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Shaping Shakespeare, Reflecting History: Adaptations of *Othello* for Children in 1990s Britain



"Wallenstein," Theater Costumes, Vienna, 1630, Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library

Abstract: *In this article, two 1990s British adaptations of Shakespeare's Othello for children are studied with the primary critical lens of New Historicism. This analysis concerns itself with the cultural resonances adaptors pass to their readers and how those traces shape the Shakespearean texts they adapt. This study contends that cultural contexts, transactions, and negotiations of the time incontestably shape these adaptations. To truly appreciate the choices made by the adaptors of the 1990s, reflections on Britain in the 1980s serve as points of comparison. As a result, analyzing and accounting for the cultural influences provides a whole reading of the texts in question.*

In May of 2008, King Lear came to Chicago, Illinois. He towered over the people and cars passing by Pedestrian Court on the Magnificent Mile. He stands roughly twenty feet tall, and while grasping his robes with his right hand and turning up his collar with his left, he seems about to admonish the winds that attack him fiercely in Act III, Scene ii, of Shakespeare's play. The sculptor J. Seward Johnson reveals this piece to be one of his personal favorites because, as Johnson says, King Lear and his own father experienced "comparable life plights" (Lancaster 1). The statue, made from nickel, emphasizes the hard and cold journey Lear unknowingly thrusts upon himself after asking his daughters to profess their love for him before receiving a portion of the kingdom to call her own. Clearly other forces—understandings of Shakespeare's text, debates and discussions about the play, and even Johnson's personal experiences—shaped the way in which the sculptor decided to portray Lear. The way in which people process Shakespeare's material, present that material to the world, and the forces that govern their choices intrigue many Shakespearean scholars, and serve as the catalyst for this study. Specifically, this article examines the presentation of *Othello* for children in two British adaptations of the 1990s: the team of Jennifer Mulherin and Abigail Frost's *The Best-Loved Plays of Shakespeare: Stories, Characters, and Quotations from Shakespeare's Most Famous Plays* (1993), and the solo effort of Geraldine McCaughrean's *Stories from Shakespeare* (1994).² Cultural forces including the state of education, race relations, and the status of women in the last decade of the twentieth century undeniably influence the way in which Mulherin, Frost, and McCaughrean present the story of *Othello* to their young readers.

The primary methodology in which this analysis participates is the vein of new historicist criticism, the

school of criticism Robert Con Davis and Laurie Finke explain as arguing that

literary works help to constitute what we mean by “history” and help to define our relationship to it. Literature does not passively reflect actual events or uncover timeless, universal truths in particular actions. Instead, literary works shape our view of historical reality and influence—often in quite subtle ways—what reality itself may be (878-879).

The adaptations of *Othello* under consideration both produce history and are products of history. Examining the cultural contexts among other elements of each work offers what Stephen Greenblatt, the most prominent new historicist (and the founder of that school of criticism) calls a “whole reading,” and this article aims to offer something of a “whole reading” for the adaptations of *Othello* examined herein. Consequently, some of Greenblatt’s major observations in his influential work, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, serve as the framework for this analysis, specifically when considering the contextualization of each adaptation. Greenblatt proposes that literary scholars

[l]ook less at the presumed center of the literary domain than at its borders, to try to track what can only be glimpsed, as it were, at the margins of the text. The cost of this shift in attention will be the satisfying illusion of a “whole reading,” the impression conveyed by powerful critics that had they but world enough and time, they could illuminate every corner of the text and knit together into a unified interpretive vision all their discrete perceptions. My vision is necessarily

more fragmentary, but I hope to offer a compensatory satisfaction: insight into the half-hidden cultural transactions through which great works of art are empowered (4).

The adaptations of Shakespeare's *Othello* examined here are not exempt from, as Greenblatt calls them, "cultural transactions." The cultural components which, when added together, produce "whole readings" of these adaptations of *Othello* include the following: contemporary educational practices, concerns about class status, racial dynamics, views of women, and contemporary Shakespearean criticism. These are the specific transactions, the forces that shape the way in which British writers of the 1990s present Shakespeare's *Othello* to their young readers.

The adaptors—Mulherin, Frost, and McCaughrean—not only fashion their texts in response to important cultural forces, but also mold their retellings of *Othello* to make the play more accessible to their readers. The adaptors shape a reader's understandings of the plot and characters of *Othello* in four major ways. These four ways include explicit adaptor commentary on the play or characters themselves; the adjectives used to describe characters; the body language and actions assigned to the characters; and the presence, if any, of a narrator. Namely, Mulherin, Frost, and McCaughrean mold their retellings by incorporating narrative elements, which are neither present, nor suggested in Shakespeare's texts. As Alison Prindle notes, "As plays, Shakespeare's texts have an openness that requires interaction. No narrator guides the through-line" (143). What follows, then, in "[m]oving from a play to a story [as Mulherin, Frost, and McCaughrean do], compels complex decisions to be made about plot. It also forces the creation of a narrator's voice, and this voice is a crucial part of the interpretation of the story for readers" (140). As Prindle sug-

gests, narrator's voice serves as a crucial component to an adaptation; a narrator (not present in Shakespeare's texts) can supply back-story, feelings, or actions, thus providing readers with reflections on "cultural transactions" of the given time period.

