

# Othello, Our First Black Hero:

The Reception and Staging History of Othello in England, the  
Netherlands and Portugal over Three Ages.

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## Introduction

“He was not of an age, but for all time!” declared Ben Johnson in the preface to William Shakespeare’s First Folio (Shakespeare 5). The ages following this statement proved Johnson right, for almost four centuries after Shakespeare’s death Shakespeare is considered one of the greatest playwrights in history. Moreover, as Clement Scott states: “Shakespeare wrote for all men, all times, all ages, all nations. He is the poet of humanity” (Scott 43). Over the centuries, Shakespeare and his works have become a global interest, and his canonical status is no longer limited to the English literature and culture alone. Shakespearean plays have been translated, adapted and performed in various languages and nations. As for example the play *Othello*, which has been popular and continuously performed in many countries ever since its first performance (Vaughan 94). It is considered one of Shakespeare’s, if not *the*, most popular play. However, *Othello* is also subjected to controversy as it is often viewed as a play with racist inclinations. The play itself has been considered racist, as it contains references to Othello such as “Barbary horse” and “the thick-lips” (Shakespeare 1.1.110, 66) Some believe it to portray a racist stereotypical image of a ‘savage’ African in the character of Othello. Moreover, the reactions to the play have been racist, as many opposed to the theme of miscegenation presented in the play in the marriage between the black Othello and white Desdemona. Also, there has been the racist view on the staging of *Othello*, as some critics argued that no leading role of a Shakespearean play should be portrayed by a Non-English, or nor Anglo-Saxon, actor (Poole 120). The title character Othello is generally considered to be the first black hero in Western literature and is still one of Shakespeare’s best known characters. Although other black characters had already been presented on the Elizabethan stage, such as Aaron, the villain in *Titus Andronicus*, also by Shakespeare, none were portrayed as heroes (Vaughan 94). Shakespeare was the first to centralize a black moor in such a manner. There is an ongoing debate on the racial aspect of the Othello character, as

some believe Shakespeare to have meant by a black moor a light-skinned Arab rather than a African negro (Hankey 13). Other believed Shakespeare simply meant his Moor as a representation of ‘Otherness’ and a outsider in a white society, whether he was black or husky.

Nonetheless, Othello was in general portrayed as a black skinned character on the Elizabethan stage (Vaughan 64). Moreover, since the Elizabethan theatre did not feature black actors this black character was always portrayed by a white male (Rosenberg 200). The very first Othello actor was Richard Burbage whom is assumed to have played Othello with a blackened face in 1604, since this was the theatre tradition in Shakespeare’s days (Rosenberg 200). This first performance of by Burbage set a tradition of black Othellos in the theatres, with only few exceptions. Although Othello was made to appear black skinned on stage, it was not until the late nineteenth century that Othello was performed by a black actor in England (Vaughan 181). This performance by the black actor was received negatively in England and led to racist attacks in the press (Lindfors 150). It would be interesting to consider the staging and reception of the Othello character on other European stages, as it can reveal certain views, of the director but also the audience, on the racial aspect of *Othello*. Furthermore, it would be interesting to compare the staging history of *Othello* in England to that of the staging history on the continent.

The focus of studies and literature has primarily been on the French and German reception and staging history of *Othello*. Only limited attention has been paid to other European countries, for example the southern European countries Spain and Portugal. Moreover, very little attention has been paid to the small country of the Netherlands. Therefore, there is a gap in the studies and literature on *Othello* and its staging in Portugal and the Netherlands. This gap has formed the basis of this BA thesis, an investigation into the reception of Shakespeare and *Othello* in different European countries, and how these different

European countries approached the staging of the first black hero in western literature, the black Othello. For this purpose a literary research method will be used, researching existing literature on *Othello* and its staging history, as well as newspaper articles or other sources on the reception of the play, and the actors portraying the character Othello. The research will be limited to the seventeenth- eighteenth- and nineteenth century and will focus on the literature and staging history in the country of the play's origin, England, as well as Portugal and the Netherlands. Moreover, considering the close relation and shared history between Spain and Portugal, the research will very briefly consider relevant Spanish reception and staging history of *Othello*. Firstly, the literature of England will be examined, followed by the Netherlands, to end with Portugal and a comparison of the three.

