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J. N. Andrews Honors Program  
Andrews University

HONS 497  
Honors Thesis

Iago as Moral Other in Jonathan Munby's Production of *Othello* (2016)

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13 April 2018

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**Abstract**

Jonathan Munby produced a contemporary adaptation of Shakespeare's Othello at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre in Spring of 2016. While continuing to utilize Shakespeare's language, Munby modernized Othello through the use of contemporary military costumes, props, accents, music, and dance. Munby did not limit his adaptation to solely visual and auditory aspects of Othello, but also took the liberty of contemporizing the principle of "otherness" in the play. This research explores the identification of Munby's character of Iago as "Moral Other," whose actions lead to the fall of his wife, Emilia, a fellow officer, Roderigo, Desdemona, and the protagonist, Othello.

Shakespeare's tragedy of *Othello* features the protagonist Othello, "the Moor," a valiant general in the Venetian army. For centuries, Othello was depicted by white men in blackface, and only later in the nineteenth century by black men. Popularized by the presence of one of Shakespeare's few black characters, *Othello* expounded upon the presence and alienation of an Other. In this tragedy, Othello often acts as the Other. Some *Othello* productions emphasize his Otherness by portraying Othello as particularly exotic. Several productions depicted Othello wearing "rich Eastern garments, strongly scented with musk" (qtd. in Hankey 44). Others had Othello wear a turban (Hankey 24, 58). Still others had Othello speak with a thickened African accent. By incorporating these elements in addition to the difference in skin color, whether real or done using makeup, between Othello and the other characters on stage, productions were able to label Othello as Other, specifically the Racial Other, in response to his depicted race and ethnicity.

Labeling Othello as Racial Other proved not to be too arduous a task. Michael Neill, in his essay "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*," explains how "the idea of a black hero was unacceptable because blackness was equivalent to savagery and the notion of savage heroism an intolerable oxymoron" (Neill 191). Given this mindset, in combination with theatrical elements, Othello could be easily dismissed as the object of alienation. This establishment of "Other" is brought about by identification and corresponding alienation, patterns we see in our own society. For example, Craig R. Smith explains, "If I identify with the Democrats, I am alienated from the Republicans. If I identify with my father, I am alienated to some extent from my mother. Worse yet, every alienation brings with it a sense of loss and creates boundaries between self and others" (Smith 322).

A recent production disrupted this traditional depiction of Othello as Other. Jonathan Munby's retelling of *Othello* at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre (Spring 2016) utilized theatre elements such as costumes, stage props, scenic design, and blocking to create a contemporary adaptation of *Othello*. Munby expanded the register of otherness to extend beyond racial differences and incorporate moral distinctions. Unlike previous productions, this adaptation did not stress the Racial Otherness in Othello. Munby's Othello (James Vincent Meredith) had no apparent difference in dress, smell, or accent from other characters. Munby's Othello was also not the only non-white character on stage. Othello was not depicted as particularly exotic. Instead, Munby's *Othello* realized an Otherness in the character Iago (Michael Milligan), the despicable, dishonest antagonist who audiences often never wish to relate to or identify with.<sup>1</sup> Due to his unscrupulous nature and wicked, deceitful actions within this production and the play text, Iago acts as a Moral Other.

By engaging audience response and contemporizing the play text, Munby's *Othello* initially guides the audience into self-identification with Iago by establishing relatable qualities to this Other. Then, after presenting the audience with the unwanted self-identification to the wrongdoer, the production challenges each member of the audience to distinguish himself or herself from Iago's character and stand opposed to his inhumanity.

### **Framing: Morality**

Morality and what is considered moral by this essay must first be defined before I can label Iago as immoral in respect to it. There are two reference points by which I am constructing my definition of morality: morality as defined by the religious environment of William Shakespeare – *Othello's* playwright – and another Shakespearean work, *Measure for Measure*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Barenboim in *Parallels and Paradoxes* explains, “[E]very great work of art has two faces: one toward its own time and one toward eternity” (Barenboim and Said 52).

<sup>2</sup> I extend my deepest thanks to Dr. L. Monique Pittman for this concept.