The adaptations of *Othello* of 1990s Britain cannot be fully appreciated or examined without examining the state of education in the 1980s. Critics concerned with 1980s education in Britain make vicious accusations, even in the titles used for their studies. Brian Simon, author of *Education and the Social Order 1940-1990*, titles the section devoted to the 1970s "Downhill All the Way." Max Morris and Clive Griggs call their edited collection *Education—The Wasted Years?: 1973-1986*. Morris and Griggs assert that "December 1973 was the end of an era" (1). To begin, 200 million pounds (roughly equivalent to 280 million dollars in the mid-eighties) were cut from the education budget: "The cut-back in educational finance was to be the harbinger of... negative attitudes to the education system in the years that followed" (Morris and Griggs 2). In 1979, Thatcher won the election for Prime Minister by a large majority. Her promises were many, but the practical implication of some of her policies led to suffering on the part of the people, education being affected most. The end of 1982 and the start of 1983 saw still falling rolls,³ lack of expectations, and poor leadership in the academy (Simon 497). Thatcher's government did so much damage to the state of education that Oxford refused to confer on her an honorary degree, which was "normally conferred on Prime Ministers within a year of their taking office" (Simon 511). Oxford's refusal to grant Thatcher a degree represented the feeling of the entire British academic world (Simon 511).

The British educational system experienced drastic changes during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Education officials, perhaps in a move to compensate for the

poor education administered during the 1980s, suddenly overloaded students with a variety of challenging subjects and educational requirements. The adaptors of the 1990s—Mulherin, Frost, and McCaughrean—include only the most basic plot elements and descriptions—just the facts—in their corresponding versions of *Othello*, a reaction largely due to the practice of overloading academic subjects in schools and to the contemporary and very ethnically diverse student body.

A chronicling of the major changes and developments for education in the 1990s must begin with Kenneth Baker and his Education Reform Act, which passed in 1988. Baker initiated repair to the damaged state of education: “From the moment of taking office, Baker made a series of announcements relating to increased resources covering almost every area of education” (Simon 529). The Education Reform Act finally helped to heal the rift between educators and the state; the state of education greatly improved. The effects of children receiving solid instruction and educators receiving different benefits started to be felt in the first half of the next decade, which forms the context for McCaughrean, Mulherin, and Frost’s adaptations. Ian Hunter, in *Rethinking the School: Subjectivity, Bureaucracy, Criticism*, reflects on the changing educational climate of the early 1990s, claiming that the implementation of the National Curriculum (part of Baker’s Act) improved education, but served as an impeding force as well. The National Curriculum “represents one of the most significant educational reforms [of the last] century. It is a public statement about the syllabus and content that every child should study” (Moon 1).

The biggest problem with the National Curriculum was the “massive overloading” of curriculum, especially in the primary schools (those in the age group forming the audience for McCaughrean, Mulherin, and Frost’s works) (Galton et. al. 15). Teachers received curriculum

assignments based on an astounding number of ten required subjects (nine subjects for the primary schools since Modern Foreign Languages was not a required subject). The core foundation subjects included Science, Math, and English; foundation subjects were Technology, Art, Music, Physical Education, History, Geography, and modern foreign languages. A schedule with 10 foundation subjects “[left] some space, but not much, for additional subjects to be chosen by schools and teachers in consultation with governors” (Dufour 202-203). One of the major problems with implementing the National Curriculum was the problem of finding staff to teach each subject. Barry Dufour, in “Curriculum Change and Organisation: The Place of the New Social Curriculum within the National Curriculum,” explains that plans were concocted to “allow people without the usual teacher qualifications to enter teaching and train on the job. A similar scheme... allow[ed] student teachers from local training institutions to go straight into the classroom and be paid as they train[ed]” (203). Naturally, this plan was met with “substantial resistance... from the teaching unions” (Dufour 203).⁴

The model for the National Curriculum was “mechanistic, subject-specific curriculum with a central emphasis on testing and performance” (Dufour 202). Alistair Ross, in *Curriculum: Construction and Critique*, explains that under the National Curriculum provisions, “[t]he average pupil would have been assessed against 700 attainment targets by the age of 16; and it was estimated that an infant teacher with 35 children in his or her class would need to make some 8,000 assessment judgments each year” (77-78). The enforcement of the National Curriculum and its required programmatic assessments has severe consequences: “The National Union of Teachers successfully brought teachers on strike to protest against the introduction of the new assessment procedures. Kenneth Baker... departed from education

to become Home Secretary” (Galton et. al. 15).

Baker’s departure led to Kenneth Clarke’s rise to office. In 1992, a bill Clarke had designed passed and abolished the HMI—Her Majesty’s Inspectorate—which Clarke felt was “too sympathetic to the educational establishment” (Galton et. al. 22).⁵ He created a new body, called the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), which conducted rigorous reviews and inspections. Chris Woodhead became the head of OFSTED; Woodhead was against progressive teaching methods which included individualization and group work—techniques Woodhead referred to as “trendy.” He felt that the major threats to education were “child-centered teaching that relied on impulse and inclination and a commitment to discovery learning in place of formal instruction. [Other problems included t]eachers acting as facilitators rather than moral and intellectual authorities [and t]he practice of dividing classes into groups instead of teaching them as a whole” (Galton et. al. 24). Clarke also desired to “purge [schools] of inadequate staff,” and put a “concentrated drive against endemic mediocrity and plunging standards of literacy” (24). Clarke’s philosophy and the measures he took to enact it became known as the “Reign of Terror.”