## The Staging History and Reception of *Othello* in England

*Othello* was first staged in 1604 and is said to have been a “leading tragedy –perhaps the leading tragedy – of the early 1600’s”, it was performed fourteen times in the eighty years following its debut and continued to appeal to audiences in the following centuries (Barthelemy 162, Rosenberg 1). What is most fascinating about *Othello*, is that with it Shakespeare turned the audience’s expectations upside down by presenting a white anti-hero in opposition to a black, noble hero (Vaughan 70). The English seventeenth-century audience would expect a mischievous Moor in a play starring a Moor, since “[t]hough the stage had its ‘white’ Moors, [...], the prominent stage Moors were devils incarnate [...].” (Hankey 14). Part of *Othello*’s immense success is precisely the representation of a black character as a noble, honourable hero (Vaughan 94). Othello was a pioneer in that sense, since he was the first black character to be portrayed positively, as a noble, honourable, courageous general of the Venetian Army. He is, for example, described as having “a loving, noble nature” and as a “most dear husband” by Montano (Shakespeare 2.1.280-282). It has therefore been suggested that Shakespeare explicitly countered the archetypal Moor character with his Othello (Hankey 15). However, there has been some debate on this matter, for whereas some believe Othello to be a noble hero countering the previous stereotypical Moor characters, others believe him to be the typical, devilish Moor. Karen Newman, for example, states that “[...] by making the black Othello a hero, and by making Desdemona’s love for Othello, and her transgression of her society’s norms for women in choosing him, sympathetic, Shakespeare’s play stands in a contestatory relation to the hegemonic ideologies of race and gender in early modern England” (Newman 157). Critics, however, have argued that although Shakespeare’s play initially opposes the typical Moor, the end of the play proves Othello a villain nonetheless (Vaughan 64). As Vaughan states: G.K. Hunter (1967) argued that “The characterization of Othello initially contradicts the stereotype of the black man [...] but as the play progresses,

Iago succeeds in ‘making the deeds of Othello at last fit with the prejudice’” (Vaughan 64). In addition, Anthony Barthelemy argued that “[...] always there to undermine the most positive aspects of Shakespeare’s representation of a noble black is Othello’s lapse into the stereotype. [...] However successful Shakespeare’s manipulation of the stereotype may be, Othello remains identifiable as a version of that type” (Barthelemy 161). Vaughan concludes that critics “from varied backgrounds and perspectives agreed on one thing – the stereotype is there, deeply embedded in the text of Shakespeare’s play. Their disagreement lies in the analysis of how Shakespeare’s text exploits that stereotype” (Vaughan 65). However, Shakespeare placed a black character at the centre of his play, against conventions of his time. Moreover, Shakespeare did not portray Othello as the stereotypical black ‘savage’ character of the Elizabethan stage, but rather as a noble hero regardless of the disputable fall back into the stereotype towards the end of the play. As one could argue that Othello simply reacted to Desdemona’s alleged adultery as most men would, whether they be black or white. Next to that, Shakespeare placed the black hero in opposition to a white villain. Disregarding conventions by the placement of a black noble hero at the centre of his play, in opposition to a white villain strongly suggest that Shakespeare wished to counter the stereotypical representation of blacks in the Elizabethan theatre. Othello can therefore be seen as an emancipation of black, heroic characters into Western culture, literature and theatre.

As *Othello* became and remained immensely popular, this resulted in the black Othello being one of the most famous and popular Shakespearean characters. During the seventeenth century, the staging of this black character did not necessarily cause a commotion, for as said before the English Renaissance audience had viewed Moor characters in the theatre before, although in a different light (Vaughan 59). Nor were London citizens unfamiliar with black people in general, since there were black people to be found in London in the seventeenth century, although in relatively small numbers. The black people were mostly known as



servants in English households, but also as “kings, nobles and merchants” in traveller’s tales (Hankey 13). However, audiences most likely did not make a connection between the black people in London, for example a black servant, and the black Othello, since Othello would be considered nobility (Vaughan 121). Moreover, the representation of Shakespeare’s Othello as an honorable general, who behaves much like a noble English gentleman and is described to be from “royal siege”, along with the fact that he was played by a white actor, although coloured to appear black, minimalised the sense of ‘Otherness’ that the Moor character would represent (Shakespeare 1.2.22).

