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"Nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice": New Biographical Information on Ira Aldridge

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The remarkable life of Ira Aldridge has been faithfully reconstructed in Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock's fine biography *Ira Aldridge: the Negro Tragedian* (1958). Using materials gathered from libraries and archives in Western and Eastern Europe and the United States, Marshall and Stock were able to put together a detailed documentary record of Aldridge's forty-two years on the stage, correcting many of the erroneous accounts that had been published during his lifetime and after his death in 1867. They also succeeded in uncovering new information about his personal life by interviewing his only surviving child, Amanda Ira Aldridge, then in her late eighties, who very generously gave them access to unpublished family papers. It is unlikely that such a full account of Aldridge's life and career ever would have seen print without the fortuitous collaboration of these three individuals nearly forty years ago.

But though their research was thorough and painstaking, Marshall and Stock were well aware that they had not been able to tell the whole story. In a "prologue" to their biography, they admitted that "there still remained some missing links," that the tale "was not complete in all its aspects" (6), yet they were ready to place it before the public in the hope that, despite its "many limitations," their book would "stimulate others to pick up where they le[ft] off, until this great man is given his rightful place in theatrical history, and until the fascinating story of a unique representative of the Negro people becomes known to the world" (13). It is in this spirit of adding a few fresh discoveries to the archive of data they recovered and assembled that the following facts are put on record.

But first, for those who may be unacquainted with America's earliest important black actor, let us briefly review what is generally known of Ira Aldridge's life and career. Marshall and Stock succeeded in establishing that he was born in New York City on 24 July 1807 and that he attended the African Free School No. 2 at Mulberry Street in lower Manhattan some time between 1820 and 1824. His father—a straw vendor and lay preacher—had wanted him to enter the religious profession, but the young Aldridge, after taking part in a few amateur dramatic productions put on by small black theater companies, aspired to become a professional actor. Finding no adequate outlet for his ambition in New York, he left for England, where in October and November 1825 he made his debut with top billing in a succession of West Indian and African melodramas at London's

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Royal Coburg Theatre. He was only eighteen years old at the time.

The first reviews of performances of this "Tragedian of Colour" were mixed. Some critics found his acting creditable; others reacted with undisguised hostility to the very notion of a black man playing a black role on the British stage. A caustic reviewer for *The Times*, for instance, asserted that the shape of Aldridge's lips made it utterly impossible for him to pronounce English properly. Such racist responses from critics did not, of course, prevent audiences from enjoying what they heard and saw. Indeed, it is quite clear, even from the negative reviews, that Aldridge usually had the audience on his side. He often won enthusiastic applause for his efforts.

But the critics may have carried more weight with metropolitan theater managers, for after his Royal Coburg engagement, Aldridge was not invited to perform in a major London theater again until eight years later. He spent the intervening period honing his skills by touring the English provinces, where he was well-received both as a tragedian and as a comedian. He developed a repertoire consisting of *Othello*, abolitionist melodramas about noble and suffering slaves, and musical farces that drew upon his ability to sing and dance. By the end of this period of apprenticeship he could perform as many as sixteen different roles in a week and a half—a range much broader than that of most of his more famous contemporaries. He also found it professionally advantageous to masquerade as an African, so he fabricated a colorful story about his ancestry, claiming that his father was an exiled Christian Fulah prince from Senegal; some of the publicity material he circulated stated that he himself had been born in Senegal and had lived the first eight years of his life as an outcast there. Soon he was billing himself as the "African Roscius," a name recalling Garrick, who had been hailed as the "English Roscius."[1] Africa thus became his theatrical trademark.

Aldridge was a seasoned actor when he returned to London in April 1833 to play Othello at Covent Garden Theatre, one of the capital's most prestigious playhouses. He performed the role only two nights, and again the critics savaged him. There were complaints about his appearance, his manner, his voice, his accent, his textual interpolations, even his color. A reviewer for the *Athenaeum* wrote a diatribe protesting vigorously his "pawing" of Desdemona. Yet once again it is clear that Aldridge had made a favorable impression on the audiences that watched him. Although he couldn't please the critics, he still won praise from the paying customers.

For the next twenty years Aldridge played almost exclusively in the provinces, building up a loyal following and a considerable fortune. He was on the road most of the year, performing in cities, towns, and villages throughout the British Isles. Restless for new challenges, he extended his Shakespearean repertoire, experimenting with white roles such as Shylock, Richard III, Hamlet, Macbeth, and Lear. In July 1852 he set out on his first major European tour and earned standing ovations wherever he went. After three years abroad, he returned to England laden with medals, decorations, and honors, but he still could not find regular engagements in London. He trouped through the provinces for a while, toured Europe again, then came back to England once more. By this time he was world-famous, but success on the London stage continued to elude him. He spent the last six years of his life performing principally in Russia and France, countries where he was acclaimed as one of the greatest tragedians of all time. He died on tour in Poland in 1867.

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Aldridge's peculiar career raises a number of questions about racial attitudes in the Western world during the mid-nineteenth century, an era that saw the abolition of slavery. Since he was a highly visible black in a white world at a time when the nature of the relationship between whites and blacks was being redefined, his life might be expected to yield insights into the big racial issues of his day. His years in the British Isles are especially interesting because the response to him was mixed. Why was he so popular in the provinces and so shunned in London? What assumptions, opinions, or biases did his audiences carry with them into the theater? Did their conception of him as an "African" condition their reactions to him as a performer? Did what they knew about his life offstage influence their reception of him onstage? It is not possible to address all of these questions here, but new bits of biographical information about Aldridge's personal and professional life may help to shed some light on why there was an ambivalent reaction to him in the British Isles.