The adaptations of Shakespeare by Mulherin, Frost, and McCaughrean appear during this reign, and their authors deliberately shaped their collections to respond to the drastic practices in contemporary Britain. To begin, the adaptations share stylistic elements like severe plot compression so the plays become more understandable;⁶ explanations of what characters do and think instead of having to infer these from their actions and behaviors; sparse quotations from Shakespeare;⁷ few adjectives or assigned actions for the cast of each play; sections devoted to each play’s characters—for easy reference; and simple sentence structure.⁸ A strong possibility for these stylistic choices forms from the threat of “massive over-

loading” found in the schools. This possibility seems very likely, especially when one considers the adaptations of the 1980s, when education was very poor: both include detailed, long, and complex sentences, and both take liberties with Shakespeare’s plots and characters via means of rich detail. While the reading abilities of children of the 1980s would not immediately transform positively because of the educational reforms of the 1990s, the point here remains focused on the “cultural transactions” which impact the way in which adaptors shape their versions of Shakespeare. The adaptors, surely aware of major educational reforms, respond to those pressures; they do not shape their texts simply to meet the needs of their readers. Instead, they shape their texts to reflect that in the 1990s there was not a lack of educational standards; rather, too many standards existed. One reflection on the practice of overloading in the schools presents itself in Mulherin and Frost’s works. They divide their adaptations of *Othello* into short segments like “Othello in the depths”: each segment encapsulates a major event in the plot of the play. These divisions mirror the compression of school lessons in schools, echoing one method of how material might be approached in 1990s Britain.

Clarke’s assaults on “trendy” educational practices in classrooms like individualizing lessons and approaches based on children’s needs also, even if implicitly, shapes McCaughrean as well as Mulherin and Frost’s work. The adaptations of the 1990s include little explicit commentary, few assigned actions, and little description. These “just the facts” adaptations could be distributed to the masses and their simplicity would allow all readers to access and understand the material. It seems probable that the goals of the National Curriculum and Clarke influenced the adaptations of *Othello* by Mulherin, Frost, and McCaughrean.

Another important cultural transaction related to education concerns students of color. Again, to fully appreciate the adaptations of *Othello* in the 1990s, context focused on the preceding decade must be established. Classrooms in 1980s Britain were quite ethnically diverse. As Philip Sarre says in *Restructuring Britain: The Changing Social Structure*, “One of the most obvious changes in British society since the Second World War has been the growth of identifiable minorities in the population” (125). A format for learning about different cultures was needed, and “the education system... [is] most vital in the endeavor to realise the ideals of the multi-cultural society” (Goulbourne 85). And while schools could help educate students on various cultures and their traditions and beliefs, a disconnect presented itself. In the early 1970s, educational scholars began producing reports claiming that children might be learning more about minorities in schools (like Bernard Coard’s seminal work *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System*, and later the Rampton Report and the Swann Report), but minority children were not receiving the same educational opportunities as many of their white classmates.

Being aware of and respecting the needs of minorities, however, was not a priority immediately after the publication of these reports. During the 1980s in Britain, minority children were treated and viewed as inferior to white students—and not just concerning mental prowess. A lack of sensitivity towards minorities remained prominent in Britain, and popular children’s writers who adapted *Othello* in the 1980s—including Leon Garfield and Beverley Birch—reflect this lack of sensitivity by referring to Othello in terms that reinforce his minority secondary status in negative ways. They echo some of Shakespeare’s adjectives like “the old black ram” (Garfield 225, Birch 74) and “the thick

lips” (Garfield 223), seemingly misplaced descriptors in adaptations of the play geared for young readers.

The adaptors’ inclusion of racial epithets also reflects the general concern about racial dynamics in 1980s Britain. This particular decade witnessed a growing concern over racial identity, representation, and segregation. The British riots of 1981 were “largely sparked by racial issues. In Brixton... youths rioted amid resentment that the police were targeting more and more young black men in the belief that it would stop street crime. Similar riots followed in Liverpool and the Midlands. The subsequent Scarman Report found that ‘racial disadvantage is a fact of current British life’” (History of Immigration). In *Race Relations in Britain Since 1945*, Harry Goulbourne says that the riots (specifically in Brixton, South London) “challenged many of the assumptions about fairness and justice for all in multi-cultural Britain” (67), and adds that “[t]he issues behind these events centered around the poor relations between local police forces and the African-Caribbean communities” (68). In sum, Goulbourne argues that the “impact of these disturbances was far-reaching. They highlighted the deplorable depths to which community-police relations had sank [sic] in inner cities up and down the country where African-Caribbean people had settled” (68). Similarly, in “Does Britain Have Ghettos?” Ceri Peach reflects on the “recurrent fear expressed by politicians, journalists, and scholars” that Britain was guilty of racial segregation (216). In fact, 1991 was the first year in which the British Census included a question on ethnic identity. Obviously, then, important conversations about race occurred throughout the decade of the 1980s. Perhaps the presence of this issue in major public arenas served as the adaptors’ catalyst for depicting Othello with specific attention placed on him as a man of color.⁹

During the early 1980s, an awareness of minorities and their situations developed; it was not until the late

1980s and the following decade in which the awareness of the ethnic population's needs transformed into actual action, which Mulherin, Frost, and McCaughrean demonstrate in their adaptations of *Othello*. The adaptors of the 1990s (who present readers with very Spartan adaptations and use simple language in doing so) go beyond demonstrating awareness of minority needs but take action themselves in making their adaptations of Shakespeare's work easily accessible to readers of all backgrounds. Mulherin, Frost, and McCaughrean considered the needs of an even more specific audience: non-native English speaking children (or those who come from a household in which the parents or guardians are non-native English speakers). Shakespeare can present serious challenges for students who are native English speakers; consider the difficulties that would present themselves in the case of a non-native English speaker. The adaptors, aware of these challenges, might have presented Shakespeare in a more simplistic manner so that children who did not understand English themselves could have a better chance at understanding the complex material. Inherently, then, they also provide access to Shakespeare for members of the lower class since the majority of immigrants found themselves "prepared to accept more or less whatever employment opportunities came their way" (Goulbourne 91); many of these immigrants had farming skills, but now were forced to do menial industrial work (91). In *An Exclusive Education: Race, Class and Exclusion in British Schools*, Chris Searle addresses the degree of the problem concerning ethnic immigrants' experiences with Shakespeare:

When [teachers] see a British inner-city class of fourteen-year-olds, most of whom came from Pakistani, Somali, Yemeni or Caribbean families, confronted with a text from [Shakespeare]... trying to grapple with a language they have but half

-learned, despite the efforts of good teaching to make it all make sense and to reveal its beauty—many teachers find themselves recoiling in rage at... the damage done to both the teenage readers and the great dramatist himself. Neither writer nor readers are ready for one another (84-85).