Despite England’s entanglement in the slave trade during the late seventeenth century, the noble black character of *Othello* was still continuously present on the English stages (Vaughan 96). Probably because the “fear of racial difference” was not as compelling as it would become in the nineteenth century (Vaughan 235). In this period Othello appeared on stage as a black man in a British General uniform, highlighting his status and respectability as military officer (Vaughan 97). Within that period, different versions of the play were even edited in a manner that emphasised Othello’s nobility and “repressed his savagery” (Vaughan 97, 112). This is clearly evident in the Smock Alley Promptbook that eliminated passages that “stress Othello’s age, his unattractiveness, or his ferocious passion” (Vaughan 97). However, the nineteenth century brought a different attitude in England towards racial difference. In particular, the British colonial expansion and racial Darwinism theories produced altered notions concerning race (Vaughan 162). Whereas black immigrants in England initially received treatment in correspondence to their social status, in the nineteenth century they no longer did, as it was “no longer conceivable that a black man could also be a gentleman” (Vaughan 161). This consequently altered the conception of *Othello*, and the sense of Othello’s “Otherness” was now stronger than it had been before among the audience (Vaughan 160). Although there has always been a clear opposition between the white

audience and Othello, the gap was now enlarged (Vaughan 162). Whereas the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth century presented a noble, heroic, respectable Othello, Shakespeare's Moor was no longer considered 'one of us' (Vaughan 159). Instead the difference of Othello as an exotic, savage character was emphasised in the nineteenth century (Vaughan 159). The changed view also brought an alteration in the staging of Othello, as he no longer appeared in British military uniform but started to appear on stage in what was considered to be Moorish clothing (Vaughan 135). The most notable portrayal of Othello in this age was by Tommaso Salvini in 1875 (Hankey 1). Salvini is said to have been the most notorious Othello of the Victorian age (Vaughan 156). As an Italian, he brought an Italian method of acting, even spoke exclusively Italian on stage and performed in a costume of what he perceived to be that of a real Moor (Vaughan 163). Salvini's ecstatic performances made him extremely popular and successful, but it also identified the Othello character with "passions antithetical to what was perceived as 'Anglo-Saxon' rationality" (Vaughan 235). Salvini's passionate performances were partly attributed to his Mediterranean origin, as Salvini did not have an Anglo-Saxon temperament, but instead a fierce one, he could more easily portray Othello's passion (Vaughan 170). In the period, the notion emerged that the role of Othello would be challenging for the "cold 'Anglo-Saxon' temperament of the white, English actors and would be more suitable for southern men" (Vaughan 181). This notion of the contrast between the actors from the 'cold' north and 'temperamental' south in the role of Othello remained, as actor George R. Fosse stated in 1932: "It is very difficult for an Englishman to simulate convincingly the blind rage and overwhelming passion of Othello, and almost impossible to fall into the swoon without being ludicrous; therefore the best Othellos have come to us from the south. Salvini, Rossi, Grassi, Paul Robeson" (Vaughan 179).

This new notion that the role of Othello is more suitable for southerners paved the way

for black actors in the role. Even though Othello is generally perceived to be a black character, he was never performed by a black actor in the English theatres until the twentieth century. There has been a progression towards a more 'natural' Othello on stage from the very first Othello, Richard Burbage in a British general uniform in Shakespeare's own days to Othello in Moorish clothing and blackened faces, to Salvini in Italian (Hankey 1). In the seventeenth century there were no black actors in England since, there were very few black people, even fewer literate black people of whom none would have the means or freedom to be included in the theatre. As a result there were no black actors in the Elizabethan theatre to portray Othello. Moreover, even if there was the unlikely possibility of an aspiring black actor, he would most likely be unsuccessful for the Elizabethan theatre and stage were not considered to be places for black people. This aversion against "blackness on the stage was moral and religious rather than racial and geographic" since blackness was associated with the devil (Hankey 13). However, with the changed racial discourse over the centuries, this significantly evolved into a racial matter as most audiences and theatre companies up until the twentieth century still considered that "no negro could or should mix with white actors on a public stage" (Vaughan 181). For this reason it was not until 1930, 327 years after *Othello* first appeared on stage, that a black actor portrayed the leading role in a great London theatre (Vaughan 181). This honour was bestowed on the African-American Paul Robeson however, he was not the first black man to portray Othello with a white cast, on a public stage (Vaughan 181). This had already been done by the African-American Ira Aldridge a century before in 1833, but Aldridge was excluded from the professional theatres in London and therefore confined to provincial stages in England and Europe (Lindfors 144, Vaughan 181). Both Aldridge and Robeson experienced racism in the press and in the theatre world, during their tours. This is illustrated by the following quote in *Figaro in London*, as a reaction to a announcement of Aldridge's performance: "[...] of that miserable nigger whom we found in

