

MUSIC AS AURAL AND SYMBOLIC SIGNIFIER OF HEROIC DISINTEGRATION IN *OTHELLO*¹

BY

CHRISTOPHER R. WILSON

As both a word and a thing (sound), music in Shakespeare serves as aural signifier as well as symbolic reference.² Occasionally it functions as acoustic diversion as when the two pages sing “It was a lover and his lass” in *As You Like It* (5.3.14),³ although even here there is an extra level of meaning as Touchstone is able to make a pun on ‘time’ – keeping time and losing time – in commenting on the performative circumstances of the song. So when Portia contemplates, “And what is music then?” (*MV*, 3.2.48), she has in mind initially its aural properties; she then alludes to its symbolic reference and later in the play (5.1.), in its romantic denouement, to its effective allusory power. The divisions of music – heard and imagined – overlap, often seamlessly, throughout the plays. The differing functions of music articulate both the structure and theme of *Othello*, a situation that has been observed by modern critics over many years. The role of the “Willow Song”, however, has resulted in divergent opinions which have yet to reach concordance, not helped by the fact the song is omitted in one of the major early prints of the play. This paper revisits the dramatic function of music in *Othello*, focusing on the development of Othello as a character, proposing that Desdemona’s “Willow Song” as well as being a reflection on her own tragic situation is an aural and symbolic signifier of the disintegration of the heroic stance of the main protagonist. The argument draws on two different methodological approaches, namely historical discussion of musical, theatrical, literary and cultural circumstances and contexts, including a transnational perspective; and a dramaturgical discussion employing performative theories to explicate the heroic disintegration of the stage character of Othello, in turn referencing historical examples of interpretations and creative re-imaginings of *Othello*, in particular the Verdi-Boito opera of the late nineteenth century. The opera works as interpretative analogue: arguably, the opera, within the background of nineteenth-century European interpretations of Shakespeare, explicates the dramatic roles of the three main protagonists, Otello, Desdemona and Iago,⁴ whereas Shakespeare presents latent ambiguities of meaning.

When Otello makes his first grand entry⁵ in that greatest of Shakespearean operas, the Verdi-Boito *Otello* (1887), we know that as the storm abates and the Turks are defeated, this is the entry of the victorious hero. Not only is he hailed by the vast (off-stage) chorus, “Eviva Otello, Vitoria, Vitoria!”, a massive orchestra supporting a brass fanfare heralds his heroic stance as he announces in supreme confidence, “Esultate”. As Joseph Kerman asserts, the “initial chorus is the most thrilling *temporale* in Italian opera; the violence and terror at once strike the pitch characteristic of the opera throughout. [...] The sense of pervasive disorder is thrust home to the emotions in musical terms, and when Otello finally appears, his triumph over the elements is magnificent.”⁶ This is unequivocal musical dramaturgy; the effect is also heightened by nineteenth-century operatic convention, the use of the voice of the heroic tenor of Romantic opera. Few, if any, do it better than Verdi. The opening of the opera is all about Otello. There are no prefiguring scenes in Venice. It is only at the end of Act 1 that we encounter Desdemona, joined with Otello in their love duet finale,

Otello:

Già nella notte densa
s'estingue ogni clamor,
già il mio cor fremebondo
s'ammansa in quest'amplesso e si rinsensa.

[...]

Desdemona:

Mio superbo guerrier! quanti tormenti,
quanti mesti sospiri e quanta speme
ci condusse ai soavi abbracciamenti!

*Now in the dark night
Every noise is silenced,
My beating heart
is lulled in this embrace and stilled.*

*My proud warrior! How much suffering
how many sad sighs and how much hope
Have led us to these sweet embraces.*⁷

When Otello bids his last farewell to Desdemona at the end of the opera, he is desolate and isolated. There is no orchestra to support him. His evocation of his dead wife is the testimony of a tragic hero. “Ecco la fine del mio cammin [...] Oh! Gloria! Otello fu.” (*This is the end of my journey [...] Glory! Otello is finished.*) His symbolic kiss has an empty finality. In static instrumentation, the opera closes with a plagal *pianissimo*.

