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Representing Othello in 1890s New Orleans: The Myth of Chivalry in the South¹

CRITICS HAVE LONG BEEN AWARE THAT SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY *OTHELLO* was very popular in the South both before and after the Civil War.² The reasons for this popularity, however, remain hard to explain, as its plot is essentially that of a black man marrying and then murdering a white woman. The possibility of racial intermarriage is known to have been a highly charged political issue that could be used to stoke racial tensions among white southern Democrats in the postbellum period,³ yet surviving responses to *Othello* from Mobile and New Orleans in the 1890s indicate that many upper-class white readers were able to sympathize with Othello and perhaps even to admire him. The strange paradox of white racist men and women celebrating a character who actually in the play refers to himself as "black"—then kills an innocent white woman—demands examination. The current political climate sadly makes it all the more necessary that we try to understand how readers in a time characterized by racial hatred were able to accept as a hero a character who did not look like them. I aim to shed a little more light on the subject by exploring two little-known representations of Othello in the postbellum period: the notebooks of a Shakespeare

¹I completed the research for this paper as a postdoctoral teaching fellow at Tulane University and greatly appreciate the very detailed and helpful comments of *Mississippi Quarterly*'s anonymous peer reviewer.

²It was the fourth-most performed Shakespeare play in New Orleans from 1817 to 1865, and equally successful in other southern cities. For the most-performed plays in New Orleans, see Roppolo 119. For Shakespearean performances in other southern cities, see Kolin's *Shakespeare in the South*.

³Martha Hodes points out that Democrats liked to rally white support by prophesying that the final step of the policy of "social equality" would be a black man marrying the hearer's sister or daughter, which they implied was the worst fate imaginable (167), while Bertram Wyatt-Brown asserts that "Would you have your sister marry one?" was "a cliché" (*Southern Honor* 312).

discussion club in Mobile, Alabama, and float illustrations and surviving documentation from a Mardi Gras parade in 1898 New Orleans.

Mardi Gras in New Orleans has a complex history and culture that can seem baffling to outsiders, so having some background is helpful. To start at the beginning, Mardi Gras is the day before Lent and in many places is celebrated as a festival or carnival. In New Orleans, the idea of celebrating Mardi Gras by means of a parade of themed floats through the streets was conceived by a group of young, wealthy, Anglo-American merchants and businessmen, who in 1857 created a secret society for the express purpose of putting on a lavish Mardi Gras parade, far more organized and on a grander scale than any New Orleans had so far seen, followed by an even more lavish ball. This group called itself the Mistick Krewe of Comus.⁴ The name Comus was chosen from Milton's masque, and the theme of the parade in 1857 was "The Demon Actors in Milton's *Paradise Lost*." In one way, both Comus and *Paradise Lost* were natural choices for Mardi Gras: Milton's Comus is the leader of a debauched and drunken group of followers that the krewe is supposed to represent; and devil costumes are a very conventional choice for carnival. In another way, as Richard Rambuss has demonstrated, the Mistick Krewe of Comus's choice to align itself with an English literary giant was a social and political statement, visually declaring to New Orleans that the formerly Catholic and Creole celebration of Mardi Gras would henceforth be dominated by the Anglo-Americans. Comus's literary and political agendas were never mutually exclusive. Comus's first parade and ball in 1857 were a success, so the krewe made this an annual Mardi Gras custom and other Anglo-American parading clubs were soon established (all of whom also adopted the title of "krewe," which became the accepted term for a Mardi Gras parading club in New Orleans). Comus frequently returned to English literary themes in its parades, and in 1898 it chose the theme of "Scenes from Shakespeare." Shakespeare plays had been represented in Mardi Gras floats before, but this was the first Mardi Gras parade wholly devoted to his works. Comus's parade adopted the format of presenting a tableau of one scene from one play on each float, and the plays chosen for the parade corresponds with what Joseph Patrick Roppolo has identified as the most frequently performed,

⁴There had been some parades before Comus was born, but these had been "small, unorganized, irregular, and relatively spontaneous celebrations" (Gotham 26). For an account of Comus's formation and initial membership, see Schindler 32.

or most spectacular productions, of Shakespeare's plays in New Orleans before 1865 (118-19). The *Othello* float was the fourth one in the procession.⁵

What the parade looked like can be reconstructed fairly well from the Carnival Bulletin, a large souvenir poster featuring colored illustrations of every float in a parade, created and sold by the *Times Picayune* newspaper in New Orleans. One of the "Scenes from Shakespeare" bulletins is preserved in the archives of the Louisiana Research Collection's Carnival Collection, housed at Tulane University.⁶ For Comus's parade in 1898, LaRC's archives at Tulane also contain a few ball tickets, a ball book and invitation card, and two (identical) little printed booklets of poems evidently intended as ball favors distributed to krewe members and their guests to accompany and explain the parade floats.