But before we turn to such matters, perhaps we should clear up one small detail about Aldridge's youth—namely, the death of his mother Luranah. Marshall and Stock have little to say about this woman except that she was a native of North Carolina with numerous children, all but two of whom (Ira and his brother Joshua) had perished before she herself passed away in 1818 (18-19). However, the Manhattan Death Libers reveal that she died of consumption a full year earlier, on 21 April 1817, and was buried by Sexton Aaron Jacobs in the cemetery of "Old Zion," the church her husband Daniel had joined. Her age is listed as 37 and her "place of nativity" as the State of Delaware, not North Carolina. Though her name is recorded as Lavinia Aldridge, there can be no doubt that this was Ira's mother, for her address is given as Beach Street, which, according to various New York street directories, is where Daniel Aldridge lived between 1816 and 1819.

Not yet ten years old at the time of her death, Ira must have retained fond memories of his mother all his life, for more than forty years later he named his first daughter after her and also called the first house he owned Luranah Villa. One early biographical account of him, written by his schoolmate and life-long friend Dr. James McCune Smith, quotes Ira's brother Joshua as having said that Ira "lost his mother while yet a child, and being of a roving disposition, only remained at home a few months after his father's second marriage" (29). We do not know exactly when this second marriage took place, but the rift with his father apparently grew wider after Ira and his brother Joshua started performing on stage, and "their father, finding it out, took them away from the theater" (29). Not long after this, Ira shipped off to England.

But he didn't lose contact with his family completely while abroad. For at least ten years he stayed in touch with a married sister in New York City named Susannah Peterson, a fact recorded in A. S. Abdy's seldom-cited *Journal of a Residence and Tour in the United States of North America, from April, 1833, to October, 1834*. Abdy, a British traveler interested in the condition of American blacks, included in his journal an account of the brave attempt by Susannah's teenage son William to rescue seven young white boys who had fallen through thin ice while skating. William had plunged in after them and saved two of the lads, but had become fatally trapped under the ice when seeking to reach the others. Several local newspapers carried this tragic story, with the *New York American* offering to take up a collection for the poor, distressed family of the heroic "colored boy

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Frederick William Aldridge of this Parish
and Margaret Gill of this Parish
were married in this Church by Banns
this Twenty-seventh Day of
November in the Year One thousand eight hundred and twenty-five
By me L. H. Wynn. Minister
This Marriage was solemnized between us { Frederick William Aldridge / Margaret Gill
In the Presence of { William Tanfield / Margaret Robinson
No. 1198

Fig. 1. Marriage certificate for Ira Aldridge and Margaret Gill. Reproduced with the permission of the Parish Church of Saint George, Bloomsbury.

Peterson" (24 Dec. 1833). Abdy promptly sought out the family and offered some work to Susannah, who supported three other young children and an ailing husband by taking in washing. Abdy was impressed by the dignity and fortitude of this woman, noting that "everything, in the furniture of the room, the decent behavior of the children, and the general deportment of the parent, bespoke full as much propriety and respectability as I ever met with in the same class of life, whatever might be the occupation or complexion" (45). Abdy went on to say that "Mrs. Peterson's brother, who is known in England as the African Roscius, had occasionally sent her remittances of money, and had expressed, in one of his letters from [Great Britain], an intention to provide for her unfortunate son's education" (46). So Ira Aldridge not only maintained contact with his sister but also offered her and her family material support, including a pledge to educate his nephew William, who would have been a small child when Aldridge had left the United States in 1824. The aspiring actor evidently came from a good family and remained a caring, responsible brother while trying to establish a career for himself in the British Isles.

Aldridge himself had no children at this time. He had married an English woman shortly after his opening run at the Royal Coburg Theatre in 1825, and he stayed married to her until her death in 1864, but they never had any offspring. By assiduously tracking down widely scattered genealogical records, Marshall and Stock managed to identify this woman as Margaret Gill, the daughter of a stockings-weaver in Northallerton, but they were not able to determine precisely when and where the marriage took place (66, 308). However, now that British marriage records from the early part of the nineteenth century can be searched by computer, it has been possible to trace and document the wedding. A page from a London marriage register (Fig. 1) shows that they were married on 27 November 1825 by Rev. L. H. Wynn in the presence of two witnesses, William Tanfield and Margaret Robinson. The ceremony took place at St. George's Church, Bloomsbury, a large church consecrated in 1730 that is still in use today.

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It is perhaps significant that Aldridge signed the register not as Ira but as Fredrick William, presumably the names given him at birth or baptism. "Ira" may have been only a nickname. The middle initial K is also intriguing and appears to stand for Keene, the name by which he had been identified in the earliest playbills at the Royal Coburg. He did not begin performing as "Mr. Aldridge (a Native of Senegal)" until his appearance at Covent Garden in 1833. Could Keene have been his mother's maiden name? Since his father evidently disapproved of his theatrical inclinations, Aldridge in the early years of his career may have decided to spare him embarrassment by performing under another name. Or perhaps their relationship was so strained that the son deliberately chose not to use the family patronym, preferring instead to adopt his late mother's surname.

There is also a possibility that Keene was merely a stage name, chosen with a fine sense of irony because it conjured up a shadowy image of England's greatest living Shakespearean actor, Edmund Kean. It may be significant that Aldridge did not drop this cognate cognomen until the real Kean collapsed while performing Othello at Covent Garden in March of 1833, just a few weeks before the "African Roscius" was invited to London to play the same role in the same theater. Edmund Kean's death a month later may have sealed Aldridge's reincarnation as "a native of Senegal," for at that pivotal point in his career England's only black Shakespearean actor may have needed to establish a distinctive identity of his own. Nothing further could be gained by presenting himself as a carbon copy of Kean, so he chose to become a professional African.

