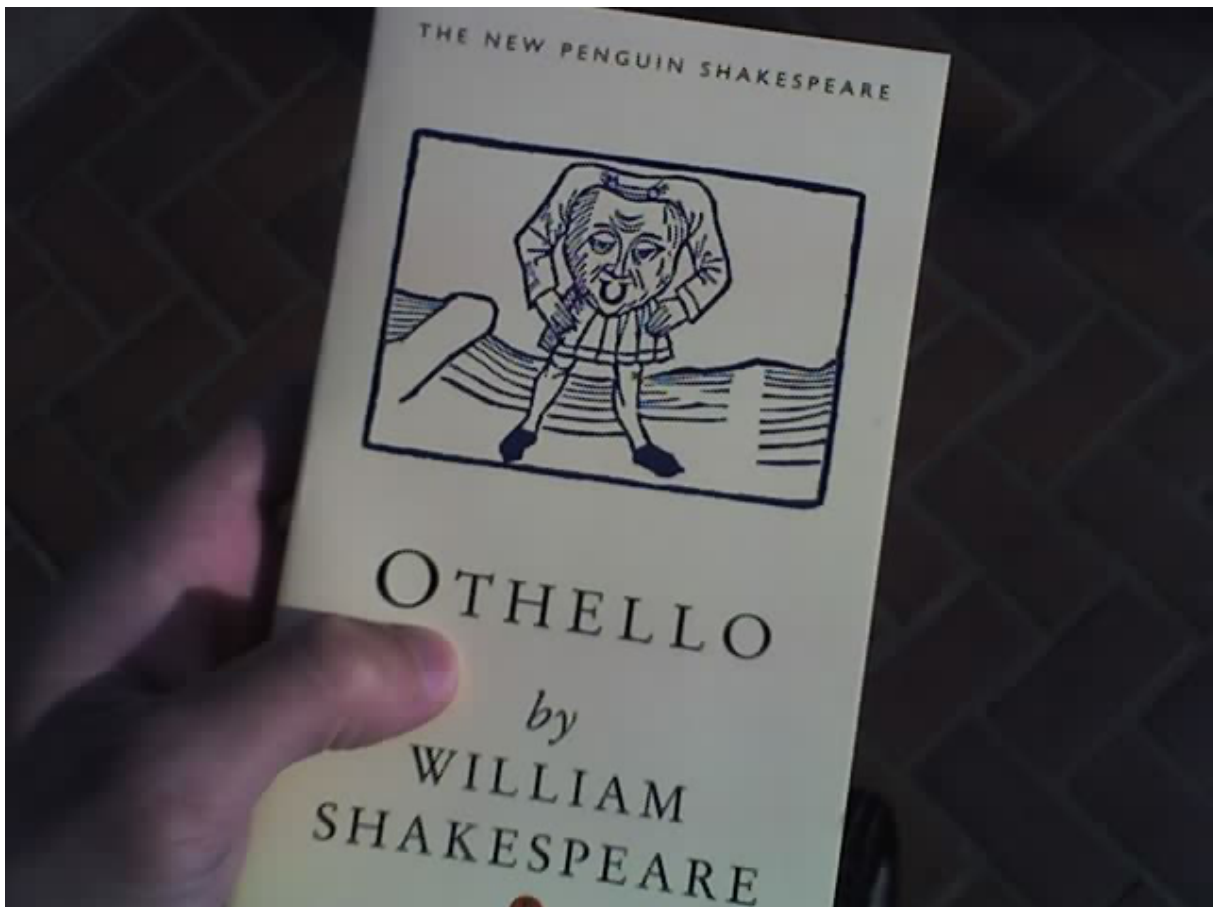


RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Note
No, It Wasn't About Love:
Teaching Geoffrey Sax's *Othello*

by Boyda Johnstone



SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO PROGRAM VIA WIKIMEDIA.ORG

An unarmed Black man is murdered in his home by a crew of white cops, and the streets have erupted in protest. Meanwhile, the white police commissioner is caught on tape making lewd and blatantly racist comments about the new official policy to diversify the police force, and is subsequently fired. After the Black officer who quelled the most recent riot by calling for “justice under the law” is propelled into the position of police commissioner, the white officer who was next in line is consumed with jealousy and turns to white supremacist online forums to plot out his revenge, beginning by doxxing the new commissioner’s white wife and later convincing him that she’s cheating on him. Things spiral, and yet another shallow attempt at reforming the structural rot of the carceral system proves disastrous and ineffectual.

This story could have been written in 2022; indeed, a version of this feels like it is playing out on the streets every day. But, instead, it’s the 2001 creation of British television director Geoffrey Sax, screenwriter Andrew Davies, and our old pal William Shakespeare.¹ Readers may have recognized some of the contours of *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, who is psychologically poisoned by his friend and confidante Iago into believing that his new wife, Desdemona, is cheating on him. Sax’s adaptation, a little-known made-for-TV movie with a haunting original musical score by Debbie Wiseman, is a rewarding teaching companion to concentrated study of the play, transposing the action from Venice into the modern streets of London while retaining fertile (though sometimes pleasingly hidden) elements of the original plot. The best Shakespeare adaptations, in my estimation, display calculated respect for the original creation while offering enough fresh material for emergent debate, encouraging a dialogic relationship between text and production. This film achieves this balance perfectly. While nothing can make the ending *not* deeply disturbing and some content warnings may be required for the use of the N-word and for some explicit sexual content as well as domestic violence, it works well in my first-year Introduction to Literature classroom at the majority Black-and-Brown public community college at the City University of New York where I teach. At BMCC I encounter a wide range of familiarities with Shakespeare: some students have acted in school plays and been reading his work since middle school; others have scarcely heard his name. After we spend weeks wading through the scenes, using more conventional video productions as aids to comprehension along the way, Sax’s modern language film serves as a refreshing reward for students who—unfortunately enough—immediately recognize the contextual circumstances, some due to personal experience having been harassed by the police.

The film’s fiery streets and polarized online spaces (personally, I was shocked Nazi digital forums existed in 2001), standing in for the military setting of the original, offer students a natural opening into the film, and once the revenge plot begins to unfold they experience the pleasure of identifying overlap and subtle parallels. A handout I distribute for consultation during viewing encourages such analytic shifts: I ask students to fill out individual profiles of the play’s filmic counterparts (“how is each character similar to the character we find in Shakespeare? How are they different? Can you find specific moments from the film and

play to back up your claims?”). While the motivations of Ben Jago (for Iago) are much clearer in the film than in the play, his character—played by the impish and charismatic Christopher Eccleston of *Doctor Who* fame—performs the same machinations of keenly sliding into people’s trust, sometimes with the aid of alcohol and often using calculated deflections (“nothing to worry about...probably”), and stoking John Othello’s jealousy through “ocular proof”—here both vivid language and suggestive photographs. Ben also breaks the fourth wall by speaking directly into the camera and enticing viewers into his version of the narrative, as in Iago’s characteristic monologues (“And what’s he then that says I play the villain? / When this advice is free I give and honest”). As in the play, Othello woos Dessie (for Desdemona) with stories of his past life, but here realizes he doesn’t know much about hers and this lack of knowledge spurs suspicions of her ongoing sluttishness. A silk robe loosely stands in for the strawberry-dotted handkerchief, donned after an accident by a drunken Michael Cass (for Cassio) who has been hired as a guard for Dessie, and who develops a crush on her with the prodding of Ben. The realm of dreams and the imagination performs the same function of torturing Othello with the fabricated notion of Dessie’s infidelity, and there is some intimation of Ben’s homosexual regard for Othello, corresponding to queer interpretations of the play. The question of whether Dessie/Desdemona is at all guilty of a wandering gaze is debatable here just as in the original, sparking spirited debates in the classroom over whether John Othello’s suspicions are even remotely justified.

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Adaptations of *Othello* throughout the centuries have suffered from various racist reenvisionings, chiefly involving black- and brownface. While studying the play, our class reviews this problematic history, analyzes the nuances of racialized terminology in the play, and considers how race intersects with gender and religion in the seventeenth century. After learning about such dispiriting performance history, it’s refreshing to engage with an adaptation that confronts structural racism and violence directly, with a compelling Black actor (Eamonn Walker) playing the lead. Moreover, some of John Othello’s paranoia is positioned within the context of generational trauma stemming from the slave trade. In a powerful dinner scene whose corollary would be the moment in Act 4 when Othello strikes Desdemona in front of Lodovico, John answers questions about his family heritage stemming from St. Lucia and North Africa and describes, pointing to LuLu (for the play’s Emilia), how “your people brought my people over there to work and die as slaves on the plantations.” As his audience of three white people becomes increasingly uncomfortable, he discloses that he used to want to be white, and claims his people only got the “leftovers” once they sought out a new life in England, his logic preempting Ben Jago’s later accusation that “you took what was mine.” This, in concert

with the unraveling court case that has lost its key witness who corroborated the racist nature of the murder, means that Othello's rage runs deeper than jealous sentiments about his wife, and opens questions about how to deal with injustice that remains unresolved over centuries.

One wishes that such a film did not continue to strike so close to home twenty years after its production, let alone 400 years after the play it is based on. The shots of the street riots—"mob rule" in the words of the previous commissioner—are uncannily resonant with recent protests in Ferguson, New York, Minneapolis, Baltimore, Kenosha, and so many other places in a country that continues to pour money into policing and incarceration rather than addressing unmet community needs that give rise to desperation and crime in the first place. As we continue to diversify our syllabi, offset the canon's reliance on dead white guys such as Shakespeare himself, and serve the needs of a student population that is experiencing higher degrees of inequality and precarity than ever, Geoffrey Sax's *Othello* helps engage students in debates over if and when a violent response is justified, the relationship between external affairs and mental health, how the media processes and publicizes issues of race and racism, to what extent Shakespeare's plays can or should be bent to fit modern contexts, and the ways some things have improved but others deteriorated over the centuries. The film also reminds us to fight for meaningfully structural rather than shallow cosmetic changes, in our institutions as well as our security apparatus.

"It was about love, that's what you've got to understand. Don't talk to me about race. Don't talk to me about politics. It was love. Simple as that." The falsehood of Ben Jago's deeply ambiguous words is increasingly apparent by the end of the film. Or perhaps it is about love, but an entirely different kind of love than the distorted version that plays out in this tragedy—love for a community rather than an individual.

NOTE

1. Sax, Geoffrey, director. *Othello*. London Weekend Television, 2001.

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