

Recent Readings of *Othello*

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In her survey of current attitudes towards Shakespeare in the American theatre, Felicia Hardison Londré argues that *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *All's Well that Ends Well* have been replaced as problem plays in the Shakespearean canon by *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello*.¹ These three plays focus attention on late twentieth-century anxieties about gender, race, and ethnicity, and have provoked some heated discussions in rehearsal rooms, theatre reviews, and scholarly conferences and publications in the last decade. Londré goes on to argue that from her survey of American theatre directors, *Othello* is seen as the least problematic of these 'politically incorrect' plays, since Paul Robeson's performance as Othello in 1943 'initiated the gradual process of transferring ownership of the role from white actors in blackface to black actors' (p. 87). Although Londré concludes that the 'racial make-up of the cast does not appear today to be a significant factor in the designation of *Othello* as a problem play,'² the difficulties of *Othello* for scholars are still felt acutely, and have produced a range of critical responses since the mid-1980s which in many ways chart the significant changes in Shakespearean scholarship in that time. Indeed, the

¹ 'Confronting Shakespeare's Political Incorrectness in Production: Contemporary American Audiences and the New Problem Plays' in *Staging Difference: Cultural Pluralism in American Theatre and Drama*, ed. Marc Maufort (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 85. Throughout this article, after the first citation of a given work, references to it will be given parenthetically in the text.

² Londré, p. 87. An interesting parallel emerges in Martha Tuck Rozett's study of the responses of first-time junior undergraduate readers of *Othello*, where she finds 'an almost complete absence of references to racism or racial identity in the [student] papers': 'Talking Back to Shakespeare: Student-Reader Responses to *Othello*', in *Othello: New Perspectives*, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Kent Cartwright (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1991), p. 264.

distance between theatre professionals' and scholars' attitudes to the racial politics of *Othello* is typical of a broader distance between the practices of the theatre and the academy.

This distance is unfortunate, as developments in Shakespearean scholarship in the last decade have much to offer contemporary theatre practice. This new work, labelled 'cultural materialism' or 'new historicism', and located within the broader school of post-structuralism, has substantially and vigorously revived the study of Shakespeare, to the extent that it is not an exaggeration to speak of a revolution in Shakespearean studies in the academy. What is so enlivening about this new scholarship is its central endeavour to place the plays of Shakespeare in their historical context, as part of what Stephen Greenblatt calls the 'circulation of social energy' in Renaissance England.³ Jonathan Dollimore notes in the new work an interest in cultural analysis coming from 'the convergence of history, sociology and English'⁴ and quotes Raymond Williams' argument that 'we cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice, in such a way as to make them subject to quite special and distinct laws' (cited in Dollimore, p. 4). Cultural materialists adopt an oppositional stance to what Frank Lentricchia calls 'ruling culture' (cited in Dollimore, p. 14) in order that other voices may be heard, and, more importantly, alternative views of the workings of political power—both in the Renaissance and now—may be expressed. But, as Terence Hawkes asks in his introduction to *Alternative Shakespeares 2*, 'Alternative to what?'⁵ After all, reading Shakespeare's plays in their historical contexts is what E. M. W. Tillyard did in *The Elizabethan*

³ *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 12-15.

⁴ 'Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism and the New Historicism', in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 2.

⁵ *Alternative Shakespeares 2*, ed. Terence Hawkes (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 1.

Recent Readings of Othello

World Picture in 1943. In explanations of what new knowledges their work produces forty years after Tillyard, Dollimore and Greenblatt (and others⁶) characterise earlier historical approaches to Shakespeare and his plays as concerned with an overly unified and stable concept of culture and politics in the Renaissance. This 'ruling culture' view of the social contexts of literature is matched with a literary theory which holds that 'the values and insights of literary texts are fully actualized at the moment of their creation. [Thus] The task of reading is simply to recognize and to acquiesce in the author's intentions'.⁷ Cultural materialists aim for a political reading of canonical texts, reconstituting them, as Karen Newman puts it, in ways 'which disturb conventional interpretations and discover them as partisan, constructed, made rather than given'.⁸

So, what are the results of these re-visionings of Shakespeare for *Othello*? The general effect of the new critical theory on studies of *Othello* is to throw emphasis back on to the language

⁶ In addition to the works cited in this essay, for some of the central statements of intent in new historicism and cultural materialism, see Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984), Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), Terence Hawkes, *That Shakespeherian Rag* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), *The New Historicism*, ed. Aram H. Veesser (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) and Scott Wilson, *Cultural Materialism: Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). For a substantial and thoughtful critique of cultural materialist theoretical assumptions and outcomes based on detailed textual analyses of Shakespeare's works, see Brian Vickers, *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). Of course, this list is not exhaustive.