Another possibility is that Aldridge passed himself off as Keene upon his arrival in England because there was an American actor of that name who had performed leading roles in *Pizarro, The Slave, Paul and Virginia,* and *Othello* at theaters in New York and other American cities between 1823 and 1825. Since Aldridge sought engagements as a lead in the same plays, it might have been to his advantage to exploit an ambiguity in nomenclature in order to impress British theater managers by exaggerating the extent of his experience on the stage. One of the earliest playbills announcing his performances speaks of him as "the celebrated American tragedian" and "Man of Colour," this "being the first instance in which one of that Complexion has displayed a striking degree of Histrionic Talent, and which has secured him the rapturous Approbation of an enlightened Public on the other side of the Atlantic" (playbill from Royal Coburg Theatre, 10 Oct. 1825). The claim was made that he was an actor "known throughout America . . . whose flattering reception at New York, and all the principal theatres in America, has induced him to visit England professionally" (advertisement in *Bristol Mercury*, 30 Jan. 1826). This may have been normal media puffery calculated to arouse public interest in a new foreign player, but it certainly overstated Aldridge's reputation and experience. Who would not be keen to see such an actor? And who would not be Keene to appear as such an actor?

But let us assume that the name was an authentic family legacy deployed adroitly to further Aldridge's theatrical ambitions by playing upon a variety of wholly fortuitous thespian associations. It is unlikely that Aldridge would have signed the marriage register with an assumed name. He had dropped "Ira" for "Fredrick William," but he had retained the middle K, presumably for Keene. In the few letters and formal documents that survive from the first eight years he was on the British stage, we usually find him signing himself with some combination of

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these three names and initials, most often as "F. W. Keene." This was how early newspaper reports normally referred to him, too.

Following his opening run in London, Aldridge was invited to perform at several provincial theaters: first at Brighton in December of 1825, then at a few cities and towns in the southwest of England—Bristol in February, Exeter in April, Devonport in June. Although he appears to have been well-received wherever he went, he performed in each place for only a few nights. For weeks, even months, he may have been unemployed. This must have been a very precarious way to make a living. By the end of the summer of 1826, he and his wife were in a truly pitiable state, as a notice in *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post* of 31 August makes clear:

> It is with pain we hear that the talents of the African Roscius, Mr. Keene, have not secured him in this country, ever alive to merit, that patronage & support which his abilities claim, nevertheless his late efforts in this city having totally failed, and both himself and his wife being in deep distress, the public are now most respectfully appealed to for that aid which may relieve their difficulties and assist them in their return to America; any donation will be gladly received at our office on his behalf.

This appeal evidently did not produce the desired result, for Aldridge remained a touring player in the British Isles for the next quarter of a century, moving slowly from rags to respectability before going on to great riches and renown on the European continent in his mature years. Never once in his professional career did he return to the United States, though he occasionally contemplated doing so and in 1867, just before his death, was negotiating a suitable contract with theatrical agents in New York City (Marshall and Stock 327-28).

Aldridge's married life has been discussed in some detail by Marshall and Stock, who were the first to establish that Margaret Gill came from a poor family and was not the daughter of a Member of Parliament, as she and Aldridge often maintained. Since she usually traveled with him on his provincial tours, this gentrification of her ancestry may have been a ploy to enhance her social standing, for the white wife of a black actor might otherwise have been treated with some contempt and subjected to various indignities. The trick seems to have worked, particularly in Ireland, where it was elaborated with so many specific circumstantial details that Margaret was sometimes mentioned in press reports as "the only daughter of a former representative of a northern English county, who successfully opposed Mr. Lambton, the present Earl of Durham, in several contested elections" (*Kerry Evening Post* 29 May 1839). If there were any truth at all in this legend, it may have been of the sort suggested by an anonymous reader of the Harvard University Library's copy of Aldridge's stage biography, *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius*, who amended the statement on page 13 that Margaret "was the natural daughter of a member of Parliament" by penciling out the word "natural."

Marshall and Stock uncovered solid evidence to prove that Aldridge himself fathered several illegitimate children, the first of whom—a son named Ira Daniel born in May 1847—was brought up by Margaret as if he were her own. Ira Daniel's true mother has never been identified, but Edward Scobie, who was a close friend of Aldridge's daughter Amanda, states that "an Irish lady gave birth to [this] child" (132). The fact that Aldridge named the boy after himself and his own late father suggests that he was very proud to have an heir to continue the family line. Margaret, who was nearly ten years older than Aldridge, would have

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been 49 at this time, well past her prime child-bearing age.

The mysterious "Irish lady" may not have been Aldridge's first partner in an extra-marital affair. The 1841 census records for Worksop, a small town southeast of Sheffield, reveal that, when Aldridge performed there on the day the census was taken, he was staying at a boarding house on Market Place occupied by an elderly shoe mender and his family as well as by a young grocer. Aldridge, listed as a "Comedian," age 35, is shown to have been accompanied by "Sarah Aldridge," age 30. Since Aldridge's wife Margaret would have been a considerably older woman, it seems doubtful that the census-taker would have misrepresented her twice, getting both her name and her age wrong. Who, then, was Sarah Aldridge? One has to rule out the possibility that she was another of Aldridge's sisters or that she was the missing "Irish lady," because she is listed as not having been "born in Scotland, Ireland, or Foreign Parts." Indeed, the only other scrap of information we are given about her is that she was not born in Nottinghamshire either, so all we may conclude about "Sarah" is that she hailed from some other part of England or possibly from Wales, provided, of course, that these small details in the Worksop tally sheets happen to be correct. The weight of the circumstantial evidence, such as it is, seems to support the inference that Sarah was neither kith nor kin. Through the census records we may have caught Aldridge in bed with another woman.