the provinces imposing on the public by the name of the African Roscius. This wretched upstart is about to defile the stage, by a foul butchery of Shakespeare, and *Othello* is actually the part chosen for the sacrilege” (Lindfors 150). In addition, he was called a “stupid looking, thick lipped, ill formed African” and a “satirical nigger” (Lindfors 150). Next to that, actor Charles Kean, “[...] on learning that Aldridge was engaged to play in the very theatre where he was, angrily refused to play on the same stage with a despised ‘nigger’” (Lindfors 149). Robeson’s performance was reviewed as follows, by reviewer James Agate: “This was nigger Shakespeare” (Agate 278). Moreover, Herbert Farjeon stated that: “Shakespeare wrote this part, for a white man to play” (Vaughan 188). It seems that for these critics Aldridge and Robeson had crossed the colour boundaries (Vaughan 188). Apparently many critics believed the role of a noble, black Moor was not to be portrayed by an actual black actor.

*Othello*, like all Shakespearean plays, has always been subject to a wide range of interpretations and adaptations. Throughout the centuries, different versions of the play have had emphasis laid on different themes. Whereas the racial theme was “muted in the Restoration and eighteenth century, [it was] accentuated in the twentieth century” (Vaughan 70). The staging of the play’s leading character has changed continuously, reflecting changing racial discourses in English culture. It seems *Othello* has been a mirror to the English audience.

## The Dutch Othello

The immense popularity Shakespeare enjoyed in his native country England, did not immediately ensure him a similar adoration on the continent. For one, the nations on the European continent would naturally have a delayed introduction to Shakespeare's works. Political alliances between England and the Low Countries enabled the first contacts between the Elizabethan and the Dutch stage in the sixteenth century (Brooks 1). As a result, the Netherlands were "quite early among continental European nations in responding to Shakespeare's work" (Brooks 17). There is proof of Shakespeare's texts being present already in the seventeenth century in the Netherlands, for example a copy of the 1623 Folio in the possession of Constantijn Huygens, one of the greatest Dutch poets from the Dutch Golden Age (Leek 15). However, the first introduction of Shakespeare in the Netherlands would not have been by way of printed text. It would be performances by English actors performing all over the continent that would introduce versions of Shakespeare's plays to Dutch audiences (Leek 2). The reception of these plays was not necessarily an enthusiastic one. Due to the small to non-existent amount of documented literary criticism in the seventeenth century, there is no definite way of knowing whether Shakespeare's work was positively received in this period or not (Leek 51). However, one could suspect the reception to be lukewarm, since the French influence in Dutch literary culture had resulted in the founding of a classicist tradition in Dutch literature (Leek 51). The Shakespearean plays did not follow the rules of classicism, for example the unities, and therefore did not fit into the conventional Dutch literary culture of that period. This could be a possible explanation for the initial negative responses to Shakespeare, for example the critic published in 1717 in *Le Journal Critique*, a French periodical published in Holland, on *Othello* as a play that "outshines for sheer barbaric coarseness" (Leek 16). Shakespeare's work was seemingly considered to be crude; another example of criticism that illustrates this is by poet and playwright Rhijnvis Feith, in 1784:

“one ought to have the heart of an Englishman not to shudder at watching *Othello*” (Leek 22). The literary preference in Holland, imposed by the French influence was so substantial that Leek “blames French classicism for the Dutch lack of enthusiasm for Shakespeare” (Brooks 20). However, this statement by Leek could be countered by a positive reception of *Othello*, more specifically the Othello character, as for example is found in the literary Magazine *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* in 1789. The article states that audiences sympathise with Othello and that “Wy hebben eer medelyden met de jealousy van Othello, dan wy hem haaten als een Moordenaar” (We would sooner have pity on the jealousy of Othello, than hate him as a Murderer) (my translation) (Kroe 79).