⁷ Michael D. Bristol, *Big-Time Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 17.

⁸ 'And wash the Ethiop white': Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*', in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion O'Connor (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), p. 157.

of the play, its construction as a social and cultural artefact, and its reception. New scholarship on *Othello* has almost completely moved from the studies of character and the exercise of moral judgement of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona, influenced by A. C. Bradley's approach to the play as if the characters were not dramatic fictions (an approach debunked by L. C. Knights' essay 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?'). A typical example of this move is to be found in Patricia Parker's detailed study of Shakespeare's comic and uncomic wordplay in *Shakespeare from the Margins* which combines close textual reading with attention to the relation between a text and its contemporary culture in 'an attempt to link feminist and literary criticism to a more historically grounded study of language and culture.'⁹ Her study of *Othello* explores the intersections of rhetoric—the linguistic power of the speaker to persuade his (or her) audience—with the discourse of law and the ideology of sexual difference, especially in Iago's accusations against Desdemona. Her study of the web of meanings to be spun from Iago's 'close dilations', and the obsession of the play with 'complex evocations of spying, informing, and exposing secrets', leads Parker to argue for a reading of *Othello* which gives us access to 'the circumstances of an England that included not only an increasingly elaborated secret service as the dispersed eyes and ears of the state but also increasingly extended networks of mediation and representation.' (p. 271) Such a reading, Parker argues in a claim which is typical of new historicist work on the Renaissance, is a new scholarly exploration of 'the network of

⁹ Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 1. Her chapter on *Othello*, 'Othello and Hamlet: Spying, Discovery, Secret Faults' appears in an earlier version as 'Shakespeare and Rhetoric: "dilation" and "delation" in *Othello*' in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, (New York and London: Methuen, 1985) and is reprinted in *William Shakespeare's Othello*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1987; Modern Critical Interpretations Series).

Recent Readings of Othello

terms that shaped politics, institutions, and laws, ... and all that we have subsequently come to think of as literature' (p. 272).

To show how far this sort of work on *Othello* has moved from the assumptions about literature underlying A. C. Bradley's and E. M. W. Tillyard's approaches, we can turn to a useful demonstration of post-structuralist criticism which takes *Othello* as its central example. In his essay 'Post-Structuralist Shakespeare: Text and Ideology', Christopher Norris neatly identifies the ideological contradictions of the Bradleian approach through a discussion of F. R. Leavis' critique of Bradley's view of the play as a psychological drama between 'Iago as a villain of near-superhuman resourceful cunning, and ... Othello as his nobly suffering idealized counterpart.'¹⁰ But Norris goes on to show how Leavis himself gets caught up in a reading of the play in which 'Leavis plays [an] Iago-like role in destroying the illusion of Othello's nobly suffering innocence' (p. 60) and in which he falls into the same trap as Bradley by assuming that dramatic character 'has its own coherence ... as a simple, real-life analogue' (p. 66). Norris' essay demonstrates the insights produced by post-structuralist critical theories which do not assume that the play is anything less or more than an artful linguistic construction, whose meanings can never be wholly fixed by the reader, performer, spectator, or critic, a construction which each reader uses to make his or her own meaning—as Terence Hawkes puts it, 'Shakespeare doesn't mean: we mean *by* Shakespeare.'¹¹ However, Norris' argument is also a cautionary tale to all readers, performers, spectators, and critics: his approach does not license a reductive, vulgar understanding of post-structuralist theory—that any text can mean anything we want it to—but points out the complexity of Shakespeare's texts and the necessity of identifying and then resisting attempts to reduce Shakespeare's meaning to any totalising ideological position.

¹⁰In Hawkes (ed.), *Alternative Shakespeares*, p. 58.

¹¹*Meaning by Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 3.