Perhaps McCaughrean, Mulherin, and Frost desired to remedy this problem: surely their bare-bones plots and simplified language would be much more accessible to immigrant children in comparison to Shakespeare's original work or more ornate prose retellings.

Another way in which McCaughrean, Mulherin, and Frost respond to their posited audience concerns race. The adaptors of the 1990s include little—if any—description of a character's appearance. They also dedicate little of the narrative to reinforcing a character's class status. Neglecting to include specific details about a character's class or race (the most race-specific term assigned to *Othello* is "Moor," the meaning of which many children would not understand) allows a reader of any ethnic background or social status to identify with the characters. Downplaying and deciding not to reinforce the race and class of Shakespeare's characters demonstrates another way in which McCaughrean, Mulherin, and Frost respond to the needs of their posited—and very culturally and socially diverse—audience.

Positive portrayals of *Othello* are a direct reflection of positive developments concerning race relations in 1990s Britain; the portrayals are also evidence that the adaptors both recognize and respect that their posited audiences are quite ethnically diverse. Examining how adaptors depict *Othello* (who serves as a character that allows adaptors to reflect on and respond to the contemporary social force of race in Britain) provides something closer to a "whole reading" than if the depiction of his character goes unexamined. Efforts to resolve racial

tension in Britain—an important development in comparison to the 1980s—shape the adaptations of *Othello* in the 1990s. McCaughrean introduces him as “a Moorish nobleman and general in the Venetian army” (88). Young readers may be confused about what the descriptor “Moor” means, but the general feeling of the description is that Othello as a powerful and noble person, which represents Shakespeare’s Othello. McCaughrean then describes him as the “hero of the wars, leader of men, general and diplomat, the pride of Venice” (89). McCaughrean’s Brabantio calls him a “sorcerer and devil” and “[a] man old enough to be [Desdemona’s] father” upon hearing that he has eloped with Desdemona from Iago and Roderigo (89); even though these terms sound unpleasant, they could be applied to any character, regardless of race. McCaughrean’s Othello, trying to defend himself to the Senate, describes himself as “a soldier... not clever with words” (90). This description differentiates Othello as a man of action and not words, and does not speak to his ethnicity; once again, the descriptor remains non-race specific. Later McCaughrean coins him as “the victim of someone’s odious mischief” (98), a sympathetic description; the most flattering series of phrases McCaughrean uses for the Moor, though, is “a man modeled on a grander scale than most, whose passions were proportionately greater, whose fire burned hotter, whose life crashed to its destruction from a far greater height” (102). McCaughrean’s terms are almost completely flattering and do not concern race (except for referring to him as a “Moor”). McCaughrean’s diction concerning Othello demonstrates that she imagines Othello as a man to be admired and, quite possibly, the most victimized character in the play.

Mulherin and Frost’s descriptions for the general are equally positive. They initially refer to him as the “Moor” and “black man” (144). They draw attention to race, but that attention seems necessary since some im-

portant issues of the play center on the relationship between a man and a woman of different ethnicities. When Mulherin and Frost describe Othello in more detail in their “Characters in the *Othello*” section, they also refer to him as “a soldier worthy of the Duke’s trust,” a man who “too easily loses control of himself,” and finally, a “foreigner and simple soldier” (156). Their first description flatters Othello and demonstrates his honor. The second description paints Othello as somewhat unable to keep his emotions in check, and neglects to mention that victimization by the mastermind Iago. Their last description of Othello as a “foreigner and [a] simple soldier” also deserves attention. First, the term “foreigner” stresses Othello’s outsider status. A stark contrast exists between the mentality of Venetian senators and military warriors, but McCaughrean’s description of Othello suggests that as a soldier, he has less mental prowess than men who plan war, just because he fights it. While Mulherin and Frost’s descriptions of the general do not ask readers to feel as sympathetic for Othello as McCaughrean’s (consider how they neglect to mention how Othello fell victim to Iago, compared to McCaughrean who stresses such a point), the adaptors’ terms remain positive and—with the exception of “black man”—are not race specific.

Readers might question why such a significant change occurs between the adaptations of the 1980s (both of whom use the racial epithets included by Shakespeare, as mentioned earlier), and those of the 1990s. Only nine years’ time spans the publication of Garfield’s collection in 1985 and McCaughrean’s collection in 1994; those nine years, however, witnessed an increased sensitivity to race. Perhaps the most significant event affecting race in Britain was the case of Stephen Lawrence, a Black teenager murdered in 1993. Police arrested five suspects, but not one was convicted. Members of the British population, Black or not, felt outrage

at the treatment of the case. Inquiries about Lawrence's murder led to major developments in Britain concerning race. For instance,

The inquiry into the failure of the original police investigation to find and convict Stephen's killers, headed by Sir William MacPherson and which reported in 1999, became one of the most important moments in the modern history of criminal justice in Britain. Famously concluding that the force was "institutionally racist," it made 70 recommendations and had an enormous impact on the race relations debate—from criminal justice through to all public authorities ("Stephen Lawrence Murder").

Eventually, Lawrence's murder "led directly to new anti-discrimination legislation passed in 2000" ("History of Immigration").

