it was black and covered with scales . . . One likened the Devil's penis to that of a mule, which the Evil One constantly exposed, so proud was he of its massive size and shape.[1]

Uncannily familiar? Indeed, the women's testimony oddly prefigures the modern myth of the hyper-sexual black male. Sometimes, in fact, the discourses of witch-craft treat the Devil's blackness as *literally* African, as in the 1324 trial of Lady Alice Kyteler, wherein a witness claimed to have seen her with "three large Negroes bearing iron rods in their hands."[2] These racialized demons seem perplexingly "modern," and the narratives

in which they appear suggest certain constants in the development of racial stereotype. Yet there is one other historical constant here that deserves pointing out: these narratives justify a woman's death on the basis of her sexuality – even, very often, on the basis of one single (if singular) sexual act.

For as long as women have existed they have died as a result of sex. When it didn't happen "naturally" – as a result of childbirth – male power found ways to make it happen, either literally or symbolically. This, for me, is the story of Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603): it is the story of a woman killed – smothered in her bed – for having sex.[3] Which *particular* man she is killed for having sex *with* matters less to me than the sexual nature of the transgression she dies for: that is, her "innocence" of the charge of adultery with Cassio strikes me as immaterial, as from the standpoint of masculinist–racist hegemony it is her defiance of paternal authority and the miscegenation taboo that results (and rightly so) in her death.

In the apt phrasing of Michael Neill, *Othello* "has rightly come to be identified as a foundational text in the emergence of modern European racial consciousness – a play that trades in constructions of human difference at once misleadingly like and confusingly unlike those twentieth-century notions to which they are nevertheless recognizably ancestral."[4] I don't set out to resolve this "like/unlike" problem, although it will underlie many of the book's discussions: the problem has generated abundant excellent and fascinating scholarship, and is as yet to be resolved. Perhaps it never can be. And indeed the question "Is *Othello* a racist play?" may be, at least at this juncture in the play's critical history, somewhat beside the point. Othello himself, the character, does not exist; he is as much a construct as the devil in the witch-craft trials mentioned above, the devil to whom Shakespeare's text frequently compares him. Rather, my own problem with the play, and the reason why – almost despite myself – I have returned to it again and again in my research, like that nagging insect bite or eternally crooked painting, can be summed up in a single comment by one of my undergraduate students: "If *my* wife cheated on me, *I'd* kill her."

That relatively few objections to Shakespeare's politics in this play have focused on its treatment of domestic violence – as opposed to its treatment of race – seems to me worthy of comment. Indeed, even those critics who categorize the play as "domestic tragedy" overwhelmingly resist applying the language of domestic violence,[5] a subject confined, seemingly, to the domain of journalists, psychologists, law enforcement officers, consciousness-raising groups, and other traffickers in the mundane

world of the real. Yet this attitude – implicitly elevating literary violence to a level above social or cultural critique – leaves uninterrogated the ways in which the text naturalizes Othello's extreme reaction to a set of otherwise unremarkable circumstances. To argue that this reaction – "jealousy," in the universalizing language of liberal humanist interpretation – is "natural" not just to black men, but to people (to men?) "in love" is *not* to rescue the play's message for progressive post-modern politics. As Linda Charnes argues, "The love story has been one of the most pervasive and effective – yet least deconstructed – of all ideological apparatuses: one of the most effective smokescreens available in the politics of cultural production." Charnes points to "the historical popularity of crime stories purveyed as love stories" in arguing that "love" is not a universal human truth, but rather a culturally constructed "genre" – "one whose coercive influence is camouflaged by its very obviousness."[6] I would like to treat *Othello* as one of those "crime stories": wife-murder, after all, is a *crime*. Wife-murder is a crime – in Shakespeare's culture as in our own – *even when the wife is "guilty" of adultery.*[7]

The language of criminality, indeed, seems appropriate to a reading of *Othello,* yet in a way that only underscores the feminist point here. As critics such as Katherine Maus have demonstrated, the play is deeply fascinated by legalist questions of guilt and innocence, with the notion of "ocular proof."[8] Yet this language, throughout the better part of the play, is most often applied to Desdemona, not Othello; indeed, discussions of "domestic tragedy" repeatedly misapply the language of crime and punishment, criminalizing the wife's adultery rather than the husband's murder.[9] That this reversal of culpability is culturally over-determined does not excuse *our own* failure of attention to it as critics who allegedly "know better" than to say that wives who commit adultery deserve violence. And in fact, attention to the (often inconsistent) details of the play brings to light the fact that sexual infidelity of one type or another is rampant amongst Shakespeare's *dramatis personae.* Cassio, for instance, is "almost damned in a fair wife" (1.1.12), yet flagrantly courts (and scornfully boasts of) Bianca, all the while worshiping Desdemona.[10] More strikingly, Iago suspects that Othello has cuckolded him, and he mentions this as one of his many motives for revenge – against Othello, not against Emilia. Critics tend to ignore this point of plot, but in my reading it sheds significant light on the play's treatment of female sexuality. No one wonders why Iago – the character whose villainy my students often cite as evidence that the text is not racist ("But Iago is *white,* and look how evil *he* is . . ."[11]) – does *not* consider his own wife's alleged adultery as grounds

