

VENICE IN PARIS (2014) AND LONDON (2017): FULLY RECOGNISED OTHERNESS IN *OTHELLO*

James VI of Scotland's *The Lepanto* is an epic poem of more than one thousand lines relating a supposedly righteous victory of the allied Christian naval forces of the Holy League over the infidel Ottoman Turks¹. The poem particularly concerns the 1571 sea battle of Lepanto, during the Turkish invasion to recapture Cyprus, an island south of Turkey that had been used as a trading hub, under Venetian control, since 1489. Shakespeare's *Othello* was written in 1604, three decades after the battle and nearly fifteen years after the now James I of England's poem was published in 1591. Audiences could have been struck, nonetheless, by the contrast between James' bigoted «racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism» in his poetic account of «a glorious military victory but also an implicit argument of the justice of just»² and Shakespeare's balanced act of cultural transfer in *Othello*. This paper addresses as equally as balanced contemporary approaches to *Othello* in Venice and, by extension, Cyprus (Léonie Simaga's 2014 staging at the *Vieux-Colombier* theatre in Paris and Ellen McDougall's 2017³ production in

-
- 1 JAMES VI OF SCOTLAND, *The Lepanto* (1591), Edited by JAMES CRAIGIE, http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=chadwyck_ep/uvaBook/tei/chep_1.1243.xml;brand=default;;query=lepanto.
 - 2 ROBERT APPELBAUM, *War and Peace in "The Lepanto" of James VI and I*, in «Modern Philology», 97 (2000), 333-363, 333.
 - 3 For fuller accounts of both see STEPHANIE MERCIER, *Othello*, translated by Norman Charette, directed by Léonie Simaga, *Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, Comédie-Française, Paris, 25 April 2014, middle stalls*, in «Reviewing Shakespeare», and Stephanie Mercier, *Othello*, directed by Ellen McDougall, the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, Shakespeare's Globe, London, 22 April 2017, lower gallery, in *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 94 (2017), 122-124. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0184767817728907e?journalCode=caea>. <http://bloggingshakespeare.com/reviewing-shakespeare/othello-translated-norman-charette-directed-leonie-simaga-theatre-du-vieux-colombier-comedie-francaise-paris-25-april-2014/>, and Stephanie Mercier, *Othel-*

London). As the two productions move fluently between languages and genre, they clearly invite spectators to reflect upon *Othello*'s nuanced cultural perspectives and provide new insights to discussions of the play. They both bring to mind Stephen Greenblatt's concept of «cultural mobility»⁴ – first formulated as the still debated «cultural transfer» by historians Michel Espagne and Michael Werner in the late-1980s⁵ for interaction and relations between France and Germany. The two productions particularly seemed to defy previous domestication models⁶ where the source culture is seen as the «self» and the target culture as the «other»; the process of domestication tending to erase all «foreignness» from the former. The issue at stake is, therefore, whether the two theatrical translations tone down or highlight cultural interaction with contemporary audiences. In fact, as the productions can be said to embrace a whole range of translation procedures (assimilation to cultural substitution) they perhaps even refuse to comply to either model, adapting instead to spectators' own cultural backgrounds.

I am focusing on theatrical translation because, although Shakespeare's language is one of the major challenges, whether in Paris or London, the world of the theatre adds an extra test of intelligibility for audiences and spectators. Simaga's choice to adopt Norman Chaurette's unpublished translation of the play rather than the customarily employed Victor Hugo version used at the Comédie-Française (the Vieux-Colombier's partner theatre), and McDougall's sporadic modernization (e.g. swear words) of Shakespeare's text-for-performance, further seem to validate notions of linguistic subordination in favour of theatrical (audio-visual) performance. Moreover, theatre allows for a more complex con-

lo, directed by Ellen McDougall, the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, Shakespeare's Globe, London, 22 April 2017, lower gallery, in «Cahiers Élisabéthains» 94 (2017), 122–124. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0184767817728907e?journalCode=caea>.

- 4 STEPHEN GREENBLATT, *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge University Press 2009. See also NINA GLICK-SCHILLER and NOEL B. SALAZAR, *Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe*, in «Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies» 39 (2013), 183–200.
- 5 MICHEL ESPAGNE and MICHAEL WERNER, *Transferts. Les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIIIe-XIXe siècles)*, Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, Paris 1998.
- 6 LAWRENCE VENUTI, *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation*, Routledge, London and New York 1995.

cept of cultural mobility than text, since stage performances are constantly evolving. The main argument of this paper is thus that we can learn something about *Othello*'s cultural accessibility and mobility through productions of Shakespeare such as Simaga's and McDougall's, since their productions seem to have the capacity to challenge obstacles to cultural differences. To examine the question, using the cultural transfer/mobility models as my guide, I first examine theatrical motivations. Second, I look at how *Othello* was produced on stage for target audiences. Finally, I examine the relevance, if any, of aiming at culture-specifics within the wider context of our increasingly post-global European continent.

