Akaela Michels-Gualtieri

Othello: A Moor Rorschach Test

The evolution of the colour of Othello's skin-tone is a surprisingly accurate cultural barometer of attitudes towards race in the eyes of scholars. A significant portion of the critical literature is focused upon the Moor's complexion as one of the main variables within the play. Yet the fact that the script has itself become a variable, and not a constant, has been neglected. This text's transformation can be traced alongside the ratification of racial laws. In Jacobean England, Antebellum American, and Imperial Germany, audiences respectively experienced Othello committing divergent crimes, ranging from murder-suicide, to marriage, to simply existing. These countries' racial legislation coloured the various audience interpretations of the Moor. While Othello's actions were always the same, the public projected their own attributed meanings onto the play – a practice analogous to a living Rorschach test. This article explores the concept of using a metaphorical Rorschach test as a tool for the historicization of the many colours of *Othello.*

Akaela Michels-Gualtieri has had a long career as a swinging trapeze artist with circuses around the world, including Cirque du Soleil, Ringling Brothers, and Barnum & Bailey. She is currently an undergraduate student at Brown University in the United States.

OTHELLO is widely understood by contemporary audiences to be a Black general.[1] However, the early twentieth-century German translations of *Othello* make an argument that the eponymous character was not only 'unblack', but that he 'might even [have been] white'.[2] Indeed, during its first performance (1604), Richard Burbage, a white actor, inaugurated the role wearing a form of blackface.[3] The evolution of the colour of Othello's skin-tone is a surprisingly accurate cultural barometer of attitudes towards race in the eyes of scholars. A significant portion of the critical literature is focused upon the Moor's complexion as one of the main variables within the play.[4] Yet the fact that the script has itself become a variable has been neglected. No fully contextualized history has yet addressed the transformation of the script over time and across continents, nor has anyone mapped the colourism of its stagings.

This article focuses upon the evolution of the play's text from its English original to Antebellum America and Imperial Germany, each period having been chosen with regard to the era's racial context and its legislative impact upon the play. The text's transformation can be traced alongside the ratification of both American and German racial laws. As a result, in each selected period, the respective audiences experienced Othello committing divergent crimes, ranging from murder-suicide, to marriage, to simply existing. The Moor's murder-suicide remains the only consistent felony in each era. Respective racial legislation coloured the various audience interpretations of the Moor. While Othello's actions were always the same, the public projected their own attributed meanings onto the play – a practice analogous to a living Rorschach test.

The Rorschach test, created by Hermann Rorschach, is a type of psychological evaluation which exposes its subjects to images, also known as inkblots, that are specifically designed to stimulate subconscious personality traits. There are ten inkblots. Five of the inkblots are black and white; two are black, white, and red; and the last three are multicoloured with no black at all. According to Rorschach's theory, a patient's subconscious will project their own meaning onto the

amorphous images. No diagnosis is correlated to a single response; a plethora of variables can be taken into account, such as colour or animal pareidolia. The divergent symbolism found within the inkblots' lines serve as a psychodiagnostic metric.[5] For example, a mentally stable patient often links Inkblot 1 with the image of a black bat, but patients prone to instability allegedly connect the image with a black mask.

The majority of clinical psychiatrists consider the test to be unsubstantiated due to the lack of a standardized method of administration.[6] While the inkblot's scientific viability remains uncertain, the term 'Rorschach' has become a part of the cultural vernacular;[7] it has even become an eponym for a DC Comics antihero.[8] Rorschach has become synonymous with the human propensity to project an interpretation upon a situation. In 2017, the *New York Times* described the popular myth of a Rorschach test as a 'shortcut to our subconscious, plunging through the artifice of our self-presentation and into our darkest mental recesses . . . [to see] who we really are'. Rorschach as a metaphor 'reveals as much about our selves . . . as it does about the thing we are looking at'.[9] Richard Lebow uses this metaphor to delineate the stagings of *The Merchant of Venice* in Nazi Germany.[10] In the same vein, this article proposes using a metaphorical Rorschach test as a tool for the colourful historicization of *Othello.*

Indeed, Rorschach himself thought about the role of colour in the processing of perception; he used 'colour shock' as a way to describe the confusion patients experienced when their subconscious could not make sense of the inkblots' use of colour. Rorschach writes: 'Colour shock occurs during the test and the colour responses are markedly confused and appear to surprise the subject himself as he gives them.'[11] He believed that a patient's response to the inkblot's use of colour, both actual and imagined, was directly correlated to their respective cultural influences.[12] Analogously, the Antebellum Southerners and the Wilhelmine public experienced a form of colour shock when they were confronted with the image of Othello as both a high-ranking military officer and as Black.