Another development in race relations focused on the arena of education. More specific developments occurred in educational practices focused on acknowledging, discussing, and developing respect for members of various ethnicities in school classrooms. Edward Hulmes's important book *Education and Cultural Diversity* (1989) provides an example of this development; his work discusses practices teachers incorporate into their classroom to respect the various ethnicities of their students.¹⁰ Hulmes's work demonstrates that Britain was not only thinking about diversity in the classroom, but about how to make all students, regardless of their backgrounds, also feel welcome and comfortable. Hulmes's work is only one example of how progress was made in the 1990s in response to the Swann and Rampport Reports (discussed earlier in the brief chronology of developments in education in Britain during the 1980s). Roughly ten years had passed since the publication of these im-

portant reports, which allowed enough time for people to adjust their ways of thinking and acting (also evidenced by the general public in the outrage expressed by Stephen Lawrence's murder). In sum, the public was made aware of the problems concerning British race relations in the 1980s, and by the 1990s, people took serious and thoughtful measures to combat the problem.

Similarly, the 1990s witnessed the publication of several landmark works on mixed marriages that created an awareness of the difficulties faced by the partners involved, including *The Colour of Love: Mixed Race Relationships*, *A Marriage of Inconvenience: The Prosecution of Ruth and Seretse Khama*, and *Jack and Zena: A True Story of Love and Danger* (these texts will be addressed in further detail in the ensuing discussion of scenes in which Desdemona and Othello interact). This developing line of thought and sensitivity, combined with important cases like Lawrence's which affected the entire cultural consciousness, served as powerful shaping influences for McCaughrean and Mulherin and Frost and their decision to avoid derogatory and race-specific language in describing Othello in their adaptations. Post-colonial critics analyzing the representation of Othello in McCaughrean as well as Mulherin and Frost's work would be pleased; the descriptions of the Moor—the outsider—do not obviously state or insinuate Othello possesses less power than the insiders, the White men of the Venetian senate.

The way adaptors describe Othello deserves attention because of cultural influences concerning racial tensions; descriptors assigned to Desdemona, however, remain shaped by contemporary British expectations for women. Like decades preceding it, the role of the working woman in the family and her career (in most cases) remained secondary to her husband's.¹¹ In "Women, Family and Class," Annemette Sorenson asserts that the husband's career determines a family's status, and that a

“family’s position is the same whether the wife is a housewife, a secretary, a professor, or an unskilled worker” (28). Nicky Gregson and Michelle Lowe, in “‘Home’-Making: On the Spatiality of Daily Social Reproduction in Contemporary Middle-Class Britain,” reflect on what homes represent and how homes remain centers for domestic labor, most of which women complete. They claim, “Home space is shown to be inscribed with specific visions of Woman, to define women, and to do so in relation to and through the work of domestic labour which takes place within the house” (Gregson and Lowe 226). Since the reality of 1990s Britain was that many women worked outside of the home, pursued careers, and held positions of power (like Thatcher, for example), one might argue that the traditionalist expectation for women to make domestic life their priority remained a dominant ideology and as such, a powerful influence. This influence shapes adaptations of *Othello* in the 1990s.

Several adjectives in particular assigned to Desdemona deserve examination since they respond to the traditionalist dominant traditional belief about contemporary British women: McCaughrean implicitly represents the secondary role of women in marriage, but Mulherin and Frost explicitly comment on women and marriage in 1990s Britain. The first of these descriptions for Desdemona is McCaughrean’s “quiet as a mouse” (90), which Othello uses while explaining the way Desdemona behaved when she listened to him recount his adventures for her. This colloquialism contextualizes Desdemona’s behavior for readers familiar with the expression, but McCaughrean ascribing the description to Desdemona via Othello deserves examination. Othello employs the phrase while trying to convince Brabantio that witchcraft did not play a role in Desdemona’s feelings for Othello; but the description still emphasizes how quiet—and timid—Desdemona remained during their visits, provid-

ing Brabantio with a reason to suspect Othello of exerting power or dominance over Desdemona. This implied dominance reflects traditional marriage expectations of 1990s Britain, in which the woman occupied secondary status to her husband and was expected to maintain the domestic sphere and be subservient to her husband's and family's needs.

Mulherin and Frost's descriptions for Desdemona also respond to dominant expectations for contemporary British women: "Desdemona shows herself when she first appears as a brave young woman. Having heard so much about the wars from Othello, she wants to see them for herself, and insists on coming to Cyprus with the army. But once she is there, safely married to the man she loves, she never thinks that anything could go wrong until it is too late" (156). To begin, this description for Desdemona allows readers of any class to identify with her since Desdemona's upper-class status remains unstressed. Second, Mulherin and Frost describe Desdemona as "first appear[ing] as a brave young woman"; she does indeed seem brave when she defends herself and her husband to the senate (only minutes after marrying Othello). But, as many Shakespearean critics observe, Desdemona transforms quickly into a subdued bride.¹² Mulherin and Frost describing Desdemona as "safely married" also deserves analysis. This description suggests Desdemona would not have been content or secure had she not become someone's bride. This detail informs young readers, females especially, to consider whether a woman needs to be married and have the companionship and protection of a partner in order to be "safe." Materialist critics would argue that Mulherin and Frost perpetuate dominant power structures by emphasizing that Desdemona holds the secondary position of power; simultaneously, the description suggests that if a woman marries and in turn becomes "safe," that woman also acquires power (since she seems to do so in the best

interest of her well-being). Considering the context in which Mulherin and Frost use the description, however, the power shifts to the man since he becomes the one to care for the female, instead of her doing so on her own.