For Léonie Simaga, Shakespeare remains enduringly realistic. In her 2014 production, she hence defended a mixing of eras, stressing that the aesthetic blend remained invisible. The silhouettes of *Othello* had to be «familiar» but not spectacular, in the literal sense of the term: they recalled the figures in the works of Leonardo da Vinci, or Raphael as well as those of Antoine Vitez or Pina Bausch. Simaga aimed at a certain classicism, in the sense that what is truly classic is always resolutely modern. Similarly, Ellen McDougall's 2017 production of *Othello* merged mindsets: Cassio was played by a woman (Joanna Horton) and Desdemona (Natalie Klamar) could thus love her fragile husband Othello (Kurt Egyiawan), who got trampled on by ambition and ideas about how we should live and behave, and Cassio, even though – or maybe because – she did not fit into any box. These first observations reveal how, although this study is being carried out on two productions, the directors' radical approach means that the cultural impact of these two instances could be similar using a larger corpus.

Having now given an idea of the motivations for the two productions, I turn next to the theatrical approaches which seem most useful for my study of *Othello* in Paris and London. The challenges for Simaga and McDougall were thus how their two productions could offer up the staging of a suffocating Venetian pride and Cypriot turmoil as a dimension of France and Britain's contemporary cultural experience. They did so through the medium of the two small theatres' tiny stage space. For instance, in the small, hull-shaped Vieux-Colombier Theatre, a clinging hug became the visual leitmotif that further emphasised control, coercion and the destructive power of indoctrination. First, when Iago (Nâzim Boudjenah) began to manipulate Roderigo (Laurent Natrella), the manoeuvre was made complete by a clinging male hug, to highlight male

bondage and Iago's power over his gullible acolyte through a gut fear of miscegenation, explained to Brabantio (Alain Lenglet) with another image of embrace, «your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs»⁷ Then, the locked pose was repeated to visually underline *Othello's* tragic evolution: Othello (Bakary Sangaré) and Desdemona (Elisa Lepoivre) joined in a passionate embrace (1.3) after the Duke (Christian Gonon) allowed their marriage; the couple next entwined when Desdemona, upon Iago's suggestion, successfully asked her husband for Cassio's (Jérôme Pouly) reinstatement (3.3) after the drunken brawl orchestrated by Iago that had caused his dishonour (3.1); Emilia (Céline Samé) was also forcibly pushed to the ground and straddled by her husband in comparable (sexual) embrace for her having delivered the «handkerchief» as a fabricated proof of Desdemona's sexual deviance; then, Othello began to embrace the stereotypes that he, as an ex-slave and first-generation immigrant, had worked so hard to escape (Othello pulled Iago about the stage as if becoming physically infested by him and in a mirror to what was now his own personal ranting against blackness, birth and cuckoldry (3.3.262-281)); last, audiences saw Iago take Desdemona in his arms to dress, and fondle, her, in an ocular point about his sexual, and social, triumph at this stage in the action. The striking banal domesticity of Iago's victory was a forerunner to Desdemona's demise that hence appeared just as commonplace: there was no eclipse, no yawning globe (5.2.108-110) merely a banal heap of bodies in deathly embrace and murdered due to ignorance-provoked prejudice and iniquity.

Similarly, the tiny Wanamaker Playhouse stage was dominated throughout performance by a blood-soaked bed. The casting choice to have Cassio played by a woman thus doubly alluded to the murderous end of the performance and exposed the ongoing concern of domestic violence frequently utilised in McDougall's production. The blood-stained bed has been seen as an inverted mirror to Othello's spotted handkerchief, meaning the emblematic embroidery that spots the handkerchief with strawberries⁸ and through which Iago (Sam Spurell) alludes to the

7 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Othello*, Edited by SETPHEN GREENBLATT, et al., W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2008, 1.1.118. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

8 AYANNA THOMPSON, Introduction, in *Othello*. Bloomsbury, The Arden Shakespeare, London and New York, Bloomsbury 2016, 1-114.