Another newly exhumed document reveals that he cheated on Margaret later in life too. Just before leaving England to start his first tour of the European continent, he had an affair with the wife of a young man he had trained as an actor, and she bore Aldridge a son on 15 March 1853, while he was still away in Germany. The child died a few months later, but when Aldridge finally returned to England in 1855, he was promptly sued by the young actor for adultery. In British legal parlance, this offense was termed "criminal conversation" (crim. con., for short), and any man found guilty of it could be compelled to pay damages to the cuckolded husband of the seduced wife. Since this interesting lawsuit is not mentioned by Marshall and Stock, it may be well to reproduce here the entire transcript of the court proceedings as published in the London press. *The Era*, the major trade paper serving the entertainment world, ran its version of the story on 20 January 1856 under the headline "Caution to Theatrical Husbands Who Neglect Their Wives":

> BAIL COURT, January 14. STOTHARD V. ALDRIDGE.—Mr. Edwin James and Mr. P. Thompson were counsel for the plaintiff, and Mr. Sergeant Wilkins for the defendant.
>
> Mr. James, in opening the plaintiff's case, said that the plaintiff sought to recover compensation in damages for the seduction of his wife by the defendant. The plaintiff was a very young man—he had been educated for the business of a surgeon at Hull. The defendant was a person who had acquired considerable reputation as an actor, performing under the name of the "African Roscius," and he was well calculated to play certain parts, being "coloured" by nature, and he had amassed a considerable sum of money. The plaintiff was now carrying on the business of a surgeon-dentist, but in 1849 he had taken a fancy to try his fortune on the stage, and having heard of the celebrity of the defendant, he went to Liverpool, where the defendant was then "starring" it as the African Roscius. He introduced himself to the defendant, and it ended in his offering to teach the plaintiff the profession for a sum of £50. The plaintiff sold a reversion to which he was entitled for a small sum of money, and he gave the defendant £50. The young man was sent to Hull, Liverpool, Wales, and other places. Soon after this, upon the introduction of the defendant, the plaintiff was induced, at the age

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of eighteen, to marry a young girl who resided where they lodged, at 22, Judd-place, New-road. They were married on the 15th of August, 1849. The defendant was present, and gave the young woman away. After the marriage the defendant sent the plaintiff upon a theatrical engagement to Wales. He took his wife, and she remained with him a short time, when, finding that he could not afford to take her [on] the different circuits with him, he sent her to her mother's at Tonbridge-wells [sic], and during the separation the defendant had taken advantage of the opportunity and had seduced the wife. He had conducted himself with all the arts of a practised seducer, and the consequence was, that in March, 1853, the wife gave birth to a child. At the time of her pregnancy the defendant, who was performing in Germany, wrote this letter to the wife:—

My dear Emma, — Your letter has just now reached me, and I am very much surprised at its contents. You may be mistaken. You say William [the husband] has been with you, and is it not likely that his visits have occasioned this mischief? However, write me particulars immediately—tell me everything—what you intend doing and where you mean to go, and I will make a remittance. Has Mrs. A. questioned you in connexion with me? and if so, what passed? How is your aunt? Where is William—what brought him to town?

Yours sincerely, Ira.

After Mrs. Stothard was confined his tone became altered and he wrote to her this letter:—

Dear Madam, — You would not have been neglected but I had some communications made to me of most imprudent conduct on your part which very much annoyed me and caused me not to address you again. I do so now, however, and if you give me the assurance that the child is "of colour" and that the father is the person you name [himself]—you understand me—both you and your child shall not be neglected. Is it a boy or a girl? Write by return, enclosing the same in the envelope I send you. Seal mine up and direct it to me. Do not pay the postage. Tell me, does your mother know whose child it is, and is she unkind to you? Did your aunt leave you anything?

Yours faithfully, Ira

He would prove that the child was "of colour." The child was now dead. He would produce the evidence before them, and would ask them to give such damages as would mark their sense of the defendant's conduct.

The formal proofs of the marriage on the 15th of August, 1849, were put in.

It was proved that the defendant acted under the name of the African Roscius. He was a black star, but rather a desirable one. He played both tragedy and comedy well.

Mrs. Ingledew: I am the mother of Mrs. Stothard. She is now thirty years of age. I saw the plaintiff just before they were married. She was then with me at Tonbridge-wells. The plaintiff came down to take her to be married. I was unfavourable to the marriage. In seven or eight months after the marriage she returned to me. I objected to the match on account of the plaintiff being a performer. She had previously been residing with her aunt in London. The defendant lodged with her aunt, and it was there the plaintiff first saw my daughter. Her aunt died, and I then went to London, and my daughter I then found had been confined on the 15th of March, 1853. I saw the child; it was a coloured boy. My daughter lived with me after her marriage, because her husband could not support her, he earned so little. She took in needlework. She still remains with me.

Cross-examined: I opposed the marriage very strongly. My daughter had resided for some years with her aunt. Mr. and Mrs. Aldridge lodged in the same house. A Mrs. Groom kept the house. My daughter has only had two children; the first was by her husband, and was born ten months after the marriage; the other child was the one of colour. My daughter never complained of the treatment of her husband. I have not seen the plaintiff since the summer. My daughter is not living with him; nor has she done so for the last six years. She works at her needle for a living. She upbraided him for neglecting her, but he said he had written letters to her which she had not received. I am in indigent circumstances. She was confined of her first child in the Lying-in Hospital. I don't know where her husband was at the time. He wrote to her in the hospital saying that his aunt wished to know whether he was married, and if inquiries were made he requested his wife to say they were not married.

Re-examined: When she wrote to him complaining of neglect, he answered that he earned so little he really could not send her money.