Nonetheless, there seems to have been some interest in the Elizabethan playwright in the eighteenth century, as a 1710 catalogue of the Dutch bookseller Henri Scheurleer listing all the English, French and Latin books sold by Scheurleer includes “Shakespear’s complete works in 6 voll, 1709” (Scheurleer). Moreover, the later decades of the eighteenth century presented a warmer attitude towards Shakespeare as illustrated by the praise by one of “the century’s intellectual prodigies,” the professor of literature R.M. van Goens: “England is indebted to him at once for the best and the worst of its dramatic poetry; but no one ever surpassed him in the natural and forceful expression of the strong emotions” as quoted by Leek (Leek 20). This increasing interest in Shakespeare is also evident in the first attempt to translate Shakespeare’s complete works into Dutch in 1778-82, by unknown translators (Pennink 62). Although considerable interest was shown in this translation, as one hundred and eighty people subscribed for it, it wasn’t until the late nineteenth century that the Netherlands acquired complete and adequate translations of Shakespeare’s work, namely those produced by Abraham Kok (1873-80) and Leendert Burgersdijk (1884-88) (“Continent” 36). In addition, the turn of the century also presents positive views on Shakespeare, as the one by Van Kampen: “a Genius who composed his works (only) with the aid of an irresistible

inspiration by Nature [...] due to unceasing diligence and ennoblement of his Art, he deserves a place alongside Sophocles, possibly ahead of Euripides” (Leek 59). The nineteenth century marked a remarkable amount of Dutch Shakespeare publications and as the Dutch literature regarding Shakespeare grew, the Elizabethan playwright became ingrained in the literary culture (Leek 120).

The Dutch theatre history in general was not very well organized and documented and therefore there is no satisfactory record on staging history in the Netherlands. Moreover, since the Dutch theatrical tradition is, as described by Leek: “not rich enough to have inspired historians and men of letters to keep close tracks of its development over the past four centuries,” there is no elaborate staging history of *Othello* known (Leek iv). What is known, however, is, that the first Shakespearean plays came to Holland by performances by foreign, mostly French and German, actors touring through Europe. Moreover, from evidence produced by the repertoire list one finds that versions of Shakespeare’s greatest plays were performed by these groups, with a very good likelihood of the inclusion of *Othello* in that repertoire (“Continent” 1-3). That would be the first staging of a version of *Othello* in the Netherlands. These first seventeenth-century performances, however, were not very impressive performances of the Shakespearean masterpieces. As the performances were probably based on poor translations of Shakespeare’s play, they could not convey the creative wordplay or wittiness of *Othello* (Leek 6). Following these first performances of Shakespeare’s *Othello* in the seventeenth century, the play was translated, adapted and parodied in the Dutch literary and theatrical culture in the following centuries.

Firstly, in 1787 M. Nieuwenhuijzen published his classicist adaptation *Desdemonia*, which was soon forgotten but nonetheless remarkable (Leek 6). Nieuwenhuijzen had turned *Othello* into an olive-skinned North African which was very conventional for that period, he states his reason for this choice to be that: “the figure of a blackamoor, I feared, for such a leading part

would be too monstrous on the Stage” (Leek 6). This adaptation was soon replaced by the French translation of *Othello* by Jean Francois Ducis and this translation was later also translated into Dutch (Leek 41). The Ducis translation however, was altered much to Ducis’s French taste and although this play was somewhat successful in that it was performed for many years, it was in general not received positively by critics as illustrated by the following quote from a review by an unknown critic published in the *Spectator* : “As far as Ducis is concerned, we have never thought highly of his Othello adaptation, even though he has.. ..produced a much more regular tragedy than Shakespeare’s. The translation from French is riddled with absurdities..” (Leek 50, 76). In 1807 N.G. Van Kampen also criticises Ducis’ adaptation: “His versions, fitted on the tight French last, cannot please anyone who has read the originals. Why does one continue to play these meagre copies, instead of attempting to present direct translations of the Bard in his own metre, which suits our language so well?” (Leek 57). These quotes illustrate that the Dutch readers familiar with Shakespeare’s original work were aware of the significant alterations in the Ducis translation. The Dutch reader unfamiliar with the original works was most likely not aware of this fact and consequently only got a corrupted view on Shakespeare and his works.

