

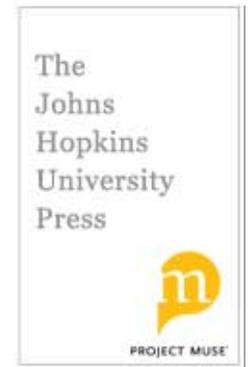


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Salvini

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"We think of others possessing you with the
throes of Othello': Dickinson Playing Othello,
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Othello is one of Emily Dickinson's favorite plays. It is the play alluded to most often in her extant letters and the one most often marked with pencil in her copy of Shakespeare's works at the Houghton Library, Harvard (Capps 182-5).¹ It is also the only play Dickinson is likely to have seen performed. In 1851, while in Boston, Lavinia Dickinson recorded in her diary on the 8th of September that they 'heard Othello read' at the Museum (Leyda I, 211).² Dickinson's epistolary allusions to this play begin in 1876 as if the play and its characters had a special significance for Dickinson in the last decade of her life. Moreover, in three of these references, Dickinson actually identifies with Othello. This paper examines Dickinson's identification with this character by focusing upon his theatrical and critical reception in nineteenth century America. Dickinson references to the play are best understood within this context, particularly the performances of *Othello* by the Italian actor Tommaso Salvini.

Othello was one of the most popular plays on the American stage during Dickinson's lifetime and was performed by many of the most famous actors of the day, including Edmund Kean, Edwin Booth and Edwin Forrest (Shattuck 74-5, Marder 301-5). Its popularity derived in part from the resonance that a play centering upon an interracial relationship had in an American culture where race was such a controversial and contentious subject. According to one critic, Ray B. Brown, common racism at the time meant that the play's central character was often viewed with contempt, yet when he was manipulated and treated unjustly by Iago he inspired sympathy (Brown 375). Although from Shakespeare's time onwards *Othello* was played by white men with blackened

faces, in 1814 the actor Edmund Kean introduced a "tawny" Othello to the stage (Cowling 133-46). Kean 'regarded it as a gross error to make Othello either negro or black, and accordingly altered the conventional black to the light brown' which according to him, distinguished "the Moors by virtue of their descent from the Caucasian race" (Hawkins I, 221). Kean's "tawny" innovation became popular and slowly the 'blackened' Othello was eclipsed on both the American and the English stage.

Like many of Shakespeare's other plays, *Othello* inspired popular burlesques, travesties and parodies, as well as vaudeville and minstrel productions (Levine 25-30).³ These production often accompanied proper stage performances of the play. In these Othello's "blackness" was constantly mentioned and exaggerated as a source of humor and amusement (MacDonald 233).⁴ For instance, *Othello: a Burlesque* (1870), performed by Christy's minstrels, white men in black-face, begins with Iago lamenting that his Desdemona has left him and is "now with a nasty, dirty fellar, / As black as mud — a white-washer — a nager called Othello" (Wells 129). When Lavinia records in her diary that they "heard Othello read" the suggestion is that like most nineteenth-century theatergoers they would have seen a bronzed actor play the central part. Yet, they may also have witnessed the burlesques or travesties that typically accompanied these performances. Might then the sisters have encountered Othello's blackness hyperbolically performed?

Thus the American theatre accepted a "tawny" Othello when the play was 'properly' produced and an exaggerated "black" Othello in popular burlesques. However, critical confusion abounded about the specificity of his race. This confusion was generated and fuelled by America's own problem with slavery and its need to prove the inferiority of certain races.⁵ Thus Shakespeare's indicators of Othello's race [for instance, Roderigo's reference to Othello's 'Thick-lips' (I.i.66)] became part of a debate to determine whether Shakespeare's Othello was black and what the consequences of this might be.

The former president of America, John Quincy Adams, who spent his entire career battling against slavery, believed Othello was definitely Black. Adams suggested that the great moral lesson of this tragedy was that mixed racial marriages are a violation of the laws of nature. He regarded Desdemona as 'little less than a wanton' who by eloping with and secretly marrying Othello betrayed her filial duty, her feminine modesty and her delicacy (Adams 438). He goes on to suggest that: "she not only violates her duties to her father, her family, her sex, and her country, but she makes the first advances' upon Othello, an 'unbleached African soldier.'" For Adams, her fondling of Othello on stage is "disgusting" and Adams asks "Who, in real life, would have her for his sister, daughter, or wife?" (Adams 439).

