

## **A Bogus Hero:**

### **Welles's *Othello* and the Construction of Race**

**Nicholas Jones**

Oberlin College

“ . . . his Lears and Othellos all seemed a little bogus . . . ”

(Thomson 355)

Welles's 1952 film of *Othello* is as much Welles as it is *Othello*.<sup>1</sup> It is stamped with the persona of its prime mover, who raised the money, wrote the script, directed the film, and acted the lead role. As director, Welles dominates the film with his personality and his style. As principal actor, Welles is by far the strongest presence in the film: his prominent body dominates the screen, his voice is the most memorable and often the only understandable part of the flawed soundtrack, and he far out-acts the doll-like Suzanne Cloutier (Desdemona) and the wasted Micheál MacLiammóir (Iago). The persona of Orson Welles has predictably determined much of the history of interpretation of the film. Now seen largely as a part of the Welles oeuvre, it is seen to participate in, variously, the mystery–biography genre (*Citizen Kane*); the interrogation of modernist progress (*The Magnificent Ambersons*); or the introduction of Shakespearean culture into modern popular genres (*Everybody's Shakespeare* and the “voodoo” *Macbeth*).<sup>2</sup> Welles has so clearly stamped his personality on this film that the filmmaker and his main character seem intertwined.

Welles not only played Othello with enormous relish in this film (about which he cared deeply) but seemed to bring Shakespeare's hero into his own very public life, which sometimes reads like Othello's "traveler's history"—a restless wandering among grand projects, illuminated by flashes of genius, and destined for self-destruction and exile.<sup>3</sup> Like the Ronald Colman character in George Cukor's *A Double Life*, Welles might seem to have identified with Shakespeare's tragic hero. The problem with that identification, of course, is that Othello is black and Welles is white. The intensity of Welles's involvement with his film's hero poses questions: To what extent is he aware of racial difference? Does he assume a "universal and timeless" relevance to the Shakespearean hero, to which race is just a secondary attribute? Or is he, as I believe, highly conscious of issues of race in his own time, artistically strategizing a range of identification, difference, and exoticism to speak to the racial tensions of the American 1950s?

Race is often assumed to be ignored by, or irrelevant to, Welles's *Othello*. Peter Donaldson, for example, says that the film "consistently underplays any sense of racial difference" (97). Jack Jorgens emphasizes the formal qualities of its modernist style over the more politicized treatment of race in the Olivier *Othello* (175). Lois Potter describes the racial tensions in the cast during production (specifically, the attitudes of MacLiammóir towards Moroccans) but gives little explication of how race might be involved in the film's meanings (142-43). Deborah Cartmell claims that "race is hardly perceptible in Welles's film" (145). James W. Stone echoes Jorgens's assertion of the primacy of form, commenting that Welles "does much to strip Shakespeare's play of its racial thematics, or at least to reduce racial difference to the fundamentally cinematic grid

of black and white photography" (189). To some degree, these assertions are fair. Given the strong aesthetic and formalist interest in Welles criticism, it is natural that the film's evasiveness and indirection could be seen to signify an unwillingness to grapple with a social issue as divisive as race in the tense years of the early 1950s.

The apparent evasiveness of Welles's film increases when it is contrasted with the obviously racialized dynamic of Lawrence Olivier's approach in the Stuart Burge film of 1965. If Welles seemed to re-make *Othello* in his own image, Olivier famously wanted to *become* the black *Othello*. As Arthur L. Little, Jr. describes it, Olivier seemed to be challenged by the play to "to embody himself as completely as possible in the body of blackness" (97). In Olivier's words: "Black. . . . I had to *be* black. I had to feel black down to my soul. I had to look out from a black man's world" (qtd. in Little 95; ellipsis in original). As Barbara Hodgdon puts it, Olivier blacks up "as though mimicry might efface notions of difference" (26). Olivier's earnest efforts re-inscribe the very inequities that he seems to have been trying to counteract. As Potter says, "in so far as Olivier's performance is seen as a *tour de force* of mimicry, it is likely to be offensive" (152). Olivier submerges his whiteness in an assumed blackness, a move that by the polarized sixties seemed naïve and deeply misguided.

Welles worked with a sharper sense than Olivier of the complex nature of racialized representations. He loved dressing up, as Olivier did, and like Olivier, Welles loved to pretend to cross boundaries such as race; but he always implied that to pretend was not the same as to be. Welles's film of *Othello*, it seems to me, is deeply involved in and aware of questions of race, even though—or because—it problematizes the racial divide. In its difficulties, evasions, and erasures, Welles's film articulates the gaps

between the white actor and the black character, as well as the gaps between the black character and the white playwright, eventuating in a complex meditation on the insidious temptations of racial essentialism.