It was however not Shakespeare’s original *Othello* but the Ducis translation that was parodied by Barbaz in 1814. The parodie by Baraz, *Othello of de Jaloersche Zwart*, illustrates that the Ducis translation was the dominant *Othello* text in the Netherlands. The adaptation also indicates *Othello*’s popularity in the Netherlands (Pennik 264). Remarkable is the parody’s emphasis on Othello’s race and colour already visible in the title of the play as it immediately defines Othello as black, whereas Shakespeare’s title does not allude to colour and simply described him as the Moor of Venice. Throughout the play, Othello’s blackness is negatively portrayed as exemplified in the following quote that describes that an African should not be considered a human being: “een Afrikaan, dien ze als geen mensch



beschouwen” (Barbaz 28). Moreover, the play has numerous references to Othello as black, a “zwartkop” (blackface) and even a “zwarten baviaan” (black baboon), and gives the description of Moors in general as “drunk” people (Barbaz 4, 23, 35). In addition, the play also accounts all Othello’s negative traits to his African descent as shown in the following quotes: “Maar dit is zó myn aart; [...] Ik ben in Afrika wat heet van bloed geboren” “Wat was ik gek jaloersch! Maar, ik ben Afrikaan...”, in English: “But this is my nature; [...] I was born hot-blooded in Africa” “I was crazy jealous! But, I am an African...” (my translation) (Barbaz 7, 39). This stronger racial language when describing Othello reveals Barbaz’ opposition to Othello as a noble General, as he instead choose to portray him as a ‘savage’ African. This view mirrors the English representation of Othello as a ‘savage’ in the nineteenth century.

Whereas performances of *Othello* in the Netherlands were previously staged in German or French, such as the French Ducis version, the first recorded *Othello* performance in English came about in 1826, by a company of English actors (Leek 80). The first performance in Dutch followed several years later as the Van Lennep version, staged in 1854 in the Amsterdamse Stadsschouwburg (Leek 78). In addition to the French and English *Othello* performances, there were also significant productions that arrived from Germany, such as the Weiss version (Leek 82). With these German performances of *Othello* came one specific production that marked a crucial point in the staging history of *Othello* in the Netherlands. This production was the first Othello performance in the Netherlands with a black actor in the title role. While the Moor had been represented in a Dutch *Othello* performance as olive-skinned before by Nieuwenhuijzen, moreover, as a “Nubian-featured Moor, black and curly-haired,” the performance was never acted out by a black actor (Leek 155). Interestingly, the first black actor to play the role of Othello in the English theatre, Ira Aldridge, was also the first black Othello in the Netherlands in 1855(Leek 82). This

representation of Othello by a black actor received a very different reception in the Netherlands. Whereas Aldridge was submitted to harsh, racist attacks in the English newspapers after his performance, his performance was in general received enthusiastically in the Netherlands both by the audience and the media. This is clearly illustrated in the following review from the *Algemeen Handelsblad*: “Mr. Aldridge breaks all the laws of the stage; he forces his voice, his explosions of emotion are extreme, his tempi run, without transition, from very slow to very fast; his long pauses would be unacceptable if practiced by our actors; yet, we forgot all about that: his representation of the Moor was so gripping that he was buried under a avalanche of applause and called back several times” (Leek 83). Furthermore, the review in *Zondagsblad* is just as laudatory: “Aldridge’s Othello is unique in its truth and dignity, its towering emotions and great calm; his use of gesture and voice [...] Aldridge shocks, carries away, enchants his audience: the difference in language is completely forgotten [...] his is the true Type of Art” (Leek 83). However, it must be noted that despite the seemingly enthusiastic reception of Aldridge’s Othello, Aldridge’s performance would be the first but also the last in this period where the title role of *Othello* would be acted out by a black actor, for this would not happen again in the Netherlands until a century later. Remarkably, Aldridge’s performance did not set a lasting presence of black actors on the Dutch stage. Although many performances of *Othello* followed in the Netherlands, the staging of the Othello character probably proceeded as before Aldridge’s performance. Although little is known about the staging details, it is highly probable that the conventional staging of Othello was by an actor in blackface; the actor would be made to look black by means of make-up (Mathijssen).

