The American Story and Stage of *Othello*:

The Black Man in Three Nineteenth-century Appropriations of Shakespeare's *Othello*

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Introduction

In the nineteenth century, the works of William Shakespeare were at a widespread peak of popularity in America. The plays were recited, studied, performed and adapted throughout the country and actors from England even moved to the United States wanting a piece of the Shakespeare pie (Levine 37). Early in the nineteenth century, English actor and comedian John Bernard even noted that,

> if an actor were unemployed, want and shame were not before him: he had merely to visit some town in the interior where no theatre existed, but 'readings' were permitted; and giving recitations from Shakespeare and Sterne, his pockets in a night or two were amply replenished. (Levine 37-38)

After the Civil War period, the interest in Shakespeare did not fade. George Makepeace Towle noticed that, after having spent some time in England and returning in 1870, "Shakespearean dramas [were] more frequently played and more popular in America than in England" (Levine 37). The German-American writer and translator Karl Knortz also demonstrates awareness of this phenomenon when he said,

> Yes, there is certainly no land on the whole earth in which Shakespeare and the Bible are held in such high esteem as in this same America, so much criticized for its love of money; should one enter a blockhouse situated in the far west, and should the dweller there exhibit very definitely evidences of backwoods life, yet has he nearly always furnished a small room in which to spend his few leisure hours, in which the Bible and in most cases a cheap edition of the works of the poet Shakespeare are nearly always found. (Levine 38)

The nineteenth-century American bardolatry was so booming that Shakespeare became a source of inspiration for playwrights, poets and authors who carry an important role

in the canon of nineteenth-century American literature. Indeed, authors like Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Mark Twain, often allude to Shakespeare in their work. What is especially interesting is that Shakespeare's plays were so frequently performed in America that literary works and stage adaptations were, besides reactions to the primary texts, often also reactions to other stage appropriations.

The nineteenth century in America thus was a time in which Shakespeare was celebrated and a popular source for entertainment. It was additionally a time of social instability in which the Civil War was either approaching, ongoing or in its aftermath. Even after slavery was abolished in 1865, the African American race was considered inferior and white supremacy remained present in society and was supported by scientific racism (Collins; Desmet). When studying the appropriation of Shakespeare in nineteenth-century America, the historical context is very important because it greatly influenced the on-stage and literary appropriations of the original texts. This is particularly the case with Shakespeare's *Othello,* a play that can easily be read and appropriated while incorporating the notions of racism of the time, as it features an interracial couple: Othello and Desdemona.

The tragedy of *Othello, The Moor of Venice* tells the story of the war hero Othello, who marries the much desired Desdemona, the daughter of a Venetian senator named Brabantio. Iago comes between the couple as a complex figure who is jealous of the Moor and also angry with him for not promoting him. He designs a devious plan of revenge, suggesting that Desdemona is unfaithful to Othello with his friend Cassio; manipulatively planting seeds of jealousy in Othello. The play ends tragically as Othello starts to believe Iago's lies and kills his wife. When Othello later learns of Desdemona's innocence, he takes his own life.

The issue of race is a central theme in *Othello.* Othello is the only person of dark complexion in the play and it makes him the 'other.' One possible reading of the play is that

the tragic ending of the play tries to say that Othello succumbs to the racism of the homogeneously white community and lives up to the stereotype that is placed on him. However, the play can also be read from another perspective as the idea that Othello starts to live up to a stereotype in the end of the story could be interpreted as him returning to his innate character. Thus, the play can be read as being about racism, or read as a racist play.

Othello's placement in America has been discussed by several scholars. Tilden Edelstein for example has written a much acclaimed historical account on the portrayal of *Othello* in America and the issue of Othello's ethnicity on different American stages in different times. Kris Collins has also written on the dichotomous image of ethnicity of Othello on different stages and specifically focuses on its relation to the American racist environment of the nineteenth century. By studying three very different adaptations of *Othello*, an image of American culture of the time can be constructed as well as the way literature and stage is used as a tool of expression in connection to the time's social environment.

The appropriations of *Othello* that shall be discussed are William Gillmore Simms' short story "Caloya, or the Loves of the Driver" published in 1845, the anonymous play *Desdemonum: An Ethiopian Burlesque in Three Scenes* from 1874, and Emily Dickinson's poem "The Malay – took the Pearl –," which was written in 1862. The short story by William Gilmore Simms and its relation to *Othello* has been discussed by Christy Desmet. *Desdemonum* is oftentimes mentioned as being a good example of the genre of blackface parody and *Othello* Burlesques, however, the play is not analyzed in detail by scholars. Emily Dickinson's poem is discussed as an appropriation of *Othello* By Páraic Finnerty in his book *Emily Dickinson's Shakespeare.*

This paper seeks to discuss these appropriations of *Othello* in further detail and answer the following question: how is male blackness represented in three nineteenth-century

American stage and literary appropriations of Shakespeare's *Othello,* and how can each representation be connected to the century's racist environment? Additionally, how have nineteenth-century stage productions of *Othello* influenced these appropriations and led to further adaptations?

Chapter 1

"Caloya, or the Loves of the Driver"

The novelist, historian, and poet William Gillmore Simms, born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina, can be said to have had a close affinity with the works of William Shakespeare. This emerges in his poetry and fictional works that draw on Shakespeare, as well as a volume called *A Supplement to the Plays of William Shakespeare,* in which he provides the reader with elaborate introductions and notes to seven plays. In the short story "Caloya, or the Loves of the Driver" Simms has appropriated Shakespeare's *Othello* and has adapted the characters and plot to fit his environment of the Antebellum American South. For "Caloya, or the Loves of the Driver" Simms received strong criticism from his contemporaries, such as the writer Walt Whitman and the editor of *Magnolia,* P.C. Pendleton. Pendleton even found it necessary to censure Simms' work due to its crude nature and the supposed immorality of the story. In "A Letter to the Editor from the Writer of 'Caloya, or the Loves of the Driver,'" written in 1841, Simms, on the other hand, states that the story contains "nothing […] that can, in the slightest degree, prove hurtful to the delicacy of the purest mind" and instead argues that "a writer is moral only in proportion to his truthfulness" (*Reader* 248). In his letter he defends the criticized coarseness of the short story by invoking great names such as Homer, Chaucer, Scott and above all Shakespeare, comparing their "truthfulness" (*Reader* 248) with his own work. Additionally, he says that he wrote the story because of his "curiosity […] to know how our fellow beings fare in other aspects than our own, and under other forms of humanity, however inferior" and agrees with Pendleton that "Caloya, or the Loves of the Driver" is "a tale of low life" (*Reader* 249). The so-called "inferior" (*Reader* 249) characters Simms refers to are the appropriated characters of Othello and especially Iago, who have both suffered an alteration in their ethnicities.

After publication in a magazine, “Caloya, or the Loves of the Driver” was published in the collective work *The Wigwam and the Cabin* in 1845, which is compiled of thirteen short stories. “Caloya, or the Loves of the Driver” is set in 1820s Charleston on a plantation of a naive young gentleman called Gillison. The main protagonist of the story, a black slave called Mingo, is introduced as being overly confident and even arrogant as it is said that he “[treads] the earth very much as its lord” (Simms 366). When a group of Native Americans settle on the property of Gillison, Mingo, who has a position of authority on the plantation, sets out to send them on their way, against the wishes of his master. At the camp of the Catawba Indians, Mingo encounters what can only be described as the other “low life” (*Reader* 249) in Simms’ story: the always-intoxicated old Indian chief called Knuckles. When Mingo and Knuckles start to quarrel and knives are drawn, the third main character enters the story: the beautiful, and much younger, wife of Knuckles called Caloya. Mingo, who is permanently unfaithful to his own wife, Diana, is instantly drawn to the woman and is determined to steal her from Knuckles. In the end, Mingo accidentally overdoses Knuckles with whiskey in an attempt to convince him to trade his wife for more alcohol, after which Mingo is sent packing by his master Gillison. The story ends on a happy note as Caloya marries the much more suitable and younger Chickawa.

The characters in “Caloya, or the Loves of the Driver” seem to closely parallel the main characters from *Othello*. Knuckles is explicitly linked to Othello by Simms, as he describes him as being “certainly quite as jealous of [his young wife] as Othello was of his” (Simms 379), and later he is even named a “Catawba Othello” (Simms 410). Naturally, the wife of the “Catawba Othello,” Caloya, is the Desdemona in the story and is presented as even more virtuous than Othello’s wife when it is said: “[she] was as shy as the most modest wife could have shown herself, and no Desdemona could have been more certainly true to her” (Simms 378). Mingo is not explicitly linked to a Shakespearean character in the text like

Caloya and Knuckles are. However, it is clear that he resembles the character of the devious Iago in his attempts to come between the couple. Chickawa arguably represents Cassio, as he is the character Knuckles is jealous of throughout the story. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the motivations of the characters have become one-dimensional in the appropriation, leaving out many complexities that are present in the original text.

Interestingly, the ethnicities of the three main characters are no longer in accordance with Shakespeare's *Othello* in Simms' appropriation. These changes accentuate the racial pecking order but also the connection between racial stereotypes and certain character traits of the appropriated characters. Additionally, the ethnicity connected to Othello was, and still is, interpreted in different ways. It can be said that in nineteenth-century America, the ethnicity of Othello became appropriated in order to fit the notions of racial hierarchy present in society (Edelstein; Desmet). To understand this, it is important to take the various kinds of productions of *Othello* into account.

Othello was one of the most popular plays in nineteenth-century America (Desmet; Collins; Edelstein). Edelstein even claims that *Othello* was popular "nowhere more than in the south," and additionally, most performances were in Charleston (Edelstein 359). Simms thus was most likely not only inspired by the original play by William Shakespeare but also by the appropriations he saw of the original. According to several scholars, Shakespearean performances were "split into two categories": high culture and low culture (*Texts* 354). While low culture performances were represented by burlesques, minstrels and travesties, which parodied African Americans through blackface and caricature, high culture performances in the time Simms wrote his story would not tolerate dark-skinned Othellos and went through a time known as the Bronze Age of Othello.

In the article "White-Washing the Black-a-Moor," Collins points out that in a time in which scholars such as Lombroso, Morton and Agassiz introduced scientific racism, it

became impossible for American spectators and editors to connect "Othello's tragic hero status and his blackness." Collins further argues that a "black hero was an oxymoron—a contradiction in cultural codes," which resulted in a process of "re-coloring" Othello (Collins 88-89). In the article "*Confession; or the Blind Heart*: An Antebellum *Othello,"* Desmet claims that audiences "by the 1830s and 1840s definitely favored Othellos of lighter skin color" and goes on to describe images of Othello from the time as "tawny," "swarthy" and "orientalized" (Desmet 5); while Collins describes the ethnicities of Othello from the Antebellum period as "Arabic, Oriental, Indian, in fact any other race other than the African negro was acceptable" (Collins 91).

While Simms has, in accordance with contemporary stage conventions, disconnected the African American race from his Othello, the representation of caricatured blackness in Mingo suggests that Simms was also influenced by the low culture performances of blackface shows of *Othello.* It seems that Simms has taken the ridiculed image of Othello from burlesque performances and has transferred it to Mingo. By making Mingo black, Simms places him below Knuckles in a hierarchy in which the Native Americans are positioned above African Americans. On this hierarchy Simms makes an explicit statement in the story when he says,

> That [the black man] lives upon the fat of the land you may readily believe, since he is proverbially much fatter himself than the people of any other class. […] He is as hardy and cheerful as he is fat, and, but for one thing, it might be concluded safely that his condition was very far before that of the North American Indian – his race is more prolific, and, by increasing rather than diminishing, multiply (sic) necessarily, and unhappily the great sinfulness of mankind (Simms 411).

It seems that Simms' own voice is in tune with his narrator's. Simms, being fiercely pro-slavery, probably read Othello as a racist play and shows this in his creation by describing African Americans as the ultimate evildoers who pass their flaws on to following generations.

The narrative voice also calls Mingo "imperious" (Simms 371) as well as "domineering" and "insolent" (Simms 372). Perhaps Simms is trying to dramatically illustrate the danger of the black man that is not held on a short leash or even freed.

The sexuality of a black man could in addition be considered a white man's fear that is actualized in Mingo as his lust for female contact is not merely directed towards Caloya. In High Burlesque fashion, Simms compares Mingo, the black slave, to Homer's Trojan prince as he writes, "[Mingo] penetrated the neighbouring estates with the excursive and reckless nature of the Prince of Troy, and, more than once, in consequence of this habit, had the several plantations rung with wars, scarcely less fierce, though less protracted than those of Ilium" (Simms 373-374). Mingo, as an enslaved character with relatively much freedom, is illustrated as abusing this freedom in order to satisfy his sexual appetite in the surrounding estates. His lust seems to be insatiable, however, as the women he surrounds himself with have "lost the charm of novelty in his sight" and he "was still yearning for newer conquests" (Simms 374). His new conquest is embedded with the white man's fear for miscegenation as he points all of his lust toward a woman of another race, Caloya. The miscegenous relationship with the Native American Caloya that Mingo seeks to engage in stands in for the real fear: a black man with a white woman.

In the book *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers* by Joane Nagel, white men, both in Antebellum and Postbellum America, were fearful of black men's supposed hypersexuality, especially concerning "white female vulnerability" (Nagel 108-112). While white men had engaged in interracial relations with their black female slaves for decades, Simms displaces this to the black man in the text. In

addition, Collins claims that miscegenation was "unthinkable" and considered a "sexual deviance" and therefore it was common to "reduce the burden of miscegenation from *Othello*" by making him light-skinned on the stage (Collins 92). By making both Knuckles and Caloya Native American, Simms has taken away the interracial element of the relationship in his appropriation of Othello and Desdemona. However, the threat of black hypersexuality and miscegenation remains present in Mingo, who attempts to engage himself in an interracial relationship with Caloya. Because the desire and lust of a black slave for a white woman would be "unthinkable," the lusting after a Native American by the black slave can be considered an act of displacement. What the text additionally suggests is that the "novelty" of the Indian woman will soon wear off and the black man will subsequently direct his sexuality toward the helpless White woman.

It can be concluded that in William Gillmore Simms' "Caloya, or the Loves of the Driver," Simms has not only appropriated Shakespeare's *Othello*, but also the *Othello* performances he must have witnessed in Charleston. In addition, the altered ethnicities of Iago and Othello are no doubt influenced by the dichotomous performances on stage. It can also be said that the adaptation gives a good reflection of racial hierarchy in Simms' mind. By changing Iago's Caucasian ethnicity to Mingo's African ethnicity, Simms associates Mingo with historical stereotypes and it becomes clear that Simms views Mingo, and with him the whole of the African race, as inferior and also transfers the white man's anxieties about the loose sexuality of the –free – black man onto Mingo.

Chapter 2

Desdemonum: an Ethiopian Burlesque in Three scenes

The Shakespeare parody, which was predominantly targeted at the white working class, was a highly popular kind of staging Shakespeare throughout nineteenth-century America (Collins; *Othello*; Edelstein). The parodies were presented as musical shows in the form of burlesques, travesties or minstrel shows. The shows were known for their cross-dressed characters and blackface actors ridiculing high culture, but also attempted to reestablish a hierarchy in an unsettling time. Nineteenth-century American parodies of Shakespeare's *Othello* include titles such as *The Boor of Vengeance*, *Old Fellow, Dars De Money* and *Desdemonum: an Ethiopian Burlesque in Three Scenes.* The latter, as the title suggests, is a short performance, anonymously written in 1874 for a New York stage. The image of the front cover of *Desdemonum* (*Fig 1.*) introduces the caricatured image of the savage, hypersexual and cruel black man, showing the disproportionally large head of a black man with woolly hair and a smirk on his face, emerging from under the white stage curtain which arguably has the appearance of a woman's skirt.

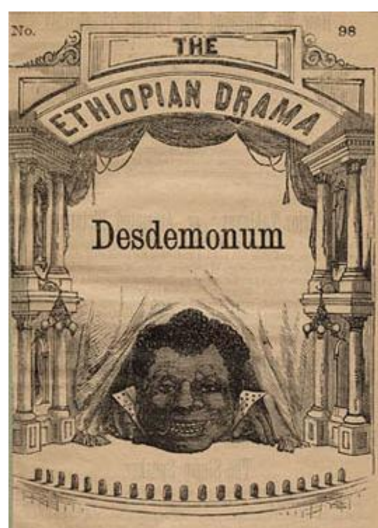

Fig. 1. Front Cover from *Desdemonum: An Ethiopian Burlesque in Three Scenes. (Desdemonum* 359)

While the plot of the burlesque is immediately recognizable as an *Othello* appropriation, the adaptations made to the original in the form of omissions, additions and appropriations are an immediate representation of racist expectations and the burlesque tradition of the depiction of people of African descent and also of interracial relationships involving black men. The names of the characters in *Desdemonum* have been slightly adapted so every name ends in –um. The character of Othello, however, remains the 'other,' not only in his skin color but also in the lonely suffix in his adapted name Oteller.

When reading the few pages of the play, it becomes apparent that the original plot and characters have been highly simplified. Like in Simms' "Caloya, or the Loves of the Driver" the motives of the characters seem to have been boiled down to a few simple lines. While much has been omitted, the first scene of the play is an interesting addition to the plot as it concerns the elopement of Desdemonum and Oteller. In *Othello,* the actual elopement scene is left out and the reader or spectator only becomes aware of the elopement through the characters of Iago, Brabantio and Roderigo in the first scene. In *Othello,* the manipulative anti-hero Iago is introduced before Othello and Desdemona take the stage; while in *Desdemonum* the audience is first acquainted with Oteller, helping down Desdemonum from her bedroom window at night, similar to the elopement scene of Jessica and Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice*. By making the actual elopement more explicitly present in the play, the so-called thievery of Othello becomes a more centralized theme of warning in the adaptation.

In the succeeding scene, which is a parallel to Act 1 Scene 3 of *Othello,* Brabantium confronts Oteller in a courtroom. In the article "The Function of Brabantio," Arnold argues that Brabantio's accusations targeted at Othello function to bring out the convincing declarations of love from both Desdemona and Othello, which are essential to the story (Arnold 54). In the adaptation, Brabantium serves a similar purpose as he makes accusations targeted at Oteller, saying he has "bewitched her" and "played de black art on her"

(*Desdemonum* 363). Unlike Desdemona and Othello, however, Desdemonum and Oteller do not attempt to convince the spectators of their romance after the accusations of Brabantium and simply announce that they are indeed married. This alters the dynamics of the play as the focus is put on the accusations of theft instead of on the love they share.

Additionally, it can be said that the Duke of Venice respects Othello in Shakespeare's play and defends him both from Iago's use of sexual and animalistic imagery (*Othello* 1.1.90, 113) and against Brabantio's accusations of their relationship going "against all rules of nature" (*Othello* 1.3.103).The Duke does so by saying to Brabantio "Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (*Othello* 1.3.293). This is important because the Duke holds a position of power and seems to approve of the match. In scene two of *Desdemonum,* a Judge has taken the place of the Duke and, in contrast to the character in *Othello,* the Judge does not take Oteller's side and even calls to "Fothch in dat hulky nig" (*Desdemonum* 362) and gives no response to Brabantium's offensive remarks. Unlike Othello, Oteller receives no support from other characters which makes accusations even more serious, with the murderous outcome as the ultimate confirmation of racist notions.

The offensive remarks of Brabantium are, as said before, similar to accusations Brabantio makes against Othello of enchantment and theft. However, what stands out is that Brabantium additionally connects Oteller to Jamaican slavery in *Desdemonum* when he says "send him to de Island, whar such fellers ought to be" and refers to him as being a "Jamaica nig" (*Desdemonum* 363). According to Hall, "Several [parodies] associate Othello with foreign slavery in different ways, often making him Haitian or Jamaican and thereby linking him to well-known cases of Caribbean slave rebellion" (*Texts* 358). Oteller is also connected to combat when he himself says, "when fightin's round I'm der/Knock de chip from off my shoulder, and for bloody work prepare!" (*Desdemonum* 362). Othello is also often linked to fights and wars. However, these wars are presented in the text as being noble and only pointed

at a mutual enemy. The connection to the Jamaican Slave Revolts made in *Desdemonum*, in which black people stood up against their white rulers, stands in contrast to this noble fighting of the original Moor. Thus, while Othello is portrayed as a war hero in Shakespeare's play, he is depicted as a rebel and a troublemaker in *Desdemonum.*

By connecting Othello to Jamaican slavery, it can thus be argued that Oteller is no longer truly the Moor from Venice and instead is brought closer to home for the American audience. By doing so, both Shakespeare's original play and high cultural appropriations, which portray moderate and light skinned moors, are appropriated. At the same time, the Caucasian race is placed above the African race in the burlesque by repeatedly calling Oteller "nigger" (*Desdemonum* 362) or "nig" (*Desdemonum* 362-363) . Hall interestingly states that "[blackface minstrelsy] allowed white working classes to carve out a space for themselves that distinguished them from their social superiors and from other, mostly racialized, groups deemed socially inferior" (*Texts* 356-357). This is indeed the case in *Desdemonum,* which is a reaction to high culture performances of *Othello* and ridicules their toning down of Othello's ethnicity, and at the same time it attempts to marginalize the African race.

In the book *Othello, Texts and Contexts,* Hall also states that "[Desdemona's] desire […] is heightened and mocked on the minstrel stage" (*Texts* 357). In *Desdemonum,* carrying the name of the female protagonist, this is very much present. In the first few lines, Desdemonum declares that "Since burnt-cork am de fashion, I'll not be behind" (*Desdemonum* 360)[1] and thereby presenting her affections as subject to fashion. In the second scene, Oteller says that "De gal, you see, got struck wid me" (*Desdemonum* 362), which, instead of an extensive statement of their profound love, presents a shallow infatuation. Not only is she ridiculed for her lapse of judgment in marrying a black man, the burlesque also

[1] burnt-cork refers to the dark make-up used by light skinned actors for black face performances.

makes a point about female sexuality in general. About this, Hall says that "urbanizing forces that galvanized blackface supported an ideal of white femininity, one of asexual purity […] cloistered in the home" (*Texts* 357) and Collins speaks of this as advocating "the repression of white female sexual prerogative" (Collins 87). Taking into account nineteenth-century notions on black men's hypersexuality, fears of miscegenation in a time of scientific racism, and the protection of female chastity, Desdemona was unlikely to be read as the embodiment of innocence and purity in her elopement with a black man, which explains her position of ridicule on the burlesque stage.

In the third and final scene, Iagum's part in the story is introduced as he finds the "han'kerchum" and sets out to "convey it/straightway to Michael Cashum" (*Desdemonum* 363), after which he says, "Oteller/I'll pump so full of stories he'll be jealous./Sack Mr. Cashum, and I'll git his place" (*Desdemonum* 364). This is the only trickery of Iagum present in the play and actual confrontation with Oteller or planting the seeds of jealousy is not present, nor is any further motivation of Iagum's deceit. It can thus be argued that whereas Iago in *Othello* is the ultimate anti-hero, constantly feeding Othello lies and giving psychopathic soliloquies full of vengeance, hate and jealousy, in this burlesque Iagum only deceives Oteller so he will give him Cashum's military position. As the scene quickly transitions into the killing scene, maximum focus is put on Oteller's irrationality and violence, making him the villain of the play instead of Iagum while in the original play Othello was "one not easily jealous" (*Othello* 5.2.355). It has been suggested by Edelstein that parodies of *Othello* "assured the audience of the absurdity of racial intermarriage" (Edelstein 363). In addition to ridiculing both Desdemonum and Oteller for their interracial relationship, the sudden murderous ending of *Desdemonum*, in which it is suggested that Iagum only shares a small part of the blame, seems to warn women of the supposed violent nature of the black man.

In short, the burlesque play *Desdemonum* is an interesting adaptation of *Othello.* It provides the audience with an oversimplified plot and at the same time it clearly lays out and highlights the absurdity and the danger in the characters of Oteller and Desdemonum and of their scandalous interracial relationship. Like Simms' short story, the play attempts to establish a racial hierarchy and additionally mocks upper class by adapting Shakespeare and adapting the stage.

Chapter 3

"The Malay –took the Pearl–"

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1830 and is one of the most famous, and often considered one of the greatest, poets of nineteenth-century America. In her lifetime, Dickinson wrote more than 1700 poems about life, love, religion, nature, death and friendship, which are considered pioneering in their modernism. The majority of her poems were left unpublished until after her death in 1886 and during her life she was mostly known for her peculiar unmarried and secluded lifestyle. Many scholars interpret her love poems and letters to her female friends as homosexually charged, an idea which was first introduced by Rebecca Patterson in *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson.* On that account, it has often been argued that the bond between Emily Dickinson and Susan Dickinson, who was married to Emily's brother Austin, was homosexual, with their extensive letter correspondence providing proof of their intense intimacy (Pollak; McIntosh; Comment). To Susan, Emily wrote: "With the exception of Shakespeare, you have told me of more knowledge than any one living" (McIntosh 1295-1296). It seems that in the poem "The Malay – took the Pearl –," which she wrote in 1862, both Shakespeare's Othello, which was "one of Emily Dickinson's favorite plays" ("We Think" 81), and Emily's desires for a woman play an important role. Dickinson frequently quoted Shakespeare in her letters to her friends. However, as Elizabeth Petrino argues in "Allusion, Echo, and Literary Influence in Emily Dickinson," references to Shakespeare in her poetry are often made implicitly and have therefore "often gone unnoticed" (Petrino 81). Indeed, even though the poem is extensively discussed by many scholars with regard to Dickinson's sexuality, the poem "The Malay – took the Pearl –" is only connected to Shakespeare's *Othello* by Páraic Finnerty in his book *Emily Dickinson's Shakespeare*. After a close reading it becomes clear that Dickinson has indeed cleverly woven her interpretation of the text and its imagery into her creation.

The poem tells the story of a Malay who takes a precious Pearl, which the speaker of the poem wanted as well but did not feel 'worthy' of, or enough 'sanctified,' to take it:

> The Malay – took the Pearl –
>
> Not – I – the Earl –
>
> I – feared the Sea – too much
>
> Unsanctified – to touch –
>
> Praying that I might be
>
> Worthy – the Destiny –
>
> The Swarthy fellow swam –
>
> And bore my Jewel – Home –
>
> Home to the Hut! What lot
>
> Had I – the Jewel – got –
>
> Borne on a Dusky Breast –
>
> I had not deemed a Vest
>
> Of Amber – fit –
>
> The Negro never knew
>
> I – wooed it – too –
>
> To gain, or be undone –
>
> Alike to Him – One – (*Emily* 171)

The Earl and the Malay thus desire the same object: the white Pearl. When reading the final lines of the poem, however, it becomes clear that the pearl is not simply a treasure found in

the sea. Instead it is a metaphor for a woman which the Earl says he has “wooed” just like the Malay.

With this imagery, the poem alludes to Shakespeare’s *Othello* in which Desdemona is also connected to a pearl when Othello says that he, “Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away/Richer than all his tribe” in the final scene of the play (*Othello* 5.2. 357). Othello draws a comparison between himself killing the precious Desdemona, and a ‘base Indian’ who discards a pearl. Emily Dickinson alludes to this comparison made by Othello by using the imagery of the Indian and the pearl in her poem.

In the poem, pearly whiteness is contrasted with several images of darkness. The rival of the Earl is first called “The Malay,” but as the poem unfolds, there seems to be a racial slippage as he later on is called a “Swarthy fellow,” “dusky” and finally a “Negro.” As Finnerty argues, the racial slippage shows Dickinson’s growing anger pointed at the man who takes the woman from the Earl (Emily 171). In addition to this analysis, it can be said that the darkening of ‘Malay’ to ‘Negro,’ as a way to express the increasing negativity, could make a point about the ethnicity of Othello on stage and in the reading of the original play. As the Earl’s anger grows, the light-skinned highbrow Othello –the ‘Malay’–, again, Othello was also depicted as ‘oriental’ in the Bronze Age (Collins; Desmet), becomes the coarse burlesque adaptation – the ‘Negro.’ Perhaps this is how Dickinson also read the original play by Shakespeare: Othello starts as light and noble and slips to being ‘base’ and dark as he kills his wife.

The imagery of the Sea in the poem makes another important point on Dickinson’s views on race and *Othello*. Vivian Pollak, in the book *Dickinson, The Anxiety of Gender,* claims that the Sea is the “poem’s most powerful emblem” and speculates that it could represent “the speaker’s unconscious or female sexuality” (Pollak 156). The sea, however, is also an important obstacle in *Othello*. In Act II Scene one, Othello crosses the Mediterranean

sea from Venice to Cyprus. In the scene, three gentlemen discuss the ferocious storm at sea, on which Othello heroically sails his ship. The First Gentleman claims that he "cannot 'twixt the heaven and the main" (*Othello* 2.1.3), saying that the tempest is so forceful it seems to fuse with the sky. The Second Gentleman provides similar imagery and says that "The chidden billow seems to pelt the clouds;/The wind-shaked surge, with high and monstrous mane,/Seems to cast water on the burning Bear/And quench the guards of th'ever-fixed Pole" (*Othello* 2.1.12-15). The sea is depicted as a deadly and 'monstrous' place and the storm seems to forebode the tragic ending of the play and Iago's treacherous manipulation; but, more importantly, this scene also emphasizes Othello's heroic crossing of this stormy sea.

When taking in mind the imagery of the dangerous sea, it can be said that the Earl in the poem is the coward while "The Swarthy Fellow" is less concerned with the dangers of crossing as he "swam –/and bore my Jewel – Home –." Perhaps this indicates that Dickinson reads Othello as a Noble Savage who is, unlike the Earl, first of all fearless of crossing this obstacle. In one analysis of the poem, it is claimed that "the Earl's masculinity is a poetic construct" in order to legitimize a love triangle between herself – the Earl, Susan – the Pearl, and Austin – the Malay (Leiter 188). Pollak confirms this and says that Dickinson has "[adopted] an aristocratic, European male persona" in the poem (Pollak 155). The poem is thus often discussed as being autobiographical and representing the struggle of Emily Dickinson in the love triangle (Polak; Leiter). In the poem, the Earl might admire the heroic crossing of the dangerous sea by Othello, or "the Swarthy Fellow," but, if the Earl is indeed a representation of Emily Dickinson, the Sea might additionally symbolize a taboo. The hypersexual burlesque Othello is eager to engage in this taboo whereas Dickinson is too reluctant and even fearful of entering in a lesbian relationship.

In addition, something Dickinson is not widely known for, but which is discussed by Betsy Erkella and Paula Bennett, shines through in this poem. Erkella calls it is her

"xenophobia" (Erkella 10) and Bennett her "casual" racism, typical of the time (Bennett 54). The racism presents itself in the poem in the 'taking' of the Pearl by the Malay, which it is suggested does not and should not belong to him because he cannot give the Pearl what she deserves and handles her carelessly. Erkella claims that "the poem […] appears to describe a historical situation in which others, specifically black others, are making gains, while the speaker, an aristocrat, is being 'undone'" (Erkkila 12). The fact that the poem suggests that the Malay is "making gains" (Erkkila 12) and takes the prize while being unworthy of it, can indeed be considered racist and also reflects the image of the black man from the parodies, such as Oteller in *Desdemonum,* who's 'theft' of the white woman is highlighted. Perhaps the poem even presents the black man as a hypersexual threat in the image of the Pearl on the "Dusky breast," which suggests an intimate scene.

To conclude, both Shakespeare's *Othello,* Dickinson's interpretation of the play and her confrontation with the staged versions seem to be embedded in "The Malay – took the Pearl –." The poem is an allusion to imagery present in Shakespeare's play and it additionally has been subjected to the general racist beliefs concerning black men and as represented in blackface Othellos. The Malay's ethnic shift to 'Negro' is an important indicator of Dickinson's racist notions as well as how *Othello* was read by Dickinson. While the Othello was read as an admirable character, fearlessly crossing the Sea, he ends up as what in Dickinson's time was seen as the lowest ethnicity according to scientific racist beliefs; a 'Negro,' who kills his own wife.

Conclusion

After closely studying “Caloya, or the Loves of the Driver,” *Desdemonum: an Ethiopian Burlesque in Three Scenes* and “The Malay –took the Pearl –,” several conclusions can be drawn about the representation of African ethnicity in these three nineteenth-century appropriations of Shakespeare’s *Othello.*

Firstly, it can be said that stage adaptations have contributed to a dichotomous image of Othello in the appropriations. This is especially visible in Simms’ story in which both the black caricature and the lighter skinned Native American from both stages are incorporated in the story. Additionally, this is also present in Dickinson’s poem, as she also includes both the diverse ethnicities which were read in Othello by higher culture –an oriental, ‘swarthy’ and ‘dusky’ skin color – and darkens the character to a burlesque ‘Negro’ as the Earl grows more angry.

Second, the toning down of Othello’s race in high-culture adaptations is also applied in Simms’ short story, but in more extreme terms as the factor of miscegenation is completely eliminated by making the Othello and Desdemona share the same skin color. Miscegenation and theft remain a threat coming from the Iago in the story, which is an act of displacement. In the “The Malay –took the Pearl –” this threat of miscegenation is also present and even becomes increasingly strong as the poem progresses. Likewise, the relationship between the Desdemona and Othello figures in *Desdemonum,* besides being an object of ridicule, serves as a warning against miscegenation and the Black man. Thus, the black man’s dangerous sexuality is present in *Desdemonum’s* Oteller, in Simms’ Mingo and in Dickinson’s ‘Negro’ and the noble and tragic hero of Shakespeare is transformed into a stealing and hypersexual threat.

It seems that in a time in which the racial hierarchy was fixed in terms of black inferiority and white supremacy, the race-theme in *Othello* has fascinated the authors discussed in this paper. Simms, Dickinson and the anonymous writer of *Desdemonum* appropriated the theme in order to fit their racial viewpoints and confirmed the racial hierarchy by highlighting Othello's supposed theft, sexual appetite or murder. The race of the appropriated Othello characters is thus used as a vehicle for the notions of a racist society, becoming both an object of laughter and for distress. Additionally, racial intermixing struck fear into the of heart of a racist society and this dominates each appropriation in the form of diminishing, disregarding, ridiculing or displacing the love between black and white. All in all, in the three nineteenth-century appropriations of *Othello*, the black man has become Roderigo's "thick-lips" (*Othello* 1.1.68), Iago's "lascivious Moor" (*Othello* 1.1.127) and Brabantio's "thief" (*Othello* 1.2.58).

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