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Othello Comes to Town: Orson Welles and Edmund Kean

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

“I look forward with foreboding to Mr. Welles’s threatened *Othello*, lest the Moor be white, Desdemona black and Iago nowhere to be found.”¹ Thus did one critic express what many feared when it became known that Mr. Orson Welles was about to perpetrate another Shakespearean film. His *Macbeth* had caused many a shiver, and his other films had betrayed a mania for trick photography and a partiality for the spectacular and even the grotesque, which caused many a lover of Shakespearean tragedy to conceive the devout wish that Mr. Welles would leave Shakespeare alone.

Last week, at the new and sumptuous Galaxy Theater, the theater-goers of Manila had a chance to see what Orson Welles had made of *Othello*. To judge from the brief five-day run, it would seem that not very many went to see the film—a great pity, because, contrary to expectations, Mr. Welles has produced a remarkable film. *Othello* is black, Desdemona white in more senses than one, and Iago pretty nearly the star of the play. He of course does not eclipse *Othello* as Jose Ferrer eclipsed Paul Robeson in the New York production; but it is remarkable that in a film “produced by Orson Welles and starring Orson Welles,” so much of the acting honors should have gone to Michael MacLiamoire as Iago.

The present writer confesses that he went to the film with settled prejudices against a Welles production. He even an-

nounced to his students before they adjourned to the theater: "Orson Welles is of course going to murder Othello, but it should be interesting to find out how he does it." It is therefore somewhat chastening, and not a little exhilarating, to discover that Orson Welles has succeeded not in murdering Othello but in making him live and in a manner not unworthy of the great acting tradition which culminated in Edmund Kean and the Booths.

Every student of theatre is of course familiar with the name of Edmund Kean. He took the theatrical world by storm on a memorable night, 26 January 1814, when he appeared at Drury Lane as Shylock.² Thenceforth for years he ruled the stage as king, with serious competition only from Macready and Junius Brutus Booth. He appeared as Othello at Brighton on Christmas Eve 1817, with Booth as Iago. They appeared together again in London in February of the following year in very dramatic circumstances. Their rivalry had become openly known, and Booth had lost a position at the Covent Garden theater; when therefore, after Kean's performance of *Macbeth* on Monday, February 17, it was announced that on the following Thursday Kean would appear as Othello and Booth as Iago, the theater audience greeted the announcement with a shout. We are told that on Thursday afternoon the crowds gathered outside Drury Lane waiting for hours for the gates to open, and when the gates did open there was a mad rush into the theater, very much (one supposes) like the human flood that pours in and out of the subways during the rush hours in New York. The theater was packed to the rafters, and there were many men of note in the audience. Kean's Othello that night was perhaps the best in his career and even Booth confessed later that he had been eclipsed: "Kean's Othello smothered Desdemona and my Iago too."³

We of course have not seen Edmund Kean on the stage: he died in 1833, a few years before our time. But he was fortunate to have lived at a time when people still kept diaries and wrote letters, and when not only Coleridge and Hazlitt but practically every literate theater-goer felt called upon to

write Shakespearean criticism. The result is that we have a vividly detailed picture of Edmund Kean's Othello.

He was short (five feet four inches) and looked puny beside Macready when the latter played Iago: but when in the Third Act he hobbled to Iago and seized him by the throat and throttling him shouted, "Villain, be sure thou provest. . .!" we are told that "he seemed to swell into a stature which made Macready appear small."⁴

His voice was harsh when raised, but he used it to produce remarkable effects. His inarticulate sounds were impressive: "the throttled struggle of rage, and the choking of grief—the broken laugh of extreme suffering, when the mind is ready to deliver itself to insane joy."⁵ But his articulate delivery was even more remarkable. His manner ranged from the grandiloquent to the colloquial. His sudden emphases and startling transitions often drew applause. When acting Shylock, he would talk of Antonio's atrocities rapidly and in a high-pitched voice until he came to a climax; then he would suddenly drop his voice to a soft, patient, gentle whisper: "I am a Jew." The effect, we are told, was instantaneous.⁶ Or when acting Macbeth he would run out on the stage and shout with a voice of thunder: "Hang out our banners on the outward walls!" Then a pause, his sword drops to the ground, and he whispers: "The cry is still they come, they come."⁷

That was consummate acting, and when brought to bear on a great play like *Othello* the result was memorable. His rendition of the lines

O now forever
Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content!

has drawn superlative praise from critics who were at a loss for the proper comparison. Leigh Hunt said that the words were spoken "in long, lingering tones, like the sound of a parting knell."⁸ Hazlitt compared them to "the swelling notes of some divine music, like the sound of years of departed happiness."⁹ Henry Crabb Robinson found them "as pathetic as a lover's farewell," and said that he could hardly keep from weeping.¹⁰ Perhaps the most remarkable praise of

all came from his rival, Junius Booth, who in later years told his son Edwin that Kean's rendering of the passage which ended "Farewell, Othello's occupation's gone" sounded "like the moan of ocean or the souging of wind through cedars... the tones of cathedral chimes were not more mournful."¹¹