In the final chapter of *Elizabethans*, Patrick Collinson gives insight to William Shakespeare's religious inheritance and environment. Collinson first explains the religious situation Shakespeare was born into in 1564. Martin Luther had sparked the conflagration of the Reformation decades prior (Collinson 219). In the 1530s, the English church was detached from Rome by Henry VIII, continuing through with the reign of Edward VI in 1547. In 1553, however, Mary I of England, a renowned Catholic known as "Bloody Mary" restored England to Catholicism. Six years before Shakespeare's birth, Mary was succeeded by Queen Elizabeth who returned the country to Protestantism in 1558. Queen Elizabeth's Act of Uniformity of 1559 required clergy to make exclusive use in all ministrations of the 1552 Book of Common Prayer, and for every person to attend parish church on Sundays and holy days (221). In regards to Shakespeare's religious identity, Collinson concludes that "[a]s for Shakespeare himself, we cannot say." Even so, Collinson does acknowledge how Shakespeare's plays, while not containing reliable pointers to his private religious convictions, do include "persistent and well-informed use of Catholic terminology and imagery" (251). Some believe Shakespeare "died a Papist," but others believe he might have employed this terminology and imagery for the "mere sake of artistic authenticity" (251). Regardless of Shakespeare's religious conviction, it should be noted that an individual living in the Elizabethan Era would have obtained great familiarity with the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. These religious ideas weigh heavily on the context of morality in which Shakespeare wrote.

Furthermore, Shakespeare's knowledge of scriptural text is displayed in *Measure for Measure*, a play whose title echoes the words of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:2, "For with what judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged, and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." This idea is then reiterated by his character, Isabella:

... How would you be,  
If He, which is the top of judgement, should  
But judge you as you are? O, think on that;  
And mercy then will breathe within your lips,  
Like man new made. (2.2.99-103)

Shakespeare is writing in awareness of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. In this same sermon, in Matthew 5, Jesus states the Beatitudes:

Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed *are* they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.  
Blessed *are* the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.  
Blessed *are* they which hunger and thirst for righteousness: for they shall be filled.  
Blessed *are* the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.  
Blessed *are* the pure in heart: for they shall see God.  
Blessed *are* the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.  
Blessed *are* they which suffer persecution for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed shall ye be when men revile you, and persecute *you*, and say all manner of evil against you for my sake, falsely. (Matthew 5.3-11)

These Beatitudes are foundational to how Jesus believes the righteous should operate. They articulate honorable principles of selflessness, care for others, and endurance in times of suffering. With the understanding that Shakespeare was knowledgeable about the Bible and surrounded by its principles in England, the Beatitudes act as a guideline of moral behavior and depict the morality of

the righteous. By no coincidence is *Measure for Measure* written in the same year as *Othello*, and by no coincidence does our Moral Other, Iago, operate against the righteous living outlined by this passage. Morality, in this argument, is specifically aligned with the Judeo-Christian beliefs of Shakespeare's time, and it is upon this understanding that I am labeling Iago as Moral Other.

### **Understanding Theatre**

*Othello* by Jonathan Munby took the stage in the form of theatre, a performing art. To assess Munby's depiction of Iago, I must first explain the nuances of this art form. There are multiple tools theatre utilizes to help tell the story, some of which are also used in film. These include lighting, props, costume, stage direction, sound, blocking, and set design. All devices are employed to convey the message of the director. Theatre is also distinct from both film and written work. Lenore DeKoven explains how, unlike film, theatre differs in size, time factor, and audience. A notable feature of theatre is how it is always fresh, new, and created right before an audience while film is finalized to one shot. For theatre, this "allows for fluidity in the work, and often [an] ongoing development and experimentation" (DeKoven 155). In addition to this, however, because theatre is not constrained to one final shot, it does have "a limited life and then disappears from view" (155).<sup>3</sup> Plays will also have a significantly smaller sized audience compared to films, as films can be distributed worldwide and stored on electronic devices. For the director, theatre can provide instant gratification with a live audience, as one is able to listen "to a packed house laugh and cry exactly where you wanted them to," unlike in film where a response might take over a year, even after using a sample audience (DeKoven 156). For the actor, theatre demands different qualities, including a higher level of vocal projection that film does not because of the great separation between the live

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<sup>3</sup> Every performance inevitably disappears from view. Some combat this disappearance with archival recordings, but these are limited to one specific performance. It should be noted, however, that essays, such as this, can be used to help preserve a theatrical production for future reference.



audience and the actor.<sup>4</sup> Aligned with DeKoven's description of its adjustments, theatre, unlike written work, is challenged by only being able to express something to a given audience once. While this is a difficulty that the art form must overcome, Karin deGravelles highlights how theatre "reveals much about [Shakespearean] plays that purely textual approaches do not" (deGravelles 163). Despite the challenges, theatre provides alternative opportunities to better express a written text.