---

Welles himself was deeply involved in questions of race. His involvement, however, is not easily reduced to one motive. Welles was on the one hand socially advanced and even radically innovative, and on the other hand patronizing and self-serving. As a famous example, the Mercury Theater production of *Macbeth* with its voodoo setting and all-black cast exemplifies Welles's divided attitude toward race. The production's premise that Shakespeare must be available to black culture as well as white was in its time startling and potentially radical. On the other hand, the show patronized and exoticized black culture for white entertainment. Not surprisingly, as Rena Fraden notes, the production was "condemned as a capitulation to stereotypes . . . and praised for the chance it offered black men and women to perform Shakespeare" (qtd. in Anderegg 172, fn. 20). Welles knew that the controversial racial issues of the age were both sources of entertainment and occasions for protest. In 1932 he wrote a play about radical abolitionist John Brown (Leaming 52). In 1941 he staged an adaptation of Richard Wright's controversial *Native Son*; Welles, loving racial cross-dressing, might have been tempted to play the lead role of Bigger Thomas himself, but he wisely refrained and cast a black actor for the role (Leaming 213). In 1942, Welles protested against the racially motivated police murder of a Mexican-American (Leaming 274). In 1944, he wrote against "race hate [as] the abandonment of human nature" (qtd. in Thomson 260). In 1946

he took up the cause of a black war veteran beaten by police. In this case, Welles invoked his own well-known persona—privileged, mobile, free to be outrageous and creative—as he intoned on the radio, "I was born a white man and until a colored man is a full citizen like me I haven't the leisure to enjoy the freedom that colored man risked his life to maintain for me" (Leaming 330). In all these cases, he manifested both an apparently sincere interest in racial equality and a gleeful exploitation of the shock value of these positions.

It must have seemed plausible for Welles to take on the Othello role in his own film. He had lived with Shakespeare his whole life, and his brash self-confidence enabled him to see any of Shakespeare's roles, black or white, as his own. And yet it was a move he must have known to go against the grain. From the days of Paul Robeson's groundbreaking performances as the first really famous black Othello of the twentieth century, the role had been seen as the rightful province of the black actor. After that, as Potter notes, any white Othello would evoke a phantom of Robeson, "a silent, embarrassing, absent presence" (Potter 135). As Herb Coursen says about later 20<sup>th</sup>-century *Othello* productions, "any effort to dodge the racial issue in the script [by using a white actor] will, indeed, either haunt or subvert the production of the script, either by calling attention to the inevitable and perhaps intentional stereotype that the actor will create (e.g., Olivier) or by creating the vacuum that a white Othello imposes on the script" (126). Welles must have sensed this potential reaction to his film, yet he approached acting Othello with no sense of being haunted or embarrassed.

Welles takes on the role much as he took on Shakespeare and life in general—as an enterprise best served by magic. Welles was an enthusiastic practitioner of magic. At the age of eleven, he donned a cape and presented magic tricks; late in life, he did a Las

Vegas show that combined Shakespeare recitations with sleight of hand magic (Leaming 22, 412). His last film, unfinished at his death, was to be called *The Magic Show* (Thomson 421). Welles practiced the stagy magic that boys would have learned from mail-order books advertised on matchbox covers, reveling in props like the cape and the “lovely assistant.” He worked the links between magic, theater, and film: for him, all these genres depended on the “magician” making a palpable untruth seem plausible even while the audience recognizes that it's a fake. The deliberate illusionism of art is the theme of *F for Fake* (1973), where the aging Welles sits before his Movieola like a card shark about to fleece you for your own entertainment.<sup>4</sup>

Like any professional magician, Welles enjoys making us think we see what's not there. At the same time he makes sure we *know* it's not “really” there: how else could we appreciate the “magic”? We *think* that we see a black Othello; at the same time we *know* that we see Welles, unmistakably white, creating an illusion of blackness. Instead of Olivier’s earnest attempts at authenticity, Welles plays with us through sleight of hand. Brashly, he doesn’t mind being haunted by the ghost of Robeson. At the same time, he plunges himself into the long history of whiteness that underlies any production of *Othello*, gleefully standing in for the long tradition of white men who have “created” the black Othello—Emil Jannings, Edmund Kean, Richard Burbage, and even the first begetter of the character, William Shakespeare.

David Thomson puts it like this:

[Welles] cherished magic because it put him in charge, so he never regarded it as a cheap trick. To make people gasp with surprise is a noble calling. Any Lear he ever dreamed of would have had that aspiration. That's why his Lears and Othellos all seemed a little

bogus, like player kings in *Zenda*, conned into taking the Big Part.  
(355)

"Bogus" seems an aptly low-brow way to characterize the formalist artificiality of a film like Welles's *Othello*—full of dashing surprises, but never trying to seem fully real.<sup>5</sup> Welles had a sophisticated enjoyment of the disjunctive condition of a magician's audience: knowing they are fooled, and not knowing how it's done.