The *Othello* float (fig. 1) seems to represent Desdemona and Othello's courtship, not shown in the play but alluded to in act 1, scene 3. Each float included some costumed masked figures, who would have been krewe members, positioned to represent a scene from the play, although the spectator might have missed the figures since they were so dwarfed by the huge fantastical fish, wave, and seaweed images that decorate the float. This imagery brilliantly connects the Mississippi River culture that serves to define New Orleans with the watery setting of Shakespeare's play, recalling the "Turk's" shipwreck and the characters' isolation on the island of Cyprus, implying that this *Othello* is located both within and without the spectator's everyday experience, blurring the boundary between fiction and reality and inviting the spectator to enter into a realm of make-believe and fantasy.

The grouping of the characters atop the float seems significant, as does the moment of the play Comus presents in the tableau. Othello, "the tall dark Moor," is standing before a seated Brabantio, presumably telling the tale of his adventures. Desdemona, described in the poem booklet (fig. 2) as "The fair-haired daughter," sits on the floor next to Brabantio, "with parted lips / Listening, all eager." The poem emphasizes Desdemona's

⁵There were twenty floats in total, depicting eighteen plays; the *Othello* float appeared after the float bearing Comus himself, the title float, and a float based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

⁶I'd like to thank the staff of the Louisiana Research Collection for their valuable assistance, good humor, and patience.

pity for Othello—she listens with “drooping eyes / That dimmed at mention of much cruelties”—and suggests, as Othello states in the play, that this pity is the origin of her love for him.⁷ The tableau thus represents both Desdemona and Othello as subordinate to the seated Brabantio, the “reverend signior,” but implies that they are a suitable match in terms of virtue and social standing. In this scene of Shakespeare’s play, the Duke and Venetian nobles agree that Othello is worthy to marry Desdemona. The Duke tells Brabantio, “If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (1.3.288-89). Comus depicts the scene that establishes Othello as an honorary Venetian gentleman and stresses his suitability as a match for fair, sweet Desdemona.

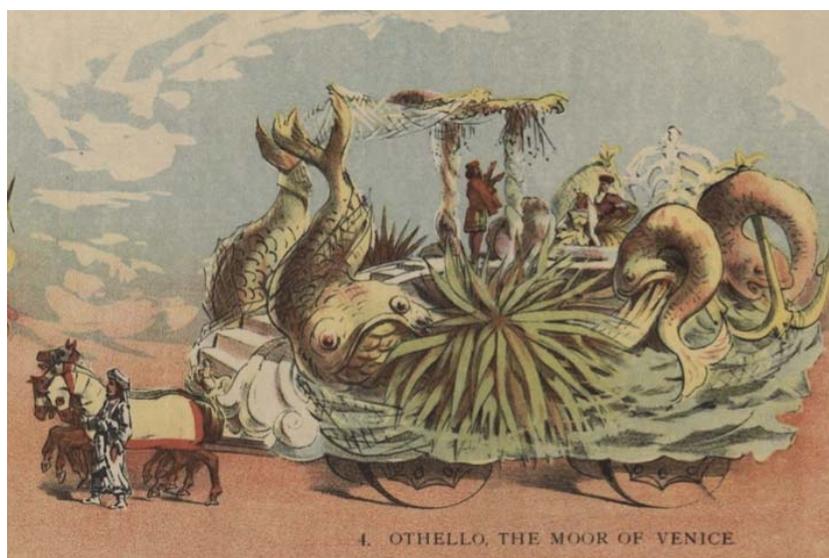


Fig. 1. *Othello* float, Mistick Krewe of Comus’s “Scenes from Shakespeare” parade 1898 (from the *Times Picayune*’s 1898 Carnival Bulletin). Image courtesy of the Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University.

⁷“She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them” (1.3.166-67).