According to the conventions of Italian *melodrama* as opposed to *tragedia*, Otello's emotions at the outset of the opera have the requisite immediacy of the genre and eschew the ambiguity of tragedy. In contrast to Iago (the consummate villain) and Desdemona (the quintessential innocent), Otello's character becomes more complex as the opera progresses. According to Frits Noske, the main protagonist may be regarded as a hero, not in the traditional melodramatic sense, but because “the idea is presented to us at the beginning, [...] Otello's glory is conveyed to the audience solely through his memories [...]. The information is more or less abstract and therefore cannot arouse our

pity (an essential element of tragedy) to the same degree as the scene witnessed [in Act 1] in Shakespeare's play".⁸

In their rationalization of Shakespeare's *Othello* for opera, Boito / Verdi emphasize the impulsive, emotionally reactive side of the character embracing both the "elevated" and grandiose in contrast to his "primitive" and gullible, the first expressed in the opening and last acts, the second in the "Iago" middle acts. Hepokoski argues that these "two different modes [...] [are] directly analogous to Schlegel's 'two spheres' hypothesis",⁹ which relates to the structural convention of the Romantic hero who is (almost mechanically) constructed as an individual torn between two irreconcilable passions, "two spheres in which he is divided". The noble hero degenerates into the primitive savage.¹⁰

Othello's entry on Cyprus in Shakespeare's play (2.1.174)¹¹ is announced by a trumpet flourish particularized by: "The Moor! I know his trumpet." (2.1.172) This is Othello's music, the music of war, the noise of trumpets, drums and fife from which he will retreat in Act 3. But Othello's entry is not to a martial scenario but one of love and harmony in an oxymoronic exchange:

Othello: O, my fair warrior!
Desdemona: My dear Othello!
(2.1.174)

The love between Othello and Desdemona symbolically calms great tempests and diminishes war. Their outward love, articulated by a kiss, demonstrates their inner concord. This is their 'musical harmony', which Iago immediately threatens to untune:

O, you are well tuned now!
But I'll set down the pegs that make this music,
(2.1.191–192).

Reference to tuning as metaphor for harmony is one that Shakespeare makes in several plays and poems,¹² and affords a reading of *Othello* (and Shakespeare) through the lens of musical imagery.¹³ By "set[ting] down the [tuning] pegs", Iago intends to untune Othello's and Desdemona's 'harmony'. Music that is out of tune is discordant and unpleasant.

Renaissance stringed instruments such as the lute and viol,¹⁴ with their natural gut strings, are particularly susceptible to unstable tuning. Unlike modern metal strings, Renaissance gut strings did not stay in tune for long. Generally they went flat and needed to be raised in pitch by turning the tuning peg. Iago's threat to lower the pitch by turning the pegs down is thus perverse. The tuning pegs serve as a positive function; to untune the strings is pernicious negativism.

Tuning is a musical theme that persists in *Othello* as "part of an extensive pattern of musical images and effects", according to Rosalind King.¹⁵ She argues that this "pattern works integrally as a

structural theme. It unites and expands the ideas of the play and provides the essential terms of reference for both aesthetic and moral judgement".¹⁶ If this is the case, it is music that articulates Othello's transformation from heroic military victor to domestic lover to cowardly murderer. The "concord of [Othello's] well-tuned sounds" becomes the discord of broken music. Such an image is reminiscent of that propounded by Richard II when he reflects on the ruination of his status and wasted life:

[...] How sour sweet music is
When time is broke and no proportion kept.
So is it in the music of men's lives.
And here have I the daintiness of ear
To check time broke in a disordered string;
But for the concord of my state and time
Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.

(R2, 5.5.42–48)

For Richard the harmonious music of better times has become discordant as he contemplates his imprisonment and loss of the throne. While Richard was never the heroic prince of Renaissance chivalry, music here acts as a symbolic commentator on his life and (lack of) achievements, as concordant music becomes discord.

