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Blackface Shakespeare: Thomas D. Rice and the Return of Jim Crow as Othello

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Thomas D. Rice's *Othello Burlesque* represents the first full performance to link Shakespearean burlesque with blackface minstrelsy on the early American stages. This disturbing milestone has its origins in a pressing need, on Rice's part, to expand the range of his signature persona, the "original Jim Crow." Rice developed his script during an extended hiatus, following a successful tour of England. Although it generally is regarded as a loose adaptation of Maurice Dowling's 1834 *Othello Travestie*, I argue that Rice took care to blend Dowling with Shakespeare. This combination recasts Jim Crow as a grotesque persona, which disrupts Shakespearean burlesque as much as it does blackface minstrelsy. Accordingly, the play dwells on Othello's anguish, but displaces that anguish in an atmosphere of chaos. In turning to performance history, I argue that the play was regarded as a momentary sensation, whose novelty wore off almost as quickly as it appeared. Subsequent revivals suggest that producers went to some trouble to maintain interest among audiences. In its treatment of racial difference as "fun," *Othello Burlesque* draws attention to a culture of distraction, where the term is understood as civil conflict and as the momentary diversions that draw public attention away from it.

Iago (sings):

The state, I know, cannot do without him,
So I rather guess I'll not say much about him,
And though I hate him as I hate the devil,
I'd cut his throat but wouldn't be uncivil.

Othello Burlesque.

There is a capital bill at the Chestnut theatre, to-night. Jim Crow Rice has written a travestie on Othello, which is said by all who have heard a rehearsal of it, to be one of the funniest pieces ever played. Rice made quite a hit on Saturday evening.

Daily Chronicle, Philadelphia, PA, 28 October 1844.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a deep dive into the production history of *Otello Burlesque*, the Shakespearean mock opera that Thomas D. Rice adapted from Maurice Dowling's *Othello Travestie* of 1834, and then performed ten years later at the Chestnut Theatre in Philadelphia.¹ *Otello Burlesque* is a milestone production, the first full-length script to recast Shakespeare's tragedy as blackface minstrelsy, and distinct from its many antecedents. As an adaptation of a Shakespearean burlesque, the play invokes a series of fashionable parodies, which were popular in England during the years Rice was touring, which drew from blackface routines as part of their own satire, but in which Rice himself never performed.² And as an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, the play quite provocatively draws from the theatrical custom, dating back to the earliest performances, in which actors use makeup to artificially darken the complexion of the title character.³ *Otello Burlesque* also marks a critical turning point in Rice's career, and accordingly I give some emphasis to his circumstances during the period when he composed the piece, roughly from April 1843 until mid-October 1844. While I offer a reading of the script, I also address performance and reception history, drawing from playbills, advertisements, and local chronicles, several of which have not been consulted in previous critical studies of the play. The sheer number of records is a telling reminder that for all the interest it has garnered as a disturbing convergence between Shakespeare and blackface minstrelsy, there remains a great deal of material still to be discovered.

My sense is that such discoveries are worth the effort, even in the instance of a play that was all but forgotten by the time Rice died in September 1860. (Obituaries make polite but passing reference to its one-time success, perhaps in recollection of a bygone era that had given way to entirely other

¹ W. T. Lhamon Jr., *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). Subsequent citations of individual sections, including Lhamon's introduction and several performances, appear parenthetically in the main text. Robert Hornback, *Racism and Early Blackface Comic Traditions: From the Old World to the New* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

² Joyce Green MacDonald, "Acting Black: *Othello*, *Othello* Burlesques, and the Performance of Blackness," *Theatre Journal*, 46 (1994), 133–46.

³ See Hornback. Additionally, I rely on Michael Neill, "Introduction" to William Shakespeare, *Othello* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1–178; Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

matters.⁴) To begin with, for all the interest it has generated among present-day critics as a disturbing combination of Shakespeare and blackface minstrelsy, the play also has a slipperiness that calls to mind the eels that W. T. Lhamon writes about in his study of the Atlantic blackface lore cycle.⁵ Very much like an eel, the play remained hidden from view for nearly a century, a single manuscript copy in the New York Public Library saving the script from disappearing altogether. It is likely that as many readers today are familiar with Rice's script through Lhamon's collection of songs and sketches as ever saw it acted. Such circumstances help account for muted scholarly responses, which range from neglect to passing references in surveys of blackface performances of Shakespeare.⁶ Many of these surveys fail to acknowledge significant differences between Rice's burlesque and better-known scripts of the post-Reconstruction period, including *Dar's-de-Money* and *Othello: Ethiopian Drama*.⁷ With a similar interest in the recovery of performance, my approach relies on ephemeral materials, often made available through facsimile, and stored across several digital collections. Whether their neglect has been due to technological factors, such as the capacity for OCR, or to an understandable aversion to a performer who was regarded in his own day as the dregs of

⁴ From an unidentified periodical, "Notwithstanding the great popularity that he achieved, it departed long before his death, and although he had received for his performances an almost fabulous amount of money, he was dependent upon the charity of his friends for some years prior to his demise." American minstrel show collection, 1823–1947, MS Thr 556 (155), Rice, T. D., 1808–1860, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University. See also the biographical study printed in an unidentified periodical, which notes, "He was the author of several pieces in which he acted, among them a burlesque opera entitled 'Bone Squash,' and an extravaganza called "'Othello' or, Dar's de Money,' both of which achieved great success." American minstrel show collection, 1823–1947, MS Thr 556 (155), Rice, T. D., 1808–1860, Harvard Theatre Collection.

⁵ W. T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁶ See Kim Hall, ed., *Othello: Texts and Contexts* (Boston, MA: Bedford St. Marten's, 2007). Hall mistakenly dates Rice's play to 1853, though the date refers to the manuscript itself, rather than the performance. Cf. James H. Dorman, "The Strange Career of Jim Crow Rice (with Apologies to Professor Woodward)", *Journal of Social History*, 3 (1969–70), 109–22. For a useful, although incomplete, bibliography see Claudia Durst Johnson and Henry E. Jacobs, *The Bard Debunked: An Annotated Bibliography of 19th Century Parodies of Shakespeare* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

⁷ See, for instance, Kris Collins, "White-Washing the Black-a-Moor: *Othello*, Negro Minstrelsy and Parodies of Blackness," *Journal of American Culture*, 19 (1996), 87–101. Cf. Tilden G. Edelstein, "Othello in America: The Drama of Racial Inter-marriage," in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 179–98. For passing references to Rice see Frances Teague, *Shakespeare and the American Popular Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 84; Vaughan and Vaughan.

entertainment, on par with the circus and “the Lions,”⁸ these traces offer an invaluable measure of what audiences thought they saw when they saw the “original Jim Crow” make his appearance in the guise of “the noble Moor.”

In another respect, though, the play’s obscurity even among audiences directly familiar with Rice is as significant as Rice’s efforts to travesty Shakespeare’s play in the guise of his signature character. In reconstructing this episode of Shakespearean blackface, I treat *Otello Burlesque* as an encounter between a disreputable but still popular performer who composed his script as a response to concerns over marginalization, and an audience that took just enough interest to view the performance as an entertaining but passing curiosity. While there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the burlesque performer held long-standing interests in Shakespeare, *Otello Burlesque* reflects a belated attempt to reshape his well-known persona, following a lengthy and unwanted hiatus. While the performance caught local audiences by surprise, as much for its novelty as for the unexpected return of its feature performer, for Rice the play represents a long-held interest in burlesque as a mode, which could hold together his distinct and otherwise incompatible interests in Shakespeare and in the Jim Crow character that established him as a figure of notorious celebrity. More than a loose adaptation, Rice’s script is a complex assemblage of sources and new stage business, which draws as much from Shakespeare’s script as from Dowling’s, and which puts as much emphasis on his character’s anguish as on his absurdity. In its frenetic wavering between mockery and tragedy, *Otello Burlesque* challenges conventional expectations of Shakespeare and blackface minstrelsy alike, as much as it disturbs as an instance in the legacy of Jim Crow.