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Susannah Burgess: Mrs. Stothard came and lodged with me in 1853, and during the time she was confined of a coloured child. I know the defendant. I saw him and said to him, "Do you remember Emma Stothard?" He said, "Perfectly well." I said, she had a child, of which he was the father. He seemed confused, and asked me why I said he was the father. I said, "Because it is so much like you." He said, "She is married." I said, "I know that, but white men don't beget black children." He said, "Are you a mother?" I said I had had nine children, but I had never had a black one. She was confined at my house, and told me that Aldridge would remunerate me. He said he could not give me anything just then, but if I would leave my address he would send to me. Shortly after that I wrote to him, and he sent word that I was to go to his house. I went there on the 19th of May, and he gave me five shillings. He said "I don't give you that on Emma's account, but for your family." I had not applied to him before because he was not in England. The child was born on the 15th of March, 1853. I was godmother to it.

Mrs. Matthews: I had the child to nurse when it was five months old. It was a coloured child. It died with me. Mrs. Stothard went to the funeral.

Mr. Smelley: I am a surgeon living in Judd-place, New-road. The child was brought to my house. It died of dysentery, and I certified the cause of death. It was coloured, and had woolly hair.

Mr. Dillon: I am a theatrical agent. I know the defendant, and have done so for thirty years. He is about fifty. I have repeatedly made engagements for him. He is now in Cork.

Richard Norman: I am an actor at the Surrey Theatre. I know the plaintiff. He went by the name of Stewart. He was acting with me at the minor theatre in Liverpool for nearly twelve months. I should say he earned about a guinea a week. He played "utility" parts in anything. He was a little fair man about twenty-two.

Mr. Sergeant Wilkins then addressed the judge for the defendant, contending that there was no proof that these parties were the persons who were married.

The learned judge thought the evidence sufficient to go to the jury.

Mr. James then summed up the evidence he had called. He thought the plaintiff was entitled to their sympathy and consideration. The defendant had pleaded that the act he had done was with leave and license, which, as no evidence was offered to support it, was adding insult to injury. It had been shown that the plaintiff had not the means of supporting his wife. His career was a most precarious one—it was notoriously so. The defendant had taken advantage of this, and had seduced the wife. It was to be urged on behalf of the plaintiff that he had not dragged his wife about with him to share his miserable poverty, but had sent her where he thought she would be safe—to her mother; and there she would have been secure had it not been for the arts of the defendant. The plaintiff had written to his wife, and addressed the letters to her at Judd-place, and, no doubt, the defendant had intercepted those letters. Was it not, then, a case for damages? The defendant had given the girl to the plaintiff at the altar, and he had every reason to place confidence in the defendant; but the defendant had caused the separation by intercepting the letters, and had then poured the poison of jealousy into her ear and seduced her.

Mr. Sergeant Wilkins then addressed the jury for the defendant. Mr. Justice Williams, when at the bar, had addressed a Welsh jury, and then said he would call witnesses in support of his speech, but was interrupted by the jury, who said he need not trouble himself, as they believed every word he had said. If, therefore, they believed Mr. James, this was a very bad case. But how was that speech supported by the evidence? Many things had been stated, but little had been proved. There was no proof of the defendant having introduced plaintiff to his wife, or that he had given her away. There was no proof of the plaintiff having paid the defendant £50. There was no evidence of his having sold a reversion. It was clear his friend was wrong in his facts, for what was there to show that the plaintiff had written any letters to his wife at Judd-place? What right had he to infer that Mr. Aldridge had intercepted the letters? What evidence was there of any seduction? Let them look at this heart-broken husband. Why, he had never lived with his wife for six years. According to the evidence of her mother, he had left her to the mercy of the world. Had he not sworn to take her for better or worse? and yet he had sent her from him, and there was no proof of his having sent her a farthing. Was it true that he had written to his wife, telling her to deny the marriage, and hold herself out as a woman of shame? Was that true? Her mother said it was. How could it be said that Aldridge had kept the husband from his wife, when he was in Germany and the plaintiff in Liverpool? He regretted that the plaintiff could not be called, as he might have told them in what way and in whose

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> society he had passed his time. The wife was first delivered of a child, and where? in a lying-in hospital; left, deserted by her husband, and without a farthing given her by him. Where was the proof of their having lived on terms of affection? What loss had the plaintiff sustained? The proof of adultery was very slight. Aldridge was not the only man of colour. Othello was a Moor—a handsome man; but Aldridge was an African. What would they say of a lady who would fall to the arts and devices of a "nigger?" The moment a woman yielded to those desires, which were a curse of her nature, then the word "seduction" was introduced. When the treasure was in the plaintiff's hands he had thrown it away and trampled upon it. Where, then, was the claim for damages?
>
> The learned judge summed up. The child had strong indications of its paternity, and he thought that it must be considered to be the offspring of a Negro. They were not to award a punishment, but to compensate the plaintiff for the loss which he had sustained, and he would caution them to beware how they were led away by the statements of a powerful advocate, when they were not borne out by the evidence in the case. A great deal that had been stated was certainly unfounded. The moral conduct might be heavy, but he saw nothing of artifice or an endeavour to pour poison into her mind. The letter of the defendant seemed to infer that he would bear his share of the burden. The defendant was not to be classed among persons of artful guilt, but he said she might expect assistance from him. What, then, was the loss the plaintiff had sustained? He did not see any indications of the plaintiff intending to pass the noon and evening of life in happiness with his wife. From the first separation the wife was left in solitude, without money, in the lying-in hospital. She complained of all this, and no support was rendered her. There was no proof of any letters to show that the plaintiff had attached any value to the situation in which he had stood. They must say what comfort of married life had been invaded, and what was the amount of loss the plaintiff had sustained.
>
> The jury returned a verdict for the plaintiff, damages 40s.