In 1854, the influential American critic Richard Grant White argued that Adams was in error for regarding Othello as Black and Desdemona as a wanton. For White, Adam's error was generated by confusion within Shakespeare's play that reflected the Bard's lack of knowledge of the noble and accomplished Moors, whom he confused with the African slaves shipped to plantations in the West Indies at the time *Othello* was being written (White 432-3). While for White, Othello was a "tawny" Moor, for Mary Preston, another American critic, Othello was necessarily white. Preston praised this play for its delineation of the workings of all human hearts. Yet she qualifies all of this, particularly Shakespeare's ability to represent humanity, by arguing that it is dependent on Othello being a white man. She asserts:

I have always *imagined* its hero a *white* man. It is true the dramatist paints him Black, but this shade does not suit the man. It is a stage decoration, which *My taste* discards, — a fault of color, from an artistic point of view . . . Shakspeare was too correct a delineator of human nature to have colored Othello *black*, if he had personally acquainted himself with the idiosyncrasies of the African race. (Preston 71)

For Preston the idea that Othello is black is an "*ebullition of fancy, a freak of imagination,*" one of the few erroneous strokes of the great master's brush, the single blemish on a faultless work" (71).

Thus for a reader like Dickinson Othello was a complex figure, both a noble and dignified Moor and a morally dangerous black man. Othello's nobility and power made it inconceivable for many, like Preston, White and Kean, that he was black. Thus they introduced the idea of a tawny figure, a noble Moor to underplay Othello's blackness or at least differentiate it from the "blackness" of contemporary African Americans. Yet for others like John Quincy Adams and those who watched the Othello burlesques or performed in them, Othello was definitely black and this fact was an integral part of what Adam's regarded as the moral lesson of the play and what the burlesques appropriated for humorous effect.

Dickinson's references to *Othello* begin in 1876 and include three letters where Dickinson actually identifies with Othello as a complex individual who personifies her own extreme possessiveness and jealousy. On June 20th 1877, Dickinson wrote to Mrs. Jonathan L. Jenkins, wife of the pastor of the First Church in Amherst, who had left with their family for Pittsfield the previous May. She told her "I hope you are each safe. It is homeless without you, and we think of others possessing you with the throes of Othello" (L506). Dickinson humorously presents herself as an enraged and passionate Othello jealous of

those who are "possessing" his Desdemona. Here Dickinson not only identifies with a man, she equates herself with a man who murdered his wife. Dickinson implies that Mrs. Jenkins is "safe" because she is far away from Dickinson's murderous possessiveness. This is a very provocative way for a white woman to address another white woman and is particularly controversial considering the theatrical and critical history of this play. Is Dickinson the "thick-lipped" black man Adams condemns Desdemona for marrying? Or the tawny safe stage Othello? Or the blackfaced burlesqued Othello? Or is she Preston's necessarily "white" Othello? While it is impossible to be certain, her reference summons up all four ideas about Othello and places Mrs. Jenkins in the position of a puzzled (and perhaps amused) interpreter.

Again, in an 1884 letter to Elizabeth Holland who had just become a grandmother, Dickinson not only refers to Othello, she also mentions Tommaso Salvini's portrayal of that role. She writes

The contemplation of you as "Grandma" is touching novelty to which the Mind adjusts itself by reverent degrees. That nothing in her Life became her like it's last event, it is probable — So the little Engrosser has done her work, and Love's "remainder Biscuit" is henceforth for us — We will try to bear it as divinely as Othello did, who had he had Love's sweetest slice, would not have charmed the World — Austin heard Salvini before his idol died, and the size of that manifestation even the Grave has not foreclosed. (L882)

What is most significant here is Dickinson's rapid, breathless movement from one Shakespeare text to another, which demonstrates her impressive familiarity with Shakespeare and the diversity of her own ability at appropriation. This movement from one play to another and the conjunction of genres and lines is reminiscent of Shakespearean burlesque.⁶ For the remark from *Macbeth* about the death of Duncan ('nothing in his life/Became him like the leaving it') refers not to a death but to the birth of Holland's grandson (I. iv.7-8). Dickinson also suggests that this birth will take Mrs. Holland's love and attention away from her and she will be left with "Love's 'remainder Biscuit,'" that according to Jacques in *As You Like It* is dry 'after a voyage' (II.vii. 39-40). Here Dickinson summons up the tawny or black hero and his murder of a white woman. Yet Dickinson also stresses the 'divine' nature of Othello's jealousy by suggesting that it was Othello's denial of 'Love's sweetest slice' that "charmed the world." The suggestion is that Dickinson identifies with Othello for she too is denied her "sweetest slice," Mrs. Holland, and instead is given "Love's 'remainder Biscuit.'"