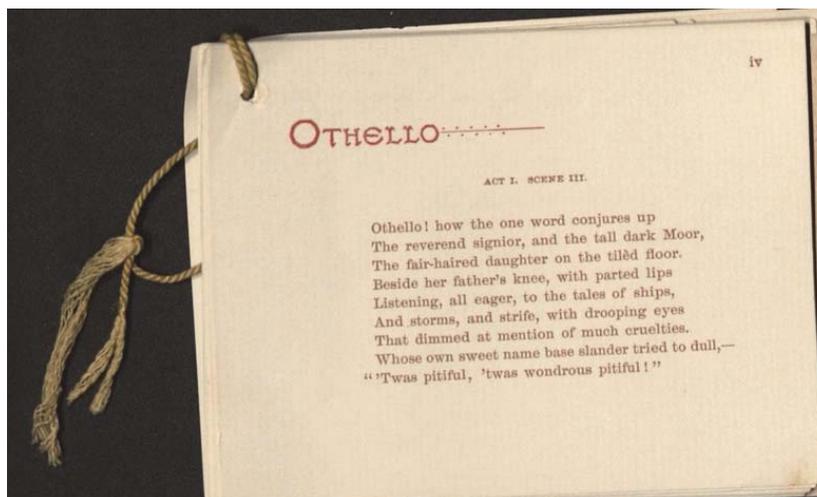


Fig. 2. *Othello* poem, Mistick Krewe of Comus's booklet, 1898. Image courtesy of The Carnival Collection, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University.

Nowhere in the parade was this impression contradicted. The float did not give any indication that the play ends with Othello murdering Desdemona, and the booklet's poem only vaguely hints at the story's ending, as if it does not want to remind the reader that Othello is going to kill his wife: "[Desdemona's] sweet name base slander tried to dull,— / "'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful!" Significantly, it is the abstract "slander," not Othello or even Iago, that is responsible for Desdemona's death. Someone unfamiliar with the play watching the parade could easily conclude that *Othello* is about two good young people who get married but then have their happiness thwarted by some kind of malicious slander for which they are in no way responsible. As we will see, this may have been how readers in New Orleans actually did understand the play.

The bulletin's depiction also affords an excellent view of Othello's costume, which offers additional clues as to how Comus saw the character. There was a nineteenth-century tradition of depicting Othello as a bronze-skinned, tawny, Arabian character rather than a black-

skinned African: Edmund Kean and Edwin Booth had both played the part in flowing oriental robes, as had the Italian actor Tommaso Salvini after the Civil War.⁸ Comus's Othello, by contrast, appears to be wearing a knee-length tunic over tights more reminiscent of soldierly characters like Richard III and not dissimilar to the costume worn by the rider who represented Henry VIII in the "Scenes from Shakespeare" parade. Perhaps more pertinently, Comus's costume recalls the knee-length chainmail tunic and armor in which John McCullough performed Othello; McCullough had frequently played Othello in New Orleans following the success of his 1879 production there.⁹

The question that arises is this: In the minds of the Mistick Krewe of Comus, what was Othello's racial heritage? Or, to put it more baldly, how black was Othello? It is surprisingly difficult to answer. The poem that accompanies the float uses the ambiguous word "dark," rather than "black," to describe Othello. Othello's costume is apparently not flowing robes, but it is not clearly "African" either (nor even necessarily exotic, as Shakespearean costumes go). Surviving evidence suggests that some actors who played Othello in the South wore bronze makeup, but some wore blackface, even in the postbellum period.¹⁰ John McCullough also seems to have played in blackface, otherwise the *Times Picayune* could not have made this racist joke about his costume: "John McCullough is putting out his high-art lithographs of himself as *Othello* in Western towns, and the boys want to know what nigger minstrel band is coming next" ([Untitled]). It is impossible to tell from the illustration whether the krewe member representing Othello in "Scenes from Shakespeare" blackened his face or not, but since all krewe members wore masks during Mardi Gras festivities to keep their identities secret, it is perhaps a moot point.

⁸Shattuck 41, 140. For the "Asiatic" or "oriental" Othello tradition, see Coppélia Kahn 129-30.

⁹For more on McCullough's Othello costume, see Shattuck 130. The tunic and cap are also reminiscent of Ira Aldridge's Othello costume (see Coppélia Kahn 132), but Aldridge had never played Othello in New Orleans.

¹⁰For a review of Othello makeup, see Lower 200-05. Lower also shows that the character was generally understood to be black (209-11). Coppélia Kahn confirms that William Macready most likely wore black, as opposed to tawny, makeup when he visited New Orleans with his celebrated 1844 production (133).