In Welles's hands, *Othello* explores this disjunction, examining its own subjects' lack of authenticity. As in *Citizen Kane*, Welles opens up the psychological ambiguities of his central character, exploring its fragmentation—but this time in the area of race. He highlights the complicated and multiple role of the white actor-director-magician who takes on the work of representing blackness. The traditional theatrical mark of race—the dark makeup that allows the white man to represent the black—becomes, like the handkerchief and the bed, an object of scrutiny and inversion. As a "bogus," or counterfeit, makeup and color play a prominent role in the film's intensely self-conscious theatricality. Olivier's heavy black body-makeup, which notoriously smudged onto the white skin of Maggie Smith's Desdemona, became a sign of the inadequacy of his attempt at authentic naturalism. But for Welles, the inadequacy of makeup becomes a proud mark of fakery, a knowing and sophisticated stance of skepticism about the meaning of race and the limits of representation in general.

-----

Recent critical work on the intersection of theater and race suggests that we need to see race in Shakespeare's *Othello* as a theatricalized artifact with a complex history

and intricate construction. Martin Orkin and Michael Neill, though they differ about the political interventions the play makes, agree that the issue must be discussed in theatrical terms rather than with the social essentialism that is often applied to it. Orkin points out that to presume to understand Othello either by focusing on or by ignoring his race is to perpetuate the racist essentialism that the play itself refutes. In his words, Shakespeare "reverses the associations attached to the colors white and black that are the consequence of racist stereotyping" (170). Neill shows that essentialist racial representations are complicated by the instability of an object like the bed:

the object that 'poisons sight' [the bed] is nothing less than a mirror for the obscene desires and fears that Othello arouses in its audiences—monsters that the play at once invents and naturalizes, declaring them improper, even as it implies that they were always "naturally" there. (208)

In recent historically based criticism, the racial identity of the hero is complicated beyond simple definition through the actor's skin color or makeup. Michael Bristol, for example, suggests an analogy to the theatricality of the medieval *charivari*, the carnivalesque ritual in which villagers used blackface, transvestism, and clowning to expose aberrant social behavior. By analogy, Bristol asks us to see Othello not as a realistic role, but as a participant in a social function of similarly strange nature:

To think of Othello as a kind of black-faced clown is perhaps distasteful, although the role must have been written not for a black actor, but with the idea of black makeup or a false face of some kind. Othello is a Moor, but only in quotation marks, and his blackness is not even skin-deep but rather a transitory and superficial theatrical integument. (185)

In his provocative discussion in *Shakespeare Jungle Fever*, Arthur Little asks us to focus on blackness as an unstable dynamic in the play rather than on its more simplistic significations, suggesting that "the fact of Othello's mere black presence [is] an aspect of the play by which we often seem to get critically paralyzed" (73). He suggests that "the play *probes* [Othello's] blackness" (75; emphasis mine), implying that "blackness" is far from simple or monolithic. He continues: "However sympathetic Shakespeare's Othello may appear for most of the play and however much Shakespeare shows him working against his indelibly marked black body . . . his killing of Desdemona changes it all" (85). There Othello "discovers himself entrapped in blackness" (86). At the heart of Little's view of Othello is a theatricality of blackness, "an artificial and performative thing, at once imitable and inimitable" (78).

Welles plunges into a similar theatricality of blackness in *Othello*. His highly self-conscious style demands that we pay attention to the dynamics—and the limits—of representation, including the representation of race. The film's resident magician makes us "see" two contradictory versions of things, on several levels. Welles the actor is quite obviously not black, yet he represents the black hero; the film is a montage of confusing and fragmented images, yet it adds up, somehow, to a heroic narrative, and the character Othello is at once a deeply shattered set of fragments and an articulate, sympathetic tragic hero. Because of its double vision from the very start, the film exposes the processes of racist fragmentation both as they occur to the black man who is its main character and to the white culture that controls the codes within which blackness signifies difference.

In early scenes, before Othello appears at the Senate, the film keeps us guessing about what he is going to look like. In the long exposition sequence, the narrative remains

oddly fragmentary, almost indecipherable, the characters nearly indistinguishable, the hero barely recognizable. Glimpses of him tantalize rather than identify. The opacity of the opening scenes frustrates many viewers, who cannot figure out what is going on. But these narrative discontinuities have a point: they defer, and thus anticipate, the long-delayed appearance of the “real” Othello. One effect is that by the time we really see Othello, we already sense the fragmentation and illusions from which he is constructed.

A heightening of the already frenzied pace precedes our meeting with Welles as Othello pace: Brabantio, enraged, hurries towards the Senate chamber and vituperatively denounces Othello. His daughter, he spits out, has "Run from her [father] to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as [that]." <sup>6</sup> At the derogatory word “that” (the text reads “thou”), the camera swings to Othello and the action suddenly stops; as Jorgens puts it, "an otherwise nervous film comes to rest" (180). Finally, we get Othello, and he is . . . Orson Welles! Self-consciously posing as a slightly dark-skinned Renaissance nobleman, he does little to disguise his own unmistakable features, including his unmistakably Caucasian nose (see Plate 1). “That” is not a black man, as Brabantio asserts, but a white man—and a well-known one—pretending to be black. He is bogus: Othello's blackness is counterfeited, but not embodied, by this makeup job.