The art of theatre itself also holds its own purpose of providing the audience with an avenue for self-criticism. "Each play," notes Thomas P. Adler, "is a mirror of reality" (Adler 335). The role of theatre is to reveal us to our own selves.<sup>5</sup> Theatre affords a place of reflection and analysis. Indeed, Hannah Arendt observes that theatre, "is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others" (188). Theatre is one of the only forms of art in which the subject is the same as the object. The art form has human beings portraying human beings while being watched and observed by other human beings. It allows the human audience to criticize themselves by criticizing the mirrored image before them. Furthermore, in this way, theatre has the power to shape the way we think. It influences what we know about ourselves and our society. Through its ability to capture the attention of its audience and allow them to suspend their disbelief, theatre constructs ideas, expresses them on stage, and leaves its impact.

A fundamental concept of theatre is its need for an audience. Carol Heim in her book, *Audience as Performer: The changing role of theatre audiences in the twenty-first century*, defines audience as "a group of individuals gathered together to watch a performance" (Heim 5). In this book, Heim argues that not only does theatre engage the audience, but the audience itself also acts as performer

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<sup>4</sup> In comparison, Edward W. Said prefers written expression because, "you have time to develop ideas in front of an audience" (Barenboim and Said 58).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Barenboim mentions in *Parallels and Paradoxes* that theater "played in societies and the totalitarian regimes, ... was the only place that political ideas and social totalitarianism could be criticized" (Barenboim and Said 44).

within a theatrical production. Audience performance includes responses ranging from laughing, applause, and whistling to crying, booing, sighing, and even silence. The theatre audience's response makes meaning and allows the audience to co-create: "Leaning forward, sitting on the edge of their seats, the audience play a part in what transpires on stage, they actively contribute to the creation as co-creators" (146). In this manner, the audience performance influences the actor's performance. In one way, the responses feed energy to the actor. By noticing audience response, it informs the actor of what the audience is understanding, what information landed and what needs to be elaborated. Potentially, the audience has the ability to walk alongside the actors throughout the play: "[The audience has] been part of the live and lived experience of the theatrical event and have been co-conspirators" (154). It is this concept of audience interaction and action, of possible co-conspiracy, of audience involvement and investment that I am exploiting in order to depict how Munby first allowed us to affix our minds with Iago's and finally dismiss him as Moral Other in this *Othello* production.

### **Munby's Contemporization: Identification**

Munby's contemporary adaptation of *Othello* first prompted the audience to identify with Iago. The adaptation took advantage of the present time period in order to make Iago more accessible and, therefore, more relatable to the audience. Dressed in clothes of the twenty-first century, the envisioned Shakespearean Iago became less distant. With this familiarized Iago, the audience members watched as he created his façade towards other characters. While we as an audience were more informed, Iago's unknowledgeable victims held him in high regard as he abused their trust in him in order to reap his own personal benefit. His power and autonomy, especially in relation to the other characters, was depicted at the top of the show when Othello and Desdemona

fled the stage, and they were physically replaced by Iago standing center stage with a harsh light cued to focus on him alone.

In the written text, Shakespeare defines Iago as the Moral Other by utilizing the word “honest” to ironically describe Iago’s character as understood by the people around him. Upon the first line delivery of “honest Iago” by Othello in Munby’s production, the audience of the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre chuckled, acknowledging the titles’ irony and, instead, Iago’s dishonest character. Recognizably, the audience was more informed than the other characters on stage about Iago’s true character and consequently acted as co-conspirators and silent confidants in Iago’s actions. As described by Marianne Novy, “...we are mentally joined with him in our understanding of what is going on, no matter how much we loathe him as a character” (Novy 114).

Throughout the first act, Munby staged Iago repeatedly breaking the fourth wall, an act that physically establishes connection between the audience and the offending character.<sup>6</sup> During Act 1, Scene 1, referencing Brabantio, Iago looked directly at the audience and extended his right hand in presentation of the other character as if to say, “witness his buffoonery.” In this same scene, Iago also bonded with the audience over the stupidity of Roderigo as he pushed the door button of Brabantio’s home while making a funny sound toward the audience, which the audience responded to with laughter. Repeatedly, Iago forced the audience into acknowledging his mental superiority to that of his scene partners. With Cassio’s voicing of, “I do not understand,” Iago made a sharp head turn to the audience, and again the audience laughed with him at those who are not as clever as he.