Here I think it may be significant that the “Scenes from Shakespeare” parade was presented in 1898. The performance history and history of visual depictions of *Othello* is complex; readers and actors had a fair degree of latitude to choose for themselves *Othello*’s degree of blackness (one antebellum southern reader famously commented that “*Othello* was a *white* man” [C. Kahn 121]). New Orleans was a multicultural city with an old established Creole culture, a large Sicilian population, and immigrants from many other places, too. In the 1870s, these aspects might well have accounted for the popularity of *Othello* with the theatergoing public.¹¹ But the 1890s were different. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, on which the Supreme Court ruled in 1896, had ushered in the now-infamous “one-drop” rule that imposed a racial binary on the complex social and racial fluidity previously found in New Orleans and cities like it.¹² Racial violence flared up across the South; as Martha Hodes points out, lynching was essentially a phenomenon of the 1890s, peaking in 1892 and relatively rare before 1882 or after 1900 (176). 1898 would also see the uprising in Wilmington, North Carolina. On the same page of the *Times Picayune* as the coverage of the “Scenes from Shakespeare” parade is a story headed “Work of a Mob. Negro Postmaster and a Baby Murdered, and Their Bodies Burned.” The murders were a culmination of a campaign of threats and assaults against the newly-appointed postmaster (in Lake City, South Carolina) following the failed attempts of the state’s senators and congressman to have him removed “because of his color” (“Work of a Mob”).

Against this stark background of racial violence in the 1890s, two facts stand out as particularly odd: first, that New Orleans chose the 1890s for a resurgence of interest in staging *Othello*;¹³ and second, that

¹¹Vaught suggests “viewers from a broad range of backgrounds” as one reason for *Othello*’s popularity with southern audiences (132).

¹²The case had begun when Homer Plessy, white but one-eighth Creole in heritage, in 1892 deliberately got himself thrown off the New Orleans streetcar for traveling in the whites-only carriage; for an illuminating discussion, see Roach 235-37, 263, 269. Hodes argues that *Plessy v. Ferguson* “codified” the one-drop rule (200).

¹³In 1890s New Orleans, Frederick Warde and Louis James made *Othello* their own. After each separately giving successful performances in New Orleans, in 1892 Warde and James joined forces to create an acting company that toured in Brooklyn and Washington, and they chose *Othello* and *Julius Caesar* as their flagship shows, investing in “gorgeous scenery” for them (“Green Room”). Warde and James parted ways in 1895, but James was still playing *Othello*, with a new company, at the Grand Opera House, and

the Mistick Krewe of Comus chose to present Othello as an honorary Venetian nobleman instead of seizing the chance to line Shakespeare up on the side of racial supremacy and anti-miscegenation by depicting the moment at which Othello murders his innocent white wife. What can possibly account for these choices? I would suggest the answer may lie not in any aspect of Othello's appearance or heritage but in his actions and in the values he kills and dies for. Comus's Othello thus offers this sliver of hope: it is apparently possible for people to ignore the fact that a character does not look like them if they are satisfied that he does think like them.

To begin to get a sense of how Comus might have arrived at its interpretation of *Othello*, we can turn to another New Orleanian's response to the play. In 1894, Annie L. Pitkin, a local Shakespeare enthusiast, gave a lecture on *Othello* at a meeting of the Arena Club that seems to have caused a sensation ("Observations on Othello"). After it was reported at length in the *Times Picayune* the next day and described as "a signal success," Pitkin was invited to repeat it for the pupils of the Home Institute a few months later, and in 1897 gave a series of lectures on Shakespeare paid for by subscription ("Mrs. Pitkin's Lectures").¹⁴ New Orleans could not get enough of her "interesting observations on Othello." The *Times Picayune* recorded her analysis of the main characters:

With true womanly feeling she depicted the tempestuous variations of the Moor's brave yet too susceptible nature, and portrayed Iago in words of flame, branding him as the type of the most consummate villain. And Desdemona, the pure, sweet, lovable, unfortunate victim, could almost be seen reflected in the speaker's mobile features as she repeated some of the meek and plaintive utterances of the Venetian lady.

The reporter appears to have been charmed by Pitkin's performance, but her interpretations of the characters clearly also struck a chord with her audience. Othello is noble but gullible, Desdemona flawless and submissive, and Iago a pure villain: this agrees perfectly with Comus's representation of Othello at Mardi Gras 1898 and seems to sum up how (white) New Orleans in the 1890s understood the play. Here we have a

returned to the part, again at the Grand Opera House, in 1898—the year of the "Scenes from Shakespeare" parade.

¹⁴She lectured at the Home Institute on 12 April 1894.

written confirmation of what Comus's float suggested visually: well-to-do readers in 1890s New Orleans admired Othello for his bravery and apparently attached little or no blame to him for murdering Desdemona.