Inauthenticity characterizes Welles’s move into blackness. Consistent with the modernist style of the film, there is a self-conscious attention to the simultaneity of signification, the dichotomous awareness of actor and role. The film as a whole avoids naturalism, the style of “authenticity.” With its highly visual formalism, the film denies us the involvement that we look for in “realism,” constantly breaking the threads of emotional and even narrative continuity. As Jorgens says, the artificiality of its

"flamboyant cinematography" (175) is supplemented by "an editing style which deliberately omits transitions" (189). When we at last see Othello, he barely constitutes a character, barely interacts with others, barely seems aware of the *mise-en-scène*, and barely seems to be engaged in a plot or a through-line. We mostly see Welles plying his own brand of magic, even while his Othello vigorously refutes the charge of magic in his courtship of Desdemona. Welles foregrounds his own face, drawing attention to his famous theatrical mastery; hardly leaving his initial posture in the frame, he effortlessly dominates the image and the soundtrack, eclipsing almost all else. His verse speaking is orotund, grand, and confident; even as he moves through the chamber, his posture seems hardly to change since the camera moves with him. He is, as it were, autonomous.

A particularly telling moment occurs as Othello sums up his effect on Desdemona: "She swore in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange" (1.3.159). On "passing strange," Welles utters a tiny chuckle deep in the throat and we see a barely perceptible smile, as if to mark that it is just at this point that the magic is happening, the illusion is created, the trick is pulled. It's as if Welles's Othello recognizes how exoticized his story is: Desdemona has believed his story, and it wins her love, and he . . . well, he can dare to show just a little amusement at her naiveté. The magician is so successful that he can risk a brief self-congratulation, as if to say, "Witchcraft, my lords? nothing so exotic. My magic was the magic not of the sorcerer but of the illusionist. It was *white* magic."

Who is the magician here? If it's Othello, it might explain the chilly sexual chemistry between this Othello and his Desdemona. More likely, though, the magician is Orson. This little chuckle of Othello is a subtle echo of the exuberant glee he showed at

his most famous hoax, *The War of the Worlds*; as David Thomson describes, "in the aftermath . . . he was uttering denials, but everything in his bearing whispered, 'Suckers!'" (103) Welles was constantly befuddling his friends and biographers with exotic and barely credible stories about his exploits, constructing and reconstructing his own image from scraps of romance novels and shreds of truth. Similarly, Othello constructs the magic of his life and his relationship with Desdemona:

She swore in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,  
 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.  
 She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished  
 That heaven had made her such a man. (1.3.159–162)

The story creates the image by which he'll have to live: exotic ("'twas strange, 'twas passing strange"); full of pathos ("'twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful"); and contradictory in effect on Desdemona ("she wished she had not heard it, yet she wished. . ."). The effects of contradiction multiply in Othello himself. He narrates himself through a Desdemona who, he asserts, "wished / That heaven had made her such a man." In delivering that last phrase, Welles inserts a tiny but significant break: ". . . made her [*pause*] such a man." The pause, like the chuckle, gives play to multiple meanings for the phrase. Even as he creates the role, Welles asks us to see the gaps and contradictions in it. What is it to wish "That heaven had made her such a man"? There are multiple possibilities:

- 1) she wants "a man made *for* her": perhaps this Othello is made for Desdemona to marry;
- 2) she wants to be "made *into* a man": perhaps Desdemona, somehow re-gendered, may participate in such masculine adventures as he narrates;

- 3) she wants “a man made *by* heaven ”: perhaps Othello himself is not quite real, somehow magically created out of thin air.

The pause gives the phrase a deeply self-reflexive import, as if once again to say, "you see that it's done, but you don't know how." The rabbit comes out of the hat, but we can't tell how.

Race is not mentioned here, but its multiplicities are surely part of the intention: there is no possibility of an irreducible single meaning to this situation, where Welles, the white actor, plays the black Othello, speaking lines written by the white Shakespeare, and telling Othello's story of the very white Desdemona. The moment mocks the idea that “such a man” could be understood in any essential terms—say, by the color of his magic, his makeup or his skin—although Brabantio obviously presumes to do so, as he angrily points to “the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as that." Welles asks us whether one is to live by Brabantio's dehumanizing simplification (“such a *thing*”) or by the more complicated possibilities in Othello's own phrase, “such a *man*.” To return to the three possibilities outlined above, one might see them as incorporating quite different ideological possibilities:

- 1) “a man made *for* her” signals a pragmatic racial economics: Othello is a black man made for a white woman's pleasure and, by extension, for the security of the Venetian state;
- 2) “made *into* a man” implies an fantastic transparency of boundaries, in which a woman might cross over the divide of gender and re-make herself into a man, going into the wars like her husband, or in which a black man might see himself invited to cross over into the society of whites;

- 3) “a man made *by* heaven” suggests that difference could be erased under the sense of a common humanity under a single god, transcending the differences of race.