In a similar fashion, Othello's 'harmony' is more than a mere metaphor and can be interpreted as the music of worldly being, *musica humana*, following an ancient scholastic tradition surviving into the later sixteenth century. Boethius defined 'human music' as the harmonious music of a person's soul and the ensuing constructive relationship with the world at large. "Temperament", as Boethius calls it, "unites the incorporeal activity of the reason with the body [...] as it were a tempering of high and low sounds into a single consonance[.] What else joins together the parts of the soul itself, which in the opinion of Aristotle is a joining together of the rational and the irrational?"¹⁷ This is embodied in the concept of 'concord' in Elizabethan poetry and philosophy. Published in 1609, John Dowland's interpretative translation of Andreas Ornithoparcus' *Musice active micrologus* (1517) describes *Humane Musick* as:

The Concordance of divers elements in one compound, by which the spirituall nature is ioyned with the body, and the reasonable part is coupled in concord with the unreasonable, which proceedes from the uniting of the body and the soule. For that amitie, by which the body is ioyned unto the soule, is not tyed with bodily hands, but vertuall, caused by the proportion of humors. For what (saith *Caelius*) makes the powers of the soule so sundry and disagreeing to conspire oftentimes each with other? who reconciles the Elements of the body? what other power doth so[l]der and glue that spirituall strength, which is indued with an intellect to a mortall and earthly frame, than that Musicke which every man that descends into himselfe finds in himselfe? For every like

is preserved by his like, and by his dislike is disturbed. Hence it is, that we loath and abhorre discords, and are delighted when we heare harmonically concords, because we know there is in our selves the like concord.¹⁸

It is in keeping with this cultural tradition that music becomes an ontological state of mind in Shakespeare's plays. In the case of *Othello*, music becomes a structural metaphor or dramatic 'foil' of the hero's development as a character, mirroring his *musica humana*. Arguably, music plays an integral and central role in the composition of the play and constitutes the refined semantics of Othello's drama. However, Othello's harmony is dependent not only on the concordant music in himself:

The man that hath no [harmonious] music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils.
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted. Mark his music.

(*MV*, 5.1.82–87)

He is also dependent on those around him, in particular Iago, who like Cassius "hears no music" (*JC*, 1.2.205), and Desdemona, who is cultivated in the art of music (3.3.187) and whose quasi Orphic powers had the ability to calm troubled breasts. According to her husband, "she is [...] an admirable musician – O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear" (*Oth*, 4.1.178–179). Her special qualities are denied their effect on Othello, whose "heart is turned to stone" (4.1.173).

In what seems to many critics, including Boito, ~~and—producers~~ a redundant comedic musical interlude, Cassio's wind music aubade in Act 3, according to Lawrence J. Ross, gains significance by its symbolic contrast with the implicit "opposition [...] of two symbolic musics", earthy wind music as opposed to the divine harmony of the music of the spheres, music unheard by mortals.¹⁹ That Othello's 'harmony' is divine is, Ross argues, confirmed by the Clown's advocacy:

[Othello] so likes your music that he desires you, for love's sake, to make no more noise with it. (*Oth*, 3.1.11–13)

The symbolic reference to 'unheard' music is placed in the Clown's next exchange with the musicians:

If you have any music that may not be heard, to't again; but, as they say, to hear music the general does not greatly care. (*Oth*, 3.1.15–16)

On one level, Othello does not want to hear anymore loud and crude music from Cassio's band or "noise"; on another, Othello begins to feel uncomfortable that the only music he can hear is the wind music of mortal strife rather than the sweet music of celestial harmony. This short episode,

often denigrated to insignificance by modern producers and consequently cut, Ross argues, “offers an oblique and generalizing comic image of the human insufficiency from which the substance of the tragedy is to grow”.²⁰ He elevates 3.1 to pivotal status:

Its function is symbolic exposition, its dramatic mode, emblematic action, the center of which is the group of pipers and their music. As comic presenter of this action, the Clown so closely identifies the players with their wind music that, by his logic, they ought to be as insubstantial and vanishingly transitory as the air they share with their instruments. [...] By his agency, the passage sets their piping, with its evoked traditional implications, in symbolic contrast to “true musick”.²¹

Its “emblematic action” is the action of the players, because music is action, is aural performance. Othello’s “true musick”, the metaphorical harmony and concord in his life become more discordant as Iago weaves his destructive web.²² As Ros King contends in describing the structure of the play according to its ‘music’, “as the audible music [...] gets noticeably falser, so both Othello and Desdemona find it progressively more difficult to effect the harmony of true partnership”.²³ Othello’s seemingly unassailable position as heroic figure is challenged and begins to disintegrate. As the plot unravels, Othello becomes more out of tune with the music with which he feels most comfortable, the music of war. The music of war is literally the clamour of war, its great noise.²⁴ In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio claims the “wild din of a woman’s tongue” could not overcome him since he has heard the noise-scape of battle:

Have I not heard the sea, puffed up with winds,
Rage like an angry boar chafèd with sweat?
Have I not heard great ordnance in the field,
And heaven’s artillery thunder in the skies?
Have I not in a pitchèd battle heard
Loud ’larums, neighing steeds, and trumpets’ clang?
(*TS*, 1.2.196–201)

Othello’s heroic mould is challenged as he turns his attention from military conquests to marital tribulations. As he laments Desdemona’s seemingly unfaithfulness, he decries what seemed his purpose in life:

[...] O, now for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troops, and the big wars
That makes ambition virtue – O farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump[et],
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.

(*Oth*, 3.3.348–358)

Not only does he invoke the visual symbols of war, he also alludes to aural signifiers including trumpets, drums and fife as well as ordnance (“mortal engines” refer to cannons) and terrifying clamours of nature, namely thunder (“Jove’s dread clamours”), though exceptionally not to violent tempests. On a metaphorical level, Othello’s heroic music of war is replaced by the subjective inner music of his individuality, emotional music affected by the unpredictable music of others, especially Desdemona.

Desdemona’s inner music is not audible until 4.3, the “Willow Song” scene. The significance of Desdemona’s “Willow Song” is indeterminate and has been interpreted in a variety of ways. In the most famous creative reinterpretation, the Verdi-Boito opera, the song is elevated to a highly charged scene at the beginning of the last act, Act 4. This is of great import; the whole opera turns on this extended moment. The ultimate persona of Desdemona is revealed by Verdi. This is an adult, sexually confident Desdemona yet pitying and agonising over her plight, or rather what she does not understand about her tragic situation. The production book for the *prima* of *Otello* (La Scala, Milan, 5 February 1887) indicates that the singer effect “that vague, sad, almost magnetic impression that arises from the anticipation of an unknown but great misfortune”.²⁵ Verdi’s aria is both agitated and reflective, strophic yet unpredictable,²⁶ seemingly spontaneous and at the same time musically directional, leading to Desdemona’s final and portentous iteration of the “salce” refrain and her parting climactic invocation to Emilia on the high A sharp “Ah! Emilia, addio”. Verdi’s “Willow Song” delineates the musings of the sacrificial victim and eschews complex metaphor. To emphasize the song’s crucial dramatic function, Verdi-Boito elucidate its emotional power, effectively transforming a structural situation into an interpretative mode. This, according to Hepokoski, is significantly indebted to François-Victor Hugo’s scholarly gloss on the scene in which he erroneously identifies the source of the song as a ballad in Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765).²⁷

The omission of the “Willow Song” from the only other primary text of *Othello*, the 1622 Quarto (Q1), has never been satisfactorily explained. Throughout the twentieth century, most textual scholars argued that Q1 was an inferior text to F.²⁸ Clare McManus, in editing both Q1 and F for the third edition of the Norton Shakespeare,²⁹ argues that each represents a version of *Othello* rather than one being subordinate to the other. The presence of the “Willow Song” in Act 4 and Emilia’s allusion to it in Act 5 constitute Shakespeare’s “original design”. It is possible that the omission of

the song in Q1 is yet another example of a ‘lost’ song which was subsequently ‘found’.³⁰ Denise Walen similarly invokes theatrical practice and asks if “F was revised or expanded or whether Q was edited and reduced” and suggests that “F prints a version of the play as performed at the Globe and Q represents a separate, generally later version that shows signs of the cuts made in F to accommodate performances at Blackfriars”.³¹

Accepting therefore that the “Willow Song” is part of Shakespeare’s concept, its significance is less easy to understand. Commentators have variously argued about its effect. Sternfeld, for example, proposed that

The singing of the Willow Song in Act IV is one of the means by which Shakespeare creates the pathos of the strangled heroine ‘in lecto decumbens’, for the notion of the dejected and melancholy lover by the side of a tree had great popular appeal and could be relied upon to arouse a sympathetic response.³²