In addition to the repeated breaking of the fourth wall, Munby implemented other theatre elements displaying Iago’s deception toward other characters and power over them. In Act 1, Scene

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<sup>6</sup> The fourth wall is a theatrical construct of division between the audience and performer. Breaking the fourth wall occurs when the actor addresses the audience directly. This action in itself shows how Munby creates the relationship between Iago and audience.

3, the power dynamic between Iago and Roderigo was displayed as Roderigo was staged squatting and crying stage right. He was physically lower than Iago and completing an act more common to babies than men. Iago picked him up, and Roderigo responded by embracing Iago. To Roderigo, Iago stood as a guide and trustworthy confidant. Iago, however, looked again at the audience while constraining Roderigo in his arms, and uttered a “pfffft,” signifying his recognition of Roderigo’s idiocy. After Roderigo left, Iago soliloquized in the War Room. He gestured at the recently exited Roderigo when he said, “thus, I make my fool my purse” (1.3.426). While doing so, Iago also sat back casually in one of the rolling chairs, with his legs extended. He appeared so relaxed, as if he was in full control in dominating the situation. These blocking choices depicted Iago as a master of deception. He was able to manipulate others and appear trustworthy to them with ease.

Munby also employed the theatrical device of lighting as he did at the top of the show to continue connecting the audience with Iago. Munby chose instances to allow Iago the complete visual focus of the audience. For example, after Cassio welcomed Desdemona to Venice, he removed her vest and they sat on one of Desdemona’s large luggage trunks. To highlight this moment, the scene froze with the exception of Iago. The stage lights dimmed, the actors held their poses, and Iago walked downstage left toward the audience while a hard light focused on him. During this time, Iago spoke directly to the audience about this affection, gesturing toward the frozen characters behind him like a diagram. This moment was a look into the mind of Iago, his narration of what we were watching. These moments built the connection of the audience with Iago mentally. When Iago returned to attention and saluted, the scene was restarted, as if to depict that Iago was in control, that his actions dictated the play.

The audience understood Iago's control throughout the show as his soliloquies shared what he was to do next. Iago's physical control was depicted with some characters like Roderigo. Iago forced Roderigo to sit on the luggage trunk by pulling his arm and later physically picked him up and threw him out of the barracks. His control over other characters was more mentally manipulative. With Iago center stage and under a strong spotlight, he spoke of how he was going to, "turn [Desdemona's] virtue into pitch and out of her own goodness make the net that shall enmesh them all" (2.3.380-2). What he spoke ultimately came to pass. While this continued to mentally join the audience members to Iago, it also built his credibility as his words turned to actions. He completed what he said he would do. As he did so, Iago's power was manifested. In this act, Iago took control and held the most power while other characters appeared to be merely his pawns. Audience members were more inclined to draw toward the powerful characters on stage, resulting in a greater pull toward identification with Iago.

Identifying with Iago was made easier by the play text and this production as it also worked to make other characters less appealing to identify with. This was accomplished by utilizing the original play text and implementing several theatre devices. I will first explain this in relation to the character with the title role, Othello. Iago, as the play text directs, fed Othello lies about the actions of his wife, Desdemona, and Othello devoured them. Iago set Othello up to hear a twisted conversation between himself and Cassio to make it seem as if Cassio were Desdemona's lover. When describing to Othello a false dream he claimed Cassio had, Iago mimicked it by touching Othello — the power of the physical imitation seemed overwhelming to Othello. Iago even had Othello witness Desdemona's handkerchief in the hands of Cassio, after having planted it in his belongings. Othello, trusting his "honest" ensign, was tricked into believing Iago. While this

adaptation did not overemphasize the otherness of Othello racially, it also did not strive to develop a similarity between him and the audience either. This might be attributed to how the gullible Othello was victimized. In "You Be Othello," Karin H. deGravelles explains this phenomenon while quoting Hugh McRae Richmond:

“Because of our superior knowledge of the plot,” he writes, “we can never identify fully with Othello’s overtly mistaken point of view.” Instead, according to Richmond, we identify with Iago because he is the one who soliloquizes... Richmond writes: “This displacement of audience perspective from the victims’ point of view certainly justifies Aristotle’s idea of pity as a classic emotional response to tragedy: we are sorry to see well-meaning personae destroyed by their own credulity. But we cannot identify with either their ignorance or their moral simplicity.” (deGravelles 156)

As an audience, we were pulled away from sympathizing with Othello because we could not identify with his ignorance or moral simplicity, especially when compared to the wit of Iago.