The very multiplicity that arises during this brief pause enables a moment of complex interrogation, if we are willing to entertain it.

But to “entertain,” in its other sense, is also the issue. Though race was a serious issue for Welles, it was also matter for a chuckle, a source of entertainment and profit. The “voodoo *Macbeth*,” for example, was clearly geared to excite audiences and to appropriate the fashions of Harlem entertainments. Later, when Welles was making *Othello*, he had to raise money for it by acting in other films; in one of them, *The Black Rose*, his biographer reports that “much to Orson's delight, he would have to be thickly and laboriously made up to play a Mongol chieftain” (Leaming 368). Blacking up, as Welles had to do to play Othello, had always seemed to him both fun and profitable. On tour with the voodoo *Macbeth*, the black actor playing Macbeth fell ill, only to be replaced by Orson himself:

“the only time anybody's ever blacked up to play Macbeth!” Orson laughs. “I was a much darker Macbeth than Jack was. I had to prove that I belonged.” If no one in the audience recognized him, it was because “they didn't know who I was. I was an anonymous radio actor. This was a Negro Macbeth, so why was anybody going to think I was passing? The cast thought it was very funny. I think this has disappeared, but they had an expression in black show business, which is: instead of 'making up,' you 'make down' — make yourself darker. So they said, 'There's Orson making down again!’” (Leaming 109-10)

There's a carnivalesque laughter in this entertainment-business anecdote. In his odd way, this manic entertainer, at once pragmatic and Dionysian, breaks down the naturalized hierarchies of white and black. His *Othello*, too, works against naturalized hierarchies. Rather than constructing another monument to western civilization, he makes us painfully aware of how tentatively constructed it is. Though he called the film by the full title, *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*, the film denies those transcendent qualities that so often make us try to universalize tragedy.<sup>7</sup> Welles plays Othello not as "universal" hero, but as a man whose identity is provisional, uncertain. Welles's style, as it fragments place and time, deconstructs identity and race.

-----

As MacLiammóir's lank-haired Iago works on Othello, the signs of blackness in Welles's representation of Othello—skin color, for example—become more pronounced. This is not in itself surprising, since it is widely noted that Iago works to exacerbate Othello's latent jealousy, irrationality, and gullibility, and these are long-time stereotypical features of the stage black. But Welles's film, with its strong sense of artifice and style, resists the stereotypical. The blackening of Othello proceeds with particular attention towards the artifice creating it. That is, the blackening is not "natural," but shown to be at once contingent (faults in continuity) and deliberately illusionist (crafted by cinematic/theatrical arts).

At the very opening of the film, well before the titles and exposition, artifice is highlighted. Out of a black screen, a vague image emerges, almost impenetrable. Later we learn that it represents the head of Othello, dead, head upside down, in extreme close-

up. But at first, we have no idea what it is. And even when we identify it, the image denies conventional expectations (this is a heroic play, but the hero is first shown dead, upside-down, passive, unrecognizable). What about the hero's race? It, too, is radically uncertain: the face of "black" Othello emerges as a face only inasmuch as it constitutes a *lighter* image than the blackness that encompasses the figure.

The funeral procession that follows fragments identity further. It echoes a similar scene in the most influential post-war Shakespeare film, Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948). There, however, the effect is heroic: the voiceover identifies Hamlet as a tragic hero ("This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind") and the camera solemnly follows the dead hero in its symbolic ascent towards the ramparts (Jorgens 297). This body has a heroic identity—an indecisive and flawed man, perhaps, but "a man" who is unmistakably the protagonist of a "tragedy." By contrast, in Othello's dead march, identities and tones are uncertain. The biers—too many, too similar, and too briefly glimpsed—move in and out of view, undefined. Their solemn, ominous movement, with the bearers cloaked in hoods, is interspersed with the fiercely disorienting motions of the imprisoned Iago, first dragged across the screen and then hoisted in a sickeningly swinging cage. As we watch him swing, Welles's camera pans back and forth like Iago's point of view; dizzyingly, the villain determines what we can see of the hero. The ceremony of tragedy is interrupted and interrogated by reversals, by interference (the bier passes behind buttresses which block it from view), and by intrusion (the lynch mob that drags Iago across the frame, chained at the neck; see Plate 2).<sup>8</sup> At the end of this long sequence, the frame gradually fills with black, to end the sequence as it had begun, in an impenetrable obscurity.