That said, much of the work on *Othello* since the mid-1980s is overtly ideological in its approach and intended effect. Michael Bristol's reading of *Othello* faces its racism, maintaining that 'An honest production of *Othello* would be just as intolerable as an honest production of *The Merchant of Venice*. In fact, as I hope to show, many readers and spectators of *Othello* have indeed refused to tolerate what is expressed so brutally in this play.'¹² He becomes more explicit: 'the text of *Othello* has to be construed as a highly significant document in the historical constitution both of racist sensibility and of racist political ideology' (p. 182). Bristol reads the play as a carnivalesque event of ritual protest over marriage which has a 'normative function in the allocation of marriage partners and in the regulation of sexual behaviour' requiring readers or spectators to see the characters of Othello, Desdemona, and Iago not as 'individual subjects endowed with ... some mode of autonomous interiorized life' but as the types of clown (Othello), transvestite (Desdemona) and *charivari* or scourge of marriage (Iago) (pp. 183-5). Reading this way, argues Bristol, takes away the consolations of the beauty of the text (what G. Wilson Knight called the 'Othello music') and compels audiences to consider their complicity in a ritual of humiliation and exile (the 'comedy of abjection') against a background of racial hatred and violence (p. 176). James R. Andreas' discussion of 'Othello's African American Progeny' takes up the topic of racism in Renaissance and contemporary culture with an answer to Jacques Derrida's assertion that 'There's no racism without language.'¹³ Andreas argues that as 'racism is a cultural virus that is verbally transmitted,' then 'its antidote must ... be verbally administered' (p. 181). He points to the ways in which *Othello* can help to offer a solution to the problem of racial violence through the play's incrimination of

¹²*Big-Time Shakespeare*, p. 176. Bristol's chapter on *Othello* is a development of 'Charivari and the Comedy of Abjection in *Othello*', in *Materialist Shakespeare: A History*, ed. Ivo Kamps (London and New York: Verso, 1995) and *Renaissance Drama* 21 (1990).

¹³In *Materialist Shakespeare*, ed. Kamps, p. 181.

Recent Readings of Othello

‘Western society at large for its predisposition to the periodic, ritual slaughter of marginal and aboriginal groups and all whites—especially women—who consort with them’ (p. 185). Like Bristol, Andreas maintains that the cultural work of *Othello* is most powerful when we witness the murder of Desdemona not as a private domestic tragedy, but as a sacrificial ritual necessary to satisfy the myth of white supremacy, arguing that ‘sexual encounters between the races are not private moments They represent a public shattering of the racist taboo’ (p. 188).

As I remarked earlier, it is a constant frustration that the richness of critical insight and breadth of approach in this new work has all but revolutionised scholarly approaches to Shakespeare’s plays, but seems to have little to say either to teachers of drama or theatre practitioners. This is an indication of the ways in which new historicist and cultural materialist readings of plays tend to neglect the embodied and performative nature of drama. To materialist critics, plays circulate in culture like other texts, and their performance potential—and all the richness of signification this might mean—is not of prime interest. A recent and fascinating exception to this tendency is Virginia Mason Vaughan’s contextual study of *Othello*. After providing a substantial study of the themes of militarism and imperialism, and race and gender ideologies, which include a survey of recent work (to 1990) on these topics, Vaughan investigates the histories and meanings of a series of specific productions of *Othello*, as well as a survey of the production of *Othello* in the Restoration. She gives detailed performance histories of Sir Francis Delavel’s amateur performance of Othello at Drury Lane in 1751, William Macready’s performances as Othello in the first half of the nineteenth century, and Henry Irving’s and Tommaso Salvini’s late nineteenth century Othellos (influencing both A. C. Bradley and Constantin Stanislavski),¹⁴ Paul Robeson’s famous and reclamatory performance in the role, Orson Welles’

¹⁴Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Othello, A Contextual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 159.

film of *Othello*, and Trevor Nunn's 1989 production of *Othello* for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Each of these productions is discussed in terms of the cultural work it performs, and Vaughan's study provides us with a critical history of *Othello* which is a model for the connection of the material practices of performance with the ideological imperatives of time and place.