A converse reading of the term “safely married” as applied to Desdemona assigns the tragic daughter the power instead. One must consider that Desdemona married the man she loved—and did so in secret—most likely because of her father’s opposition to the marriage. He does, after all, accuse Othello using witchcraft on Desdemona to get her to agree to the marriage.¹³ So, “safely” here might represent that Desdemona was able to marry the man she loved without interference. One might also question if an unmarried Desdemona might represent some type of danger or chaos to Venice, much like Bianca of Cyprus (who is unmarried). Desdemona did, after all, sneak off to marry, the result of which was a marriage that not only disappoints her father, but causes him to take his own life.¹⁴ If this is Mulherin and Frost’s implication with “safely married,” they provide readers with another instance of a character’s heightened sexuality and the dangers that may accompany it.

Mulherin and Frost also include some noteworthy supplied actions concerning Desdemona that involve kissing; their continued emphasis on the romantic and sexual elements of Shakespeare’s plays aligns with the focus of their introduction and responds to the contemporary teen sex problem in Britain. In the section “Lovers’ greetings,” “Desdemona [welcomes Othello] with a kiss” (147). This action, while natural since the lovers have just reunited after a tumultuous trip to Cyprus, also appeals to the sexual interests of Mulherin and Frost’s readers. The other kiss involves Desdemona and Cassio, and foreshadows for readers what will occur later in the play: “The courteous Cassio greets Desdemona with flowery compliments, and kisses her hand” (147). No explicit line or stage action exists in

Shakespeare's text that states Cassio kisses Desdemona's hand. When Desdemona finally arrives in Cyprus, Shakespeare's Cassio, happy to see her, says:

O! behold,
 The riches of the ship is come ashore.
 Ye men of Cyprus, let her have your knees.
 Hail to thee, lady! and the grace of heaven,
 Before, behind thee, and on every hand,
 Enwheel thee round! (II.i. 91-96).

Desdemona responds to these compliments with "I thank you, valiant Cassio./ What tidings can you tell me of my lord?" (II.i.97-98). The line "[b]efore, behind thee, and on every hand" implicitly suggests that Cassio kisses the hand of Desdemona. Friends glad to see each other may greet one another with handshakes, hugs, and even kisses; the significance of Mulherin and Frost's assigned action, however, lies in that they have Cassio kiss Desdemona in front of a large group of witnesses, emphasizing an event which becomes ammunition for Iago. In doing so, they emphasize Cassio and Desdemona's closeness from their first meeting, and foreshadow the fictional romantic relationship created between them by Iago. This foreshadowing stresses Michael Bristol's claims that "[l]ike all of Shakespeare's woman characters, Desdemona is... a female artifact created by a male imagination" (149); without Iago's plans, Desdemona would not be subjected to her treatment as a possession, an aspect on which Mulherin and Frost also capitalize by having Cassio kiss Desdemona.

When Othello strikes Desdemona, the "crisis point" of the play—as Jardine refers to it ("Why Should He Call Her Whore" 28),¹⁵ Mulherin and Frost and McCaughrean's adaptations implicitly support contemporary materialist feminist criticism by silencing Desdemona almost entirely. Simultaneously, their descriptions

of the scenes do not focus on the difference in color between Desdemona and Othello since the views on interracial relationships and racial tensions in general had improved since the last decade.¹⁶ One mark of this “improvement” is the publication of works which explore mixed-race relationships in detail; such works create an awareness of the problems these couples face, and encourage readers to think critically about the state of race relations (especially miscegenation) in 1990s Britain. The story of Jack and Zena Briggs, a mixed race couple, “raises important questions about how we move as a multicultural society,” and provides a forum from which readers can educate themselves and become “better equipped to fight against racism” (McCarthy 9). The 1990s also saw the publication of another important work concerning miscegenation: *A Marriage of Inconvenience: The Persecution of Ruth and Seretse Khama*. The story explores in detail the relationship between an English girl and an African Prince, narrating the difficulties and violent attacks launched at the couple. While both these pieces chronicle the difficulties faced by two well-known mixed-race couples, the publication of their stories in the 1990s (along with the work *The Colour of Love: Mixed Race Relationships*, which provides dozens of personal accounts of British people in mixed-race relationships), demonstrates Britain’s changing attitude toward miscegenation, simply in their desire to create an awareness of and a dialogue about the issue.

Mulherin and Frost describe the scene as follows: “While [Othello] reads the letter, a summons back to Venice, Desdemona talks to Lodovico. Suddenly Othello turns round, shouts at her and hits her. Horrified, Lodovico asks if the letter has made him angry; but Iago hints that the general is mad” (152). McCaughrean similarly silences Desdemona: “Visiting dignitaries had seen Othello insult his wife in the open street—even hit her—without the least cause or explanation” (98). Mulherin

and Frost's adaptation of the scene focuses on the men present, and Desdemona does not even appear in McCaughrean's version. Materialist critics would argue that the adaptors view Desdemona as a woman who holds little—if any—agency. In fact, they depict her as a disposable presence. Though some readers might find this minimizing and deletion of Desdemona troubling, McCaughrean, Mulherin, and Frost make symbolic statements; the adaptors of the 1990s, even if unknowingly, support contemporary observations in Shakespearean feminist criticism. Valerie Wayne, in "Historical Differences: Misogyny and *Othello*" argues that "The male text in *Othello* shows that men have the power to appropriate women for their own purposes and to write women out, annihilate them or make them 'naught'" (174). Mulherin and Frost "write Desdemona out" while McCaughrean "makes her 'naught.'"