Iago’s superiority was considerably emphasized in his scenes with another character, Roderigo. The character Roderigo was implemented by this production to display Iago as powerful and clever. Repeatedly, Iago was depicted as such. Roderigo was the character with whom Iago first appeared on stage. In the first scene alone, Munby’s contemporization utilized blocking to establish Iago’s power in comparison to Roderigo. Iago spent most of the first scene at center stage, a position of power to demand the attention and focus of the audience. In contrast, Roderigo spent most of the scene moving along the edges of the stage, alongside Iago. This pattern of power placement continued throughout the first act. As written in the play text, Iago spoke for Roderigo to

Brabantio, taking Roderigo's voice, his independence, from him. In Act 1, Scene 3, this contemporary adaptation of the War Room scene had wheeled office chairs as stage props. Iago's dominance was not undermined as he loomed over the seated Roderigo and forcefully pushed his chair to the edge of the stage.

This use of Roderigo as inferior continued throughout the production. In Act 4, Scene 2, Roderigo voiced the first accusation against Iago: "your words and performances are no kin together" (4.2.213-4). Munby then orchestrated staging that blatantly depicted the immensity of Iago's power. Iago offered Roderigo a knife and the opportunity to kill him. After fake charging at Roderigo to scare him, showing how Roderigo was still a toy to him, Iago put Roderigo's knife-clasped hand to his own neck. Even still, Roderigo could not bring himself to kill Iago. This lack of power was inevitably what killed him later, as Iago stabbed Roderigo in Act 5, Scene 1 with a knife. This addition showed how weak Roderigo was in his inability to take Iago's life in spite of his anger at Iago's control of the situation.<sup>7</sup>

The production also played with another aspect of identification with Iago. The audience was found resonating with the humor of Iago. A bellow of laughter followed his raspberry toward "virtue" in Act 1, Scene 3, and continued through to his enticing proposal of pornography on a laptop to Roderigo in hope of cheering him up. There was even a response of laughter (documented on the archived recording) to Iago pocketing the cash from Roderigo's wallet while he looked away. Even though these followed the virtueless line of thinking of a future murderer, we the audience found Iago entertaining, amusing, and witty. Our laughing at his actions and line deliveries displayed

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<sup>7</sup> This staging also provided insight into the humanity and gullibility of Roderigo in comparison to Iago. Even though he was furious with Iago, he could not bring himself to murder another, displaying the presence of his humanity. His gullibility, however, was also present as he did not expect Iago to use him and kill him later.

our capability to understand his thoughts and be “mentally joined” with him; it suggested we were able to identify with the Moral Other.

Munby strategically drove the audience further to identification with Iago through the depiction of Desdemona, whom Munby then specifically used to draw us away from Iago later in the production. This initial separation from Desdemona was encouraged using the theatre elements of blocking and costume choice. Desdemona’s blocking, specifically with Othello, acted as a device to repel the audience from identification with her. At the top of the show, Munby added a scene of her marriage to Othello, and for the rest of the first half of the production, Desdemona remained attached to her husband. In the War Room, Desdemona held both of her father’s hands while stating, “to you I am bound for life...,” then left to be held by Othello, then claiming, “but here’s my husband...” (1.3.210-4). Though she took agency in her relationship with her father, Desdemona still lacked the independence the audience searched for. She still did not have a fully formed selfhood, unlike Iago who was a free agent. Toward the Duke in the War Room, Othello said for Desdemona, “let her have your voice” (1.3.295). Othello even spoke for her. Desdemona’s attachment to Othello repeated itself as she jumped into his arms center stage when she arrived in Venice, affectionately kissed him whenever they would meet onstage, was swept off her feet and held at his side, followed him after he scolded Cassio and ordered her to “come away to bed,” and stood next to him in the scenes they have together. Desdemona was attached to Othello, and as similarly as Roderigo moved alongside Iago, Desdemona forfeited her agency to Othello.

The audience was distanced from Desdemona also by her costume. In her first entrance after the wedding in the War Room, she entered with a Burberry scarf and high heels. She was not depicted in “professional” attire, but instead as a wealthy social ornament. She arrived in Cyprus



onto a military base wearing high heels and a purse on her shoulder, followed by multiple large suitcases filled with her belongings. Later, she wore a large sun hat and heels. These costume choices led to estrange Desdemona from the audience as her class distinction from the other characters on stage was made heavily apparent.

The strong use of costumes in Munby's production also explained how other characters on stage could be so foolish and trusting of the despicable Iago. Costumes were utilized to Munby's advantage in making Iago a multi-faceted character. His uniform displayed his respectable and honest façade; it was always pressed clean and never rolled up or worn with unnecessary folds. This was seen in contrast to the costume of Lieutenant Cassio. In some scenes, Cassio's sleeves were casually rolled up, and in others, he wore no shirt at all, giving him a less professional look than that of Iago. When speaking with the young Lieutenant Cassio in the barracks during Act 2, Scene 3, Iago was the only individual in dress blues, and Munby skillfully placed an addition of eyeglasses to Iago's costume plot. This addition caused Iago to appear older, wiser, and more experienced in this relationship. It was this difference between old and young that not only built the understanding of Iago's spite toward the promotion of Cassio, but also afforded the trust Cassio gave to Iago as an elder. With the respect Cassio had for Iago, he divulged the secret of his weakness with alcohol to the coaxing Iago and freely spoke of his love affairs with women like Bianca. Iago seemingly befriended Cassio saying, "I am on your side," "I am here for you," and joking of how "our general's wife is now our general" (2.3.333). Iago still respectfully addressed Cassio as lieutenant. Cassio approached Iago with a hug, depicting his trust in his elder, Iago.

Contrastingly, in the presence of General Othello, Iago's uniform appeared lackluster when held in comparison to the highly decorated uniform of Othello, and this difference contributed to

how Othello so carelessly misplaced his trust in Iago. Iago's superiority was muted in his decorated presence. Iago, Othello's ensign who had proven himself trustworthy to Othello, did not evoke from him a shred of doubt.<sup>8</sup> In Othello's office, Iago had a significantly smaller side table depicting how, in this setting, he was significantly less important than Othello. In Act 3, Scene 3, Othello even waterboarded Iago using a water cooler downstage center. These costume choices, set pieces, and added blocking depicted how Othello would understand himself to hold power over Iago, leading him to trust the seemingly reliable ensign effortlessly. Munby emphasized this power in Othello's actions. Othello took the liberty of throwing Iago's desk when he was angry and shoving him out of the doorway when Iago tried to block him. Unbeknownst to him, he was being duped by the manipulative Iago. In Act 3, Scene 3, Iago prayed to God while kneeling with Othello, an action usually depicting honesty and creating both trust and credibility with an individual. At the end of this scene, Iago even stood up with Othello while giving him a carefully chosen action by Munby: a handshake done by hooking each other's thumbs, a handhold often used towards friends or brothers, a sign of established relationship.<sup>9</sup> These actions, to Othello, would deem Iago as his subordinate and worthy of his trust.

Iago earned the trust of individuals around him. Roderigo entrusted Iago with the task of winning Desdemona for himself, and Iago provided him with encouragement and schemes like going to the house of Brabantio. Othello called him "honest Iago" because of who Iago portrayed himself to be towards him. Iago was present for the other characters when they were vulnerable and supported them when they were misunderstood, as with Cassio when he was trying to regain the

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<sup>8</sup> This can be attributed to a plot point in Shakespeare's text where Iago earns Othello's trust by being "honest" with him about what happened in the fight between Cassio and Montano.

<sup>9</sup> The "dap" is historically considered "hand-to-hand communication" of unity within the military (Shuter 136). I am grateful to Dr. Vanessa Corredera for introducing me to this information.

favor of Othello. This trust between Iago and other characters repeatedly appeared visually with other characters hugging Iago or offering him their hands for a handhold. The audience watched Iago develop as a seemingly personal, loving being to others, and looked upon the character in awe, approval, and respect as he was such a good actor to the others on stage. Iago did not just earn the respect of Othello, Roderigo, Desdemona, and Cassio, but even the audience as a great depicter of the terrible.

The audience members, in the theatre setting, watched their mirror of reality. Criticizing Iago as a terrible human, the audience still acknowledged that he was human nonetheless. Acknowledging that Iago was human and therefore likened to ourselves as audience members, Munby created a distinction as to what was within our human limits to accomplish. Through depicting us paralleled with Iago, he silently introduced our power to be deceitful, dishonest, cunning, and murderous. We are capable of taking advantage of other people. We need not treat others with respect. Like Iago, we can be drenched in self-centeredness. As Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio explains of Ensign, the character Shakespeare's Iago is based on, "...although he had the basest of minds, he so cloaked the vileness hidden in his heart with high sounding and noble words, and by his manner, that he showed himself in the likeness of a Hector or an Achilles" (Cinthio 243). Shakespeare created a dramatized reflection of the "worst" in us shielded by a deceitful countenance who begs to be identified with, and Munby contemporized him to bring him even closer to our likeness in the twenty-first century.

### **Munby's Contemporization: Distinction, Iago as Other**

After utilizing theatre elements to insist on our self-identification with Iago, Munby pleaded for us to create and enforce the distinction of Iago's "otherness." He implored us to label him

wrong, evil, and unworthy of our trust. Munby did so mainly by utilizing other characters to create this distinction, specifically Desdemona. Upon her entrance after the intermission, Desdemona was met by the soldiers in the mess hall singing and dancing to two songs: "Hotline Bling" and "You've Lost That Loving Feeling," both of which center on men speaking of women after a relationship has ended. These songs foreshadowed to different age ranges in the audience what was to come:

Desdemona's separation from Othello.

Desdemona was the epitome of purity and honesty in *Othello*. During the first half of this contemporized production, the audience was presented with reason to dismiss identification with her. Her costume and her attached blocking to Othello made her distant and gave her a lack of agency and personhood. This, however, changed as a result of Iago's influence over Othello. After Iago's suggestion of Desdemona as a cheater, the first interaction between Othello and Desdemona was one of separation. Munby staged them, for the first time, apart on stage. In Act 3 Scene 4, after an unreciprocated kiss from Desdemona to Othello, Desdemona sat across from Othello on a different lunch table at the mess hall: Desdemona stage right and Othello stage left. They were no longer one cohesive unit. Othello's tone of voice had changed from one of affection and concern to one of harshness and brutality. In Act 4 Scene 1, Othello dominated at center stage, the place of power. In this scene, Desdemona was downstage left, with lighting focused on her. Attention was drawn in by the lighting to Othello slapping Desdemona across the face as he called her, "Devil" (4.1.270). This interaction was then followed by Othello grasping Desdemona's face in Scene 2 and Desdemona pulling her face away. It was a movement of division. Finally, when Othello stated, "By heaven, you do me wrong," he yelled it while sexually assaulting her, forcefully leaning Desdemona over a table and repeatedly thrusting himself against her. After calling Desdemona a whore, Munby

added Othello dropping money on her and leaving. With these added choices layered over the Shakespearean language, a greater distance was created between the husband and wife, seen not just in word but also in deed. Desdemona became the central victim. Unlike in Othello's situation where we were unable to identify with his ignorance and moral simplicity, Desdemona's demise was not a result of her own doing. We see how she had done nothing wrong and was undeserving of her fate. The audience was pulled to the side of justice, seeing how it was Iago who had corrupted the minds of the individuals in play, and it was Iago who caused the resulting pain and hatred.

We watched as Desdemona acted on behalf of morality. Faced with Othello's slanderous accusations of "devil" and "strumpet," she did not lie to Othello (4.2.81). Instead, at the end of the production, she even lied for him with her last breath, even after he strangled her. In response to Emilia's question of who was responsible for her death, she responded, "Nobody – I myself. Farewell" (5.2.123). Desdemona's character exuded purity, dressed in all white.<sup>10</sup> She even placed trust in dishonest Iago, seen in Act 4, Scene 2 when she found solace in him after hurtful words from Othello. After Othello threw Desdemona to the ground, it was Iago who stuck out his hand to help her up. It was Iago who offered her a chair to sit on. It was Iago who patted Desdemona's back while saying, "do not weep, do not weep." As Desdemona knelt on the ground stage left of the chair, Iago got into a crouched position to be eye level with her. Though together they appeared equal on stage, their characters stood at two moral extremes.

This presentation of a truer and honest individual gave the audience someone else to relate to. Desdemona, instead, gave us a hope for an honest self. As Iago told her, "all things shall be

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<sup>10</sup> This costume choice aligns with a history of past productions who utilize the color white to symbolize Desdemona's purity.

well,” he put his hands around Desdemona’s face and kissed her forehead.<sup>11</sup> The audience knew this to be false, as Iago has plotted against her. The action of false care from Iago brought forth the distinction that could be made from him. He was not “Honest Iago.” That was now verifiable. Desdemona’s purity and truthfulness cast Iago’s falsehood and lies in a darker light. As his actions led to her murder, the declared distinction of self from the Moral Other of Iago was almost as if to say, “I will not be Desdemona’s killer too.”

### Conclusion

Within two hours and fifty-five minutes, Jonathan Munby reconceptualized “Other” in his production of *Othello*. He introduced Iago as the Moral Other, but utilized Shakespeare’s text and theatrical elements first to assist us in self-identifying with him. Over the course of the production, the audience was engrossed with the character of the dishonest Iago, who initially seduced us with our own reflection in his character. He later completed immoral actions, all opposing Judeo-Christian teaching and the Beatitudes. While the Beatitudes focus on selflessness, care for others, and endurance in times of suffering, Iago’s behavior was self-centered and unjust. Iago blatantly cheats other characters, steals, lies, and kills. He shows no regard for anyone but himself. Against that which is clearly outlined in the Beatitudes, he is not poor in spirit, he causes other characters to mourn, he is not meek nor righteous nor merciful. Iago does not make peace and, instead, causes others to suffer. The actions Iago took inevitably led to the death of four characters, Roderigo, Desdemona, Emilia, and Othello, and could be succinctly described by the audience as

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<sup>11</sup> Another character Munby utilizes is Emilia, Iago’s wife. To his wife, Iago is unloving and hurtful. Before her exit during Act 3, Scene 2, Emilia kisses Iago. Iago turns and wipes his lips in disgust. To this, the audience neither applauds nor laughs. Instead, there is silence in response to Iago treating Emilia, the caretaker and protector of Desdemona, so poorly. This Iago contrasts the Iago of Act 4, Scene 2, who gently lifts Desdemona off the floor and kisses her forehead. It reveals the multifaceted personhood of Iago. Iago’s “selves” are drastically different, and through this staging, that is made apparent to the audience. This also depicts to the audience a dramatized version of our multifaceted selves and our capability to deceive others.

“inhumane;” however, it must be understood that all his actions were within the limits of being human. As audience members “mentally joined with him,” we were able to parallel our own humanity to his and realize our ability to act as he did.

Throughout this production, through lighting, Munby called the audience to acknowledge this and to answer the plea for ethical decision making. In reference to theatre lighting, Carol Heim writes, “Some productions leave the house lights on for all or part of the performance. Compared with the last century, when most audiences were expected to sit practically comatose in the dark, the twenty-first century audience experience is a new frontier.” Throughout the production, the theatre was never fully dark. Munby’s lighting design on the audience remained at a level in which the audience members could always see each other. This lighting forced the audience to acknowledge the presence of another while watching the production. It worked as a constant reminder of our accountability to the people around us, a persistent, silent questioning of, “What is your responsibility to them?”

Self-identification with Iago found throughout the beginning of the production acted as a means of correction. Later realizing the results of his actions, the self-identification revealed how horrifying and disturbing our capabilities can potentially be. By seeing Iago as relatable and then dismissing these actions as truly Other, we were asked to purge ourselves of these feelings, thoughts, and actions. *Othello* begs for moral reasoning and wariness for those around you, for an alteration of moral perception. The ending scene provided the culminating statement for this, as Iago stood in the limelight, centered on stage over the three dead bodies, all of whom died as a result of his actions. He was arrogant and he was proud, standing powerfully with his feet wide and a smirk

stretched across his illuminated face. This staging was reminiscent of Antony Sher's performance as Iago as logged by Laurie Maguire in *Othello: The State of Play*:

Although the director wanted ambiguity, it was [Antony Sher] who was clear about the meaning of Iago's confrontational stare at the audience:

In our production, Iago was left in a sitting position after Othello wounded him; handcuffed, head bowed. Then after Lodovico's closing couplet, and just before a snap black out, we had Iago suddenly look up, confronting the audience with his eyes. [The director] wanted the moment to be a strange, final aside, enigmatic, open to your own interpretation, but I was always clear about it myself. The dangerous wordsmith may be silent, but in my head this question always rang out: *You saw what was happening -- why didn't you stop it?* (Maguire 34)

Iago wielded a power meant to make the audience uncomfortable as they were asked to acknowledge how wrong Iago was while understanding how they too hold this same power. At the conclusion of the performance, it was asked of the audience to form a distinction between self and Iago in order to declare, "What I am has the potential to be like Iago, but I am not what I am."



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