Dickinson's reference to Tommaso Salvini implies that her brother Austin attended one of his performances of *Othello* in Boston in 1873-4, as these were the last ones he gave in America before his 'Idol' (his wife) died in 1878. It is provocative that all Dickinson's epistolary references to *Othello* occur after Austin's initial attendance at Salvini's performance. The final example of Dickinson's identification with *Othello* occurs in an 1884 letter to Maria Whitney which also contains a brief discussion of Salvini's performance. This is also Dickinson's only explication of a Shakespearean character or play. Dickinson writes:

Has the journey ceased, or is it still progressing, and has Nature won you away from us, as we feared she would? *Othello* is uneasy, but then *Othellos* always are, they hold such mighty stakes. Austin brought me the picture of Salvini when he was last in Boston. The brow is that of Deity — the eyes, those of the lost, but the power lies in the *throat* — pleading, sovereign, savage—the panther and the dove! Each, how innocent! (L948)

Here Dickinson is again jealous because a friend's attention has been taken away from her, this time by "Nature." More interesting is Dickinson's description of Salvini's picture for it reflects her knowledge of Salvini's performance of *Othello* and hints at the network of references she used in her complex understanding of this play.⁷

While Austin's conversations about Salvini's performance informed her view of Salvini, her understanding of it was also influenced by, and actually reiterates contemporary reviews of Salvini's performance. In fact, Dickinson cut out passages from two articles on Salvini from her November 1881 edition of the literary magazine *The Century*: "Tommaso Salvini" by Emma Lazarus and "Impressions of Some Shakspearean Characters" by Tommaso Salvini (Leyda II 357). The poet and essayist Emma Lazarus stresses that Salvini becomes his parts so completely that he is *Othello*. This explains why Dickinson combines a description of Salvini's portrait with his performance as *Othello*. Moreover, Lazarus suggests that Salvini's performance, when compared to Shakespeare's texts, reveals that his *Othello* is true to "the spirit of Shakspere" and she rejects those who think it is "brutal, coarse and *un-Shakspearean*" (Lazarus 113). For Lazarus, Salvini unites in the last scene "the *Othello* of Desdemona's love with the *Othello* who assassinates her:" *Othello*'s "old majesty of carriage and commanding trumpet-tones" return to a man 'whose whole frame' had just been 'quivering with affliction' (113). Lazarus notes the majesty of Salvini's physical presence, the grace of his movement and, like Dickinson, emphasizes

his voice. Lazarus writes: "most memorable of all, a voice of such depth and volume of tone, and such exquisite and infinitely carried modulations, that having been once heard it haunts the sense like noble music" (111). For Lazarus, Salvini enthralled his audience with "his sudden electric transitions through every phase of emotion." Like Dickinson, Lazarus describes a complex figure, "not merely an embodiment of a single furious passion, but a rounded, many sided human being." For Lazarus, Salvini's Othello "sweeps the whole gamut of passion from frankest loyalty and simplicity of affection, through doubt, anguish, livid wrath, insensate jealousy, and blood thirsty revenge to a sublime despair" (113-4). In Dickinson's words he is sovereign and savage, panther and dove.

Similarly, Dickinson's description of Salvini restates the actor's own presentation of Othello as more than merely the personification of jealousy. Like Dickinson who called Othello "Sovereign," Salvini noted that "Othello was descended from a royal race," that he "grew up amidst 'the pomp and circumstance of glorious war,' and that without experience in evil himself, he had no idea of dissimulation in others" (Salvini 122). According to Salvini, Desdemona falls in love with Othello's "noble qualities, sees beneath his dark complexion the whiteness of his soul and declares her love" (122) This corresponds with Dickinson's color-inflected description of Salvini/Othello as both a panther and a dove. Like Dickinson who emphasizes the innocence of Othello, Salvini notes Othello's naiveté in the face of Iago: "the personification of all deception, he is the crucible in which all deceptions are fused together; he is the very ideal of perfidy and treachery" (123). For Salvini, Iago's reminder to Othello of the difference of color and custom between him and Desdemona gives legitimacy to Othello's own suspicions of betrayal. Salvini underplays Othello's race by arguing that "Othello is often quoted as the personification of jealousy; but he is no more jealous than any other man in the same circumstances would be" (123). Yet Salvini does mention Othello's race to justify his own performance of Othello's suicide, whereby he cuts his throat rather than stabbing himself, an act which according to Salvini better followed the customs of the people of Africa.