Shakespeare’s introduction in the Netherlands, although naturally delayed, was relatively early compared to other European nations. However, the early reception of Shakespeare’s work in the Netherlands was significantly affected by the strong French

influence in Dutch literature and theatre. Although the initial reception and criticism of Shakespeare and his works was not very positive, the eighteenth century presented a more positive attitude towards the playwright. The nineteenth century provided a significant Shakespearean presence in the Dutch literature and theatre. Although little is known about the staging history of Othello in the Netherlands it is assumed to be equal to the staging tradition in England, that is, a representation of Othello with a black face. Also similar to England, the Dutch theatre provided at least one exception in the form of an olive-skinned Othello. A crucial point in the staging of the Othello character in Dutch theatre came with the black actor Ira Aldridge. Whom was also the first black actor to play Othello in England. The difference in reception of the black actor in the role of Othello between England and the Netherlands could be considered remarkable. For although both nations were greatly involved in the slave trade, it seems the racial discourse in the English and Dutch culture in that period was very differently established. Certainly, the mere casting of the title role of Shakespeare's *Othello* cannot be representative for a Nation's view on black actors, let alone generalize a nation's possible racist inclinations. However, the staging of the black character of Othello, either black, white, brown, olive-skinned, can reflect dominant cultural views on ethnicity.

## *Othello in Portugal*

As in most European countries, the appearance of Shakespeare in Portugal was rather late. During the theatre-significant part of Shakespeare's life, and after his death, Portugal was part of Spain and consequently Spain played a key role in the cultural influence in Portugal during Shakespeare's own days (Afonso "Jealousy" 1). Notwithstanding the strong treaty with England, the English culture was not appealing to the Portuguese (Afonso "Jealousy" 1). It would not be until the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century that significant appearances of Shakespeare would be found in Portugal. The most prominent cultural influence in Portugal during the eighteenth century was French and therefore translations of Moliere and Voltaire largely occupied the stages in Lisbon and Oporto (Afonso "Simão" 1). Foreign plays were often preferred as they more easily passed "the rigours of censorship and police interference" present in Portugal in that period (Afonso "Simão" 1). Moreover, the country already had a history of accommodating performances by foreign theatre companies from countries such as Spain, France and Italy (Duarte 99). Notably, not the theatrical plays but rather operatic adaptations of Shakespeare received early popularity for, since the opening of the Lisbon Opera House in 1793, opera's such as Rossini's *Otello* and Verdi's *MacBetto* were continuously staged with great success (Duarte 99).

Portugal's theatrical tradition was not very strong and similar to the Netherlands, the nation has very few records of its theatrical history (Afonso "Simão" 129). The first written Portuguese reference to Shakespeare was not published until 1762, and was made in the country's first literary periodical, the *Gazeta Litteraria* (1761-1762) (Afonso "Simão" 132). The intention of the author Frei Bernardo de Lima was to "[...] permit Portugal to know the best books, or, at least, the most famous modern compositions [...]" (Afonso "Simão" 133). The appearance of Shakespeare in the periodical would suggest that Frei Bernardo de Lima considered Shakespeare to fall into one of the two categories, and consequently this first

written reference to Shakespeare would seem to indicate one first positive reception. This is more clearly illustrated in one of the two articles referring to Shakespeare, as Frei Bernardo de Lima states:

The English, who are so prominent members of the Republic of Letters, worship their Shakespeare, whom they unanimously call great, because, though his tragedies are full of irregularities and baseness, they perceive passages in them which display the great genius of the Poet. If the English pay this tribute to Shakespeare, why should not the Portuguese do the same towards Camões, who, in the poetical forms he used, has beauties equal to those of Shakespeare without being flawed by so many irregularities? (Afonso “Simão” 133).

This quote illustrates that Bernardo was aware of Shakespeare’s canonical status in England, moreover, it illustrates the presence of French neoclassicism in the literary culture in Portugal (Afonso “Simão” 133, Duarte 99). The second article contains comments on, and quotes from, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, clearly demonstrating Bernardo’s familiarity with at least one Shakespearean play (Afonso “Simão” 133). Two other references were made to Shakespeare in 1794, in the periodicals the *Mercurio Historico* and the *Politico e Litterario* (Afonso “Simão” 133). Moreover, a record of Shakespeare’s work in a register of the book market at that time, dates from 1799 therefore Shakespeare’s work must have been available to interested customers in bookstores in that year. However, the register does not specify what versions or editions of the Shakespearean works are concerned in this case but it would very likely have been French translation or adaptations such as the Ducis version (Afonso “Simão” 133). In addition, records of the Portuguese National Library show that two editions of the complete Shakespearean works, one English and the other La Place’s French version, were

sold in Lisbon and Oporto in 1771 (Afonso “Simão” 135). These records suggest that Shakespeare’s plays were known by, and desired by, Portuguese readers.