Throughout this essay, I consider *Otello Burlesque* as a measure of public distraction. In using this term, I have in mind both the sense of public division and that of conflict, such as one finds in treatises throughout the English Civil Wars, as well as the now more familiar sense of diversion.⁹ Given its mixture of materials, at once provocative and over the top, *Otello Burlesque* resists straightforward conclusions about just which way the play means to distract. Much of the business that Rice introduces suggests a play that dwells on the conflicting status of servitude, at once vital to and rejected by the community that depends on it. Such concerns may have resonated in a city like Philadelphia, deeply divided in its public sentiments about slavery. They also resonate, if not always in obvious ways, with Douglas A. Jones’s

⁸ G. P. Morris, “Decline of Theatrical Amusements,” *New York Mirror*, 29 Feb. 1840, HaithiTrust.

⁹ See, for instance, Edward Reynolds’s *Eugenia’s Teares for Great Brittaines Distractions of* 1642.

characterization of northern pro-slavery culture, which relied on conventions of blackface humor as an instrument for frustrating Black inclusion in public affairs.¹⁰ It is fitting that *Otello Burlesque* occurs at a chronological midpoint between the 1833 National Anti-Slavery Convention, held in Philadelphia right when Rice was making his first performances at the Chestnut, and William Wells Brown's 1855 transatlantic travel narrative, which was published in the United States right when Rice's career was near its end, and which describes Philadelphia as the most colorphobic, pro-slavery city throughout the North.¹¹

Given these concerns, I contend that performance records give signals that are not clear from the script alone, namely a warm but very brief reception, followed by intermittent touring and "revival" shows. Several records suggest that the play was regarded as as much a curiosity as an outrageous spectacle; audiences enjoyed the performance for its novelty, without necessarily giving weight to the main conceit behind its display of Othello as a Jim Crow figure. The combination of enthusiasm and disregard invites comparison with other contemporary productions of *Othello*, where suggestions of race and racial difference meet with various forms of resistance, from privileged disavowal and deflection to outright hostility. Against such responses, *Otello Burlesque* stands apart as a complex solution among early productions of *Othello*. In its travesty of Shakespeare as blackface minstrelsy, it is almost as though the subjects of race, of racialized difference, and of racial discrimination that already went by the name of Jim Crow, could somehow be defused at precisely the moment when they were offered up as the most conspicuous features of the performance.

Many of these early American productions of *Othello*, including performances that Rice's audiences may have been familiar with, anticipate circumstances that Ian Smith addresses in his description of contemporary debates about racial difference and discrimination in Shakespeare's play.¹² Smith is one among a growing number of scholars who note a striking critical position, which denies association between Othello and race or racism on the ground that Shakespeare could not have known about these subjects, much less anticipated their significance for audiences located throughout a rapidly expanding United States, increasingly divided over questions of slavery. While often represented as a defense against anachronism, such refusals also suggest an underlying desire to regulate what can or cannot be said about the play,

¹⁰ Douglas A. Jones, *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

¹¹ William Wells Brown, *The American Fugitive in Europe* (1855), in Brown, *Clotel & Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2014), 215–412, 308, 411.

¹² Ian Smith, *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

whether in scholarship, in performances, or even in classrooms.¹³ The sense of pressure can be amplified if it occurs alongside what Sujata Iyengar characterizes as “strategic blackface” – productions that cast white actors in makeup in the pursuit of what is designated as an original staging practice.¹⁴ As further described by Ayanna Thompson, it can be difficult to tell when such efforts speak to a legitimate scholarly endeavor to reproduce Shakespeare’s original conditions – rather, to approximate them as best we can imagine – and when they suggest a desire to return to a mode of blackface performance that avoids the guilt of slavery, along with more persistent modes of racial discrimination.¹⁵ Such desires for an accurate return to origins (if not an innocent one) can raise awkward questions over how to account for productions like Rice’s blackface rendition, or related contemporary cases in which race is read into *Othello*, often with express misgivings even as they proceed. In revisiting such instances, I mean to reconsider the importance of anachronistic readings, including blatant anachronisms; and rather than dismiss them as errors, instead to acknowledge the contributions they have made to reshaping collective encounters with Shakespeare’s “Moor of Venice.”¹⁶

As *Otello Burlesque* suggests, the story of *Othello* on the early American stage does share an affinity with the conditions that led to the establishment of Jim Crow, though an affinity that surprises as much as it unsettles. In recasting his signature character as Othello, Rice directly addresses fundamental and intractable problems of community, from whom it recognizes and excludes, to whom it depends upon for its survival. Performing it as travesty, he frames that narrative as a problem that, in laughing it off as absurdity, audiences need neither acknowledge nor reckon with.

UPSTART JIM: HOW ONE CROW LEADS TO ANOTHER

As Lhamon observes in his biographical study of Rice and his signature persona, Jim Crow is marked by traces of Shakespeare throughout the course of the performer’s professional career. Some connections are direct.

¹³ See, for instance, Karin H. deGravelles, “You Be Othello: Interrogating Identification in the Classroom,” *Pedagogy*, 11 (2011), 153–75. For an intriguing survey of performances outside Anglo-American traditions see Coen Heijes, *Shakespeare, Blackface and Race: Different Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹⁴ Sujata Iyengar, “White Faces, Blackface: The Production of ‘Race’ in *Othello*,” in Philip C. Kolin, ed., *Othello: New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 103–31. Cf. Thompson, *Passing Strange*, chapter 5, “Original(ity).”

¹⁵ Ayanna Thompson, *blackface* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 112: “But honestly, my greatest hope is that this will be the last book we will ever need on blackface.”

¹⁶ Cf. Margreta de Grazia, *Four Shakespearean Period Pieces* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021).

Lhamon identifies several early performances, which Rice gives in Louisville in 1830 and 1831, which cast him in a full range of Shakespearean parts (Lhamon, 38). By as early as 1833, at the Tremont Theatre, Rice performs his signature character as an afterpiece to *Richard III*; more than once, he appears at the Bowery's American Theatre while productions of *Othello* take place at a venue like the National.¹⁷ In performance, Rice's many references to individual plays, including quotations of familiar passages, offer the opportunity to make knowing allusions to these nearby productions. At some point, Rice must have become familiar with Charles Mathews, the prominent comic actor whose imitations of Black characters are widely recognized as an antecedent to his own, and whose late performance as Othello drew favorable attention among New York audiences.¹⁸ Failure on Rice's part to follow suit earlier on might account for the tone of resentment, which underlies a crude joke about irrational violence in his 1837 *Peacock and the Crow*: "ha ha, I should like to play Otello – and smoder de white gal" ("Peacock and the Crow," 293).

Shakespeare also helps to shape Rice's public reception, though rather more for the purpose of discrediting the performer's sudden fame and questionable talents. Contemporary reviewers link Rice/Jim Crow with Shakespeare/Othello through tropes of antithesis, as though the mere pairing of names were enough to demonstrate the gulf that separates them. Scorn also betrays a hint of anxiety over an underlying parasitical relationship, particularly in an environment where, as Lawrence Levine describes, Shakespeare holds distinction as a figure of shared culture, universally appreciated by people of otherwise sharp differences in class.¹⁹ In this respect, it is remarkable not only that the comparisons appear as early as 1833, when Rice was still a relatively new sensation, but also that they can be found in a periodical like George P. Morris's *New York Mirror*, which proclaims itself a weekly journal "devoted to literature and the fine arts." In a seeming effort to assuage concerns among readers who might sense, in Gumbo Cuff, traces of Othello or Troilus, Morris assures,

Let no one, however, suppose that Mr. Rice has taken a hint from Shakespeare; far be it from his original genius to borrow an idea from any body; and, in order to silence at once all envious hypercriticism on this point, we deem it no more

¹⁷ *Morning Herald*, 1 Aug. 1837, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress (hereafter LOC), at <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>.

¹⁸ Anne J. Mathews, *Memoirs of Charles Mathews, Comedian, by Mrs. Mathews*, Volume III (London: Richard Bentley, 1838), 408, HaithiTrust.