On the symbol of the willow, Seng cites a number of sources, including the following explanations: “this tree might have been chosen as the symbol of sadness [...] or else from a coincidence between the *weeping* willow and falling tears [...]. The willow seems from the remotest times to have been considered a funereal tree and an emblem of grief”.³³ This assumes, not unreasonably, that the Elizabethan audience would have been familiar with the ballad cited and its willow emblem. Seng concludes that

Rather than serving such a complex purpose as Brennecke would attribute to it,³⁴ Desdemona’s willow song seems intended [...] to release and give vent to the painful tension that has been aroused, by the out-flowing of a pathos that comes like the release of tears after some terrible sorrow.³⁵

Desdemona’s ballad, according to Martha Ronk, transfigures the persona of her former self, enabling her through the allegorical image of the song to “reveal her sadness, betrayal, and isolation. [...] It is as emblem that a character seems to come closest to an intimate revelation of self”.³⁶ That the “Willow Song” is essential to the characterization of Desdemona and her tragic situation has been emphasized by a range of critics over many years.

The willow as emblem of the forsaken lover occurs in a number of early modern literary sources. Seng cites Nicholas Breton’s *Wits Trenchmour* (1597), Thomas Middleton’s *Blurt Master Constable* (1602), *Laugh and Lie Downe; Or, The Worldes Folly* (1605) and another Shakespearean script, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (c. 1613), 4.1.80.³⁷ The Wooer (of the Jailer’s daughter) in recounting the activity of Palamon to the Jailer, asserts:

[...] Then she talked of you, sir:
That you must lose your head tomorrow morning,
And she must gather flowers to bury you,
And she the house made handsome. Then she sung

Nothing but 'Willow, willow, willow'

(*TNK*, 4.1 76-80).³⁸

The verses of a song in Robert Jones's *The Muses Gardin for Delights* (London, 1610) XII, with its "willow" refrain and imagery, articulate the plight of the sad lover, beginning:

I Am so farre from pittying thee,
That wear'st a branch of Willow tree,
That I doe enuie thee and all,
that once was high & got a fall,
O willow willow willo tree
I would thou didst belong to mee.³⁹

This importation of the "Willow Song" into art music attests to the popularity and familiarity of the genre, which resides in the ballad corpus emanating from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Seng notes that in addition to the song in British Library Add MS 15,117 (the probable Shakespeare source), there are at least another five versions in early sources, with their characteristic anapaestic tetrameter meter and conventional refrains that particularise the genre.⁴⁰

To understand the significance of the "Willow Song" is to understand its stylistic and theatrical context, in particular its transnational associations. Clare MacManus attempts to show that *Othello* "bears the traces of a mixed-sex culture of theatricality that surrounded the playhouse stages and that the Willow Song scene, in particular, is a confident assertion of the skill and technique of the boy actor against domestic and European competitors".⁴¹ As she points out:

England was part of a transnational network of theatrical dissemination of practice, personnel, playing companies, and theatregrams ('the plot modules, topoi, characters, or framing devices that 'constituted a common European theatrical language').⁴² [...] English theatre understood and interpreted its own practices through and against European theatricality. This matters especially for *Othello* because, as many have pointed out, it is an English domestic tragedy grafted onto the bones of an Italian commedia with, in simplified terms, Desdemona as the *innamorata* and Othello as the duped and 'fearful Pantalone'.⁴³ Hence Shakespeare's Desdemona, the 'super-subtle Venetian' (1.3.357), is inflected with the performativity of the famous Venetian courtesan or the virtuosic flexibility of the Italian actress [...].⁴⁴

McManus goes on to argue that the theatrical and thematic interchange between English and Italian elements and between male and female performance are integral to the "Willow Song" scene (4.3). Here an "elite Venetian woman" sings a popular English ballad, albeit a text slightly but significantly adapted. This juxtaposition, a quasi Italian lament *Englised* in context and performative stance, provokes tensions in its function and interpretation. This "theatregram of female lament, rendered English by its ballad form and boy performer, is self-consciously framed by an intercultural context and by an embedded narrative".⁴⁵ The boy actor substitutes for the adult

female persona, who in turn substitutes for the Italian diva made famous for example by the grand *Intermedii* of Medici Florence and d'Este Milan.