for violence against *her*. This is not, of course, to praise Iago at Othello's expense: eventually, Iago too kills his wife. But Iago's violence is practical, not symbolic – he kills Emilia to prevent her from incriminating him, not because she has "contaminated" his marriage bed (IV.i.205), as Othello believes Desdemona has done. Is this why readers so seldom notice, let alone believe in, the suggestion that Othello and Emilia have committed adultery? Is this why Iago has been so famously held up as an example of "motiveless malignity"[12] – why he does not seem, to us, to believe in his own motives? Because a sexually jealous Iago would act precisely the way he urges Othello to act – he would lash out in misogynistic violence. Perhaps the homoerotic reading of Iago's interactions with Othello might explain his apparent indifference toward his wife – it is Othello, as Iago's primary love-object, who bears the brunt of his jealousy. But this does not explain the critical silence surrounding the *other* adultery plot – a silence that underscores our complicity in the notions that perpetuate domestic violence.[13]

Let us return briefly to the subject of witch-trials and consider the status of the women who confessed to knowledge of the devil's penis. What happened to their bodies as a result of the confession? What happens to bodies that burn? They char, they blacken. The witches thus join with their devil-lover in the sooty blackness associated with hell-fire. The transformation, of course, is irreversible; innumerable proverbs of the period insist on the indelibility of blackness as a moral signifier. The notion of "washing the Ethiope," indicating an exercise in futility, is only one. Another such expression is "Pitch defiles."[14] Pitch defiles; it does not just dirty; and it does so by physical contact. Moreover, it does not merely rub off on someone; rather, it sticks. Like the cultural inscription of the hymen as, not a minuscule and biologically useless membrane, but rather an irreplaceable (and tenuous) state of moral purity, the reification of blackness has little to do with the physical properties of, say, pitch (which is hard to wash off) or soot (which isn't) and has everything to do with the addressee of the proverb, the potential handler of the pitch. Along the same lines, the discourse of racial blackness and its proscriptions against inter-racial sex have little to do with real people of color. As Toni Morrison says, "The subject of the dream is the dreamer."[15]

One aspect of Shakespeare's controversial play that has *not* been the subject of debate is whether we should credit Othello's statement in the epigraph to this Introduction, his characterization of the dead Desdemona as "gone to burning hell" (V.ii.127). The question may seem naïve or overly literal from the stand-point of a secular, post-modern community

of scholars, readers, and play-goers, but early modern audiences would have been acutely aware that Othello, as a murderer-suicide (never mind a Moor and born heathen) would be going to hell. Yet Desdemona also compromises her spiritual status in this scene, for she has taken on the blame for her death: "*Emilia*: 'O, who hath done this deed?' *Desdemona*: 'Nobody. I myself. Farewell'" (121–2). Othello immediately underscores this as a lie, and one that re-casts her death as a suicide and hence symbolically damns her. Othello, not wishing to "kill [her] soul" (33), has given her a chance to pray, and she makes only a feeble effort: asked to "Think on [her] sins," she oddly confesses, "They are loves I bear to you," and he, even more oddly, replies, "Ay, and for that thou diest" (39–41). The audience may well have agreed with them both: her love for the Moor could not be anything less than a sinful perversion, and one that ensured her ultimate destruction, physically and spiritually.[16] Though Emilia's speech emphatically attempts to redeem her dead mistress and re-assert moral binaries, she, as a female and a servant, is the least authoritative voice in the scene, and she promptly dies anyway. Of all the men onstage in the final 119 lines of the play (there are six, plus an unspecified number of "officers"), only the murderer himself says anything good about the victim, calling her a "pearl . . . / Richer than all [my] tribe" (345–6). The final speech refers to Desdemona only obliquely and grimly in the "tragic loading of this bed." Notably, the dead lovers are indistinguishable – and indistinguishably hideous – in death: "This object poisons sight, / Let it be hid" (361–3).

The early modern Prince of Darkness was indisputably black, but some lesser devils were known to wear white. Thomas Adams' popular sermon *The White Devil; or, the Hypocrite Uncased* (1613) developed Martin Luther's notion of "the white devil" as "black within . . . but white without";[17] just one year before, John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) had dramatized, in the words of the title page, "The life and death of Vittoria Corombona the famous Venetian curtizan." Desdemona is from Venice too. Even if she has not committed adultery with Cassio (and we know she hasn't), the "foul disproportion" and "unnatural" desires (III. iii.237) that led her to elope with the Moor risk placing the "fair devil" (481) in the same moral category.

Pitch defiles. Or, in the more positive terms of the contemporary African-American sexual boast, "Once you go black, you never go back."

The devil, iconographically speaking, is no longer black. In the popular imagination, he is generally a cartoon figure in red tights with a goatee, horns, and a pointy tail. Hardly an intimidating figure. And so it should be:

does anyone miss witch-hunts? This is not to say our culture lacks demons: from the Cold War to the "War on Drugs" to the "War on Terrorism" our demons are increasingly ideological – or, at least, more overtly so.

One could even say that in the official discourse of post-modern, white democracy, the devil is racism itself. That is why so many scholars, theatre-goers, and readers have been struggling, for so many years, to prove that *Othello* either is or is not racist, either is or is not "about race." I have a different set of questions to ask of the play and of the discussions surrounding it: namely, *Why this play? Why Othello?* Of all seventeenth-century treatments of blackamoors, why was *Othello* singled out for all this attention? Mary Floyd-Wilson situates the play "at a crossroads in the history of ethnological ideas when an emergent racial discourse clashed with the still-dominant classical and medieval" paradigms. At the same time that the play reflected these changing views, however, it also, in Floyd-Wilson's analysis, helped to solidify them: she explains, ". . . it is the legacy of Shakespeare's play that this portrait of 'Moorish behavior' [as irrational, jealous, and lascivious] established many of the strains of modern racial discourse."[18] Floyd-Wilson's arguments are persuasive; they do, however, raise the question of whether this "legacy" or impact owes itself to the intrinsic literary merit of the play, to some preternatural ability of the play to anticipate more modern (albeit offensive) attitudes toward racial difference, or to the mere fact that Shakespeare wrote it. This book aims to explore this set of questions.

Let me introduce a term that will be central to this analysis: *Othello-philia*, the critical and cultural fixation on Shakespeare's tragedy of inter-racial marriage to the exclusion of broader definitions, and more positive visions, of inter-racial eroticism. I originally coined the term to address a very specific problem in contemporary classical theatre: the habit of casting black actors in "color-blind" roles that uncannily recalled the role of Othello. Thus, Hugh Quarshie, the actor who broke the color-line in the Royal Shakespeare Company, managed to make a name for himself *without* playing Othello, a play that he views as reinforcing racial stereotypes.[19] But, as I argue in my essay on black actors, the role continued in many ways to haunt his career, cropping up in the language of reviews, alluded to in the semiotics of costuming and blocking. Likewise with Quarshie's successor, Ray Fearon, whose 1996 roles as Bracchiano in *The White Devil* and Paris in *Troilus and Cressida* subtly evidenced his status (as one critic put it parenthetically) as "a future Othello." Indeed, even Fearon's acclaimed performance as Romeo (1997) – despite, seemingly, the director's best intentions – inspired Othellophile musings, at least in

the critics.[20] When he went on finally to play Othello – opposite the same actress who'd played Juliet to his Romeo (a fact I will return to later) – I could not help but wonder whether the critical enthusiasm didn't owe something to collective relief at seeing Fearon's professional destiny fulfilled.

My work on Othellophilia in casting opened my eyes to the way Anglo-American culture *generally* "casts" black men as Othellos. The fixation on the coupling of a black male and a white female, with the attendant cultural anxieties played out in the story's tragic result, is not unique to the RSC or even to English "classical" drama. The discourse I call Othellophilia is not solely theatrical – or even, necessarily, consciously Shakespearean.

An exemplary phenomenon is the popular approach to modernizing *Romeo and Juliet* – namely, the device of translating the medieval blood-feud into the language of modern, particularly American, racial conflict. In my fact-gathering about so-called "non-traditional" casting, I discovered that these inter-racial productions almost inevitably cast Romeo, not Juliet, as black – an observation that says as much about contemporary racial discourse as its early modern progenitor in the portrayal of black-amoors like Othello.[21] Thus, something that appeared as a mere, awkward note in my essay on racial casting – that is, the practical invisibility of black *female* performers in Anglocentric, classic theatre – becomes the aporia this book aims to explain, if not to fill. Why, for instance, have white performers monopolized the role of "tawny" or "black" Cleopatra – as the text calls her (*Antony and Cleopatra*, I.i.6; I.v.28) – throughout the play's 400-year performance history? This puzzling stage legacy occupies the flip-side of Othellophilia, and points toward its own suppressed counter-discourse: the more historically pertinent if more ideologically troubling story of white male sexual use of black females, the slave-holder's secret.

This book proceeds from the simple observation that in Anglo-American culture from the Renaissance onward, the most widely read, canonical narratives of inter-racial sex have involved black men and white women, and not black women and white men. Why? True, Anglocentric beauty standards might discourage authors from setting up women of color as objects of lyric praise, but conventions can always be played with – as indeed Shakespeare does with Cleopatra, as well as the "Dark Lady" of the Sonnets. Moreover, historical fact simply does not bear out the myth that women of color are sexually repugnant to white men. If anything, the opposite.

For the first miscegenists were European males. The very first documented case of inter-racial sex in English history involved an African woman impregnated and abandoned during the famous expedition of Sir Francis Drake.[22] And the pattern continued: there were no women on board the first ships to arrive on the shores of Africa or the New World, and European women were in short supply in the colonies into the eighteenth century. Furthermore, until 1800 the vast majority of women sailing to America were non-European.[23] This means that unless the European colonists remained doggedly chaste (or insisted only on homosexual relations) any sexual interest would have been directed at either native or enslaved females – that is, Indians or blacks. Correspondingly, the first miscegenation statute in Virginia in 1662 specifically addressed the offspring of white masters and their slaves: "Children got by an Englishman upon a Negro woman shall be bond or free according to the condition of the mother, and if any Christian shall commit fornication with a Negro man or woman, he shall pay double the fines of a former act." The wording of this infamous statute barely acknowledges the possibility that an English *woman* might fornicate with a Negro man, though that is clearly covered in the second clause. In any case, Virginia law did not address the children of such a union until 1691.[24] Indeed, the widespread prostitution – literal and de facto – of women of color in the West Indies has been well documented, and historians have noted the disproportionate number of female versus male manumitted slaves, manumission being a frequent reward for sexual service.[25] The practice of West Indian concubinage was so deeply entrenched that by the early 1800s white males openly commented on the comeliness of "the ladies of color." One historian notes that "white males possessed a sexual typology in which white women were valued for domestic formality and respectability, coloured women for exciting socio-sexual companionship, and black women for less-structured covert sexual adventurism."[26] If there is a class hierarchy affording relations with "coloured" (i.e., part European) women a prestige denied those covert relations with blacks, this doesn't discount the latter group as erotic objects. In fact, the very presence of those "coloured" women evidences the sexual desirability of their black mothers.

This book claims that masculinist racist hegemony used myths about black male sexual rapacity and the danger of racial "pollution" at least partly to exorcise its own collective psychological demons: the slave-master's sexual guilt, and his fear of the products – filial and social – of the inter-racial trysts so powerfully portrayed in slave autobiographies.

Another motive, of course, was the control of white women. According to Kim F. Hall's ground-breaking *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*, women's bodies in the discourses of English colonialism become "the symbolic repository of the boundaries of the nation."[27] Yet this description also applies to American racism, as is made obvious by the title of the white supremacist propaganda film *Birth of a Nation* (1915). As stated in the first sentence of the first novel written by an African-American, William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853), "With the growing population of slaves in the Southern States of America, there is a fearful increase of half whites, most of whose fathers are slave-owners, and their mothers slaves."[28] Thus, the historical popularity of *Othello* on American stages – even despite squeamishness about inter-racial marriage – makes perfect sense. Whatever might have been Shakespeare's point in telling the story, it has served well as a cautionary tale for white women who might besmirch either their own (sexual) "purity" or that of their race. In lynching, white female sexuality justifies racist violence: in Othellophilia the woman is lynched too.

I had originally conceived of this as a study of inter-racial eroticism, and that is how a draft title phrased it. But the further my work proceeded, the less erotic the "eroticism" of the material appeared. Many of the texts are, indeed, obsessed with (generally female) sexuality; many contain scenes bordering on pornographic; but the ideology these images serve is, at basis, profoundly sex-phobic. The paradox is only an apparent one: as I have argued elsewhere, many sexually explicit representations are colored by loathing of the flesh, designed to chastise, purge, annihilate, or contain the erotic body.[29] When one body is female and white and the other black and male the ideological stakes are especially high.

This project is ambitious in its chronological scope: in tracing the impact of a cultural trope across four centuries and across the Atlantic, I am consciously flouting the central dictate of New Historicism: that of avoiding comparisons across what Foucault calls "epistemes."[30] In doing so, I align myself with an increasing number of scholars critical of that by-now orthodox critical practice.[31] I feel I need not apologize for the project's trans-historical reach, having garnered ample evidence of a trajectory of racialized sexual discourse that originated in Shakespeare, that achieved dominance in and through his reputation, and that continues to shape Anglo-American cultural fantasies. In this respect, the book is a kind of critical history of Shakespeare's *Othello*, but one with broader political and theoretical implications. New Historicism's caution in discussing race in the early modern period, its insistence on