¹⁹ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), chapter 1, "William Shakespeare in America."

than justice to inform the reader, that “Gumbo Cuff” is not founded upon Shakespeare’s *Othello*.²⁰

Morris’s scathing review has rightly enjoyed critical attention, not least because Rice was angered enough to write a reply in his own defense, a rare public instance of the actor in his own words.²¹ But in his neat trick of doing away with the emerging celebrity, Morris establishes a framework for subsequent reviewers. By as late as 1844, when E. R. Harper begins to take Rice’s place in Jim Crow sketches, a notice from London’s *Era* remarks, “We have only, in expressing a wish for the success of his enterprise, to hope his ... peculiarities will not put an extinguisher on poor old Shaksperc.”²² Whether they come from widespread and unremitting concern over contamination, or a more practical journalistic reach for familiar phrases, ironic expressions of concern over Jim Crow’s spreading influence take on a formulaic character by the end of the period when new sketches for Rice are being staged.

One important but overlooked measure of Jim Crow’s ambivalent public reception can be found among burlesque adaptations of Shakespeare, which were at the height of their popularity when Rice made his first tour of England in 1836. Several scripts include songs set to the music of “Jump Jim Crow,” while performers routinely comment, in character, about its interminable length and its distinctly unpleasant melody.²³ In their allusions, such performances continuously waver between exploiting Rice’s notoriety and acknowledging it as the basis for an underlying affinity. But even when they take notice of him, there is no evidence to suggest that Rice himself participates in any of their performances. Notably, Rice does not make an appearance in *Othello*, *Moor of Fleet Street*, a play which in many ways would have been suited to him. The burlesque had been performed in 1833 at the Adelphi Theatre, where Rice would later hold extended engagements. Whether or not the play had been written by Charles Mathews, the cast featured several actors who later share billing with Rice.²⁴ While the play was not nearly as successful as Dowling’s *Othello Travestie*, which made a hit at the nearby Strand,

²⁰ G. P. Morris, “The Celebrated Opera of—Oh, Hush,” *New York Mirror: Devoted to Literature and the Fine Arts*, 11, 110 (5 Oct. 1833), HaithiTrust.

²¹ See Lhamon, “An Extravagant and Wheeling Stranger,” 20–21; Thompson, *blackface*, 32–33.

²² *The Era* (London), 25 June 1843, 5, col. 4, 28 April 1844, 6, col. 3, Juba Project.

²³ Specific burlesques include *Macbeth Modernised* (1838), *King Richard Ye Third* (1844), and *Hamlet the Dane* (1847). In Stanley Wells, ed., *Shakespeare Burlesques, Volume Two of Five* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1978).

²⁴ Charles Matthews, *Othello*, *Moor of Fleet Street*, ed. Manfred Draudt (Vienna: Francke Verlag, 1993), Introduction, 11–27. Rice’s *Flight to America* features no fewer than five actors who had appeared in the Shakespearean burlesque.

it easily could have been revived, either with or without revisions. The fact that it was not suggests a combination of factors, from general satisfaction with the sketches Rice did perform to a general lack of interest in the material. The circumstances also suggest that neither the house nor audiences expected Rice to appear as Othello in any manner, not in Shakespearean burlesque, and certainly not as part of his Jim Crow repertoire. While we can only imagine the conversations that took place among the performers, passing allusions turn up in later advertisements, which change Othello's origins from Fleet Street to Orange Street, "or somewhere thereabouts," as one 1846 performance puts it (see Figure 1). By as late as 1858, *Othello Burlesque* appears under a new title, *Moor of Orange Street*, a renaming that directly recalls the Adelphi production of some twenty-five years earlier (see Figure 2). Since there is little chance that Rice's audiences would have recalled that earlier play, which had long disappeared from the stages and which never held a recorded performance anywhere in the United States, the indirect allusion suggests that *Moor of Fleet Street* lingered as a personal memory for Rice, an antecedent he would recall to himself for the duration of his career, regardless of whether his audiences caught the reference or not.

For all his interest, Rice did not resolve to play Othello until his career had come to a standstill. While he had begun to suffer from a partial paralysis by as early as 1840 (Lhamon, 71), he continued both to perform and to travel overseas, including a successful engagement at the Adelphi for the 1842–43 season. From December 1842 until April 1843, he appeared nearly every night, in feature performances that ran for as many as two dozen consecutive evenings.²⁵ This remarkable stretch stands in sharp contrast with his return to the United States, when only a handful of bookings, including a New York appearance which announces "a New Opera [unnamed] written expressly for him," give any signs of activity.²⁶ Ironically, Rice's popularity may have directly contributed to his displacement from the London stage, as new performers began to take roles previously written for him. In one intriguing instance, the Adelphi records a performance by E. R. Harper, promoted as an up-and-coming talent and cast in the familiar role of Ginger Blue.²⁷ As it happens, the evening's performance of *The Virginia Mummy* was staged as an afterpiece at the end of an

²⁵ Rice gave 24 performances of *Yankee Notes for English Circulation*, from 26 December 1842 until 21 January 1843. *Jim Crow in His New Place* ran consecutively from 23 January until 18 February 1843. This was followed by *The Foreign Prince*. Rice was featured as James Crow, alias Prince Marryboo-de-Banjo-de-Ram Jam; the show ran from 20 February until 1 April 1843. Performance records are collected from *The Adelphi Theatre Calendars: 1840–1849*, The Adelphi Calendar Project 1806–1900, Alfred R. Nelson and Gilbert B. Cross, general editors (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1988–2016).

²⁶ *New York Herald*, 24 April 1844, America's Historical Newspapers (hereafter AHN).

²⁷ *The Era* (London), 28 April 1844, 6, col. 3, 9 Feb. 1845, 6, col. 3, Juba Project.

BROADWAY THEATRE
 Stage Manager..... Mr. A. W. Fenno

Grand Complimentary Testimonial
 TO
T. D. RICE

The original representative of Negro Characters in America, England, Ireland and Scotland.
 The following papers and favorite artists have kindly volunteered:

Messrs. CHARLES WALCOT, H. A. FERRY, C. FISHER,
 BARRETT, BRIGGS, SETONELL,
 (by permission of W. E. Barton, Esq.)
 MARK SMITH, H. BLAND,
 T. WEYMES, W. M. O'NEIL, the popular Irish Comedian, G. WALTERS,
 BUCKBEE, H. B. PHILLIPS, T. HART,
 T. E. MORRIS, H. L. WARD, &c.,
 MRS. K. BUCKLAND, MISS JOSEPHINE MANNERS,
 MRS. KATE McLEAN, MISS ELLEN GREY,
 MRS. WARREN, MISS C. KNIGHT,
 MISS KATE PENNOYER, the favorite Dancer,
 MATT PEEL'S ORIGINAL CAMPBELL'S MINSTRELS, and
 ROBERTSON'S CORNET BAND,
 (Attached to the 12th Regiment.)

Friday Evening, May 14th, 1858,
 The performance to commence with the favorite comic Comedy, called
DAY AFTER THE WEDDING

Col. Freestone..... Mr. H. A. Ferry
 Lord Rivers..... Mr. C. Warren
 James..... Mr. Y. E. Smith
 General Freestone..... Mr. W. W. Wines
 Mrs. Davis..... Mrs. Henry

After which
MEDLEY DANCE..... MISS KATE PENNOYER

To be followed by J. B. Flanagan's celebrated Drama, in two acts, of
LAVATER
 OR, NOT A BAD JUDGE.

John Cramer Lavater..... Mr. Charles Walcott
 Count de Selenburg..... Mr. H. B. Phillips
 Marquis de Terrel..... Mr. H. Bland
 Christian..... Mr. Barrett
 Herman..... Mr. Setonell
 Zep..... Mr. W. H. O'Neil
 Hilgers..... Miss Carter Knight
 Ladies of the Corps de Ballet

After which
PADDY'S WEDDING..... MR. W. M. O'NEIL
 With the celebrated and original **IRISH JIG**.
 MR. T. HART will give his popular Imitations of celebrated Actors.