Similarly, issues concerning domestic violence work as a shaping force on McCaughrean and Mulherin and Frost's work. Promising developments occurred at the beginning of the 1990s concerning this troubling issue. In 1993, the United Nations "[recognized] domestic violence as an international human rights issue and [issued] a Declaration of the Elimination of Violence Against Women" ("Herstory"). Shortly thereafter, in 1994, domestic violence came to the forefront of the world's consciousness with the highly-publicized murder of Nicole Brown-Simpson and O. J. Simpson's ensuing trial. In Britain, specifically, two other cases made headlines. The first case was that of Emma Humphreys, the woman who killed her abusive boyfriend and pimp after years of abuse; Humphreys was released from prison in 1995. The second case concerns that of Sara Thornton, who stabbed her abusive husband to death. Thornton was first convicted of murder, but after a retrial was instead convicted on manslaughter. As Heather Mills wrote for London's *The Independent*, Thornton's case

highlighted the shortages of refuges, the lack of care for victims, and questioned whether the legal defences, particularly the law on provocation, was better suited to a man's immediate rage than a woman's slow build-up to breaking point. It strengthened calls from senior judiciary such as the Lord Chief Justice to abandon the compulsory life sentence for murder—so that judges could reflect some sympathy upon battered women driven to kill (1).

These women's cases “put the issue of domestic violence and law reform firmly back on the legal and political agenda” (Mills). Consequently, 1990s Britain saw “the tide of popular opinion [turn] towards justice for women who experience abuse, even those who kill as a result” (Mullender 6). In several instances, the adaptations of *Othello* examined here become shaped by the developments in the collective cultural consciousness on abuse against women.

Mulherin, Frost, and McCaughrean's adaptations of Desdemona's death respond to the cultural concern of abuse against women; they heighten her status as victim, mirroring the raised awareness of the cultural consciousness concerning domestic violence in 1990s Britain. My claim that Desdemona mirrors victims of domestic abuse is only strengthened by contemporary feminist Shakespearean scholarship like Sheryl Craig's “‘She is abused’: The Battered-Wife Syndrome in *Othello*.” Craig claims that “In light of what we know about wife abuse, it is clear that the marriage of Othello and Desdemona is a recipe for wife-beating” (45). Craig also says that “Desdemona is typical of the fearful, submissive wife” (45). Mulherin and Frost's Desdemona aligns with Craig's observation since she “begs piteously for time” but to no avail, since shortly thereafter “Othello smoth-

ers her with a pillow” (153). Then Emilia asks Desdemona who committed this crime, and Desdemona answers with “Nobody; I myself,” then dies (153); they supply no other details concerning her death, revival, or claims that Shakespeare’s Desdemona utters, including “O falsely, falsely murder’d” (V.ii.143), and “A guiltless death I die” (149). One reason for this choice may be, as Craig claims, that once “a battered woman begins to realize that she cannot in any way control the abuse, depression sets in” (55). Perhaps Desdemona’s silence in these adaptations also reflects a sense of depression and deep sadness.

Like Mulherin and Frost’s Desdemona, McCaughrean’s also does not claim she was “falsely murdered” or that her death was “guiltless.” McCaughrean depicts Desdemona’s final scene as follows: “[Othello] even stooped to kiss her, and she woke. Her fear at the look on his face incited him to violence” (100). Perhaps some of this description arises from comments made by Shakespeare’s Desdemona, who says, “And yet I fear you; for you are fatal then/ When your eyes roll so” (V.ii.42-43). McCaughrean’s choice suggests that she must have imagined a Desdemona whose face becomes so affected by fear of her husband’s behavior that it not only upsets him, but enrages him. This imagined detail suggests that the fault lies with Desdemona, and echoes Craig’s critical observation that, “The reader who devalues Desdemona for her apparent helplessness and lack of action to save herself is only reflecting the long established prejudice against Desdemona and all battered wives” (47). The rest of the description for Desdemona’s final scene, however, shifts the responsibility to Othello and emphasizes Desdemona’s victimization: “Too soon for Othello’s choosing, Emilia hammered at the door and disturbed his ‘act of justice.’ Too soon was the pillow eased from over Desdemona’s mouth, for she revived briefly and cried

out. Emilia heard her and pushed her way in, cradling Desdemona in her arms until her heart finally stopped” (101). McCaughrean neglects to include Othello’s agonizing personal struggle over murdering his wife;¹⁷ by portraying Othello as a beast instead of a manipulated man, she increases the sympathy readers feel for Desdemona. The shaping cultural force for Desdemona’s final scene in both adaptations—and her silence and role as enticer—continues to be, as it was in the 1980s, violence against women. One might question why, in a decade when monumental strides (like building dozens of refuges for battered women) addressed the problem of violence against women, the Desdemona of the 1990s does not assert herself or attest to her “guiltless death” before she dies. The answer to this question lies in the collective cultural perception about victims of abuse and, in particular, the cases of women like Humphreys, Thornton, and others whose sentences were either changed or ended for their crimes.¹⁸ While none of the women released was suddenly deemed “innocent,” they were, to some degree, excused for their crimes since they did not deserve the violent abuse they suffered. This pattern shaped McCaughrean, Mulherin, and Frost’s adaptations in that Desdemona does not have to assure anyone of her innocence because of what characters come to know, (and what readers already know), that similarly to Humphreys and Thornton, she did not deserve the punishment she received, so there is no need for her to assert her innocence.

In their corresponding adaptations, Mulherin, Frost, and McCaughrean both represent and create awareness for major cultural issues relevant to the problems of domestic violence against women, race relations, and educational practices of 1990s Britain. Their Desdemona does not explain to Emilia that she dies a “guiltless death” or that she has not deserved to die: this choice not to include this information rests on that readers already

assume that, as a victim of domestic violence, she obviously is guiltless, and does not deserve to be treated in such a way. In response to violence against minorities, especially the murder of Stephen Lawrence, Britain developed not only more sensitivity to and respect for race, but antidiscrimination laws; the adaptors, in turn, shape their adaptations to avoid negative race-specific descriptions or epithets. This is a promising development from the depiction of *Othello* in the 1980s, who adaptors define consistently and negatively in terms of his race. The adaptors also downplay a character's appearance and in many cases, his/her social class as well, allowing for the ethnically-diverse population of 1990s Britain to appreciate and better identify with Shakespeare's characters. Finally, Mulherin, Frost, and McCaughrean respond to contemporary educational practices; in response to curriculum overloading supply their readers with the "just the facts" of the play. Using the critical lens of historicism, and examining the cultural transactions scholars such as Greenblatt consider so vital, provides something closer to a "whole reading" of Mulherin, Frost, and McCaughrean's adaptations of *Othello*. With a "whole reading" of these texts, and the cultural forces which influenced their shape, these adaptations of *Othello* appear dense with meaning, even if they seem to impart "just the facts" to their readers.