Vaughan's contextual study of *Othello* is an invaluable resource for students of *Othello*, as is Julie Hankey's edition of the play, which prints the text of the play on the left hand page and matches the script with details of past performances on the right hand page.¹⁵ The script is accompanied by a selective chronology of performances of *Othello* (in Britain and the USA only), and an exemplary theatre history of *Othello* as its Introduction. However, in the classroom, caution Jean Howard and Marion O'Connor, 'it is only too easy to read and/or write as a born-again poststructuralist/Marxist and still teach like an unregenerate New Critic'.¹⁶ Although Howard and O'Connor use most of their editors' introduction to *Shakespeare Reproduced* to explore the conditions for teaching Shakespeare (again, only in Britain and the USA—not even a question is raised about conditions beyond these two centres), the essays themselves rarely raise the issue of teaching, still less performance. In this respect, few of the collections of essays heralding a 'new Shakespeare' mentioned above are any better. It is not until the 1990s that scholars turn to the question of teaching Shakespeare—or more precisely, teaching the new approaches to Shakespeare. The subject occupies two special editions of the journal *Shakespeare Quarterly* (Volume 41, Number 2, Summer 1990 and Volume 46, Number 2, Summer 1995).

The 1995 edition of *Shakespeare Quarterly* includes two articles which directly address the political and interpretative issues raised by teaching *Othello*, albeit in the American

¹⁵*Othello* by William Shakespeare, ed. Julie Hankey (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1987; Plays in Performance series).

¹⁶'Introduction', *Shakespeare Reproduced*, p. 5.

Recent Readings of Othello

context. Usefully, both Michael Collins and Milla Riggio frame their teaching of *Othello* with contemporary contexts and concerns. In 'Using Films to Teach Shakespeare', Collins starts where his students are, using their familiarity with film to demonstrate 'the openness of Shakespeare's scripts to interpretation.'¹⁷ They come to a viewing of four different film productions of *Othello* after having experimented with their own readings and interpretations through performance of lines and speeches from *Othello*. Collins also shows scenes from contemporary popular culture (Nixon's resignation speech, scenes with Jack Nicholson as the Joker in *Batman*, the informers in *JFK*) to demonstrate the rhetorical and theatrical strategies of *Othello* through a range of accessible texts, which encourage the students 'to recognize and reflect on their own responses without their teacher telling them how they ... should respond ... to an analogous theatricality in Shakespeare' (p. 231). Milla Riggio uses *Othello* in a much more risky way: in 1990 she set up a seminar on the play which would lead to a student performance of the work. Of her twenty-four students, ten were of colour, and Riggio's dilemma was to involve all her students in a production which she had planned to highlight the racial isolation of Othello.¹⁸ In this case, colour-blind casting would include the black students, but destroy the political and pedagogical points Riggio wished to make. Nor could Riggio use a recent 'solution' to the 'problem' of Othello's blackness, that is, the use of 'photo-negative' casting in Jude Kelly's production for the Shakespeare Theatre, Washington D. C., featuring white actor, Patrick Stewart as Othello, accompanied by a cast of black actors.¹⁹ Riggio's solution was to create

¹⁷*Shakespeare Quarterly*, 46:2 (Summer, 1995), p. 229.

¹⁸'The Universal is Specific: Deviance and Cultural Identity in the Shakespeare Classroom', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 46:2 (Summer, 1995), p. 196.

¹⁹Further information, reviews, interviews, and photographs of this production can be found on the World Wide Web at <<http://www.cedarnet.org/jensen/patothel.html>> The interview with Patrick Stewart is interesting for his observation that until Kelly's

white half-masks for all the characters in the play except Othello, a *coup de théâtre* which 'at once intensified and destabilized the concept of racial identity' (Riggio, p. 197).

Riggio's powerful but pragmatic solution echoes the theoretical discussions of Dymna Callaghan and Kim Hall who both explore the acculturated ways in which blackness is created as a performance of difference on the Renaissance stage. Callaghan focuses on the various ways in which actors assumed blackface to play Othello (quoting Billie Whitelaw's marvellous description of the four hours it took Laurence Olivier to make up for the role),²⁰ meditating on the 'ineluctable discrepancy between the cultural performance of alterity on the one hand and its lived condition on the other' (p. 193). Likewise, Hall investigates the gendering of tropes of blackness and argues that in the early modern period 'the language of aesthetics is constitutive of the language of race.'²¹ In discussing the ways in which beauty is defined through tropes of light and dark (Hall), and the ways in which whiteness is linked to feminine identity (Callaghan), both critics are interested in exactly the kind of performance Riggio's white masks produce, where whiteness is not normative, but is made as visible as Othello's blackness.