To be followed by the Screen Scene from Sheridan's Comedy of
SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

Mr. Peter Truant..... Mr. H. B. Phillips
 Joseph Surface..... Mr. H. A. Ferry
 Charles Surface..... Mr. C. Warren
 Joseph Surface's Servant..... Mr. W. W. Wines
 Lady Truant..... Mrs. Buckland

After which
ROBERTSON'S CORNET BAND
 Will play some Favorite Airs.

To be followed by
Grand Concert
 BY
MATT PEEL'S CAMPBELLS
 After their regular performance at 444 BROADWAY.

PART FIRST
 Overture, "Nones"..... Full Band
 Cossack Chorus..... Campbell's Comic Refrain, "Was will Mrs. Gandy buy?"..... Matt Peel
 Comic Song, "Pull Back"..... J. Carver's Song, "Oh when I see her"..... H. Abner
 Comic Song, "Pull Back"..... G. W. Moore's Quickstep, Instrumental..... Full Band

PART SECOND
 Accordion Solo, "Molly"..... C. Keene's Banjo Solo..... F. B. Converse
 Baroque Fling..... Matt. T. T. Peel

THE MEETING
 Or, NEGRO PECULIARITIES, portrayed by Matt Peel and Converse.

Containing with
THE DARKIE'S DREAM
 Or, "COME TO THE MUSH"

The whole to conclude with the laughable Baroque, in one act, of
OTELLO
 OR, THE MOOR OF ORANGE STREET,
 (With all its original music.)

Otello..... Mr. T. D. Rice
 Desdemona..... Mrs. T. D. Rice
 Iago..... Mr. C. Warren
 Cassio..... Mr. H. B. Phillips
 Roderigo..... Mr. H. A. Ferry
 Emilia..... Miss Josephine Manners
 Bianca..... Mrs. Henry
 The Duke..... Mr. W. H. O'Neil
 Attendants on Desdemona..... Ladies of the Corps de Ballet

Doors open at Seven. To commence at a quarter before Eight o'clock.

HERALD PRINT.

Figure 2. Tom Rice. *Othello* playbill (1858). MS Thr 1848, Box 17, Rice, Tom, 1808–1860, Playbills, 1833–1845, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

evening, which features *Othello* as the headline event. Professional companies like the Virginia Minstrels also play a direct role, the more as their performances are packaged in the language of cultural distinction. As little as two months after Rice had wrapped up his grueling season, the Virginia Minstrels were welcomed to the Adelphi with praise that championed them as a “vast improvement” over their predecessors.²⁸ Such promotion resembles similar notices for Christy’s Original Band, in which descriptions of market share are characterized, in a crassly commercial brand of elitism, as “a large and highly respectable audience” (see Figure 3). Even as these new acts were drawing interest, the Philadelphia *Enquirer* would report on the construction of a luxurious new home on Long Island, and then speculate (with seeming relief) that Rice had finally retired for good.²⁹

A Shakespearean mock opera holds clear appeal for an aging burlesque performer in need of a new direction, particularly in the United States, where such performances were still a novelty.³⁰ *Othello* was an obvious selection for a blackface rendition, meanwhile, given the common convention, in which actors used makeup to artificially darken their complexions. In explicitly recasting Othello as a figure of blackface, however, Rice also exploits widespread inconsistencies, among audiences and critics alike, over how – or even whether – to acknowledge Othello as Black. In making this statement, I mean to address a complex and deeply troubling practice of silence and evasion, coupled with flagrant exaggerations of racialized difference, which recurs throughout early American productions of *Othello*, in performance as well as in writing. Specifically, I wish to consider to what extent these productions, which vary on questions of Othello’s race and its visibility in recognizable signs, in turn lead audiences either to confront what Ayanna Thompson identifies as the “unstable semiotics of race,” or to recast it in other terms, or to avoid the subject altogether.³¹

To consider specific instances, Maurice Dowling’s *Othello Travestie* is well recognized as a calculated response to the abolition of the slave trade

²⁸ *The Era* (London), 25 June 1843, 5, col. 4, Juba Project.

²⁹ *Daily Chronicle*, 26 June 1844, 4, AHN.

³⁰ At the National Theatre in Philadelphia, “The great Burlesque” *Othello Travestie* was staged in 1841 advertised as a revival of an 1835 production. During his tour of cities in 1842–43, the actor Thomas Placide gave several performances of one *Othello Travestie*, likely the same play. Cf. John Brougham, who performs a “Burlesque Tragedy” of Othello at the National Theatre in Boston as a benefit performance; notably, Brougham took the part of Iago. “Advertisement,” *Daily Atlas*, 103, 75 (25 Sept. 1844), 3, AHN. An 1843 production of *Macbeth Travestie*, written by William Northall and staged at New York’s Olympic Theatre, suggests an emerging market for new material. As Wells suggests with his selections, American productions of Shakespeare burlesque pick up by the 1850s.

³¹ Thompson, *Passing Strange*, 77 ff.

PROGRAMME
OF THE
CONCERT

TO BE GIVEN
THIS EVENING,
THURSDAY, APRIL 18, 1844,
AT GRANGER & LARNED'S HALL, BY
CHRISTY'S
ORIGINAL BAND OF
MINSTRELS!

Whose performances last evening were received with
approbation, by a large and highly respectable audience.

PART I.

1. WHAT'S GOING ON	Banjo Melody.
2. THE RAGING CANAL	A Comic Song.
3. ALLIGATOR REEL	Banjo Accompaniment.
4. THE BROKEN YOKE	First and Second Banjo.
5. OLD TAR RIVER	Dance and Banjo Accompaniment.
6. GREY GOOSE AND GANDER	Banjo, Viola and Tambourine.
7. WAY DOWN IN OLD VIRGINIA	Banjo and Viola Accompaniment.

CONCLUDING WITH A
TREBLE DANCE.

PART II.

*The following Melodies will be sung, with Banjo, Violin,
Jawbone, Tamborine, & Bone Castinett Accompaniment.*

I Wonder where he went to.
Oh! Mr. Coon.
 Git along home, my Yaler Gals.
 Uncle Gable, or the Niger General,
 Dance to the Boatmen.
 Way down South, in the Alabama.
 Reel o'er the Mountain, and
 Dandy Jim, from Caroline.

AFTER WHICH, A
TRIAL DANCE!

BETWEEN MASTERS CHRISTY AND PEIRCE,
Which is universally acknowledged to be the BEST SPECIMEN OF NEGRO DANCING
EVER EXHIBITED. Master PEIRCE will introduce his RAIL ROAD and LOCOMOTIVE
IMITATION. To conclude with
The Extravaganza of Miss Lucy Long.

Doors open at 7 P. M. Concert will commence at 8 o'clock, precisely. Tickets 25 cents
to be had at the Syracuse and Tremont Houses, and at the door. Appropriate seats are reserved
for the Ladies, who may attend with propriety, as nothing will be introduced that can possibly
offend the most sensitive mind. Journal Yankee Job Press.

Harvard University, Houghton Library,

Figure 3. Playbill, Christy's Minstrels, 18 April 1844, MS Thr 1848, Box 9, Christy Minstrels on Tour, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

throughout the British colonies, and perhaps also to a recent production at Covent Garden, which featured Ira Aldridge – the prominent American actor, often promoted as “the African Roscius.”³² As a telling sign of its dependence on local conditions, Dowling’s play was far more successful in Liverpool, which was a major port in the slave trade, than throughout the United States, where only a small number of performances can be found. Dowling also is concurrent with the contemporary convention, which features actors in distinctly lighter shades of makeup – regarded today as the “Bronze Age of *Othello*” – and which allows audiences to either to associate “the Moor” with terms like “swarthy” or “Arab,” or to evaluate performances by other criteria.³³ The American celebrity Edwin Forrest had been touring various cities for years. His rendition of *Othello* was promoted as part of a broad repertoire of characters, which included Cardinal Richelieu and *Metamora*, “Last of the Wampanoags.” Reviewers were just as likely to consider the size of his audience as the quality of an evening’s performance.³⁴ Other performances invite speculation about intriguing new prospects, such as one James Robert Anderson, whose rendition at New York’s Park Theater in September 1844 draws favorable attention as the sign of future talent.³⁵ Closer to Rice’s engagement in Philadelphia, at a public lecture held in May 1845, the actor James Edward Murdock uses *Othello* to demonstrate “the art of correct reading, and the matchless power of true personation,” before spectators who evidently are not embarrassed to be described as “a fashionable and intellectual audience.”³⁶ Given some six months after *Otello Burslesque*, which Murdock’s audience must have heard of, the lecture focusses on the subject of “contrasts” among the characters; among the several passages noted as key illustrations, the report makes no mention of race, or of interracial marriage, as a part of the evening’s discussion.