That was great acting, and it is perhaps unfair to compare Mr. Welles with the incomparable Kean. Yet Orson Welles's Othello is not unworthy of Kean's tradition. In fact, it was fascinating for this writer to sit watching the film and mentally compare Orson Welles's rendition with the way in which according to the authors Edmund Kean would have rendered the identical passage. The first appearance of Othello in the film is impressive. It is to defend himself from the charge of witchcraft in marrying Desdemona:

Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors
Rude am I in my speech,
 And little bless'd with the soft phrase of peace;....
 Her father lov'd me; oft invited me;
 Still question'd me the story of my life
 From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes
 That I have pass'd....
This to hear
 Would Desdemona seriously incline...
 She gave me for my pains a world of sighs.
 She swore, in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,
 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.
 She wish'd she had not heard it; yet she wish'd
 That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me
 And bade me, if I had a friend that lov'd her,
 I should but teach him how to tell my story
 And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake:
 She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd,
 And I lov'd her that she did pity them.
 This only is the witchcraft I have used.
 Here comes the lady; let her witness it. (I. iii. 76 sqq)¹²

Edmund Kean, we are told, would give this long narrative rapidly, gabbling over it, until he reached the close. Then he would attack the word witchcraft with high and sudden emphasis, and drop into an unexpected colloquialism when the lady appeared. His delivery at this point would always startle the audience into applause. Welles's delivery was altogether

different. The camera was trained on his profile, and he spoke softly, almost shyly, with the shadow of a smile on his lips. Instead of Kean's sudden sarcastic emphasis, Welles whispered the line

This only is the witchcraft I have used. (I. iii. 169)

That is excellent elocution.

This brings us to an advantage that Welles has over Kean: the close-up camera. Among Kean's greatest assets were his facial reactions and his gestures, and it was his misfortune that the workings of his face could not be seen by any except those closest to the stage. Hazlitt says of him that "His face is the running comment of his acting. . . . Without that index to his mind, you are not prepared for the vehemence and suddenness of his gestures. . . . it is in the working of his face that you see the writhing and coiling up of the passions before they make their serpent-spring; the lightning of his eye precedes the hoarse burst of thunder from his voice."¹³ What splendid effects might Edmund Kean have achieved through the use of the camera! What Kean did not have, Welles has and exploits to the full. The camera records every reaction of the face: the flash of the eye, the flick of an eyelash, the twitch of lip or cheek. Iago's face will not be easily forgotten; nor Emilia's (Fay Compton) as she talked cynically of how women betray their husbands; nor the Moor's.

But lest this article grow too long, let us catalogue briefly the chief virtues of Welles's production, and then list its defects—for it has many.

The film opens with a magnificent funeral procession in silhouette, slightly reminiscent of the ending of Olivier's *Hamlet* but on a grander scale. The bodies of Othello, Desdemona, Emilia, and Roderigo are borne aloft, while Iago is dragged to his cage whence, like a captive animal, he watches the procession of all the deaths that he has caused. There is a grandeur to this scene, suggesting the peace that comes at the end of all great tragedy. It is also the whole play in synthesis.

We are then taken into the splendidly-architected city of Venice where the elopement is briefly enacted, Othello makes

his first impressive speech, and Brabantio pronounces his ominous

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see;
She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee. (I. iii. 294-5)

Then, before we know it, we are in Cyprus where the wind lashes the surf against the shore and flaps wildly the mantles of Desdemona and Iago. The windy scene reminds us of Shakespeare's description of this tempest:

The chidden billow seems to pelt the clouds;
The wind-shak'd surge, with high and monstrous mane,
Seems to cast water on the burning bear
And quench the guards of the ever-fixed pole. (II. i. 12-14)

Then Othello's colorful arrival, and Iago's first assault on the Moor's jealousy.

Iago's second assault on Othello's jealousy is made while both are walking on the ramparts, their faces bright in the brilliant sunlight. The walking gives an air of casualness to the conversation (III. iii. 92-170). This scene is climaxed with Iago's "O beware, my lord, of jealousy..." They now leave the bright sunshine of the ramparts and enter the dimly lit castle where the somber light is in perfect keeping with the darkness that has now descended upon Othello's mind. Iago talks while divesting Othello of his armor, and Othello stands in front of a mirror listening intently, while the camera catches the glint of his eye in the mirror. It was said of Edmund Kean that he listened well:¹⁴ Welles's Othello listens very well—a long pause, a twitch of the lip, a flick of the eyelash, and then a gruff, sharp question.