Desdemona's song is not a lament,⁴⁶ not least because her lover has not yet deserted her and is still alive. She is expecting him to arrive at her bed-chamber any moment. It is, however, a sad, reflective song, one that 'expresses' her tragic fate. Its music must represent its emotional purpose. The re-imagining of the song in the Verdi-Boito opera overwhelmingly emphasizes this interpretation. By adding the prayer "Ave Maria" it evokes a supplicatory element as well.

Desdemona does not 'perform' the willow song in a 'formal' sense as an inset musical number. The apparent spontaneity of the singing and break-up of the vocal lines render the song informal, integral to the dramatic situation. It does not serve as a musical interlude. If it does, as many nineteenth and early twentieth-century productions intended, the song becomes dramatically redundant. In the Restoration redactions, "improvements" included the excising of domestic allusions "in the interests of ladylike behaviour and speech; [the] Willow Song apparently affronted the Restoration image of a tragic heroine".⁴⁷ During the eighteenth century, the song and its surrounding dialogue were invariably cut.⁴⁸ Essential to Shakespeare's dramatic concept, the song symbolizes Desdemona's dissolution into uncertainty and despair, transfigured from a self-confident, resolute and accomplished Venetian young lady. In so doing, her broken music finally untunes Othello's 'sweet music' so that it becomes harsh and discordant. It is the "Willow Song" that foretells the tragic ending:

What did thy song bode, lady?
Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan
And die in music: [*sings*] 'Willow, willow, willow.'
(Oth, 5.2.244–246),

as Emilia utters her last breath and effectively seals Othello's fate.

The dramatic function of the song, commentators insistently confirm, "displays Desdemona's emotional state and manipulates the audience's response to her".⁴⁹ Desdemona is not able to confront Othello directly, either here or in the so-called "Brothel" scene to ascertain what the problem is with her husband, his irrational attitude towards her, nor to defend her innocence. Therefore she must console her isolationist anxiety. The song achieves that role. But it also serves to undermine and ultimately effect the destruction of the heroic stance of Othello.

But why should honour outlive honesty?
Let it go all.
(Oth, 5.2.243–244)

The song acts as a symbol, both for Desdemona as the ‘symbolizer’ and Othello as the ‘symbolized’. The “common pool of affective reactions” is experienced by the audience. This is the critical role of music, since, as Nattiez argues, “the expressive or sentimental component [...] justifies appeals to the concept of the symbol”.⁵⁰ However, that symbol can take on differing levels of meaning because “the emotions that [music] evokes, are multiple, varied, and confused”.⁵¹ Shakespeare contrives a looseness of association. Verdi-Boito leave us in no doubt. The symbolic function of the song acts as metaphorical unifier, encompassing the conjoined fates of Othello and Desdemona as ‘one body and one soul’ united in ‘matrimonial (dis)harmony’. Othello believes in two truisms: his military prowess and his marital dominance. The music signifies that both are destroyed.

Zusammenfassung

In Shakespeares *Othello* stört Iago die süße Harmonie zwischen Othello und Desdemona; und musikalische Metaphern zeichnen diese Desintegration nach. Desdemonas “Willow Song” markiert schließlich den Zusammenbruch der Heldin und damit auch das Ende des Helden. Obwohl das Lied in der Quarto-Ausgabe von 1622 ebenso fehlt wie in Bearbeitungen des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts, versteht es Christopher Wilson als Teil von Shakespeares ursprünglichem Konzept und misst ihm zentrale Bedeutung für das Verständnis des Stücks bei. Diese Interpretation wird durch einen Vergleich mit der Verdi-Boito Oper herausgearbeitet. Wilson zeigt, wie sie emphatisch eine binäre Opposition zwischen Held und unschuldigem Opfer etabliert: durch Otellos heroischen Einzug gegenüber Desdemonas melancholischem “Willow Song”.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was given at the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft conference, “Helden und Heldinnen bei Shakespeare”, in Berlin, 23–26 April 2015. I wish to thank Professor Claudia Olk for the invitation. I should also like to thank my colleagues, Professor Pavel Drábek and Dr Mark Slater for their valuable comments and suggestions for revision.

² See further, Christopher R. Wilson / Michela Calore, *Music in Shakespeare: A Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). For an incisive discussion of the roles of music, see David Lindley, *Shakespeare and Music* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006).