None of these instances prevent *Othello* and *Desdemona* from serving as shorthand names in scandal stories – runaway couples newly discovered, night-time assaults narrowly averted – where such references needle public anxieties over “amalgamation.”³⁷ Still, events like the public lecture in Philadelphia help

³² An account of this historical context can be found in Neill, “Introduction” to *Othello*, pp. 42–44.

³³ On Forrest see, for instance, *Daily Chronicle*, 17 Oct. 1842, 2, AHN. For related descriptions of Macready see, for instance, *Daily Chronicle*, 20 Oct. 1843, 1, AHN.

³⁴ “The Baltimore Clipper says that on the evening Mr. Forrest played *Othello* in that city, the house was so thin that a vehicle might have been driven through it without injury to any one.” *Boston Daily Mail*, 23 Nov. 1843, AHN.

³⁵ *Daily Chronicle*, 2 Dec. 1844, 2, AHN.

³⁶ “Evenings with Shakespeare,” *American Sentinel* (Philadelphia), 17 May 1845, AHN.

³⁷ *Boston Daily Mail* (Boston, MA), 3 Nov. 1842, 2, AHN. Cf. “An Adventure,” *Semi-weekly Eagle* (Brattleboro, VT), 7 Oct. 1852, 1; “An Adventure,” *Detroit Free Press*, 6 May 1853, 2;

clarify the strain that other individuals express when they address *Othello* in terms of racialized difference and the consequences of mixed-race marriage. Critics rightly give prominence to “The Character of Desdemona,” the provocative essay written by John Quincy Adams, not least because its forceful aversion to the marriage between “a daughter of a Venetian nobleman of the highest rank” and “a thick-lipped wool-headed Moor” raises questions about the character of the former President, his ongoing interest in anti-slavery causes, and the deep-seated fears of miscegenation that underlie his public activities.³⁸ It also raises questions about the motives of the aspiring critic, who goes out of his way to censure the marriage only to concede doubts over how effectively it supports his central premise that a correct reading of Shakespeare’s text requires a didactic interpretation.³⁹ With a complicated defense against an all too obvious objection, namely that his moral lessons offer “no practical utility in England, where there are no valiant Moors to steal the affections of high-born dames,” Adams is left to contend that a frankly anachronistic moral is preferable to a play that offers no moral instruction at all.⁴⁰

In playing Othello as Jim Crow, Rice takes advantage of underlying contradictions among audiences, where questions of Othello’s race are simultaneously denied and taken for granted. Such conditions allow the performer not only to recast his outmoded stage persona in a new guise, but also to pass it off as though the pairing of Jim Crow and “the Noble Moor” represented an unexpected novelty. In some ways, this sense of novelty gives Rice occasion to respond to the newly professionalized minstrel troupes, and their own appeals to propriety. Faced with his own diminishing prospects, the nearly forgotten “Original” minstrel draws a neat, if clever, parallel to the General – cast off as an outsider from the very community that formerly depended on his service. Meanwhile, in returning to Dowling’s script, *Otello*

“Marriage Extraordinary,” *Granite State Farmer* (Manchester, NH), 11 Aug. 1855, 3. See also “An Adventure,” *Boston Daily Mail* (Boston, MA), 17 Oct. 1846, 1, an account of a runaway slave from Virginia caught in an attempted assassination of a young woman, reprinted often.

³⁸ John Quincy Adams, “The Character of Desdemona,” in Adams, *Notes, Criticisms, and Correspondence upon Shakespeare’s Plays and Actors*, ed. James H. Hackett (New York: Carelton, 1864), 234–49. For a useful summary of studies see James Shapiro, *Shakespeare in a Divided America: What His Plays Tell Us about Our Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), chapter 1, “Miscegenation,” along with his bibliographical essay, 228–31.

³⁹ A recorded conversation with Francis Kemble notes that Adams preferred reading to live performance, which reduces tragedy to burlesque. See Diary of Charles Francis Adams, volume V, 11 May 1833, n. 1, Adams Papers, Digital Edition, Massachusetts Historical Society, 2022, at www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-13-05-02-0001-0005-0011#sn=6

⁴⁰ Adams, “Character of Desdemona,” 249.

Burlesque gives Rice occasion to respond to the broader tradition of Shakespearean burlesque, which he had observed at a close distance, during his years on tour. The full nature of that response requires a separate and direct review of the script, as much of the ways in which he depends on his source material as of the ways in which he departs from it.

CHAOS COMED AGAIN: SHAKESPEARE IN THE BLACKFACE SHAKESPEAREAN BURLESQUE

Among all the scripts that Lhamon assembles in his collection of songs and sketches, *Othello Burlesque* stands out as an unusual departure. As a mock performance of Shakespeare, the play marks a new direction in subject matter. As an adaptation of another script, it is unusually dependent on written sources, a telling sign of Rice's professional circumstances, far from the rehearsal spaces and stages where he traditionally developed his material. Since Rice had occasion to observe a rich variety of Shakespearean burlesques, including no fewer than three distinct versions of *Othello*, it is not clear how much his direct dependence on Dowling is a matter of convenience, a turn to the one script that happened to be in print, and how much a deliberate engagement with a rival who in many ways upstaged him.⁴¹ Along similar lines, since *Othello Travestie* had been staged in Philadelphia some years earlier, though only for a limited number of performances, it is not always clear from Rice's adaptation (which reproduces Dowling's script down to Othello's signature sneeze) which revisions are meant as minor updates to suit local tastes, and which are meant as a direct response to a recognizable antecedent.

These uncertainties shape virtually every aspect of Rice's script, from its alterations to the story line, to its jokes and other stage business, to specific bits of dialogue. Along these lines, the play follows Dowling's basic dramatic narrative, itself a highly reduced outline of select passages from Shakespeare's play, from the council scene to the arrival in Cyprus, followed by several scenes of Othello in dialogue, with Iago and with Desdemona. While the songs throughout generally are meant as parody of familiar melodies, on occasion lyrics make clever nods to passages left out from Shakespeare's play. For his own part, Rice introduces a child, half made up in blackface, who represents the offspring of the marriage. He removes the confrontation over the missing handkerchief, a troubling yet critical development in Othello's

⁴¹ On the diversity of performances see Wells, *Shakespeare Burlesques*. Cf. Richard W. Schoch, *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

jealous rage.⁴² While the bedchamber scene stages a grisly combination of eroticism and violence, Rice takes the moment to call out in the name of his notorious signature persona, “it is the cause, caws, caws.” And in a notable divergence from Dowling, he rewrites Othello’s final speech under the conventions of blackface dialect, to reemphasize his history of “some sarbice” done the state, all of which gives way to Desdemona’s sudden rise from her deathbed, leading the cast in a dance and song, set to the melody of “Fifth July.”

In one clear sign of deliberate revision, Rice restores several passages from Shakespeare’s script, some rewritten into his own idiom but many nearly verbatim, which are not found in Dowling’s. Rice is surprisingly generous in his selections, restoring lines to nearly every character, occasionally inserting single lines (for example Iago: “scan this thing no further. Leave it all to time,” 376) into passages he lifts from Dowling (“Othello Burlesque”). While he never misses an opportunity to depict Othello in the throes of his passions, more incidental phrases, such as “how comes it Michael” (“*Otello*,” 369), also suggest a more extensive drawing from his material. These passages are noteworthy, as much for their dependence on Shakespeare as a direct source as for their fixation on language as a significant feature of Shakespeare’s play. They are distinct from the well-known blackface routine of quoting from well-known speeches, typically to highlight the difference between the “universally shared” language of the bard and the “broken English” dialect that held the blackface performer apart.⁴³ They also are distinct from the conventions of Shakespearean burlesques, which tended either to mock scholarly fixations on text and language, or else to highly discount it as a feature of the performance. (John Poole’s early examples, parodies of *Hamlet* and *Othello*, are as much a mockery of Edmond Malone and his circle as they are of the plays themselves, whereas others make light of easily recognizable phrases; several burlesque scripts make no reference at all to Shakespeare’s language.⁴⁴) In their gradual accumulation throughout the performance, the lines recall Rice’s lifelong interest in performing Shakespeare, even as they acknowledge his limited opportunity to realize it. Whatever his dreams of playing Othello, this highly altered version was as close as he would come.