In this remarkable sequence, light and dark sharply interpenetrate. Neither seems possible without the other. The biers pass back and forth from sunshine to shadows, criss-crossed by the bars of Iago's cage and the geometrical rectangles of the ramparts. Repeatedly a sunlit image plunges into near-complete darkness, lost to sight. It is obvious from the start that cinematic realism, with its subtle play of gray tones, is not the priority in this film: light and dark are going to be used for symbolic formal effects rather than for the display of organic, bodily authenticity. Blackness and whiteness, the central social markers of race difference, are also tools for making formalist illusions, for making us see meaning where none inheres. In other words, color differentiation of race, like truth and justice in the *film noir* genre on which this work is based, is both essential and at the same time constructed.<sup>9</sup>

We encounter this alternation of shadow and light again during the Senate speech. As Othello tells his story, he walks in and out of intensely black shadows that momentarily obscure his figure. The effect is repeated and startling, as if this heroic figure were little more than an illusion of light and shadow. Similar patterns recur through the film, sometimes in regular ways (as when the alternation is created by the forest of columns), sometimes in less regular ways (as when Othello, hiding in an arched doorway, is framed by the brilliance of the wall surrounding the arch and by the intense darkness of the arch's shadows). In the long tracking shot that follows Othello and Iago as they walk the ramparts ("Honest, my lord?" [3.3.106ff.]), the rhythmic alternations of the tessellated ramparts create a maddening alternation of light and dark. Here is Jorgens's perceptive description:

its overlaying of several aural and visual rhythms, each in conflict with the others . . . builds a growing sense of unease in the viewer:

the regular beat of the boots on the stone and the accompanying movement of their bodies, the rhythm of the waves beating against the shore, the uneven bursts of speech and silence, the irregular appearances of cannon in the notches in the wall, the regular patches of sunlight thrown on the walkers' feet, and the pattern of the irregularly spaced rocks in the sea beyond the ramparts. (184)

Despite Iago's fatuous sentiment, men in this highly constructed, modernist film are not likely to "be what they seem" (3.3.131). What we see, including skin color, does not take us to the essence.

As the film goes on, Welles's makeup seems to become at once darker and more inconsistent. Other markers of difference become more intense and more problematic as well. In a scene on the ramparts, Othello reveals an elaborate embroidered pattern on his cloak, an exotic emblem of "otherness" that the film has not focused on earlier.<sup>10</sup> When Othello emerges again from the dark castle crying to Iago, "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore" (3.3.364), he wears a white hooded cloak that seems Moroccan, reminding us that this Othello is a "Moor": whatever that slippery term may mean, it obviously connotes a racial difference from the inhabitants of Venice, the metropolitan center.<sup>11</sup> The bright sunlit cloak sets off the ever-darker makeup on Othello: Welles is making him blacker than before. Inasmuch as we see the cloak as a tool of the filmmaker—and by this point in Welles's highly figurative film, we tend to see most objects as expressive, symbolic tools—it signifies above all the filmmaker's art, the control over contrasts by which Welles's use of whiteness constructs a corresponding blackness.<sup>12</sup>

Peter Donaldson discusses at length the crucial role of mirrors in examining identity in this film. As Iago prompts him to doubt himself, Othello looks into a mirror: "Not to affect many proposèd matches / Of her own clime, complexion and degree . . . a will most rank" (3.3.234-25, 237). The mirror is a tricky one, and, like the magician, it conceals its trickiness (see Plate 3). Iago suggests a belittling of Othello ("I see this hath a little dashed your spirits"). Othello denies it ("Not a jot, not a jot" [3.3.218-19]). But the spherical mirror confirms Iago's vision, showing Othello smaller than the camera does, his image in the mirror diminished by more than a "jot." The mirror, like Iago, is a threat disguised as a friend, its prominent frame composed of protruding "ramparts" with sickle-shaped sides to them. These sickles are like sharpened weapons, edges of dark that slice across Othello's increasingly hard-edged view. Iago is sawing Othello in half. How's it done? With mirrors.<sup>13</sup>

If the progress of Iago's temptations constructs blackness for Othello, the murder of Desdemona fixes Othello in that blackness. Arthur Little asserts that at the end of the play Othello "discovers himself entrapped in blackness" (86), and Welles virtually films that notion. Twice we see Othello as only an intensely black shadow projected on a rough wall; twice we watch the candles extinguished, deepening the darkness out of which Othello's face, barely illuminated, appears. Blackness is absorbing him, defining him. The diaphanous white cloth with which he smothers Desdemona whitens her until she becomes a featureless wraith, a white parody of Othello's black and barely featured face. Othello ends as a man deeply alienated from the world, isolated behind a vast grate of geometric black bars and utterly disheartened by Emilia's terrible message, "Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor" (5.2.256).