impurity of the female characters in the play when he asks: «Have you not sometimes seen a handkerchief / Spotted with strawberries in your wife's hand?» (3.3.439-440). Confusing the «Other», whether a woman or foreigner, with traditionally held inferiors became Iago's narrow-minded excuse for his crimes. Such plot elements, that have already been discussed by feminist scholars such as Ania Loomba or Ruth Vanita with regards to Desdemona in Shakespeare's ⁹, were thus revealed to relate to all characters in McDougall's production; here, Iago spitefully held the back of the dark-skinned Emilia's (Thalissa Teixeira) head or cruelly grabbed her hair to secure the «thing», or handkerchief (3.3), she had stolen for him. He murdered her in a similarly callous manner, using a startlingly noisy twisting neck snap technique (getting behind Emilia to put one hand on her chin, the other on her neck and then pulling her head round rather than the traditional stabbing) before senselessly discarding her body like a throwaway object next to the stifled Desdemona. The two female bodies revealed a timeless tableau of amalgamated racism and sexism and the fierce bigotry was further reinforced due to the miniature space of the Wanamaker stage. For Simaga, as for McDougall, therefore, the function of the stage space was an easing of intercultural exchange, moving from past to present. The participatory nature of stage space and the props that occupied it both offered the experience of engagement with the foreign for everyone and associated audience members.

Extradiegetic borrowing also occurred in Simaga's production thanks to wardrobe, inspired by the different artistic influences mentioned earlier, and that illustrated how she blurred boundaries between the textual and the conceptual, Venice, Cyprus or modern-day London. To enhance the physicality of the suffocating grip leitmotif, Simaga's costume transformation took the audience from the comfortable softly lit opulence of a curved, fur-lined and ermine-cloaked Venetian interior to the harsh metallic tones of bold-illuminated Cyprus, set within a framework of ramparts that resembled scaffolding and was peopled with military garbed characters, whilst the dirt that carpeted the stage furnished a

9 ANIA LOOMBA, *Shakespeare and Cultural Difference*, in «Alternative Shakespeares», Edited by TERENCE HAWKES, Routledge, London and New York 1996, 164-192, and *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002; RUTH VANITA, «Proper» Men and «Fallen» Women: *The Unprotectedness of Wives in «Othello in Studies in English Literature», 1500-1900* 34 (1994), 341-356.

common denominator to both. Sound effects also played a leading role in the story line: regular drumbeats moved allegro then crescendo in Venice and strident sirens replaced the initial aural cradle-like sonority of the Cypriot seashore to successfully contribute to the heightening suffocating tension of the end game being played out on stage. The combination suggested the mixing of different cultural elements rather than clear foreignization or domestication *per se*. There was neither transparent translation nor cultural substitution to produce cultural differences or similarities as informed by the Venuti model. Instead an extra layer of dissemination and interpenetration of cultural knowledge exterior to the Shakespeare text was added through Simaga's *mise en scène*.

Similar elements in McDougall's production produced equivalent taxonomic difficulties. The emotionally charged Lana Del Rey song *Videogames* inspired by broken relationships and a mix of memories was sung out in Jacobean style *a cappella* from the musicians' gallery (Peter Braithwaite, Joyce Moholoagae, Malinda Parris). For McDougall, the function of her production's «soundtrack» seemed that of a facilitator of intercultural skills to accompany spectators on their voyage, moving from period to period without the risk of feeling overwhelmed or becoming prisoners of the whole. The choice of songs was clearly meant to produce a comparable effect, for instance, when Othello and Desdemona's devil-may-care-modern-married-couple attitude was exposed in Cyprus. Here, all out partying involved the fantastical, all singing, all dancing, sometimes even chandelier-suspended, Bianca (Nadia Albina) caught up in the carousing to the extent of kissing Desdemona on the lips whilst Katy Perry's *I Kissed a Girl*¹⁰ played in the background. While it remains unclear whether the musical references were a form of borrowing or cultural substitution (the allusions could be understood in both

10 Lyrics include: «This was never the way I planned / Not my intention / I got so brave, drink in hand / Lost my discretion / It's not what, I'm used to / Just wanna try you on / I'm curious for you / Caught my attention». Moreover, the conversion of Desdemona from virtuous bride to courtesan would have been plausible to a Renaissance audience because it was then taken for granted that Venetian women were licentious – «I know our country disposition well. / In Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands» (3.3.205-207) – a modern-day Othello, as would have the play's first audiences, could hence very easily have believed his wife to be in a bi-sexual extra-marital relation with *Michelle*, rather than Michael, Cassio, or even with a prostitute, due to the kissing business that had earlier associated her with Bianca.