³ Unless noted otherwise, all further Shakespeare references are to *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt et al. 2nd edn (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

⁴ Stefan Kunze, “Der Verfall des Helden: Über Verdis “Otello”, in Attila Csampai / Dietmar Holland (eds), *Giuseppe Verdi: Otello: Texte, Materialien, Kommentare* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1981), 9–36, emphasizes the cultural and aesthetic generative context of *Otello*. See also Francesco Degrada, “Otello: da Boito a Verdi”, *Il palazzo incantato: Studi sulla tradizione del melodramma dal Barocco al Romanticismo* (Fiesole: La Nuova Italia, 1979), vol. 2, 155–166.

⁵ “The most unforgettable entrance in all of opera”, according to Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, rev. edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 112.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 111–112.

-
- ⁷ Text and translation from CD booklet, *Otello* (RCA Records 9/85/R, 1978).
- ⁸ Frits Noske, *The Signifier and the Signified: Studies in the Operas of Mozart and Verdi* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), 133–134.
- ⁹ James A. Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: Otello* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 172.
- ¹⁰ Schlegel’s lectures on drama, including Shakespeare, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* (Heidelberg: Mohr und Zimmer, 1809–1811), were translated (from the French) into Italian by Giovanni Gherardini, *Corso di letteratura drammatica* (Milan: Giusti, 1817). Schlegel’s theory contends: “Othello shows himself to be noble, sincere, full of trust (*fidanza*), fully aware of the love that he inspires; he is a hero who scorns danger, the worthy head of his soldiers, the solid supporter of the State. But the purely physical power of his passions demolishes his adopted virtues with one blow, and the savage supplants in him the civilized man. This same tyranny of the blood over the will is shown in the expression of his unrestrained desire to be revenged on Cassio. And after recovering from his deception (*acciecamiento*) – when remorse, tenderness, and the feeling of offended honour suddenly reawaken in his heart – he turns against himself, with all the fury of a despot who punishes his rebellious slave. He suffers doubly; he suffers in both of the spheres into which his existence is divided” (Hepokoski [1987], 165–166).
- ¹¹ Line references are taken from the New Cambridge updated edition, ed. by Norman Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- ¹² See Wilson / Calore (2014), “tune”. Citations include *The Taming of the Shrew* 3.1, *Troilus and Cressida* 1.3, *King Lear* 4.7, *Cymbeline* 5.2, Sonnet 8.
- ¹³ See Christopher R. Wilson, *Shakespeare’s Musical Imagery* (London: Continuum, 2011).
- ¹⁴ On the lute, see Matthew Spring, *The Lute in Britain: A History of the Instrument and its Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). On the viol, see Ian Woodfield, *The Early History of the Viol* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- ¹⁵ Rosalind King, “‘Then murder’s out of tune’: The Music and Structure of ‘Othello’”, *Shakespeare Survey* 39 (1986), 149.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.
- ¹⁷ Boethius, “*From the De institutione musica*”, in Oliver Strunk (ed.), *Source Readings in Music History* (London: Faber, 1952), 85.
- ¹⁸ Andreas Ornithoparcus, *His Micrologus, or Introduction: Containing the Art of Singing*, trans. by John Dowland (London: Thomas Adams, 1609), 1.
- ¹⁹ Lawrence J. Ross, “Shakespeare’s ‘Dull Clown’ and Symbolic Music”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 17:2 (1966), 117.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² The imagery of weaving permeates *Othello*. On occultism, see Pavel Drábek, “‘There’s Magicke in the web of it’: The Occult Dimension of Shakespeare’s *Othello*”, in *Theory and Practice in English Studies 4: Proceedings of the Eighth Conference of British, American and Canadian Studies* (Brno: Masaryk University, 2005), 43–50.
- ²³ King (1986), 155.
- ²⁴ Elizabethan audiences, particularly in the outdoor theatres, were especially keen on noise. See further, Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 217–218.
- ²⁵ Giulio Ricordi (ed.), *Disposizione scenica per l’opera Otello* (Milan, 1887), 88–89. Cited in Hepokoski (1987), 16.