But how were they able to feel this way? The much longer and more detailed discussions of *Othello* preserved in the minutes of a Shakespeare discussion club in Mobile, Alabama, offer more insight. Besides potentially illuminating the processes behind Comus's and Pitkin's thinking, these minutes suggest that a positive response to Othello was not confined to readers in New Orleans. The Shakespeare Club of Mobile was an all-female discussion group founded in January 1897. Except for its female membership, the club's social makeup was very similar to that of Comus: it was rich and upper-class. Members included the mayor's wife, a congressman's wife, and the wife of the president of the Mobile Cotton Exchange. They had all been on the Confederate side during the Civil War, and most were married to former Confederate officers. Electra Semmes Colston was the daughter of Mobile's Civil War hero Raphael Semmes, while Mrs. T. K. Irwin's husband had been an aide to Jefferson Davis in the closing days of the war.¹⁵ The club's early membership lists include as an honorary member another wealthy wife of a former Confederate officer: Augusta Evans Wilson, who was also one of the most popular, and best-selling, novelists of her day.¹⁶ During the war, her novel *Macaria*, about a single woman working as a hospital nurse, had been "a rare Confederate best-seller," and her works after the war unapologetically continued to paint an idealized picture of plantation life (Fahs 143).

The Shakespeare Club met once a week to discuss one act of one play by Shakespeare, and the secretary recorded the minutes of their meetings in the club's notebooks, which are today preserved in the Minnie Mitchell archives in Mobile.¹⁷ The minutes include things like

¹⁵For a fuller account of the club and its members, see Forsyth.

¹⁶That Evans Wilson was an honorary member suggests that she attended some, but not all, of the club's meetings. Why she was not a full member is not clear; perhaps she had reasons of poor health or lack of time, or perhaps she simply didn't want to be one. I should note that she was certainly not present at the 1916 discussion of *Othello*, as she had died in 1909.

¹⁷The Minnie Mitchell Archives are maintained by the Historic Mobile Preservation Society. Many thanks to all the volunteers at the Historic Mobile Preservation Society, especially Bob Peck, as well as to all the members of today's Shakespeare Club, for all their generous help and support for my research.

membership rolls and business decisions, but also contain a wealth of information, sometimes very detailed, about the contents of their group discussions. The club studied *Othello* for five weeks in 1916, through a series of weekly “quizzes” (their term), each of which was typed up (perhaps to distribute to members during the meetings, or in advance) and most of which have been preserved in the club’s notebooks.¹⁸

Like Comus and Pitkin, the Shakespeare Club did not blame Othello for Desdemona’s death. Unlike them, the club was explicit on this point: members were advised on the first *Othello* meeting, in an answer to an unrecorded quiz question, that “Desdemona [is] not killed by Othello but by Iago.”¹⁹ The club unstintingly threw all the blame for the play’s events onto Iago, painting him as a thoroughly black character who “does evil deeds for the pleasure it gives him” (27 November; 13). On 18 December the club asked, “What is the answer to Othello’s question, ‘Why hath he thus ensnared my soul and body?’” (26) and was able to answer it in one word: “villainy” (27). On 4 December, the “paper assigned to Miss Moffatt” and read at the meeting was “Comparison of Iago, Richard III and Macbeth in their villainy” (18). No room for ambiguity there. In this interpretation, the Shakespeare Club echoes Pitkin, who had called Iago “an eminent villain. He is an adept in wickedness. His perfidious, insinuating, satanic way of misleading proclaims his innate malignity” (“Observations on *Othello*”).

For Othello, by contrast, the Shakespeare Club shows a great deal of sympathy. An apparently mechanical quiz question on 18 December, “Discuss the arrangement of the stage for [act five] scene 2” (26), yields a surprisingly revealing answer:

¹⁸1916 may to some readers seem too long after the 1890s to tell us anything useful about them. But the Shakespeare Club was a socially prestigious organization, so its membership, and therefore its cultural outlook, moved slowly. Consider that in 1897 the founding members were almost all married to former Confederate officers and had lived through the war and that their discussion of *Othello* in 1916 included the question “How did Kean as Iago act in this scene?” when even the younger of the two Keans had died in 1868. It will become clear that a decade or two makes little difference to this club.

¹⁹The discussion of *Othello* appears in the club’s log book for 1916 (the date is written on the inner front cover). The pages are numbered and the recording secretary has been meticulous about dating each report. Both dates and page numbers of entries will be given throughout this paper; this question was asked on 20 November and appears on page 10.