The verdict obviously went in Aldridge's favor. Though found guilty of "criminal conversation" with Emma Stothard, he was required by the court to pay only a nominal penalty. Had William Stothard been a better husband, Aldridge could have suffered sterner consequences, but he had an able attorney who knew how to exploit to good effect the plaintiff's glaring faults of character and conduct.

Aldridge's letters to Emma are quite interesting, for they show that he was prepared to face up to his responsibilities as father of the child, yet he evidently did not want Margaret to be hurt by hearing about the matter from Emma. Again he comes across as a caring, compassionate man, one who wants neither his wife nor his mistress to suffer on his account. Some might not regard such behavior as evidence of kindness, but perhaps the worst that could be said of Aldridge as a husband and a paramour is that he had a tendency to love not wisely but too well—and too many.

Several press reports of the court case mention that Aldridge had authorized that his son be christened John William Aldridge, but Emma may have received this message too late, for the name she recorded when registering his birth was Frederick Charles Aldridge; when he died three months later (on 18 June 1853), she identified him as Frederick Charles Aldridge Stothard. As far as we know, this was "Ira" Fredrick William Keene Aldridge's second illegitimate child.

He was to have at least two more: Irene Luranah Pauline on 29 March 1860, and Ira Frederick ("Fritz") Olaf some time in 1862, both of them born to a young Swedish woman named Amanda Pauline von Brandt, who was to become Aldridge's second wife thirteen months after Margaret's death on 25 March 1864. Margaret had been in poor health in her later years and after 1855 had not accompanied Aldridge on his tours abroad. Where he first met Miss von Brandt is still unknown, but her legitimate daughter and namesake Amanda told Marshall and Stock that it definitely was neither in England nor in Sweden but somewhere on the Continent,

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"probably in Germany" (293). For several years Aldridge evidently kept two households, supporting Margaret and his first illegitimate son in one and Amanda Pauline and her two illegitimate children in the other. Whether Margaret was aware of these arrangements we do not know for sure, but Aldridge seems to have managed to maintain cordial relationships with both "wives" simultaneously, and one small piece of evidence suggests that the women themselves also got along well with one another. After wedding Aldridge in 1865, Amanda Pauline gave birth not only to Amanda Christina Elizabeth (who later in life adopted her father's name and became known as Amanda Ira) in March of 1866, but also, four and a half months after Aldridge's death the following year, to another daughter whom she named Rachel Margaret Frederika. The second name of this second legitimate daughter may signal the respect—perhaps even affection—that the younger wife held for her predecessor.

Not much was known about Amanda Pauline von Brandt at the time Marshall and Stock wrote their biography of Aldridge. Relying on information she had supplied when applying for a marriage certificate, they could report her date of birth as 2 March 1834, and since she lived on until 1915, they could depend on the details her surviving daughter Amanda Ira provided about her later years in England, but her early life remained an unsolved riddle. Aldridge had been in the habit of introducing her as a Baroness, but research in Stockholm archives failed to turn up her name in any of the published genealogies of the nobility in Sweden (Marshall and Stock 294).

However, after the biography was published, a Swedish scholar, Dr. Gunnar Sjögren, uncovered some interesting new facts about her which he communicated to Marshall and Stock. First, the woman's noble birth was a sham.

Baron Uloff von Brandt was in fact a falsification; Amanda Paulina's father was plain Olof Brandt, a farrier-blacksmith of Västerås, a country town in Sweden. Her mother's maiden name was Christina Elisabeth Nyholm. Their only child, Amanda Paulina, was born 7 March 1833. Amanda Paulina Aldridge's first daughter born in wedlock was christened Christina Elisabeth—the names of Amanda Brandt's mother—a most unusual combination of names in Sweden. This fact establishes their identity, despite the small discrepancy in the date of birth stated in the marriage certificate.

A few years after the birth of her child, Amanda Brandt's mother died and her father followed her a few years later when she was eleven years old. In 1848, the orphan moved to Stockholm and three years later became involved in the greatest scandal which had ever hit the Swedish literary world (51).

The scandal involved Carl Jonas Love Almqvist, a well-known writer who had attempted to poison an elderly money lender, Captain Johan Jacob von Scheven, from whom he had borrowed substantial sums by signing promissory notes. Almqvist, after gaining the older man's confidence and helping him in his business, appears to have stolen these promissory notes from him. When the papers were discovered missing, Almqvist offered to make out a new set, which he then signed with a false name, a ruse who was suspicious of the debtor. Shortly after this, von Scheven's oatmeal gruel and brandy were found to be laced with arsenic. The police were called in to investigate, whereupon Almqvist suddenly decamped to the United States. Since Almqvist was an army chaplain, the case was tried by court-martial,

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but no verdict was ever pronounced. The Court felt that, though the circumstantial evidence against Almqvist was considerable, a final judgment should be postponed until the accused could testify in his own behalf. Almqvist never returned to Sweden to defend himself.

Five or six weeks before the scandal broke, Amanda Brandt had moved into von Scheven's apartment, lodging with him and his ailing housekeeper in return for helping with the housework and reading aloud to him. She had been working at a country inn outside Stockholm but desired to study at the Royal Theatre's choral school, so through one of von Scheven's neighbors she had offered her services to the old Captain. Professor Sjögren states that:

> Amanda Brandt's position in his house was somewhat ambiguous. Von Scheven lived in a flat of only four rooms. Questioned by the police von Scheven said that the girl slept on a couch in the drawing-room, a story which she confirmed. But in two letters, written during his flight, Almqvist insinuated that Amanda spent the nights in von Scheven's bedroom. In view of the fact that this was not the first time that von Scheven housed a destitute girl, and that he had confessed to a friend that lechery was his worst fault, it seems at least possible that Almqvist was right (53).