The eavesdropping scene is splendid. This is usually awkward on the stage, and Granville-Barker cites it as an example of the indignity to which Othello has fallen.¹⁵ In the film it is easily done, Othello listening and looking through a missing stone in the wall.

It has become traditional for Othello to seize Iago by the throat at "Villain, be sure thou provest..." It is standard procedure which Granville-Barker commends.¹⁶ Orson Welles

does not follow this convention. Instead he edges Iago to the edge of the parapet with the raging sea below, and the sight of the sea and the sound of its surge supply the ominous counterpoint to Othello's demand for proof.

The arrival of Ludovico gives a colorful respite to the march of events, and the slapping of Desdemona is done in the most dramatic manner, climaxed by Othello's snarled "Goats! Monkeys!" (IV. i. 274)

The handkerchief scenes are very ably done. But the climax of the film (as of the play) occurs earlier when in the gloom of the castle corridors Othello whispers the famous Farewell:

O now forever
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars
That make ambition virtue! O farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th' ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!
And O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
Th' immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone! (III. iii. 348 sqq)

Wilson Knight calls this the great Othello music.¹⁷ Welles speaks the words softly, the camera full on his face, and the last three words are whispered with long pauses between.

Welles has omitted all the comical scenes in Shakespeare's text, but a momentary hint of comedy is provided by the disgusted Roderigo, stripped for the bath, whom Iago has persuaded to kill Cassio:

I have no great devotion to the deed. (V. i. 8)

One of my students who sat near me in the theater commented that it was the greatest understatement of the year.

The strangulation scene is well executed. Othello walks through the dark corridors, and from the darkness one hears the bass voice.

Most of the other defects come from the preoccupation with trick photography: the elopement scene is confused; so is the street brawl in Venice, so that Othello's

Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them (I. ii. 59) loses point completely. Shakespeare apparently intended the line to be very impressive: the Moor, by one word, quells a street riot. In the film the words are not impressive; they are part of the chaos.

Confused, likewise, is the street brawl in Cyprus which leads to Cassio's dismissal. More confused still is the brawl in the bath (and why in the bath?) in which Roderigo attempts to kill Cassio and gets killed by Iago instead. Orson Welles seems to like to photograph movement for movement's sake: men running, daggers shaking, bodies swaying, water falling—all in semi-darkness, making confusion twice confounded. One English professor who has taught Shakespeare for years but who had not recently read *Othello*, asked me what the whole thing was about. If he did not understand what was going on, how could the ordinary person in the audience understand it?

Many lines lose their point, or their meaning, from the fact that they are heard while something else is being photographed. Even Othello's "Blood, blood, blood!" is lost in this fashion, though it should be one of the climaxes of the play.

Perhaps less serious but just as deplorable are the omissions of very dramatic scenes; for instance, the great scene when Othello, having called upon the Pontic Sea, kneels and invokes yond marble heaven to witness his vow of vengeance, and Iago also kneels to make his mock vow. It must be said, however, that the interchange after it:

Oth. Now art thou my lieutenant.

Iag. I am thy own forever. (III. iii. 479-480)

is brought out with the proper irony, meaning: "You are mine!"

A worse omission is that of Act IV Scene 3 in which Desdemona sings the willow song. This is one of the most

beautiful passages in all Shakespeare. Its tenuous surface of seeming humor, its underplayed pathos, and the deep undertones of approaching tragedy are difficult to surpass: and it is all done very simply—Desdemona singing the willow song while Emilia helps her out of her state dress, Desdemona often interrupting her own singing with some trivial remark or a casual request. The omission of this lovely scene from any production of *Othello* is impossible to justify.

A seemingly trivial omission, but of more than trivial import, is that of Iago's song in Act II, Scene 3:

And let me the canakin clink, clink;
 And let me the canakin clink.
 A soldier's a man;
 O, man's life's but a span;
 Why, then, let a soldier drink.

It is true that in the film the song is sung vaguely by the multitude in the background while Iago and Cassio drink. But I believe there is a special significance in making Iago himself sing it. The reason is this: although Iago is in reality a "demi-devil" whose one desire is to destroy other people, yet it is the uniform impression of everyone in the play that he is an exceedingly good man. Othello, Cassio, Desdemona, Emilia, Roderigo—all acclaim him an "honest, honest man." There must be an objective reason for this unanimous love for Iago. He must be (externally) a loveable man, a hail-fellow-well-met. Bradley has called attention to this curious phenomenon,¹⁹ and Tucker Brooke enlarges upon it.²⁰ The latter goes so far as to compare Iago with Falstaff—a bizarre comparison, but not without foundation in Shakespeare's text. Falstaff is a lovable rogue despite his depravity: Iago is not at all lovable to the audience, but he must have appeared (or rather be made to appear) lovable to the *dramatis personae*. Hence his drinking song.