Othello's end, in Welles's version, resonates with pathos; he signifies not strength, action, or self-knowledge, but pity and sorrow at the illusions practiced on him.<sup>14</sup> As the dying Othello staggers towards the bed where Desdemona lies, the camera makes the room stagger wildly, confusing the geometry even more than usual. He picks up the body of Desdemona, but we hardly see her; we see only the face of Othello looking up, framed by complete blackness (see Plate 4).<sup>15</sup> Fragmented and disembodied, Othello is like the specter that might swim up in a magician's crystal ball: a face without body, background, or context, a lonely wraith. In his resonant voice, he pleads, "speak of me as I am" (5.2.351) and "set you down this" (360), as if to imply that there were a definitive "I" and a definitive "this," an identity and a story for this hero. But the film makes it seem unlikely. Iago has just told Othello, "what you know, you know" (309). What he knows must surely be this: that he can finally know nothing about who he is; only, perhaps, that he has been tricked into being what Iago designed for him to be.

A Las Vegas magician entertains us by confusing us about what's real, and yet we hardly care that we don't know the truth: in Vegas, we are more than willing to suspend our desire to know more than we know, to penetrate the bogus. Similarly in Welles's film, we cannot know what this Othello knows, for he has no "natural" existence. In the end, what he says, who he is, what we are to "set down," are as impenetrable as "Rosebud." Welles seems to refuse to penetrate Othello, insisting on fragments, surface constructions of shadow and light. His chilly and chilling Othello is the tragic counterpart of the magician-entertainer who denies us access to the essential nature of the entertainment, who tricks us even while pretending to be straightforward with us. In the polarized United States of the middle decades of the twentieth century, it was easy

enough for the dominant culture to assume that one could know the essence of a person: African blood, Japanese ancestry, Communist sympathies, homosexuality, etc. Welles puts on his blackface with the earnest glee of one who both knows that assumption and defies its essentialism.

Ernest Hemingway famously referenced Othello's pivotal speech about his occupation as a soldier ("O, now for ever / Farewell the tranquil mind . . . / Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone." [3.3.352-353, 362]) in the title of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Near the end of the novel, the speech is referenced again, as Catherine Barkley applies Othello's "farewell" to her lover Frederic Henry. They have been apart a few hours:

"Don't think about me when I'm not here."

"That's the way I worked it at the front. But there was something to do then."

"Othello with his occupation gone," she teased. (257)

Catherine sets up Frederic as an embodiment of Othello's jealousy: her lover, having left the front, distrusts her, she implies. He answers immediately:

"Othello was a nigger," I said. "Besides, I'm not jealous." (257)

His response refutes the charge of jealousy, but only as an afterthought. His rejoinder, so easily using the n-word, can remind us, if we need reminding, of the harsh racial divisions of twentieth-century America. In one stroke, Frederic denies the complexity of racial identity with the easy privilege of a white man caught up in his own impending romantic tragedy. Ambiguities both of race and jealousy are refused. Ironically, the refusal resembles that of Othello himself just before the "farewell" speech: "to be once in

doubt / Is once to be resolved” (3.3.183-84). Tragically, Othello separates himself from the multiplicity and complexity of his earlier life, the magic he has worked in the Senate and with Desdemona. In so doing, he lays himself open for the essentialism that Hemingway’s hero voices: “Othello was a nigger.” But Welles, as "bogus" as his Othello may be, refuses such a simple, racially polarized gesture, and gives us instead an Othello whose racial constructedness is as complex as the racial awareness that Welles brought to his film.

### Notes

A version of this paper was first delivered at the seminar on “Racial Cross-Dressing on the Renaissance Stage” at the 2002 Shakespeare Association of America annual meeting, convened by Ian Smith. I am grateful to the members of that seminar, as well as to my colleagues and students at Oberlin, for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> This paper references the 1992 restored version of *Othello* released on DVD by Image Entertainment. The text of the film is highly unstable (see Impastato), but this has emerged as the only widely available, if not definitive version.

<sup>2</sup> See Mulvey, Perkins, Anderegg, and France.

<sup>3</sup> See Leaming and Thomson.

<sup>4</sup> He uses the same prop in the documentary "conversation," *Filming Othello*.

<sup>5</sup> “Bogus” apparently originally referred to the making of counterfeit money—not to the entertainment business—but the word (though the etymology is murky) may derive from the same source as “bogy,” a devil or hobgoblin, a stock-in-trade of the theater and film industries. *OED* (on-line), “bogus, (*n.1*) *a.*”

<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare 1.2.71–72; the text reads “guardage” for “father” and “thou” for “that.” Welles brings the line in from a previous scene (1.2) to provide this climax.

---

<sup>7</sup> The antiquated "Elizabethan" quality of the title sequence hints at some irony in its appropriation of the venerable tragic status of the text.

<sup>8</sup> Welles himself called this "the lynching of Iago" (*Filming Othello*). The hooded figures, apparently monks, evoke images of the Ku Klux Klan.

<sup>9</sup> See Jacobs.

<sup>10</sup> The emblem is probably the lion of Venice, but it is worn and displayed in an "exotic" manner that none of the Venetians in the film would dare assume.

<sup>11</sup> See D'Amico and Smith.

<sup>12</sup> Though a magician's cloak *should* be black, surely any cloak, even a white one, worn by Welles reminds us of his magician's posturing.