⁴² See Maurice Dowling, *Othello Travestie: A Burlesque Burletta in One Act* (London, 1834), 26–27, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/othellotravestieooooodowl>.

⁴³ A useful study of this tradition can be found in Ray Browne, “Shakespeare in American Vaudeville and Negro Minstrelsy,” *American Quarterly*, 12 (1960), 374–91. Cf. Hornback, *Racism and Early Blackface*, 229. Cf. Collins, “White-Washing the Black-a-Moor,” 95–96.

⁴⁴ On the linguistic conventions of Shakespearean burlesque see Schoch, chapter 1, “The Language of Burlesque.” Cf. Wells, *Shakespeare Burlesques*, Volume I, Introduction.

In fact, the combination of sources suggests a grotesque of a distinctly new kind. Passages from Shakespeare are just as liable to disrupt the conventions of burlesque as those burlesques mock the cultural conventions that assign central importance to Shakespeare. The hybrid design well mirrors the themes of union and offspring, which Lhamon identifies as a prevailing concern in the provocative depiction of the marriage (Lhamon, 83–84). Meanwhile, the recurring stylistic incongruities allow the performance to waver between confrontational and extravagant. The black and white child who shows up in Cyprus compels audiences to acknowledge the marriage as a case of “miscegenation,” even as its spontaneous appearance in a carriage makes nonsense of their coupling. To the extent that the marriage can be regarded as a stand-in for sectional rivalries in national politics, the unnamed offspring hints at the closely related subject of territorial expansion. In one subtle but tantalizing allusion to this concern, Desdemona warns her husband, should he refuse her appeals, “Cassio’s off and making tracks for Texas” (“*Otello*,” 374). Although only a passing remark, the reference illustrates good fortune in timing. Appearing onstage the same month as Emerson publishes his second series of essays, the performance offers an unexpected response to “The Poet,” with its calls for songs about “Oregon and Texas,” along with “our Negroes,” as material for a new national aesthetic. And while there were several months to go before various interests in the region would lead to annexation and border war – when one Robert E. Lee and a young Ulysses Grant would meet and fight nearly side by side – it is fitting that Desdemona happens to express her worry right when the marriage shows its first real signs of strain.

Nearly all this stage business falls in line with techniques found throughout Rice’s more standard repertoire, where jokes about “bobalition” and fascination with Black male bodies ridicule the very things they seem to celebrate.⁴⁵ But in the hybrid form of *Otello Burlesque*, which infuses the Jim Crow persona into a strange combination of Shakespearean tragedy and burlesque, Rice leaves uncertain just how much he means to continue a similar spirit of mockery, how much he seeks to redirect it to surprising purposes. The combination gives Rice’s script an especially complex relation to chaos, both the fear of chaos that underlies Othello’s anguish and the chaos that prevails throughout the world of travesty. Rice takes care to emphasize Othello’s marriage as a tenuous defense against chaos. Rewriting the general’s line in the conventions of blackface dialect, he anticipates a condition later described

⁴⁵ On parodies of emancipation rhetoric, and their contribution to anti-Black hostilities, see Jones, *The Captive Stage*, esp. “The Senses of Bobalition,” 40–49. Cf. MacDonald, “Acting Black,” 246–47.

by Ralph Ellison, who recalls the marriage in his study of “American Myth,” and its dependence on the myth of the “Negro stereotype.” As Ellison suggests in his subtle analysis, the blackface trickster bears an affinity rather more with Desdemona than with Othello, in that both stand as a figure both of the imagination and of what lies beyond the capacity to imagine.⁴⁶ In playing Jim Crow as a cross between Othello and Othello, Rice’s character manages both to fulfill something like the stereotype and to mimic the obsessions that create such persistent demand for it. Along related lines, Rice both amplifies his character’s outbursts and diffuses them throughout the carnival atmosphere that envelopes him. Even at the height of his rage, as his threat to “tear her to pieces” clearly exploits racialized fears of brute violence, the reference to dismemberment is tempered by a scenario where physical bodies are intrinsically permeable, engaged in a continuous process of consumption and expulsion, and even death is only a temporary condition that leads to a rousing chorus based on a well-known song about emancipation. Chaos certainly does come again and again. Given the palliating effect it has on the tragedy, it could not come quickly enough. Meanwhile, in its celebration of chaos, the performance allows audiences to disregard the fantasies of racialized difference that the script puts on display. As I address in the section that follows, the records we have suggest that reactions to Rice’s novelty are unsettling enough to warrant direct attention of their own.

NOW THERE’S NOTHING IN IT: *OTELLO* ONSTAGE AND (QUICKLY) OFF AGAIN

In teasing out readings of the script, I do not wish to overstate the role that *Othello Burlesque* plays in confronting public attitudes, whether about sectional rivalries or about the complicated attitudes toward race and racial difference that lie behind them. Performance records strongly suggest that Rice’s hit was unexpected, and more for its novelty than for its subversiveness. In his chronicles of the Philadelphia stage, for instance, Charles Durang includes a brief description of the first night. The passage warrants full citation, since it represents the most direct account of what audiences observed:

In this Ethiopian opera Rice looked the part of the noble Moor to admiration. It was extremely well (musically) constructed. It had its songs, arias, cavatinas, concerted music, choruses, &c. – the dialogue mostly rendered in recitative, and all Othello’s soliloquies in airs or songs. Without a joke, it was really a clever thing, and was well executed. It made a palpable hit, and had a fine playing run. Such was its success

⁴⁶ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, from *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library Classics, 2003), 47–340, 96.

that the managers re-engaged Rice. Up to this period the actors received their regular playing salaries.⁴⁷

Durang's remarks are helpful as much for what he does not note as for what he does. He does not identify any contemporary performers or their acting styles, neither celebrities who had recently performed in Philadelphia, such as Forrest, nor more remote figures such as James Hewlett, whom earlier critical studies have speculated as a target for Rice's antics.⁴⁸ While parody of specific individuals is recognized as a standard feature of burlesque performances, Durang's disregard for it here suggests that the play spoke to entirely different concerns, for the house as much as for the performers.

For the Chestnut these concerns are financial, more candidly so as the run of performances continues. The course of advertisements suggests that *Otello Burlesque* held the stage slightly longer than audiences might have preferred. Initial promotions announce a new play by "the original Jim Crow." Such straightforwardness was sufficient early on, when the play was so successful that the nearby Arch Theater would attempt a burlesque *Othello* of its own. By 12 December, "Jim Crow Rice again held forth in his 'Otello,' and other negro oddities, but not to very good houses."⁴⁹ Within two days, in a newfound effort to draw in whatever remaining customers it could find, notices make recourse to a striking phrase: "If you wish to see fun, go to the Chestnut tonight."⁵⁰ The nebulous appeal to momentary diversion deflects public attention from several additional concerns that the performance might otherwise make inescapable, whether fixations on Shakespeare and blackface minstrelsy alike as signs of cultural merit, their overlap with ideologies of racial supremacy and segregationist practices, even the culture of the professional theaters, which hold all these elements together under a sign of manufactured leisure. But the promise to "see fun" is intriguing as much for its elusiveness as for its appeal to a culture of novelty. The very use of the phrase suggests something of an innovation, in promotions for professional theaters. While hardly brand new in its terminology – indeed, a notice in the *Enquirer* had already described it as "one of the funniest pieces ever played" – American theaters make surprisingly uncommon

⁴⁷ Charles Durang, *History of the Philadelphia Stage between the Years 1749 and 1855*, arranged and illustrated by Thompson Westcott, 5 vols., 1868, Volume V, 191 (Penn Libraries: Colenda Digital Repository), <https://colenda.library.upenn.edu/catalog/81431-p3fq9qb96>.