Von Scheven at first suspected Amanda of stealing the promissory notes and questioned her about them in Almqvist's presence, but she emphatically denied the charge and immediately left his house. Later, during the police investigation, when his suspicions had turned to Almqvist, von Scheven testified that she was "quiet, calm and decent, always of a reasonable temper and had never given [him] any cause for complaint or dissatisfaction" (Hemming-Sjöberg 49). Almqvist, nonetheless, persisted with his insinuations, reporting that he had seen von Scheven's son in Amanda's company and that they had appeared intimate. Almqvist also appears to have tried to persuade her to leave town by sending her an anonymous warning letter and some money. Amanda, however, stood her ground and, according to Professor Sjögren, made a very good impression on the members of the Court. The minutes show that, whereas, for example, the housekeeper was a voluble and somewhat erratic witness, Amanda Brandt's deposition was clear, sober, and matter-of-fact. The Court did not question her morals and was entirely satisfied that she had nothing whatever to do with the theft of the missing notes (54). However, before the Court came to its inconclusive decision in the Almqvist case, Amanda too had left Sweden, never to return. The poor nineteen-year-old orphan girl initially went to Copenhagen, then perhaps to Germany where she and Aldridge might have first met.

Aldridge clearly must have been known as a womanizer—and a miscegenizing womanizer at that. Could this have been the primary reason that he was kept off the London stage for most of his career?

These details about Amanda's past are too equivocal to allow us to form a firm opinion about her character as a young woman, but certain indisputable facts stand out. She was of humble birth and upbringing, not someone of noble blood. She was a singer, an aspiring chorus girl who left her homeland after becoming involved in a well-publicized scandal. She may have been innocent of any wrongdoing, but like Aldridge himself, at a young age, she had to make

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her own way, on her own talents, in a foreign land. She bore Aldridge two illegitimate children, accepting whatever risks to career and reputation such dependents might entail. From what we know of her subsequent domestic life, she appears to have been a good mother to these and her later children, and a good wife to Aldridge in the closing years of his life.

Aldridge, for his part, remained steadfast in his commitment to his incapacitated first wife, not divorcing or discarding her in favor of the much younger woman who had won his affection. When he purchased his first house, Luranah Villa, he moved Margaret and Ira Daniel into it and found other accommodations for Amanda and her small children. In other words, he discharged his responsibilities as a spouse and father to two households, dividing his loyalties between them. He was not the kind of man who could sever forever his ties with his earliest loved ones, simply leaving them in the lurch. Just as he had never forgotten his sister and her children in New York, he never totally abandoned any of his wives, mistresses, or children in England. Though not a faithful husband, he was a dependable family man.

Yet it is conceivable that in Georgian and Victorian England his associations with white women would have raised more than a few eyebrows and attracted comment. Consider what his defending attorney had asked jurors to contemplate with regard to Emma Stothard: "Othello was a Moor—a handsome man; but Aldridge was an African. What would they say of a lady who would fall to the arts and devices of a 'nigger'?" Aldridge's legitimate wives must have had to face the same racist scrutiny and the same doubts about their morals and judgment. Is it any wonder, then, that Aldridge introduced Margaret as the daughter of a Member of Parliament and Amanda as a Baroness? He had employed the same tactic when presenting himself to the British public, pretending to be the son of a Christian Fulah prince from Senegal. Had it been widely known that he and his wives were of lowly birth, they might not have been accepted in polite circles or even in the scruffier world of the theater.

Indeed, it is entirely possible that Aldridge found it difficult to secure regular engagements in London because his humble origins were known there and his intimacies with white women were greatly resented. We have already seen how the *Athenaeum* complained of his "pawing" of Desdemona at Covent Garden Theatre in 1833. Ellen Tree, the actress who played Desdemona that evening, later married Edmund Kean's son Charles, who became a famous actor himself and in middle age took over the management of London's Princess's Theatre, where he and his wife starred together between 1850 and 1859. Not once during his term as manager did Charles Kean invite Aldridge to perform at his theater. Never again was the "African Roscius" given the opportunity to play opposite the former Ellen Tree.

Others besides Charles Kean were unwilling to allow their wives to share the same stage with Aldridge. Marshall and Stock recorded an interesting exchange between the manager of the Theatre Royal Dublin and the irate husband of Mme. Celeste, another famous actress of the day. The husband, "a *Yankee* of the genuine type," stormed into the manager's office to protest the arrangements that had been made:

> "I see you have announced the African!"
> "Yes."
> "My wife shan't play with him."
> "Why not?"
> "Because he's a nigger."
> "I am not alive to the objection. I am no negrophilist, neither do I denounce a man because he happens to be black."

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> "You are odd people in this country. In America we don't associate with blacks."
>
> "Neither do we, as a national habit. But he's a good actor and the public like him. His colour is nothing to me, though it were green, blue, or red."
>
> "That's all very well for a joke; but my wife shan't play with a nigger."
>
> "I don't think she will be called upon to do so. They are not in the same pieces."
>
> "But she shan't be in the same bill, or come into the theatre while he is here."
>
> "That's another view of the case. Am I to understand that you mean to break the engagement?"
>
> "Well, I guess I've not exactly made up my mind to do that; but you oughtn't to have engaged this fellow. . . . You can't go near the fellow. He is abominably offensive. All niggers are."
>
> "Perhaps so. We must keep on the windward side, and give him as wide a berth as possible."
>
> The indignant Republican, finding the questions resolving itself [sic] into an absurdity, subsided. But the difficulty passed away. The African's visit was postponed by some accident, and the impending contamination never took place (105-06; originally published in *Dublin University Magazine* Nov. 1868: 560).