Notes:

1. I would like to thank Alexandra G. Bennett, Nicole Clifton, and Deborah De Rosa of the Northern Illinois University English Department for their guidance with the larger project—my dissertation—on which this article is based.
2. I selected these collections in particular based on the parameters of my dissertation, in which I studied collections that were in print, readily available, and which con-

tained the following four plays: *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *King Lear*.

3. The “quite rapid decline in the number of pupils... began in 1973” (Coe 65).

4. John White’s *Education and the Good Life: Autonomy, Altruism, and the National Curriculum* serves as a possible response to staffing schools with unprepared teachers. The work promotes effective teacher preparation and assessment.

5. One might question whether or not Mulherin and Frost’s adaptation could respond to this bill, passed in 1992. Again, all logic suggests that the issues surrounding the bill were well-known and existed since the late 1980s. So even though the bill only officially passed in 1992, Mulherin and Frost would have been aware of the problems the bill sought to address and correct.

6. McCaughrean’s adaptation has been described as a “good appetiser [sic],” followed by the comment, “A full meal would be nice” (C. 39). Peter Hollindale provides readers with a review of Mulherin and Frost’s work in which he writes, “Synopsis, illustrations and notes on character are the substance of the book, and here... Shakespeare is pushed to the margin, reduced to decorating his own plots” (x). Hollindale’s comment becomes particularly interesting considering this dissertation works to provide whole readings for each adaptation by examining the margins and “cultural transactions” that shape each work. His review finds fault with but ignores the dominant cultural forces that shaped Mulherin and Frost’s collection, which pushed Shakespeare to the margin of their text.

7. Tony O’Sullivan argues that McCaughrean “has paraphrased the Bard’s work instead of including [it],” followed later by “I came from reading this well-intentioned book with a feeling of dissatisfaction and with a sense that those put off by the difficulty of Shakespeare’s language are going to be presented with an alternative linguistic barrier” (71). The adaptors include quotes from the plays, but without explication or immersion in the narrative, they seem obtrusive and out of place and consequently, their meanings are lost to young readers.

8. Rather than repeating textual examples that I will discuss in depth below, allow me to provide examples of the adaptors’ prose from their adaptations of *Romeo and*

Juliet. Here is an example of McCaughrean's prose, which reflects her accessible sentence structure: "There was no shyness between them, no elaborate courtship. Time was too pressing and the danger of being discovered too great. It was Juliet who proposed they marry next day" (11). Mulherin and Frost explain Juliet as "Juliet is a young girl, only 14 years of age. She is a gentle person and obedient to her parents. And she is fond of the Nurse who has looked after her since she was a baby. She belongs to a noble family from Verona" (81).

9. For more information on race relations in Britain during the 1980s, see Paul Gilroy's

'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1991); chapters include in-depth examinations of topics like ethnic absolutism, anti-racism, and urban social movements.

10. Practices discussed by Hulmes include respecting religious beliefs and holidays, working to make sure the classroom becomes an inclusive environment, and fostering respect for all ethnicities in one's classroom.

11. Gay relationships present a different dynamic and rarely receive attention in studies that reflect on family dynamics and the roles of women like those consulted in this study.

12. Lisa Jardine writes that Desdemona "becomes the patiently suffering spouse as she prepares herself for Othello's unjust punishment" (*Still Harping on Daughters* 184). Similarly, Dash describes Desdemona as "tamed in the crucible of marriage" (103), further explaining that her tragedy involves "a slow loss of confidence in the strength of the self, always with the aim of adjusting to marriage" (104). Even though these observations were made in the 1980s, I refer to them here since they helped form the Shakespearean feminist critical tradition of the 1990s, which views Shakespeare and his male characters as oppressive. Mulherin and Frost's depiction of Desdemona supports this vein of criticism.

13. See Act I, Scene iii.

14. After seeing Desdemona dead, Gratiano exclaims: "I am glad thy father's dead:/ Thy match was mortal to him, and pure grief/ Shore his old thread in twain" (V.ii.240-242).

15. This scene is also indicative of the level of violence in Othello and Desdemona's marriage: "The fact that Othello

strikes his wife in public implies a more advanced level of violence" (Craig 47-48). The violence and how in turn Desdemona comes to represent the plight of battered women in Britain are discussed in detail below.

16. As Suzanne Model and Gene Fisher argue, based on the 1990 census "British attitudes towards Black-White unions are more favourable than American.... About 20 per cent more Americans than Britons disapproved of such relationships" (733). Similarly, interracial relationships were viewed as positive developments concerning relationships between races: As the South African writer Mark Mathabane argues, "Interracial couples have an important role to play in the improvement of race relations... They know firsthand the importance of Blacks and Whites knowing each other as individuals rather than through stereotypes and half-truths" (Norment 26).

17. See, in particular, Othello's soliloquy at the opening of Act V for an example of his personal struggle over killing his wife (V.i.1-22).

18. As reported in London's *The Independent*, three other women won their appeals, and "Pamela Sainsbury, who strangled her violent husband, and June Scotland, who battered hers to death, were given probation. Elizabeth Line, a former nun who killed a violent husband, also received a non-custodial sentence" (Mills).

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