The difference in position makes either Othello's face or back to the audience. It is better to see his face because then the struggle of doing what he considers right must be a masterly work of art. (27)²⁰

"What he considers right" is an interesting phrase, as it does not necessarily imply that the club agreed that murdering Desdemona was in fact the right thing to do. Intriguingly, the question "Is the conclusion in harmony with the demands of poetic justice?" asked in the quiz on act 5 of *Othello*, has another one-word answer: "no" (26 December; 29, 32). It seems that the Shakespeare Club has arrived at an interpretation of Othello as a tragic hero struggling against his own instincts in order to do what he believes to be right, and the club apparently sympathizes with him because he faces this struggle. This reading is supported by another quiz question: "Why does Othello kill Desdemona?" (18 December; 26). Its answer, "Because he considers it his duty" (27), attests to the club members' compassion for Othello's situation and their charitable understanding of his murderous action.

Moreover, importantly, their focus on Othello's mental struggle and desire to see his face in act 5, scene 2, suggests that the club's members were not repulsed by his race. They did know he was not white: a quiz answer on 20 November is "Prince of Morocco, Aaron, Titus Andronicus" (10). The question this answers is not recorded, but I would guess that it was "What other African characters are there in Shakespeare?," the answers being the Prince of Morocco and Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*—it is hard to come up with another reading that explains the connection of these three names to Othello. In general, however, the minutes give the impression that the club said little about Othello's race, did not mention miscegenation at any point, and apparently had no discussion about whether Desdemona had been wrong to marry Othello.²¹ Sympathy for Othello's situation and mental struggle

²⁰In this interpretation the club may have been influenced by Edwin Booth, who pioneered the idea of having Othello's face rather than Desdemona's dead body visible to the audience in this scene; Booth's innovative staging had been recorded in Horace Howard Furness's *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: Othello*, published in 1886. See Shattuck 141.

²¹About Desdemona the club said almost nothing at all, showing more interest in Emilia; one club member prepared a presentation on "The Character of Emilia" for the meeting on 18 December (26). In this, as Edward Kahn has shown, the club was very unlike antebellum northern readers, who found much to say about Desdemona and had a range of changing responses about whether she deserved censure for eloping with

seems to have been the club's dominant response to the play, and to have outweighed any concerns it may have had about Othello's race or about the fact that he does commit murder.

To understand this response, apparently shared by the Shakespeare Club, Pitkin, and Comus, I think we as modern readers may need to acknowledge *Othello's* other themes and moral values and place less emphasis on its ostensible racial narrative. The ultimate reason for the play's popularity, it seems to me, is that his actions make black Othello something close to the white South's ideal hero, however startling and paradoxical that seems. To see why Othello could be a southern hero, we can start by considering *Otello, A Burlesque Opera*, Thomas Dartmouth Rice's 1844 blackface minstrel parody of Shakespeare's play. As Coppélia Kahn has brilliantly demonstrated, *Otello* starkly reveals the "ideology of chastity that drives events in the original play" (141). For all that Desdemona is married, Kahn argues, she is presented in Shakespeare's play as somehow still pure and "unviolated" (she cites Othello's comparisons, in act 5, scene 2, of her skin to "snow" and "alabaster"), and Othello kills her to prevent her from destroying that idealized image, with Cassio or some other man (140). Rice's *Otello* exposes this ideology by removing it: *Otello's* Desdemona has already had a child by Othello, possibly out of wedlock (Kahn 135), so murdering her to preserve her chastity becomes a case of shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. The contrast makes it clear that in Shakespeare's play Othello murders his wife to uphold the ideology of idealized (white) female purity, to serve, and preserve, what Kahn calls "the patriarchal idea of the chaste female body as the sign of honor among men" (143).

Kahn's analysis of Othello's motives brings out an important point: Othello does not kill Desdemona because he is a black man, but because he is trying to act like a white man. This means he does not really fit the standard postbellum anti-miscegenation rhetoric of "Would you have your sister marry one?" What he does fit, surprisingly well, is the culture of the white, upper-class, postbellum South, whose ideals were very similar to those of Othello's Venetian society: an obsession with honor, the idealization of white women's chastity, and a willingness to defend both of these attributes through violent action. This may sound like a caricature but, as we will see, there is some truth in it; and, moreover, these are the values white southerners themselves claimed to respect and

Othello, a question the Shakespeare Club apparently did not even ask.

esteem. This similarity of cultural values might explain why Othello was a congenial tragic hero to southern audiences and why they were (therefore) blind to the play's other narrative, so apparent to us, of a black man marrying and then murdering a white woman.