Perhaps the worst defect of the play is the botching—for it must be called that—of the scene in which Othello falls to the ground in an epileptic fit. This is a great scene in traditional productions. Iago usually kicks the prostrate body

of the unconscious Moor—an appropriate gesture, as Granville-Barker says.²¹ Verdi in his opera *Otello* makes the scene melodramatic. He makes Iago sing over the prostrate Moor: *Eco il leone!* (Behold the lion) with supreme contempt. But Orson Welles does not show Othello's fall. There is talk one minute: the next minute the camera is focused on a horrible face, upturned, with gaping mouth, followed by scenes of buildings and sky—presumably what the prostrate man sees as he regains consciousness. This makes sense to the Shakespearean student who knows his *Othello* well. It makes nonsense to everyone else.

Another defect—though it is not important: The “Dismiss thy attendant” of Act IV Scene 3 is spoken out of context and its meaning mistaken. The film takes it to mean that Emilia is to depart there and then from the corridor. She later reappears and talks with Desdemona about the foibles of women—which makes nonsense of her dismissal. In Shakespeare's text, the dismissal is ominous: “Get you to bed and dismiss thy attendant.” In other words, “I don't want anybody else in the room when I come in to strangle you!”

One final defect: the events after Desdemona's strangulation are confused and unintelligible. Cassio's reappearance is unexplained, Iago's crimes are not fully proved to Othello, Othello's suicide is not clear—it is confusion thrice confounded, relieved only by Othello's splendid rendering of the well-known lines:

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
Of one that lov'd not wisely but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought
Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand
Like the base Indian threw away a pearl
Richer than all his tribe. (V. ii. 341-347)

I am not sure if the last two lines were actually spoken. If they were not, they were not missed though they are part of the great Othello music.

¹ Paul Dehn, "The Filming of Shakespeare," in *Talking of Shakespeare*, ed. John Garrett (London 1954), p. 56.

² A. C. Sprague, *Shakespearian Players and Performances* (Harvard 1953), p. 193. The details given below on Edmund Kean are from this work, pp. 71-86.

³ J. H. Hackett, *Notes, Criticisms, and Correspondence upon Shakespeare's Plays and Actors*, New York 1863, p. 307 (*apud* Sprague, p. 72).

⁴ G. H. Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting*, New York 1878, pp. 15-16 (*apud* Sprague, p. 72).

⁵ R. H. Dana, *The Idle Man*, No. 1, New York 1821, p. 35 (*apud* Sprague p. 72).

⁶ G. Vandenhoff, *Leaves from an Actor's Note-Book*, London 1860, p. 23 (*apud* Sprague, p. 75).

⁷ *Dame Madge Kendal, By Herself*, London 1933, p. 7 (*apud* Sprague, p. 75).

⁸ Leigh Hunt, *Dramatic Essays*, ed. Archer and Low, pp. 207-208 (*apud* Sprague, pp. 83-84).

⁹ *Dramatic Essays*, p. 78 (*apud* Sprague, p. 83).

¹⁰ H. C. Robinson, *Diary, Reminiscences and Correspondence*, ed. Thomas Sadler, New York 1877, I, 276, 19 May 1814 (*apud* Sprague, p. 83).

¹¹ *Actors and Actresses of Great Britain and the United States*, ed. Matthews and Hutton, III, 7 (*apud* Sprague, p. 84).

¹² The numbering is according to the Oxford Shakespeare, ed. W. J. Craig, (London, New York and Toronto 1943). We might mention in passing that it has always seemed comically odd that Othello, who claims to be rude and devoid of eloquence, proceeds thereupon to speak eloquently. Is it another case of *aliquando bonus dormitat Gulielmus?*

¹³ "Whether Actors Ought to Sit in the Boxes," *Table-Talk*, 1822, (*apud* Sprague, p. 73).

¹⁴ J. Finlay, *Miscellanies*, Dublin 1835, pp. 208-209 (*apud* Sprague, p. 73).

¹⁵ "...was ever tragic hero treated thus?" asks H. Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare II* (Princeton 1951), pp. 53-54. He adds that most actors of Othello shirk this scene (to spare themselves the indignity?).

¹⁶ *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, II, 42-43.

¹⁷ *The Wheel of Fire*, 4th ed. (London 1949), pp. 97-119.

¹⁸ I have often thought it comical that Desdemona, after being thoroughly strangled by Othello (who makes sure that she is dead), should later on speak, and speak coherently! Orson Welles makes this scene more plausible by having Desdemona roll down from the bed to the floor. The shock, presumably, revives her sufficiently to give her dying lines.

¹⁹ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*

²⁰ Tucker Brooke, *Essays on Shakespeare and Other Elizabethans* (Yale 1948), pp. 46-56.

²¹ *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, II, 53, note 29.