Although the BBC Television version of *Othello* falls outside my rough guidelines of approaches to *Othello* in the last decade, it presents an interesting case of the endurance of ideas about the place of Shakespeare's plays in national and international cultures. It is worth discussing here because of the aura of cultural authority such a series bears with it. The critical

concept of 'photo-negative' casting, he had assumed that the role of Othello would never be available to him.

²⁰'Othello was a white man': Properties of Race on Shakespeare's Stage' in *Alternative Shakespeares 2*, p. 203.

²¹'I rather would wish to be a Black-Moor': Beauty, Race, and Rank in Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania*', in *Women, 'Race', and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 179.

Recent Readings of Othello

and aesthetic assumptions of the BBC Shakespeare series, the financial and ideological investments in it, and the conditions under which plays were produced, all demonstrate the lasting power of 'Shakespeare' as a commodity, a point made by both Alan Sinfield in his discussion of the Royal Shakespeare Company as a cultural icon of Margaret Thatcher's corporate Britain,²² and Graham Holderness in his accounts of the place of Shakespeare in the British National Curriculum.²³ The BBC Shakespeare series was predicated on traditional ideas about Shakespeare, such as those outlined by Terence Hawkes in his introduction to *Alternative Shakespeares 2* (pp. 9-10). The series aimed to present Shakespeare's plays in their 'textual purity,'²⁴ in a standardised series which John Collick argues has more in common with the 'Victorian ideal of a high-class, historically 'accurate', character-centred (and by implication, narrative-based) Shakespeare' (p. 54). Collick's analysis usefully focusses on the institutional imperatives in the production of the series, finding in the 'rigid demands for a standardised product' (p. 53) from the American-based multinationals who invested in the project limitations which even the most inventive directors could not overcome. These included requirements that each video was to have a famous actor in a leading role, the action and costume were to correspond with the time and place of the play's fictional setting, and that there was an overall ban on what Collick calls 'monkey tricks'.²⁵

²²Alan Sinfield, 'Royal Shakespeare: Theatre and the Making of Ideology' in *Political Shakespeare*.

²³See, for example, Graham Holderness' essay, co-authored with Andrew Murphy, in *Shakespeare and National Culture*, ed. John J. Joughin (Manchester and New York: Manchester University University Press, 1997), pp. 19-41, or his editorship of the collection *The Shakespeare Myth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

²⁴John Collick, *Shakespeare, Cinema and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 52.

²⁵Collick, p. 54. It is not clear from Collick's text (he uses few footnotes) whether he is quoting the production guidelines here.

Susan Willis' study of the BBC Shakespeares is more sympathetic than Collick to the project and its outcomes, emphasising director and producer Jonathan Miller's interest in the Renaissance focus of the project 'not because I believe that's the way to do Shakespeare but because I happen to believe at this moment it's a rather interesting way to do Shakespeare'.²⁶ Willis discusses in detail Miller's *Othello* commenting on his use of interiors, his 'kinetic' camera work, and rich lighting in the realisation of *Othello* as a 'closet tragedy' (pp. 120-3). The question of casting the role of Othello is revisited, only this time the discussion is of the material difficulties of casting James Earl Jones, rather than the ideological question of race and 'ownership' of the role. In the light of objections from British Actors' Equity to Jones as an American import, I can't help feeling that Miller's decision to cast Anthony Hopkins as Othello was a pragmatic one, although he justified it by his view that in the Renaissance, a Moor was an Arab, a decision echoed by Ben Kingsley in his conception of the role for the Royal Shakespeare Company production in 1985. Kingsley further justifies his conception of the role by claiming a mixed, non-European racial identity himself through his father who was born in East Africa, of Gujerat parents, but was brought up in an Islamic community until the age of fourteen when he was sent to an English public school. In preparing his Othello, Kingsley uses the memory of 'the cry behind his [father's] eyes when our world baffled his ancient soul. "I want to go home" they used to say; and "I want to go home" went into the crucible to be coined night after night during Othello's disintegration.'²⁷

A different kind of alienation is created by Trevor Nunn's direction of *Othello* for the Royal Shakespeare Company in

²⁶Jonathan Miller, cited in Susan Willis, *The BBC Shakespeare Plays: Making the Televised Canon* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p.110.

²⁷Ben Kingsley, 'Othello' in *Players of Shakespeare 2*, ed. Russell Jackson and Robert Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 171.

Recent Readings of Othello

1989 (adapted for television and broadcast by the BBC in 1990). The setting is sometime in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the military uniforms of the men suggesting the Crimean War, the American Civil War, or the Franco-Prussian war. Othello is played by black opera singer Willard White, making his debut in Shakespeare, and this newness to spoken (as opposed to sung) drama was, according to Robert Smallwood, an effective emblem for the play: 'an alien among the Venetians, the black opera singer among the white Shakespeareans.'²⁸ Nunn's production is also memorable for a Desdemona who can and does speak for herself, played by Imogen Stubbs as a very young and ingenuous, but passionate, woman, not the pathetic creature critics often imagine her to be, and as directors (usually male) construct her on stage. The presence and energy of Stubbs' interpretation of Desdemona makes sense of the theoretical recuperation of Desdemona's voice and agency for which feminist scholar Lisa Jardine argues.²⁹ Stubbs' performance is strongly supported by Zoë Wanamaker as Emilia³⁰ in a production that focuses on two marriages,³¹ and on the sexual politics of intimate domestic relationships.

Most remarkable is Ian McKellen's performance as Iago: his playing of evil with frank relish prefigures his magnificent performance as that other Shakespearean arch-villain, Richard III, in Richard Loncraine's spectacular film.³² As Iago,

²⁸Robert Smallwood on *Othello* in *Shakespeare in the Theatre*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 311.

²⁹'Why should he call her whore? Defamation and Desdemona's Case', in *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

³⁰Michael Collins mentions the benefit of students seeing a film version of this production for its 'remarkable enlargement of Emilia's impact', 'Using Films to Teach Shakespeare', p. 229.

³¹Smallwood in *Shakespeare in the Theatre*, p. 309.

³²Loncraine's version of *Richard III* was first produced on stage in London by the National Theatre Company.

McKellen literally embodies the deeply racist assumptions on which the play is based and in doing so, makes clear in the flesh Michael Bristol's argument that readers and spectators have recoiled from an 'honest' production of *Othello*.³³ James Andreas vividly describes McKellen's creation of racist complicity with the audience in Iago's soliloquies: 'McKellan [*sic*] ... pulled up a chair, leaned towards the audience and told them what they had been conditioned to know and fear implicitly all their lives: a "liver lips" has been given professional preferment over him and has desired and taken his wife right from under his nose. ... The invisible theme of racism and the murder it provokes were rendered visible for all to see in this gruesome production.'³⁴ Unfortunately, the most recent film version of *Othello*, starring Laurence Fishburne as Othello and Kenneth Branagh as Iago (dir. Oliver Parker, prod. Castle Rock Entertainment, 1995) had little of this intellectual rigour. This film gives us what the *Washington Post* called a 'narcissistic, bratty' Iago,³⁵ and an Othello played with all the stereotypical markers of the exotic black man, and bears all the marks of having been produced to cash in on the vogue for popularised Shakespeare.

In preparing this survey of recent work on *Othello*, I've made substantial use of various information technologies unavailable to most scholars a decade ago. To find a citation for almost every published essay on *Othello* that's considered scholarly enough by the Modern Languages Association to merit inclusion in its vast bibliography I can simply type 'othello' into a computer with the MLA bibliography on CD-ROM, and a search engine will give me over 430 references of work published since 1981. And to find information and reviews of recent film and stage versions of *Othello* I made a

³³*Big-Time Shakespeare*, p. 176.

³⁴In Kamps, p. 185.

³⁵Desson Howe, *Washington Post*, 29 December, 1995:
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/othellorhowe_c03fe1.htm>

Recent Readings of Othello

search of the Internet through a search engine on the World Wide Web. But in a convergence about which cultural materialists might have a lot more to say, I learnt that 'Othello' is also the name of a game converted to a computerised form which can be played over the Internet with remote and invisible opponents. I rather like this—if the first performances of Shakespeare's plays competed with prostitution, alcohol, dog fighting, and bear-baiting in an energetic and diverse popular culture, then it is appropriate that four hundred years later Shakespeare's work survives still in a vital and heterogeneous popular culture, despite various attempts from Left and Right to claim his writing for their own cause.

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