In contrast, the majority of seventeenth-century British audiences were horrified by Desdemona's tragic death – not the Moor's complexion. Between the early seventeenth century in England and the early nineteenth century in the United States, Othello's skin-tone shifted from Black to tawny. Then, a century later in Germany, the Moor's Blackness was erased from the script altogether. Applying Rorschach's theory of colour shock to the textual transmutation of *Othello* allows a narrative to emerge on how the script of *The Moor of Venice* became a psychodiagnostic test of unconscious colour bias.

Jacobean England

At the time *Othello* was written, the Moor's marriage to Desdemona was not a crime; the United Kingdom has never ratified any form of anti-interracial marriage legislation.[13] Although miscegenation was technically legal in England in the early seventeenth century, 'Blackamoores' (Black people) were certainly not welcome. In 1596, Queen Elizabeth authorized the deportation of 'negars and blackamoores' in an effort rid her country of its Black population.[14] Seven years after the 'blackamoore' ban, Shakespeare chose to write a play centred upon a character described as both a Moor and as Black. In contrast to the most frequent interpretation of the Moor as a reference to a person with a dark complexion, in the early seventeenth century, 'Moor' was also used as a derogatory moniker for the Genoese,[15] and in reference to the light-skinned population of Mauritania.[16] Seen through the lens of a light-skinned Moor, Iago's reference to Othello's homeland as Mauritania creates a juxtaposition to the notion that the title character must be defined by his Black complexion.[17] The Shakespearean concept of a non-Black Moor was initially used in the first Quarto edition of *The Merchant of Venice* (1600), where the stage directions indicate that its Moor is of a 'tawnie' complexion.[18]

'Moor' is used as a descriptor for Othello around sixty times throughout the script, yet never in correlation to his skin-tone. Instead, the word is often written in conjunction with

adjectives such as 'brave', 'cruel', 'dull', 'lascivious', 'lusty', 'noble', 'valiant', and 'warlike'.[19] Given the paraprosdokian nature of the original text (or texts),[20] to assume that its use of the word 'black' was solely intended as a descriptor of race is a mistake. Iago is an unequivocal liar and is still repeatedly referred to as 'honest'. Adding to the lexicon on the character's complexion, in a long-forgotten anecdote, Rawdon Brown postulated that Othello was, in fact, based upon a *white* man.[21] Brown was a nineteenth-century British antiquarian who spent half a century working in the Venetian archives to 'seek out all the material he could find which had a bearing on the history of England'.[22] Brown believed that Cristofalo [sic] Moro, a white sixteenth-century Venetian Lord-Lieutenant, was the historical basis for Shakespeare's Othello.[23]

The Venetian records apparently indicated that Moro was 'known far and wide under the pseudonym of Othello'.[24] In the late fifteenth century, Moro was the captain of several Cypriot ships, similar to the description of Othello as 'the Moor himself at sea, / And is in full commission here for Cyprus' (2.1.29–30). On 16 October 1507, Moro appeared in front of the Venetian Senate to share the account of his recent military expeditions, including how he witnessed the deforming effects of leprosy upon a foreign population. Brown connects Moro's tale of lepers with that of Othello's description of the Anthropophagi and the 'men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders' (1.3.144–5). Brown suggests that the mulberries from Moro's insignia are reflected in the 'strawberries' found on Desdemona's handkerchief (3.3.435–6). In the Middle Ages, strawberries were often associated with mulberries.[25] Lastly, during Moro's time, the Italian word *moro* meant 'blackamoor or mulberry-tree'.[26]

Burbage may have portrayed Othello as a Blackamoor by using 'charred cork' and 'oil' on his skin and a 'black lambswool' to cover his hair.[27] Even though Burbage's portrayal of the Moor would have personified Iago's insulting description of the Moor as an 'old black ram' (1.1.88), what little we know of the reaction of Jacobean audiences seems not to

have centred upon the racial element of the play, instead focusing on Desdemona's death. The earliest recorded audience reaction to the play is from 1610 by Henry Jackson, of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. After a performance by the King's Men there, Jackson described how the audience was moved to tears when Desdemona was murdered by her husband.[28] Half a century later, in London, the diarist Samuel Pepys wrote that an audience member screamed out in horror when Desdemona was smothered to death.[29] From such admittedly scant evidence, it is striking that Othello's crimes were defined here by his murder-suicide, not miscegenation. In stark contrast, during the Antebellum era in America, Othello's marriage was not only against the laws of the land,[30] but against the laws of nature.[31]

Antebellum America

During the Antebellum era, in the majority of the United States, Othello's felonies included homicide, suicide, *and* marriage. Between 1812 and 1865, 50 per cent of the American states/territories ratified anti-miscegenationist laws.[32] In 1835, President John Quincy Adams, the sixth president of the United States (1825–29), wrote that the great moral lesson of *Othello* was that mixing Black and white blood in matrimony was a 'gross outrage upon the law of Nature'.[33] With Brabantio, Adams believed that if a white woman fell in love with a Black man, it was 'Against all rules of nature' (1.3.102). Although Adams was vehemently opposed to miscegenation, he was also opposed to slavery – a view shared by many Antebellum Americans.[34] Even President Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, was never 'in favour of making voters or jurors of negroes . . . nor to intermarry with white people'.[35] H. H. Furness candidly sums up the valence of miscegenation in the form of a question apparently 'constantly' asked of the Abolitionists: 'How would you like your daughter to marry a n——r'?[36] If Adams's daughter Louisa had survived childhood, he would have been as horrified as Brabantio if she had married an Othello.

Othello was one of the most frequently performed Shakespeare texts during the early to

mid-nineteenth century, and audiences on both sides of the Mason–Dixon line shared a deep fascination with the play.[37] Yet in a country divided by slavery, would giving Othello a voice and a platform while portraying him as a high-ranking military officer help the Union cause? Or would placing a spotlight on the murderous Moor inspire the Confederate one? In the early nineteenth century, South Carolina, later the first state to secede from the Union in 1860, began to worry about how its residents might interpret the play.[38] As a result, in 1807, the City Council of Charleston decided against licensing any performances of *Othello*, stating that the play's sentiments were 'incompatible with the real interests of this country'.[39]

Seven years later, the great English actor Edmund Kean decided that a Black Othello was also incompatible with the real interests of the nineteenth-century stage. Kean is remembered as the pioneer of the Moor's 'bronze age':[40] the actor 'altered the conventional black to the light brown which distinguishes the Moors by virtue of their descent from the Caucasian race'.[41] The complexion of Kean's Othello reflected that of the 'tawnie' Moor in *The Merchant of Venice*. Kean's later biographer rationalized his actions by observing that there is a 'variety in the colour of the Moors', and that 'Spaniards . . . indeed are half Moors'.[42] Paul Robeson later argued that the 'light-skinned Moor' was a reflection of the desperate need to separate the noble Moor from the enslaved African Black man.[43] Even though Othello was no longer portrayed as a Black Moor, however, the play's representation of colour still elicited impassioned – and often violent – reactions from the Antebellum audiences.

In August 1822, the French novelist Stendhal recorded the events of a near-fatal production in Baltimore, Maryland, a city south of the Mason–Dixon line. Immediately before Desdemona's death, an American soldier screamed out, 'It will never be said that in my presence a damned n——r killed a white woman.'[44] When the colour shock experienced by the soldier evolved from the visceral to the violent, he took out his gun and shot at the actor portraying the Moor. Fortunately,

the actor left the performance with only a broken arm. According to Stendhal, a year did not pass without the 'newspapers report[ing] similar incidents'.[45] Three years later, during a performance in Albany in New York, a city above the Mason–Dixon line, a 'stalwart canal-boatman' was deeply troubled by the play. In this production, Kean was cast as Othello and Edwin Forrest as Iago. During Iago's manipulation of Othello in Act 3, scene 3, the boatman 'hissed through his teeth while grinding them together, "You damned lying scoundrel, I would like to get hold of you after this show is over and wring your infernal neck!"'[46]

The respective performances in Albany and Baltimore were only separated by three years and three hundred miles, yet the respective legislative landscapes were drastically different. In 1691, Maryland became the first American colony not only to ban, but to criminalize, mixed-race marriages.[47] This anti-miscegenation statute would not be repealed until 1968. In contrast, New York has never had any form of an anti-interracial marriage legislation. New York abolished slavery in 1827.[48] This was thirty-seven years before Maryland (1864) and thirty-eight years before the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment (1865). In Albany in 1825, Othello's criminality was defined by his taking both his life and Desdemona's. Conversely, in Baltimore in 1822, the Moor's felonies included his union and subsequent uxoricide-suicide. The boatman and the soldier both witnessed Kean's portrayal of a tawny-toned Moor, yet the two audience members projected different interpretations upon the colour representation within the play. The boatman reacted to Iago's 'green-eyed monster' of jealousy (3.3.169), whereas the soldier in Baltimore reacted to the 'black Vengeance' of Othello (3.3.447). Analogous to a Rorschach test, the audience's response to the play's use of colour, both actual and imagined, was correlated to their respective cultural influences.

The American use of a lightened Moor continued after the end of the Civil War (1865) and through the ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Constitutional Amendments (1865, 1866, and 1870,

respectively). In 1888, Othello was now a free man, a citizen, and had voting rights. However, the American audience could still not reconcile the idea that the script left any room for interpretation on the hue of the Moor's complexion. As a result, in Edwin Booth's 1878 promptbook of *Othello*, William Winter published an epilogue to delineate the colour of the Moor. Edwin Booth is remembered as one of the pre-eminent American Shakespearean actors of the nineteenth century, and was the older brother of John Wilkes Booth (the man who assassinated Lincoln). First, Winter decided that the text establishes the Moor race as 'Negro', then declared that because there is a 'marked difference between a Moor and a Negro', Othello 'should be painted a pale cinnamon colour'.[49] Winter projected his own meaning upon the Moor's image, similar to a patient envisioning a black mask within Inkblot 1.

The legacy of a pale cinnamon Moor would continue to prosper,[50] until he crossed the Atlantic Ocean and 'the horrors of the Herero genocide' began.[51] As a part of the Wilhelmine Empire,[52] Othello was no longer part of a war centred upon emancipation but, rather, extermination.[53]

Imperial Germany

During the Second Reich (1871–1918), the most egregious crime the Moor committed was no longer correlated with the act of marriage, manslaughter, or suicide, but rather the act of being human *and* Black. In a matter of fifty years, from Antebellum America to Imperial Germany, the laws against nature mutated from mixed-race blood to the very existence of Black blood. In 1906, Captain Maximilian Bayer, the founder of Germany's scouting movement, wrote that the very existence of the *Hottentots* went against the laws of nature.[54] In the twentieth century, the word 'Hottentot' was often used as a derogatory insult regarding African populations with Black, Brown, and tawny complexions – similar to the word 'Moor'.[55] A Hottentot became synonymous with a 'savage' person,[56] analogous to Iago's description of Othello's epileptic episode as a 'savage madness' (4.1.51).

In 1905, the same year as the construction of the Death Island *Konzentrationslager* (concentration camp),[57] the first German law banning *Rassenmischung* (mixed-race) marriages was ratified in Southwest Africa.[58] When German Chancellor von Bülow wrote the first order to build a *Konzentrationslager* in Namibia, he coined the German word for concentration camp.[59] Benjamin Madley argues that the 1905 'interracial marriage ban catalyzed a movement to institute similar laws in Germany'.[60] As the genocidal rhetoric and anti-miscegenation legislation entered into the German vernacular, Othello's *Blackness* was also abolished.[61] In 2010, Tom Cheesman translated thirty-two German scripts of *Othello* from 1760 to 2003. He found that during the Wilhelmine era, 'Black' was no longer translated in correlation to race, but rather as a reference to physical ugliness.[62] In contrast to Kean using stage make-up to manipulate Othello's complexion, the twentieth-century German translations manipulated the actual script. Wolf von Baudissin 'epitomized' Othello and the 'no colour' rule; in his translation, the Moor was always 'unblack' and 'ugly'.[63] Baudissin's translation, also known as the Schlegel-Tieck edition, is considered the German Gold Standard.[64] Through the lens of this edition, the Moor was 'certainly not sub-Saharan African'; in fact, he 'might even be white'.[65] The Moor returned to his purported white ancestry, akin to Rawdon Brown's Cristofalo Moro.

In his production,[66] Max Reinhardt, perhaps the leading twentieth-century German director, used the Schlegel-Tieck edition of *Othello*.[67] Similarly to Rorschach's use of colour within his inkblots, Reinhardt believed that colour could be used as a psychological stimulus in dramatic writing.[68] In a diary entry, Ernst Stern, Reinhardt's long-term stage manager, wrote that, for Reinhardt, 'above all else colour is needed for "mimic art . . . to come to life"'.[69] Yet in the Schlegel-Tieck edition of *Othello*, the text segregated the Moor from his Blackness. As a result, Reinhardt focused upon Iago's 'green-eyed monster' as the colour to use as a psychological stimulus within his production. Stern writes that Reinhardt envisioned *Othello*'s Iago

himself in green, 'glittering like a reptile',[70] rather than focusing on the Moor as an 'old black ram' (a phrase cut from the prompt-book). As Lawrence Gunter poignantly writes: 'Since a blackamoor Othello did not appear in [German] translation, he could not appear on the stage.'[71] The script's textual transformation changed the colours of the play's 'painted passion' (4.1.249).

Othello was one of the most popular shows on the German stage during the Great War,[72] and German audiences reportedly experienced the play as 'the truest picture of human passion'.[73] The script's textual transformation indeed changed the colour of the play's 'painted passion', and the Teutonic public was entranced by the painting of the 'unblack' version of the tragedy. In 1914, after a sold-out production in Cologne, Germany, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* reported on the excellence of Iago's prowess, Desdemona's inner fire, and Othello's performance; the Moor's race, suicide, and marriage went unmentioned. The article concluded: 'For the audiences here, Shakespeare is not an Englishman, but a German classic.'[74] Ironically, half of this article's conclusion is true. Their *Othello* was written by a German classic, and not an Englishman. The author was Baudissin, not the Bard.

The American scholar James Shapiro describes how the 'incendiary' issue of miscegenation in *Othello* is 'inescapable no matter how heavily edited the script or how much the hero's skin colour was lightened in performance'.[75] However, the Schlegel-Tieck edition and the subsequent *Frankfurter Zeitung* review of the performance in Cologne (1914) contradict this argument. In fact, a heavily edited script that rewrites the tragic hero's skin-tone as 'unblack' can be used to extinguish the volatility of the play. Marius Ostrowski argues that the use of Shakespearean rhetoric 'deeply coloured' every aspect of the German experience of the Great War.[76] Conversely, the German experience deeply coloured the Shakespearean rhetoric by *bleaching* its Moor; and therefore catalyzed the script as a variable – not a constant – in the historiography of the Moor.

Conclusion

The name Othello, like that of Rorschach, has become part of the cultural vernacular, and each acts as a colloquial 'shortcut to our subconscious, plunging through the artifice of our self-presentation and into our darkest mental recesses . . . [to see] who we really are'.[77] No analysis of the depth of Blackness in Othello's complexion is complete without taking into account the darkness within our cultural unconscious. Michael Neill writes that *Othello* has become 'a foundational document in the history of "race"'.[78] Yet the racial foundation within the texts, including the scripts of the Jacobean, Antebellum, and Wilhelmine eras, is arguably as unsubstantiated as the administration of a Rorschach test. Ironically, William Winter's conclusion about Othello's skin-tone was mistaken, but his hypothesis was correct: the 'effect of contrast in the elements of colour and nationality' is exactly what creates the powerful colour shock within the play.[79]

This article has sought to demonstrate that the portrayal and evolution of Othello's complexion and crimes may be directly correlated with the ratification of racist laws in both America and Germany. However, the variability of race-based legislation over time is not the only rhetoric that has coloured the historiography of the Moor; rather, the textual variants of the script itself have been in dialogue with the flickering colours of Othello. History has continually tried to answer the tragedy's question: what colour *is* Othello's complexion? (What colour is it *really*?) Yet the tragedy of this type of historicization is the simple fact that there is no definitive answer, merely an unconscious need to create an attributed meaning, which is analogous to adding another inkblot to the Rorschach test.

Editor's Note

The unacceptable racist language of some of the quotations has been partially included to indicate their hugely negative social impact.

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