<sup>13</sup> The untrustworthy imaging of this mirror is, as Sam Crowl points out, in contrast to its iconographic significance in the famous Arnolfini portrait by van Eyck (qtd in Rothwell, 268). In this serene, balanced portrait, a white bourgeois couple stand calmly, while the spherical mirror behind them, practically identical to Othello's, neatly reflects the couple, their tidy room with its emblems of fidelity, and even the faint forms of two observers in the doorway, whom the couple seem to welcome with open sincerity. Welles' tricky shape-shifting mirror ironically references the painting's vision of a marriage undisturbed by social divisions like race. The allusion both expresses Othello's increasing alienation from the white world of Italian society and emphasizes how artificial (artful, constructed, illusionist) is that world and therefore, too, the exclusion of Othello from it.

<sup>14</sup> Welles has him wound himself not at the climax of his heroic speech about his defense of the honor of Venice—which he does not deliver in the film.

<sup>15</sup> The shot echoes a similar moment in Welles' earlier *Macbeth*.

PLATES



Plate 1. Orson Welles as Othello before the Senate. “She swore in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange” (1.3.159).



Plate 2. The funeral procession moving right, with Iago dragged to the left.



Plate 3. Othello at the mirror. "IAGO: I see this hath a little dashed your spirits. / OTHELLO: Not a jot, not a jot" (3.3.218-19).



Plate 4. Welles's Othello framed by blackness. "Speak of me as I am" (5.2.351).

### Works Cited

- Anderegg, Michael A. *Orson Welles, Shakespeare, and Popular Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 1999.
- Bristol, Michael D. *Big-Time Shakespeare*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Cartmell, Deborah. "Shakespeare and Race: *Othello* I.iii." *Talking Shakespeare: Shakespeare into the Millennium*. Ed. Deborah Cartmell and Michael Scott. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001. 138-48.
- Coursen, Herbert R. *Watching Shakespeare on Television*. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993.
- Cukor, George, dir. *A Double Life*. Perf. Ronald Coleman. Universal, 1947.
- D'Amico, Jack. *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama*. Gainesville, FL: U of South Florida P, 1991.
- Donaldson, Peter S. *Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990.
- France, Richard, ed. *Orson Welles on Shakespeare: The W. P. A. And Mercury Theatre Playscripts*. New York: Greenwood, 1990.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. 1929. New York: Scribner's, 1957.
- Hodgdon, Barbara. "Race-ing *Othello*, Re-Engendering White-Out." *Shakespeare, the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, and Video*. Ed. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt. London: Routledge, 1997. 23-44.
- Impastato, David. "Orson Welles' *Othello* and the Welles-Smith Restoration: Definitive Version?" *Shakespeare Bulletin* 10.4 (1992): 38-41.

- Jacobs, Alfred. "Orson Welles's *Othello*: Shakespeare Meets Film Noir." *Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century*. Newark, DE: U of Delaware P, 1998. 113-24.
- Jorgens, Jack J. *Shakespeare on Film*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977.
- Leaming, Barbara. *Orson Welles, a Biography*. New York: Viking, 1985.
- Little, Arthur L., Jr. *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.
- Mulvey, Laura. *Citizen Kane*. BFI Film Classics. London: British Film Institute, 1992.
- Neill, Michael. "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40 (1989): 383-412.
- Olivier, Lawrence, dir. *Hamlet*. J. Arthur Rank, 1948.
- , perf. *Othello*. Dir. Stuart Burge. B.H.E., 1965.
- Orkin, Martin. "*Othello* and the 'Plain Face' of Racism." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38.2 (1987): 166-88.
- Perkins, V. F. *The Magnificent Ambersons*. BFI Film Classics. London: British Film Institute, 1999.
- Potter, Lois. *Shakespeare in Performance: Othello*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002.
- Rothwell, Kenneth S. *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York: Norton, 1997.
- Smith, Ian. "Those 'Slippery Customers': Rethinking Race in *Titus Andronicus*." *JTD: Journal of Theatre and Drama* 3 (1997): 45-58.

Stone, James W. "Black and White as Technique in Orson Welles's *Othello*."

*Literature/Film Quarterly* 30.3 (2002): 189-93.

Thomson, David. *Rosebud: The Story of Orson Welles*. New York: Knopf, 1996.

Welles, Orson, dir. *Citizen Kane*. Mercury Productions, 1941.

---, dir. *F for Fake*. Janus Films, 1973. ---, dir. *Filming Othello*. 1978. Transcript by

Lawrence French in website "A Touch of Welles."

<http://film.tierranet.com/directors/o.wells/fothelloe.html>.

---, dir. *Macbeth*. Republic Pictures, 1948.

---, dir. *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Mercury Productions, 1942.

---, dir. *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*. Perf. Orson Welles, Suzanne Cloutier, and Micheál MacLiammóir. Mercury Productions, 1951. Restored, 1992. DVD, Image Entertainment, 1999.