periods as a satirical reference to male ideas concerning female virtue), the music was autonomous from the Shakespearean text and yet had a function in its performance because the songs provided a strong audible aid to communication. In studying the two productions, it seems important to identify such areas of cultural transference that may at first glance seem minor but that nonetheless create bridges thanks to, in this case, stage space, props (the bed), or extradiegetic items (costume or soundtrack). I would finally like to discuss how Simaga and McDougall refrained from using stereotypical concepts, especially in their treatment of the characters, to question the existence of culture-specific references in *Othello*.

In the process of transfer from the English cultural situation to the French one or from Shakespeare's society to our own, Simaga and McDougall seem to have been intent on challenging settlement in favor of mobility, especially when this concerned character depiction. In so doing, they moved beyond clear-cut opposites such as self and other. By recognizing the mutual constitution of subjectivity, they hence provided new insights into the impossibility of either communalism or cosmopolitanism of the on-stage translation process¹¹. There were, for instance, no limits or unsurpassable obstacles to the cultural mobility of Simaga's dreadlocked Othello, originally from the former French colony of Mali, whose obsequious and carefully pronounced, although non-native, French perfectly transcribed attempts at host country submission. In Venice, Othello's wisdom indeed seemed strange in that it was he, the outsider, a Turk converted to Christianity, who found the right words to «out-tongue [...] complaints» (1.2.19). As a force of nature exuding confidence and contained energy, Bakary Sangaré made his tale worthy of the finest oral tradition of African story telling (1.3.130-165). In Cyprus, however, Iago, who had imposed himself as Othello and Desdemona's point of reference in their newfound expatriate community, gave full rein to his underdeveloped version of humanity in Simaga's staging: he noisily pretended to defecate into his soldier's helmet to represent giving birth, stared out into the audience to loudly soliloquise his scheming, and vociferously mimicked Othello's accented pronunciation, before eventually imitating an ape, on all fours, in a raucous clichéd representa-

11 See HILARY CUNNINGHAM and JOSHIAH HEYMAN, *Introduction: Mobilities and Enclosures at Borders*, in «Identities. Global Studies in Culture and Power» 11 (2008), 289-302.

tion of how he imagined his duped superior. As Iago left the stage the unfathomable dimension of his totalitarian hatred was made clear by a triumphant victory lap around the stage comparable to the full swing into the senseless violence that would end the play. This suggested a process that neither imposed a conventional reception framework upon audiences (foreignisation) nor adapted Shakespeare's work to French spectators (domestication) but adopted a posture that encouraged the public to participate in a wider, if more unstable and uncertain, framework of the cultural. Simaga's staging of *Othello* was thus marked by residual French/English spatiotemporal similarity, French specificity and voluntary mobility towards a global textual and cultural migration. As such, she expanded upon specific categories to enable audience members to call into question their own personal access to Shakespeare's play and empower them with an ability to shape new understandings through her staging of it.

Likewise, apart from the choice of contemporaneous music, McDougall's very modern approach to the perception of the «Other» was very helpful in bringing concerns raised in *Othello* up to date without limiting them solely to race. The potentially innocuous Iago, played as a commonplace man in the street who had been triggered into homicidal behaviour by being passed over for promotion, seemed to become increasingly angry only because he could get no one, not even his wife, to take his hurt pride seriously. At first cowering and shaking in fear like a little boy under the Duke's doorway whilst Roderigo (Peter Hobday) did all the talking, the otherwise subservient quiet-voiced ensign grew into an unrepentant, reckless jealous fiend intent on destroying everything in his path. Character progression was further heightened for spectators because Iago's wife Emilia was played by an actress of Brazilian descent, who, like Othello, initially gave out the impression of having transcended race issues. The casting choice cleverly brought into debate the traditionally-held idea of Iago being racist, before conflating ideas of domination, possession and marriage through how the social isolation of Othello could also be foregrounded in Emilia's isolation as an objectified possession of her violent husband.