A month before Austin attended Salvini's performance in Boston in April 1883, Henry James also published an article on "Tommaso Salvini" in *The Atlantic Monthly*, another journal Dickinson read avidly. James notes the devotion and sympathy that Salvini inspires in his audience and that "no other artist today begins to be capable of giving us such an exhibition of tragic power" (James 378). This recalls Austin's diary entry on April 11th 1883: 'Evng went to the Museum to hear Salvini and Clara Morris as Othello and Desdemona, a revelation to me of human power' (Leyda II 396). James finds depths of

nobility and passion in the performance as well as that which is ugly, repulsive and bestial; this echoes again Dickinson's complex figure. Like Lazarus and Dickinson, James mentions Salvini's "voluminous voice" (379). However, unlike Lazarus, James does not underplay Othello's race and instead notes that "no more complete picture of passion can have been given to the stage in our day, — passion beginning in noble repose and spending itself in black insanity" (380). James continues by calling this performance a portrait of "an African by an Italian." Salvini's Othello displays "the rage of a wounded animal" which never turns to excess, "the rage of an African, but of a nature that remains generous to the end" (380). Furthermore, James notes that

in spite of the tiger-paces and tiger-springs there is through it all, to my sense at least, the tremor of a moral element, the entire performance is intensely human. (381)

Dickinson's description of Salvini's picture is the concentrated substance of these articles and reflects her knowledge and interest in the theatrical and critical reception of Shakespeare's plays. It also suggests that Salvini's role influenced her conception of *Othello* whereby for her Othello was a complex, passionate and noble figure capable of extremes of love and of violence: he was "the panther and the dove! Each, how innocent." Yet while her identification with Othello's jealousy particularly in her letters to her female friends may be explained through reference to Salvini, it remains highly provocative considering this character's connections with what James regards as "black insanity" and African passion. For Dickinson has expressed her possessiveness of three of her close female correspondents, Mrs. Jenkins, Maria Whitney and Mrs. Holland, by provocatively invoking a play immersed in sexual and racial controversy. This is in stark contrast to Dickinson's fashioning in art and life of her role as "A solemn thing – it was – I said – / A Woman – white – to be" (Fr307). Here the woman who in her later life dressed exclusively in white, to symbolize virtue, purity, heavenly, election, worldly renunciation, or simply class and cultural difference, uses Othello to articulate her extreme jealousy.⁸ This exaggerated jealousy is not only represented by a man, but by a black man which suggests that Dickinson wanted its extremity to go hyperbolically beyond contemporary ideals of femininity, as passive, non-sexual, reticent, innately moral and altruistic (Dobson 15-16). Thus I suggest that Dickinson's identifications with Othello must also be viewed as her use of an extreme symbol of "otherness" that represented that which her culture thought should not be found in herself.

Notes

1. Although access to Dickinson's books is denied in most circumstances, I was allowed to briefly examine the edition Dickinson used, *The Comedies, Histories, Tragedies and Poems of William Shakespeare*, 8 vols. Ed. Charles Knight. (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1953). *Othello* had been marked in pencil thirteen times. Although none of these marks can be positively assigned to Dickinson they testify to the importance this play had or was believed to have for the poet.
2. See Hiroko Uno's discussion of Emily's and Lavinia's probable attendance at a performance of *Othello* and her explication of the type of performance they would have seen, the 'theatrical entertainment' that would have accompanied this play (Uno 31-2).
3. In *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (1988), Levine argues that the immense popularity of Shakespeare's plays on the American stage was connected with many factors, but centrally related to their integration with more popular forms of entertainment. As a result, Shakespeare was parodied and burlesqued into the hearts and imaginations of the American people and his plays were shared public experiences that united the country's heterogeneous population.
4. Both *Desdemona* (New York, 1874), and *Dar's De Money* (London, 1880), were performed on American stages before being published. For other examples of American Burlesques see Stanley Wells ed., *Nineteenth-Century Burlesque: American Shakespeare Travesties*, Vol. 5 (London: Diploma Press Limited, 1978).
5. See Reginald Horseman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: the Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge UP, 1981) 139-57.
6. This letter recalls the sort of integration and confusion of Shakespeare lines for humorous effect that was popular in Dickinson's day. See Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* particularly chapter 21 where the Duke and King give a rendition of 'Hamlet's Soliloquy' for Huck and Jim that begins: "To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin."
7. A picture of Salvini appeared in J. Brande Matthews, "Foreign Actors on the American Stage" *Scribner's Monthly* 21 (February 1881) 533.
8. For example see Eberwein 33-7, Farr, 34-7 and Mitchell, 75-83. Vivian Pollak has recently argued for Dickinson's ambivalent towards "whiteness" as a sign of racial privilege that excluded otherness (Pollak 84-95).

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