⁴⁸ See Hornback. Hewlett was not in Philadelphia at the time of Rice's performance.

⁴⁹ Durang, *History of the Philadelphia Stage*, Volume V, 197. Several operas by "Jim Crow Rice," *Otello* among them, were being translated into German, with the intent of introducing them "on the German stage early next spring." *Daily Chronicle*, 16 Dec. 1844, AHN.

⁵⁰ *Daily Chronicle*, 14 Dec. 1844, AHN.

reference to fun as a distinct quality which describes the experience of attending a performance.⁵¹ In this regard, the shift in terms reflects a calculated response in the face of rapidly declining interest, even if whatever rewards offered by the house are as fleeting as the performance itself.

Beyond its brief sensation in Philadelphia, Rice's touring schedule tells of a performer willing to go to great lengths to generate new interest in a play whose appeal had turned out to be decidedly short-lived. One engagement at Niblo's Theatre in New York, in August 1845, announces the show with such over-the-top enthusiasm that irony cannot be ruled out.⁵² Periods of several months separate his next appearances in various cities, from a feature engagement at the National Theater in Cincinnati to a bottom-of-the-bill performance at the Chatham Theatre in New York, in late September 1847. While performance records tend to be incomplete as a rule, those that are available suggest ongoing concerns, on the part of the theaters who book him, over how to promote his play. In one instance that has become prominent, thanks in part to Eric Lott's passing attention to it in his remarkable study of blackface and working-class disaffections, Rice appears in consecutive roles, first as *Otello*, and then as *Uncle Tom*, in an early adaptation of Stowe's novel.⁵³ The pairing makes a surprisingly vivid illustration of the complex ideological forces which structure blackface discourse. As Sarah Meer and Brian Roberts note in their respective studies, the conventions of blackface minstrelsy are malleable enough to sustain multiple, and often incompatible, social attitudes among its audiences.⁵⁴ But more often, *Otello Burlesque* is staged as a revival, whether as a museum piece at P. T. Barnum's establishment in February 1850, or as an evening at the National later that July gives occasion to show, as "Daddy Rice" remaining "just as good as new, just the same as ever, the only representative of the Ethiopian race, who ever really deserved to be

⁵¹ In a search through the America's Historical Newspapers database, the precise phrase turns up in three instances, and none before the Chestnut. Variations in phrasing, including the shorter "see fun," only slightly increase the total number of documents.

⁵² "Niblo's. – Rice, the renowned Jim Crow, commences an engagement to-night in a new sphere; the tragedy of *Othello* has been adopted as an opera, and Rice enacts the sable Moor. We hear it is the richest *travestie* ever performed and abounding in native airs." *New York Herald*, 18 Aug. 1845, AHN.

⁵³ Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy & the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 220. Cf. Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy & Transatlantic Culture* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 115.

⁵⁴ Meer, chapter 2, "Minstrel Variations: 'Uncle Toms' in the Minstrel Show"; Robert Nowatzki, *Representing African Americans in Transatlantic Abolitionism and Blackface Minstrelsy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010); Brian Roberts, *Blackface Nation: Race, Reform, and Identity in American Popular Music, 1812–1925* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

called the artist.”⁵⁵ By 1858, the latest date for which there is an available advertisement, the Broadway Theatre stages it as part of a retrospective revue, which represents Rice in bluntly nostalgic terms – “The original representative of Negro Characters in America, England, Ireland and Scotland.”⁵⁶ Taking care to note that *Otello* would be played with “all the original music,” the managers at the Broadway Theatre could only hope that a play conspicuously out of fashion would hold enough curiosity to generate at least some turnout. Fittingly, it is this same performance that advertises the play under its new name, *Othello, the Moor of Orange Street*; the alteration of the title hearkening back to an origin that pre-dates Rice himself.⁵⁷

Age and health partially account for the sharp decline in performance schedules. Following another stroke of paralysis, suffered in 1846, it is remarkable that Rice continued to make public appearances of any kind.⁵⁸ These same years also show a sharp decline of interest in burlesque performances of *Othello*, and at least some records suggest that in the main the primary conceit had worn thin. A passing recollection of *Otello Burlesque* turns up in an 1851 review of an art exhibition, where one painting of Othello and Desdemona as a mixed-race couple stands out for especially sharp criticism. In a rare combination of Jim Crow and the former President turned Shakespearean critic, the reviewer surmises that “the painter may be supposed to have had the inimitable burlesque of Rice in his mind’s eye, while painting” Desdemona in embrace with a “thick-lipped, wooly headed Moor.”⁵⁹ Contemporary professional companies like Christy’s Minstrels and the Ethiopian Serenaders made no attempt to imitate *Otello Burlesque*, even as they drew from other parts of Rice’s repertoire – *Virginia Mummy*, *Oh Hush!*, and *Fra Diavolo*, among others. Among the nearly three hundred “Ethiopian Melodies” compiled in their famous songbook, none make mention of *Othello*; only one joke mentions Shakespeare’s name in passing.⁶⁰ A single undated notice stands out as the only confirmation that

⁵⁵ *New York Herald*, 28 Feb. 1850, 3, AHN; *Sunday Dispatch*, 7 July 1850, 2, AHN. A staging at Ordway’s Theatre in Boston reports the play on more modest grounds of its favorable reception “by a crowded house.” *Boston Daily Mail* (Boston, MA), 24 Feb. 1853, 2, AHN.

⁵⁶ American minstrel show collection, 1823–1947, MS Thr 556 (540), Rice, Tom, 1808–860, Playbills, 1833–1845, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

⁵⁷ See [https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:424019356\\$2i](https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:424019356$2i).

⁵⁸ *Theatrical Journal* (London), 15 Aug. 1846, 263, Juba Project.

⁵⁹ “Correspondence of the Atlas New York May 13th,” *Daily Atlas* (Boston, MA), 29 May 1851, 1, AHN.

⁶⁰ *Christy’s and White’s Ethiopian Melodies: Containing Two Hundred and Ninety-One ... Melodies ... Comprising the Melodeon Song Book: Plantation Melodies: Ethiopian Song Book: Serenader’s Song Book, and Christy and Wood’s New Song Book* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1850–?).

CHRISTY'S MINSTRELS !

PROGRAMME FOR THIS EVENING.
PART FIRST.

Grand Instrumental Overture—(Arranged by T. McNally)
Company

Opening Chorus,—Operatic,..... Company

Oh, Farewell—A Serenade,..... **J. W. Raynor**

Camptown Races—With Imitations of Horse Race,
Geo. Christy

Dear Mother, I've come home to Die, . . . J. Whittaker

Dat's another Pull Back,..... H. Talbott

Rock me to sleep, Mother, J. H. Surridge

Gypsy Davey,..... **Geo. Christy**

Grand Finale—"Slumbering Darkies," . . . Company
(Introducing a number of old Style Negro Melodies.)

PART SECOND—CHRISTY'S CARNIVAL.

YOUNG EPH'S LAMENT, - W. Fields

BALLAD, - - - - - J. WHITTAKER

D W A R F D A N C E !

Original with, and performed only by Geo. Christy.

CLOGOPEDALITY, - - - - - Fields and Cooper

O T H E L L O !

Desdemona, Geo. Christy | Othello, J. H. Surridge

TAMBORINE SOLO, - - - - - H. TALBOTT

OVERTURE, - - - - - ORCHESTRA

The whole to conclude with the Laughable Burlesque,
with all the Original Music, entitled

O H ! H U S H !

Or, the Virginia Cupids.

GUFFY, - - - - - GEO. CHRISTY

Sam Johnson—a Retired Boot-Black, . . . J. H. Surridge

Pete Williams, H. Talbott

George Jackson, J. Thompson

Jasper Cadwalader, J. Whittaker

Augustus Armstrong, R. Wilson

William Perdue, F. Bicter

Alexander Rainforth, E. Moebus

Patience Rialto, J. Cooper

Rose—A Contraband Maiden, W. Fields

Hamfatters, Hoplighters, Giggists, Hot-Corners, Sing-
ists, Wampers, &c., by the Corps de Ballet.

