



RECEPTION OF THE PLAY IN 17TH CENTURY

Most recent criticism of *Othello* has focused on race, but it 'was not always approached in these terms.'¹ Critics have found that 'the most striking thing about the very earliest responses to the tragedy is that they pay no attention to what, from a modern perspective, seems its most conspicuous feature – the interracial love affair at the centre of the action.'² Early reactions to the play seem to not notice race 'as an issue in the play', for example, Henry Jackson who saw the play at Oxford in 1610. He doesn't mention colour.³ Initial reaction tended to view the play as a tragedy of jealousy, and it proved popular and was repeatedly performed. It has been suggested that the play was well-liked 'for its ability to overwhelm audience disbelief and to compel extraordinary identification with the suffering of its central characters', as seen in the audience responses that have survived.⁴ Furthermore, in the 17th century the play inspired 'numerous dramatic imitations' and attracted 'more contemporary allusions than any other Shakespeare tragedy.'⁵

Notable 'early-seventeenth-century performances' include those 'by the King's Men' when 'Burbage and Swanston played Othello', both leading men for the company.⁶ Burbage's interpretation 'was apparently remembered vividly alongside his Hamlet.'⁷ Other responses include a comic reaction to Iago, as one audience member noted 'that the person that acted Iago was in much esteem of a comedian which made Shakespeare put several words and expressions into his part, perhaps not agreeable to his character, to make the audience laugh.'⁸ The Oxford performance in 1610, however, generated a different reaction where 'all the actors were capable of drawing tears from the crowd', and it garnered specific praise for 'the boy who impersonated Desdemona' as he successfully appealed to 'the pity of the audience.'⁹ The play continued to be performed in the Restoration, though it did, however, meet with some criticism. Thomas Rymer 'denounced the play for the rank implausibility of its characterization and plotting.'¹⁰ He argued that 'no sensible audience...could possibly be taken in by the absurdities of its design', citing the love between Othello and Desdemona as unlikely considering he is 'a supposed 'blackamoor general' and she 'an aristocratic Venetian woman.'¹¹ A late seventeenth-century response is found in Samuel Pepys' diary, who saw the play in both 1660 and 1669. During the first performance he notes an emotional response from a lady who cried out at Desdemona's death. The play continued to be popular with 'only seven years during the whole century in which there is no notice of a production of *Othello* in the London theatres.'¹² The actor performed the leading role from 'as early as 1683' to 'his farewell to the part on 15 September 1709.'

The play was also reworked in the seventeenth century, with echoes of Iago in the De Flores of *The Changeling* c. 1622, as well as other plays such as John Ford's *Love's Sacrifice*, Thomas Porter's *The Villain* and Henry Nevil Payne's *The Fatal Jealousie*.¹³ Othello continued to be the character that audiences focused on, with Burbage's Othello dominating the production that Henry Jackson wrote about in 1610, 'whose note...does not even mention the villain.'¹⁴

¹ Michael Neill, 'Introduction' in *Othello, the Moor of Venice* by William Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1–179, (p. 3)

² Neill, p.1

³ Neill, p.1

⁴ Neill, p.2

⁵ Neill, p.2

⁶ Norman Sanders, 'Introduction' in *Othello* by William Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.1–51, (p.38)

⁷ Sanders, p.38

⁸ Sanders, p.38

⁹ Sanders, p.38

¹⁰ Neill, p.3

¹¹ Neill, pp.3–4

¹² Sanders, p. 40

¹³ Neill, p.14

¹⁴ Neill, p.74