Though this is passed off as a humorous anecdote, with a liberal Dublin theater manager getting the last laugh on a xenophobic Yankee, the virulence of such naked racial and sexual hostility must have had a decidedly negative impact on Aldridge's career. Again, it was his contact with white women, not his competence as an actor, that was the primary point at issue here.

This kind of biological animosity was seldom stated so bluntly in newspaper reviews of his performances, but one occasionally finds evidence of it elsewhere. In the memoirs of an actor who performed with him for a season in Croydon in 1850, one comes across the following remarks:

> We did a splendid business for six weeks, the "African" winning laurels of histrionic growth, and multitudes of admirers among the various Desdemonas who constituted the majority of the assembled audiences in this usually straight-laced town, or village of Croydon. I can remember the feeling of repugnance I experienced at the adulatory congratulations bestowed upon him by the fair members of the company (who for decency sake shall be nameless) . . . . it shocks a sensitive nature to see a pure blonde with almost angelic features and form, putting on a most bewitching smile and using every art of feminine blandishment to win the notice and deserve the esteem of the true bred "African Nigger." (Howe 58)

We also have the testimony of Madge Robertson, the last woman ever to play Desdemona to Aldridge's Othello in London:

> Mr. Ira Aldridge was a man who, being black, always picked out the fairest woman he could to play Desdemona with him, not because she was capable of acting the part, but because she had a fair head. . . . Although a genuine black, he was quite *preux chevalier* in his manners to women. The fairer you were, the more obsequious he was to you. (Kendal 10-11)

But on the stage, especially when enacting the jealous Moor, he behaved very differently. In the last act of *Othello*, she recalled,

> he used to take Desdemona out of bed by her hair, and drag her round the stage before he smothered her. You had to wear sandals and toed stockings to produce the effect of being undressed. I remember very distinctly this dragging of Desdemona about by the hair was considered so brutal that it was loudly hissed. (11)

London audiences evidently did not relish watching an undressed white woman being rudely manhandled by a black man. In playing the scene this way, Aldridge may have been violating much more than an ordinary taboo against undue violence on the stage. His brutality appears to have been construed as unbridled bestiality, a racial tragic flaw. This sort of Othello was less sinned against than sinning.

Offstage Aldridge looked and behaved like a perfect gentleman, but in some quarters his elegant appearance

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and demeanor were enough to provoke ill will. There were negative reactions to his public display of respectability, even gentility. At the Folger Library a letter scribbled on the back of a Scottish playbill advertising his performance at a theater in Dingwall on 1 May 1840 carries the following account of his entry into that town:

> he arrived here (would you believe it—) in his own Carriage, a smart Chariot & pair (Horses his own) mounted Postilion flashy Livery, Black velvet Hunting Cap trimmed with Gold Lace etc. Two Ladies (White inside) Imperials on the Top—and his Butler in the Rumble—Is that not going it—

The author of this note also objected to Aldridge's interpretation of Zanga in *The Revenge*, noting that "with the exception that he dress'd & look'd the Moor it was otherwise contemptible." One wonders if this assessment was based solely on his acting or if it was prompted to some degree by the sight of Aldridge's splendid carriage, horses, livery, servants, and white women. Was the actor being judged strictly on his merits or on his violation of social norms? What seems to have impressed this Dingwall correspondent most is that Aldridge appeared altogether out of normal character for a black man: He dressed and behaved in too princely a manner to know his proper place in life or art. This may have been too much for some spectators to take. They were inclined to condemn what they saw because Aldridge too openly challenged conventional racial and class expectations.

But what may have bothered this public most about Aldridge was his evident sex appeal. His wives and mistresses were white women. So were his casual conquests, which included Hungarian and Czech ladies he met on his tours of eastern Europe (Marshall and Stock 185-87; Napier and Winters 25-26). At least three of these consorts—the unidentified Irish lady, Emma Stothard, and Amanda Pauline von Brandt—bore children by him out of wedlock, and when the birth of the Stothard child led to a suit being brought against him for criminal conversation, the case received wide publicity throughout the British Isles. Aldridge clearly must have been known as a womanizer—and a miscegenizing womanizer at that. Could this have been the primary reason that he was kept off the London stage for most of his career? Was he blackballed for his sexuality?

This is the kind of question it may never be possible to answer definitively. The full story of Aldridge's years on and off the British stage may never be available to us, for there are too many lacunae in the documentary record to allow us to reconstruct his career completely. His performances in London and other major metropolitan centers can be investigated in depth by consulting local newspapers, journals, and magazines, and one can trace with some success his movements through other parts of the British Isles by tracking down whatever playbills, theatrical ephemera, business records, and unpublished letters or diaries may still exist. But as he made his rounds, Aldridge performed in many towns, villages, and hamlets that had neither printed media nor any other means of keeping records of notable local events. The chapters in his life-story that ought to be devoted to such small-scale theatrical ventures cannot now be written, and some areas of his private life may be closed off to us forever. Yet the hunt for more data should nonetheless continue, for his was an unusual life worth rendering in the fullest detail possible. The smallest fragment of documentation, whether it be a death or marriage certificate, a passing remark, a census entry, a court transcript, an eye-witness report, a racial joke, a professional

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recollection, or a handwritten personal critique, should be preserved and put on record so that we can arrive at a clearer conception of the man through a more comprehensive account of his experiences and achievements. As Marshall and Stock put it thirty-five years ago, we need to persist in this biographical quest "until this great man is given his rightful place in theatrical history, and until the fascinating story of a unique representative of the Negro people becomes better known to the world" (13).

Note

1. The name alludes to Quintus Roscius Gallus, an eminent Roman actor of tragedy and comedy.

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