Othello seemed young and plausibly malleable enough to believe all of Iago's spin. His youthful appearance also made credible his and his feisty wife's lack of concern for the absent dowry or the blustering denial that their love was anything else than witchery from Brabantio (Jon Foster). Nonetheless, Othello became an increasingly intimidating, vi-

cious force. Because Negro spiritual music played out to accompany the storytelling of the courtship (1.3) or the handkerchief (3.4) this also suggested Othello would perhaps never be able to escape the legacy of long-term bigotry and the stereotype of the savage. Indeed, McDougall had created a centuries-spanning hero that slanted history from the distinct perspective of resistance against, and then compliance to, dominant ideology but that also encouraged spectators to acknowledge Othello as a symbolic representation of unwarranted subjugation through time. Nonetheless, this Othello was not exempt from existing within a Millennial culture contact zone: after his suicide the Duke appeared, as he had done at the beginning of the production, to take a snapshot of the ghastly scene and subsequently disappear, presumably to post the snapshots on the Internet. If this could appear an ultimate educative trope in a production very much concerned with abusive men, it nonetheless pointed to the cross-culture violence that Shakespeare challenged his audiences with, and that is still our challenge.

To sum up, it can be said that Simaga and McDougall's productions clearly revealed transcultural mobility in their representations of not only Shakespeare's text but contemporary cultural overlapping. As we have seen, their productions are a sound study sample with which to examine not only questions of immobility and mobility but concepts of categories themselves as well as received notions of culture. They constitute an effective example of how theatrical identities are negotiated from page to stage with the stage director as an equally important mediator of culture as the text's translator into French or contemporary English. What is more, in performances such as these, audiences are also called upon to arbitrate meaning; spectators' degree of receptiveness enables the promotion of diversity, tolerance and respect for difference in an increasingly multicultural post-global European society. My final conclusion is, therefore, that translation and cultural mobility in theatrical adaptation cannot be contained within fixed classifications and should instead be allowed to freely negotiate multiple identities.

STEPHANIE MERCIER

Ամփոփում

ՎԵՆԵՏԻԿԸ ՓԱՐԻԶԻ (2014) ԵՒ ԼՈՆՏՈՆԻ (2017) ՄԷՋ
ԼԻՈՎԻՆ ԸՆԴՈՒՆՈՒԱԾ ՕՏԱՐՈՒԹԻՒՆ
ՕԹԵԼԼՈՅԻ ՄԷՋ

ՍՏԵՖԱՆԻ ՄԵՐՍԻԷ

Հեղինակը լուսարձակի տակ կ'առնէ թատերական շարժառիթները եւ կ'ուսումնասիրէ թէ ինչպէս Օթելլոն բեմադրուած է, նկատի առնելով յատուկ ունկնդիրներ: Նաեւ կ'արժեւորէ կարեւորութիւնը մասնաւոր մշակութային յատկանիշներ շեշտելու ներկայիս՝ յետաշխարհային Եւրոպայի մէջ:

Սկզբնական Յակոբ Լեփանքոն հազար տողէ աւելի դիւցազներգական բանաստեղծութիւն մըն է, նուիրուած միացեալ քրիստոնեայ ոյժերու՝ Սուրբ Դաշինքի «արդար» յաղթանակին, անհաւատ օսմանցի թուրքերուն դէմ: Բանաստեղծութեան գլխաւոր նիւթը՝ 1571ի Լեփանթոյի ծովամարտն է, Կիպրոսը վերագրաւելու թրքական ներխուժուման ժամանակ: Օրին, Կիպրոս առեւտուրի կեդրոն մըն էր, որ 1489էն ի վեր, Վենետիկի վերահսկողութեան տակն էր: Շէյքսպիր Օթելլոն գրեց 1604ին, ծովամարտէն երեք տասնամեակ ետք եւ գրեթէ տասնըհինգ տարի յետոյ Յակոբ թագաւորի բանաստեղծութենէն, (լոյս տեսած 1591ին):

Շէյքսպիրի գործը, սակայն, հանդիսատեսներուն աւելի հաւասարակշիռ կերպով կը ներկայացնէ Օթելլոյի մշակութային փոխանցումը, եթէ բաղդատենք Յակոբի «ցեղապաշտական, մշակութային եսասէր եւ կայսերապաշտական» բանաստեղծական պատումին «փառաւոր զինուորական յաղթանակի մը, բայց նաեւ լուելեան գովասանութիւն մը արդարութեան արդարոց»: Այս յօդուածի հեղինակը կը մեկնաբանէ չափաւոր մօտեցումները Լէոնի Սիմազայի բեմադրութեան ֆարիզի Վիլ Գոլմուիէր թատրոնին մէջ 2014ին եւ էլէն ՄակՏակալլի 2017ի Լոնտոնի բեմադրութիւնը: