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Othello in Shakespeare 400 Chicago

Verna Foster

Loyola University Chicago, vfoster@luc.edu

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Chicago Shakespeare Theater – Othello

February 29, 2016 City Desk 400 Staff

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Othello is the Shakespearean play *par excellence* that resonates with contemporary concerns over race, class and gender and, more recently, with the complex and often conflicted relations between East and West, Islam and Christianity. Othello, the text suggests, is a black African Muslim prince (“of royal siege”) and mercenary soldier who has converted to Christianity (receiving in baptism the “seals and symbols of redeemed sin”). As a convert to Christianity, he resembles the traveler and geographer Leo Africanus, from whose *Description of Africa* Shakespeare drew in creating his own Moor.

Chicago Shakespeare Theater’s production of *Othello*, directed by Jonathan Munby, does not directly address Othello’s outsider status as a cultural “other.” Nor does Munby make any more of Othello’s racial difference than is required by Brabantio’s prejudice and Iago’s foul mouth. Rather what fuels this fast-moving modern-dress production is its emphasis on military culture and all that it implies about male bonding, machismo, the casual resort to violence—and the consequences of that culture for women and for the native population of an occupied country. The light-colored fatigues of the soldiers, the metallic no-frills barracks, and the relative undress of Bianca (Laura Rook speaking accented English as a Greek Cypriot prostitute) suggest sand, heat, and a masculine perspective. Cyprus easily stands in for somewhere in the Middle East and the Italian soldiers for American troops. In this context Othello’s problem is not so much his difference from as his similarity to the other soldiers, black and white.

Munby establishes a setting familiar to the audience through a number of nice touches in the first act in Venice.

When Roderigo (Fred Geyer) cannot arouse Brabantio (David Lively), Iago (Michael Milligan) shows his superior intelligence by ringing the doorbell. Roderigo puts money in his purse by accessing his bank account on his smart phone. The female Duke (Melissa Carlson) is super-efficient in a red Hillary Clintonesque power suit. And the Senators use laptops, on one of which Iago finds pornography to illustrate for Roderigo what he thinks of Othello and Desdemona's marriage.

What chiefly motivates this Iago is his pornographic imagination. He wants to destroy Othello out of sexual jealousy. Rather a cold fish for much of the play, Milligan's Iago becomes frenzied when he declares his suspicion that Othello has taken his own place in Emilia's bed. That Othello gave Cassio the lieutenantcy he wanted matters to him but not much, and his declared lust for Desdemona seems improbable. Iago is most comfortable hanging out with men, though there is no sense that he is erotically attracted to any of them. Rather he enjoys violent horseplay as long as he can control it. He ensures that a drunken brawl will take place in the barracks by spiking the soldiers' drink. The final scene displays the results of all the mayhem he has caused: Montano with his arm in a sling, Cassio on crutches, and the "tragic loading" of Desdemona's bed. As he exits, Iago pauses to gaze enigmatically at the mingled bodies of Desdemona, Emilia and Othello, the fulfillment perhaps of his ugly sexual fantasy.

Milligan downplays Iago's comic irony; he is too intense for the audience to feel implicated in his schemes. The advantage is that the production maintains an appropriate balance between Iago and Othello. Too often cleverly amusing Iagos upstage their Othellos. In Munby's production James Vincent Meredith's Othello in his demeanor and speech is always the more commanding figure of the two even when he loses his composure. Othello's physical violence towards Desdemona seems to be the product of his military background rather than attributable to his "otherness." When he demands that Iago furnish him with proof of Desdemona's infidelity, he uses a quasi-water boarding technique to make Iago speak. His recourse to brutality is of a piece with the military machismo displayed by the other soldiers in the brawl or when one of them spits in Cassio's washing bowl after he has been cashiered. Cassio (Luigi Sottile) has good reason for the seriousness with which he takes his loss of reputation in this environment.

But it is the women who are most in danger from such machismo. In Cyprus Desdemona (Bethany Jillard) is at first treated like an idol not only by Cassio but by the other soldiers as well. At a Christmas party in the barracks, they switch from a raucous rendition of Drake's misogynistic "Hotline Bling" to serenade Desdemona with "You've Lost that Lovin' Feelin'" (it proves as foreboding as the willow song). But from idol to whore is only a short fall in this play. And Othello soon thinks of Desdemona in the same way that Cassio and the soldiers think of prostitutes such as Bianca. The violence with which Othello knocks Desdemona down is particularly shocking—both times. As a woman and as a member of the native population Bianca is doubly threatened by the military. First sexually used by Cassio, she is finally brutally handcuffed and marched off to prison, a suspect—without any evidence—in the

attack on him.

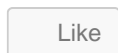
The production's military environment underscores *Othello's* exploration of gender relations by isolating the women and throwing them onto their own resources. And all three women are remarkably strong characters. Contrary to the usual critical wisdom, Jillard's Desdemona actually becomes a stronger character in Cyprus than she was in Venice, as she learns how to be a wife negotiating with her husband in an environment that is alien to her. She participates gracefully in the social life of the military outpost, though her clothes are packed in suitcases and hanging on walls. At the end she fights hard for her life. Emilia (Jessie Fisher) is a soldier, not just an army wife. Her military position does not quite make sense of her role as Desdemona's maid, but it does emphasize her strength of character from the beginning. Emilia's insights into men and marriage come from her unhappy relationship with Iago. She can recognize Othello's jealousy because she has experienced Iago's. When she offers her lengthy disquisition on women's rights and abusive husbands in her intimate bedroom conversation with Desdemona, she speaks movingly out of her own sad experience, and Desdemona's.

Munby's modernization of *Othello* causes some inevitable problems. We lose wonderful lines like "Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them." But the contemporary focus of the production gives us a new take on Othello. Military greatness is both Othello's glory and his downfall.



Verna Foster is a professor of English at Loyola University Chicago, where she specializes in modern drama, dramatic theory and Shakespeare. She holds her PhD, MPhil and BA in English from University of London. Her publications include a book on tragicomedy, as well as numerous articles.

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