Evidence of the South's values is not hard to find. Its willingness to fight duels over honor is legendary, and not just a stereotype: the postbellum South had the highest homicide rate in the nation because of its predilection for dueling (Roland 274). To see its idealization of chaste white upper-class women, we need look no further than the rest of Comus's 1898 Mardi Gras parade, where the virtue of women is the unspoken secondary theme. Float after float, and poem after poem in the accompanying booklet, depict the krewe's ideal woman: beautiful, virtuous, in love, and obedient to male authority. Some of the plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cymbeline*, and *Pericles*, fitted the theme easily and some took a bit more effort to recast: Lady Macbeth is here praised for her "soft white dainty hands." Comus's sympathetic Desdemona, sitting by her father, likewise conforms to this feminine ideal. The idea that all good men would see it as their highest duty to defend women is apparent in the poem for *Cymbeline*, in which Imogen, "dainty as a fairy," receives her brothers' instinctive protection even before they know she is their sister.

More ominously, the ideology of defending white women's purity was frequently used to justify violence. In *Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell used it to explain the Klan: "It was the large number of outrages on women and the ever-present fear for the safety of their wives and daughters that drove Southern men to cold and trembling fury and caused the Ku Klux Klan to spring up overnight" (656).²² Punishing black men who had committed outrages on white women was a frequently stated rationale for lynching.²³ It was the immediate cause of the Wilmington massacre and, as Joel Williamson vividly recounts, what sparked the Atlanta riot of 1906, experienced by the five-year-old Margaret Mitchell (90-91). As Martha Hodes shows, "white ideology about the purity of white women" intensified in the late nineteenth century, as did the idea that women were in constant need of male protection and too scared even to remain in their houses alone (201). Hodes sees this as a concomitant of the period's increase in lynching, as

²²For a less-rosy account of the Night Riders' activities, see Cardyn.

²³For a critique, see Hodes 205-06.

the former was used to justify the latter. To a surprisingly high degree, white southern culture was a culture of being willing to kill to preserve the purity of white women. These ideas only hardened in the postbellum period when, as Thomas J. Brown suggests, the rituals of the old southern way of life increasingly assumed a sacred significance because they were at risk of being swept away ("Civil War Remembrance" 210-11).

White women themselves were sometimes collateral damage of men protecting their chastity. A southern man was expected to use violence in his own family to keep his wife in line; Bertram Wyatt-Brown shows that southern courts rarely granted divorces to men who had not attempted to chastise their unfaithful wives, in one case "Even when a wife deserted a yeoman husband to turn up as a prostitute somewhere else." He suggests that the courts' unstated "hidden requirement" for a man to prove he had acted in a masculine enough fashion to deserve a divorce "was a confrontation with the lover(s) and, one may safely guess, administration of some firm corrective to the erring wife" (*Southern Honor* 303-04; 304). This was a culture that violently punished both men and women in response to white women's adultery and considered it right to do so; no wonder they admired Othello. Understanding (though not necessarily agreeing with) this attitude, the Shakespeare Club was able to conclude that Othello sincerely believed murdering Desdemona was his "duty."

In this value system, it did not matter very much whether the woman had actually done anything wrong. To recall Kahn's formulation, the chaste female body is a token of familial honor to be traded among men; how the woman feels about it does not enter the equation. Celia R. Daileader points out one incident in *Gone with the Wind* in which Klan members break into a jail and murder a man accused of and awaiting trial for raping a white woman. Mitchell explains, "The Klan had acted to save the as yet unnamed victim from having to testify in open court. Rather than have her appear and advertise her shame, *her father and brother would have shot her*, so lynching the negro seemed a sensible solution" (Daileader 159; emphasis added).²⁴ That shooting an innocent woman seemed to this culture like a suitable way to deal with the fact that she had accidentally brought shame on her male relatives goes a

²⁴Hodes confirms that "White Southerners also repeatedly expressed special horror at the thought of a white woman testifying in court on the subject of rape, and some endorsed lynching on those grounds alone" (205).

long way towards explaining why they had no problem with Othello murdering Desdemona. It also casts light on Comus's final comment on Desdemona, whose "sweet name base slander tried to dull,- / 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful!" For Comus it is indeed a pity that Desdemona does not survive her shame, especially as she is innocent, but what really matters is that the shame does not stick (as slander can only "try" to dull her good name).

For the Shakespeare Club, too, the real tragedy of *Othello* is not that Othello kills his wife, but that his wife was innocent. Because its tragedy lies in the slander rather than the murder, they could regard Iago as the play's real villain: Othello has been tricked into acting upon faulty information, but his actions were not wrong. If he has a fault, it is, to quote Pitkin, that he is "too susceptible." That Othello loves Desdemona and finds it difficult to kill her only heightens the tragedy, as the club's desire to see his anguished face suggests. Southerners tended to admire those who were willing to destroy themselves for the demands of honor.²⁵ Indeed, through the Lost Cause myth, they recast the entire Civil War as a similar case of a brave but doomed army that had destroyed itself for honor and principle in a fight it knew it could not win.²⁶ Desdemona's innocence may also explain the Shakespeare Club's conclusion that the play was not in harmony with the demands of poetic justice. If Desdemona had indeed committed adultery, they might have answered this question with a "yes."

I have, perhaps, painted too bleak and too one-dimensional a picture of southern culture. Of course not every white southerner was dueling, lynching, riding with the Klan, defending his honor, or obsessively policing the chastity of white women; all these activities also had their

²⁵For instance, Wyatt-Brown gives George Tucker's *The Valley of Shenandoah* (1824) as an example of a sentimental novel typifying southern values. The protagonist, Edward Grayson, has to fight James Gildon, the man who ruined his sister. As Gildon is from New York, however, he refuses the offer of a duel, so Grayson is forced to waylay him in the street and shoot him, and dies himself in the process. As Wyatt-Brown points out, readers are apparently not expected to reflect critically on these values, and are supposed to admire the hero for following the code of honor to his own destruction, rather than think "that all the sacrifice and ruin had been a perverse, monstrous waste" ("The Evolution of Heroes' Honor" 112-13, 114).

²⁶See Eicher 282-85 for an overview and critique of the Lost Cause myth. For an interesting analysis of how female writers contributed to the myth, see Gardner's *Blood and Irony*, especially chapter 5.

critics. But they did have enough participants and supporters to change the cultural conversation, to make violently defending white women's purity seem normal, defensible, and in some quarters even ideal. For a simple illustration of how a prevailing attitude might influence one unawares, consider *St. Elmo*, the best-selling postbellum novel by the Shakespeare Club's own Augusta Evans Wilson. *St. Elmo* strongly criticizes dueling—the heroine, Edna, boldly tells St. Elmo she “detest[s] . . . that form of legalized murder” (214)—yet St. Elmo himself murders his best friend in a duel (over St. Elmo's adulterous fiancée) with no punishment or recrimination at all. He does not face criminal charges, neither his social prestige nor his (enormous) wealth suffers in the slightest, and his murderous record does not stop the virtuous Edna from falling in love with him. Even the father of the man he killed (whose innocent sixteen-year-old daughter St. Elmo also killed) forgives him and begs Edna to accept St. Elmo's marriage proposal (334), explaining to her that “it was through my son's sin and duplicity that St. Elmo's noble career was blasted, and his most admirable character perverted” (332).²⁷ In reality, whatever they may say about it, neither Hammond nor Edna really believes that killing a love rival in a duel, or murdering a woman in response to adultery, is all that wrong; the widespread cultural acceptance of these actions is softening their responses even as they ostensibly condemn them. By a similar process, I suggest, the Shakespeare Club could easily accept that Othello considered murdering Desdemona to be “right” and “his duty,” even if it reserved judgment about whether he was correct about this, and it therefore cannot give him as much blame for his actions as he deserves. Like St. Elmo's, Othello's actions chime too well with the stated ideals of some, if not all, members of their own society for outright condemnation. It was much easier to condemn Iago.

For southern readers in the 1890s, then, *Othello* may have offered not a racial narrative but a cultural one. For them, *Othello* was not about a white woman marrying a black man, but about an honor killing of a white woman accused of adultery. Not only did they see nothing wrong with that, but many were even willing to admire as a tragic hero any

²⁷Interestingly, St. Elmo's murders are excused largely because he was deceived by his best friend, which is apparently sufficient justification—an instinct oddly similar to the Shakespeare Club's and Mrs. Pitkin's desire to blame the smooth-tongued hypocrite Iago for the murders Othello commits.

character who would defend the purity of white women at cost of his own happiness and his own life. However, Othello was also definitely not a white man, and that posed something of a problem when it came to making him a white southern hero. The solution was to emphasize Othello's innate nobility and recast him as an honorary white man. This explains Comus's choice, at Mardi Gras 1898, to showcase the part of the play where Othello is accepted as a Venetian noble; they are welcoming Othello into the fold and appropriating him as a cultural role model of their own. Recognizing this and the importance to these readers of the values Othello holds dear enough to kill for, may go some way towards explaining the continued popularity of *Othello* in the nineteenth-century South.

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