-
- ²⁶ Rossini's setting (1816) is more insistently strophic. While a beautiful aria, this repetition detracts from the immediacy and poignancy of the song.
- ²⁷ James A. Hepokoski, "Boito and F.-V. Hugo's 'Magnificent Translation': The Genesis of the *Otello* Libretto", in Arthur Groos / Roger Parker (eds), *Reading Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 34–59.
- ²⁸ For a summary position, see Ernst A. J. Honigmann, *The Texts of 'Othello' and Shakespearian Revision* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- ²⁹ *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt et al. 3rd edn (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015).
- ³⁰ On 'lost' or 'blank' songs in Shakespeare, see Frederick William Sternfeld, *Music in Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 22; and Tiffany Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 122–134. Stern identifies at least six songs in the Shakespeare canon where the surrounding dialogue and / or stage directions indicate a performed song but where no text is provided.
- ³¹ Denise A. Walen, "Unpinning Desdemona", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58:4 (2007), 488–489. For a practical research experiment, see "Unpinning Desdemona – The Movie"; 2009. <http://bufvc.ac.uk/dvdfind/index.php/title/av75198>; accessed 26 Oct 2015.
- ³² Sternfeld (1963), 25.
- ³³ Peter J. Seng, *The Vocal Songs in the Plays of Shakespeare: A Critical History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 193.
- ³⁴ Ernest Brennecke speaks of "a kind of psycho-analytic therapy for Desdemona [...] revealing more of her subconscious awareness that any spoken words could indicate" ("Nay, That's Not Next!": The Significance of Desdemona's 'Willow' Song", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 4:1 [1953], 37).
- ³⁵ Seng (1967), 199.
- ³⁶ Martha Ronk, "Desdemona's Self-Presentation", *English Literary Renaissance* 35:1 (2005), 63–64.
- ³⁷ Seng (1967), 198. In her Arden edition, Lois Potter's footnote to the willow emblem notes "Willow: from the song of 'Willow' (also sung by Desdemona in *Oth* 4.3.40–57), alluding to the wearing of a willow garland by a forsaken lover. Thiselton-Dyer (233) suggests that it derives from Psalms, 137.1–2, where the exiled Israelites, weeping beside a river, hand their harps on the willows. The appearance of the 'weeping willow' and the fact that it grows beside streams might in themselves be sufficient explanation for the tradition." (John Fletcher / William Shakespeare, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, ed. by Lois Potter. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series [Walton-on Thames: Nelson, 1997], 264n.)
- ³⁸ The 'willow' moment in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* can be seen as a parody of Ophelia's madness conflated with Desdemona's melancholy, affirming as it were the argument that the play is a composite creation. See further, Pavel Drábek, "Dva vznešení příbuzní jako součást Fletcherova díla" [*The Two Noble Kinsmen* as a Part of Fletcher's Works], in the programme notes brochure for the Czech premiere of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (Prague: National Theatre, 2008), 50–82.
- ³⁹ Robert Jones, *The Muses Gardin for Delights* (London: William Barley, 1610), song XII verse 1 (sig. D1v).
- ⁴⁰ Seng (1967), 197.
- ⁴¹ Clare McManus, "'Sing it like poor Barbary': The Texts of *Othello* and Early Modern Women's Performance" (University of Hull, 6 November 2013), 2. This paper has been reworked and developed as "'Sing it Like Poor Barbary': *Othello* and Early Modern Women's Performance", *Shakespeare Bulletin* 33:1 (2015), 99–120. See 109 for a reworking of this passage.

-
- ⁴² Robert Henke, “Introduction”, in Robert Henke / Eric Nicholson (eds), *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theatres* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 2.
- ⁴³ Pamela A. Brown, “*Othello* Italicized: Xenophobia and the Erosion of Tragedy”, in Michele Marrapodi (ed.), *Shakespeare, Italy, and Intertextuality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 150.
- ⁴⁴ McManus (2013), 9.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ For a brief summary of the early-modern lament tradition, more usually associated with opera but especially apposite in relation to Desdemona in *Othello*, see Suzanne G. Cusick, “Re-Voicing Arianna (and Laments): Two Women Respond”, *Early Music* 27:3 (1999), 436–450.
- ⁴⁷ Sanders (2003), 39.
- ⁴⁸ See Edward Pechter, “Too Much Violence: Murdering Wives in *Othello*”, in Edward Pechter (ed.), *Othello: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 369.
- ⁴⁹ King (1986), 157.
- ⁵⁰ Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. by Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 37.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.