Admission, 25 Cts. Orchestra Seats, 50 Cts
Doors open at 7 o'clock To commence at 8 precisely.

JOHN P. SMITH Business Agent.

Figure 4. America Christy Minstrels on tour. Playbills, 1844–65 and undated. MS Thr 1848, Box 9, Christy Minstrels on Tour, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

the ensemble attempted an *Othello* of their own – at least in excerpt, since only Christy (Desdemona) and J. H. Surrige (Othello) are identified as cast (see Figure 4). Perhaps this performance was restricted to the bedchamber scene, which in turn becomes the kernel for blackface performances during the 1870s and 1880s, when *Othello* serves to aggressively highlight themes of sexual violence against innocent victims; though in the end, exactly what passages were selected remains unclear. Whatever its contents, the performance shows no trace of influence from Rice’s burlesque. If anything, its obscurity helps illustrate a stark contrast in periods, between the final years of Rice’s career when blackface performances of *Othello* remain comparatively infrequent and increasingly peripheral, and the productions that turn up during “the turbulent period” following the Reconstruction, when, as Michael Neill notes, *Othello* fuels hostilities over patterns of immigration and widespread anxieties over mixing among races.⁶¹

Still, these late and intermittent performances of Rice’s *Othello* offer intriguing hints about the presence of *Othello* during the no less turbulent decade of the 1850s, when disputes over slavery become increasingly visible as signs of sectional conflict, and when questions about the status of free Black men are addressed by a Supreme Court which would deny to Black persons any rights which “the white man” was bound to respect. In very briefly turning to these turbulent years, I mean to revisit questions raised by Ian Smith, both how to answer Othello’s demand to “speak of me as I am,” and how to do so in a manner that lives up to the challenges of a racially divided American society. To the extent that Smith’s questions call for examination of the play in production (onstage as well as in written records), it follows that responses will necessarily include further examinations of the numerous productions that take place during a period that finally came to be recognized as a house divided. I suggest here that accounts of this period remain indefinite, not least because they require the study of materials no less slippery than Rice’s burlesque. They are all the more so the further they move away from landmark surveys of Shakespeare in early American performance, which characterize these years by distinguished actors and new “stars,” and which themselves make distinctions between the virtuoso performances of Edwin Booth and the underappreciated, yet respectable, accomplishments of James W. Wallack.⁶² Within such frameworks, the contemporary blackface ensembles stand apart as a separate world, all the more so as their performances

⁶¹ Neill, “Introduction,” 44.

⁶² Esther Cloudman Dunn, *Shakespeare in America* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939); Charles H. Shattuck, *Shakespeare on the American Stage: From the Hallams to Edwin Booth* (Washington, DC: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1976).

offer up artificially halcyon portraits of plantation life as a foil to the harsh conditions of wage labor throughout the industrialized northern cities. Even as performances of *Otello Burlesque* become infrequent during these years, the occasional revival should serve to remind us that contemporary audiences for Shakespeare and blackface minstrelsy were not necessarily as bifurcated as the records of more distinguished performances might otherwise suggest.

Meanwhile, in light of more familiar cases – of celebrities and songbooks alike – it remains crucial not to lose sight of the occasional performer who does, on occasion, make use of Shakespeare’s play for more tendentious purposes – all the more so the harder they are to observe. Taking recognition of one neglected but significant instance, I conclude this production history by turning to a select moment in the career of George W. Jamieson. To a limited degree, Jamieson can be regarded as a companion of Rice’s. He produces his first plays at the Bowery Theater in New York, just as Rice was “quite literally figuring Jim out” through song and dance (Lhamon, 30). They continue to play in proximity for several years, including a series of separate evenings in December 1844, when each appears at the Chestnut to perform in distinct versions of *Othello* – one as tragedy, the other as farce.⁶³ Jamieson makes regular appearances in Shakespeare’s tragedy, and a cast which features him as the subtle Iago can safely be described as “good.”⁶⁴ For all his professional accomplishments in playing Iago, however, Jamieson reappears at the Bowery Theatre in March 1860 for a double bill, where a performance of *Othello* is paired up to “coincide with the Southern play of the *OLD PLANTATION*, in which the author ... enacts the part of a plantation negro unsurpassably.”⁶⁵ As a pairing of Shakespearean tragedy with anti-Tom propaganda, Jamieson’s performance makes a neat counterpart with the one Rice had given some years prior, when he brought his blackface Shakespearean burlesque together with the melodramatic adaptation of Stowe. As these occasional performances suggest, the respective scenarios and modes they draw from could in fact be combined and recombined to suit any number of occasions. And in turn, strategies for evasion and blatant display were not limited to the ones that Rice had adopted in his script.

As a performance record, *The Old Plantation* remains well suited to the kind of dredging-up work that scholars have undertaken with Rice’s songs and scripts. About the script, all that currently remains is the title, some of the music, and a record of its performance in New Orleans some six

⁶³ *Daily Chronicle* (Philadelphia), 2 Dec. 1844, 3, AHN.

⁶⁴ *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, 1 May 1848, 2, AHN.

⁶⁵ “Advertisement,” *New York Herald*, morning edition, 8 March 1860, 1, AHN.

years earlier, when it played under the name *Uncle Tom As He Is*.⁶⁶ To New York audiences it is essentially a new piece. Details of the performance are as unsettling as they are faint. From a contemporary account printed in the *New York Dispatch*, it was welcomed as much for its pleasant construction and design as for clear display of the author's "ultra pro-slavery" outlook. Even the double billing with *Othello* gives occasion to remind reviewers "that Othello was *not* a white man, and that luxuriant side whiskers, and moustache, *a la* George Jordan, were *not* worn years ago in Venice."⁶⁷ One additional hint can be inferred by the layout of the advertisement, right at the top of the front page of the *New York Herald*. Notice of the performance appears directly to the left of a multicolumn article, which editorializes at great length on William Seward's prominent speech on "The Irrepressible Conflict," including discussions of slavery and the plantations, the upcoming presidential election, and the secession question. It also appears directly above an advertisement for Barnum's American Museum, in which the notorious showman trumpets forth a grotesque of his own, "Face of man" – "Limbs of monkey" – "WHAT IS IT?" – replete with the bold type, capitalizations, and countless exclamation points that had become customary in the museum's advertisements.⁶⁸ Wedged as it is at the intersection between these two entries, incommensurate in their interests, the notice for the Bowery performance appears to invite readers to pursue remarkably divergent directions in their scanning. Along related lines, it remains unclear to what extent Jamieson's performance was meant to address the prospects of sectional conflict, or in fact to deflect attention from those concerns toward an increasingly sprawling network of curiosities and sideshow marvels that go about their business with indifference to public affairs. Cast as passing entertainment, on the brink of civil war, this pro-slavery rendition of *Othello* bears direct witness, though disturbing in its obscurity, to an altogether new age of distractions.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Adam H. Kitzes is a Professor of English at the University of North Dakota. His research focusses on early modern English literature and its reception by editors, literary critics, and other readers. The present article is part of an ongoing series of short pieces which examine controversial landmark adaptations of Shakespeare, both in performance and in print. Recent

⁶⁶ See Joseph P. Roppolo, "Uncle Tom in New Orleans: Three Lost Plays," *New England Quarterly*, 27 (1954), 213–26. On the music see Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, 106.

⁶⁷ *New York Dispatch*, 10 March 1860, *Chronicling America*, LOC, original emphasis.

⁶⁸ *New York Herald*, 8 March 1860, *Chronicling America*, LOC. A similar announcement appears in the *Dispatch*, where the figure is named as an octoroon.

examples have appeared in *Renaissance Studies*, *Shakespeare*, and *Essays in Criticism*. For this piece, the author wishes to thank all his colleagues in the English Department, including Randi Tanglen for organizing the UND Faculty Writing Group project, as well as the three anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and helpful feedback.