This was followed by the first Portuguese translation of a Shakespeare play, *Othello, ou o Mouro de Veneza*, by Simão de Melo Brandão (Afonso “Simão” 134). Although the exact date of the translation is not certain, it is assumed, considering biographical and historical facts, to be written in the late eighteenth century period (Afonso “Simão” 135). The play was never published and the manuscript was only discovered in the current century (Duarte 100). That *Othello* was the first Shakespearean play to be translated into Portuguese strongly indicates the popularity of the play in Portugal. The play, however, was not translated directly from the Shakespearean text but from the French La Place version of *Othello* as Brandão himself states it was: “originally written in English, then translated into French and now turned into Portuguese” (Afonso “Simão” 137,139). The use of French sources instead of English original texts was not unusual in Portugal, since Portuguese scholars would have been more familiar with French than with English (Afonso “Simão” 135). This illustrates that, like in the Netherlands, readers that were unfamiliar with Shakespeare’s original work only received a corrupted view; via second-hand or even third-hand, in the case of *Othello, ou o Mouro de Veneza*, adaptations of the Shakespearean originals. Brandão’s translation is said to be more of an adaptation than translation, for Brandão exceeds La Place in number of cuts to the play, altogether excluding characters such as Gratiano and Bianca (Afonso “Simão” 139). By cutting these characters, the focus is put on Iago, Desdemona and Othello and more attention given to the dramatic aspect of the play, which was much in taste with the Portuguese dramatic culture (Afonso “Simão” 139). A taste that still reflected the dramatic language used by Gil Vicente, one of Portugal’s greatest playwrights of the sixteenth century (Afonso “Simão” 130). Moreover, Brandão also adapted the play to his own taste as he, a priest, added numerous Catholic salutations in (Afonso “Simão” 141). As Afonso concludes:

“[...]Brandão’s vigorous *Othello* translations appears to embody some of the typical literary and theatrical preferences of his time” (Afonso “Simão” 142).

In the period after the mid-nineteenth century the first Portuguese Shakespearean translations from English emerged (Homem 15). *Othello* was again translated in 1842 and in 1856, but most notable is the 1885 translation, for it was done by Portugal’s King Louis I (Duarte 100). Before the translation of *Othello*, King Louis I had already translated three other Shakespearean plays, and the first one, *Hamlet* (1877), is said to have been a turning point in the reception of Shakespeare in Portugal (Duarte 100). For it was one of the first translations made directly from English moreover, the translators royal status gave a special allure to Shakespeare’s plays (Duarte 101). The translation by King Louis I illustrated that not only was *Othello* read and appreciated by nobility, but moreover, studied and appropriated by the ruling King.

Many translations of Shakespeare’s work followed this royal translation. However, the significant lack of translations from 1890 till 1900 is more striking (Duarte 101). This gap in translations can be accounted for by the strained political relationship between England and Portugal in this period, resulting in the British Ultimatum (Duarte 103). This Ultimatum forced Portugal to retreat from a colonial area in Africa, a corridor linking Angola and Mozambique, and resulted in “national humiliation” (Duarte 102). This created an extreme “wave of anti-British nationalism” throughout Portugal and everything British was boycotted (Duarte 103). Even Shakespearean performances, as a performance of *Hamlet* at the National Theatre was “cancelled by the authorities in order to avoid riots” (Duarte 104). The reception of Shakespeare was obviously affected by this political affair, but the anti-British attitude passed in time and the Shakespearean plays returned on stage in the twentieth century. Remarkably, during the British Ultimatum Verdi’s operatic version of *Othello* was never banned, it was even considered a hit during 1889-1892, which indicates *Othello*’s popularity

(Duarte 105).

The specific popularity of *Othello* in Portugal seems to reflect the immense popularity the play received in neighbouring Spain. As the Spanish reception of Shakespeare was subjected to an immense popularity of *Othello* in the early nineteenth century, also referred to as “Othellomania” (Calvo 113). This specific popularity is often ascribed to the domestic aspect of the play, as it does not depict monarchs, aristocrats or magical characters but rather centralizes characters from the middle class (Afonso “Simão” 139). In addition, the dramatic themes in *Othello*, such as social restrictions, followed the themes of the popular dramas on the Spanish stage (Afonso “Simão” 139). Moreover, traces of Moorish influence in the Spanish and Portuguese culture could still be present after the Moorish invasion of the countries centuries ago. Portugal and Spain certainly have had a stronger association with Moors than England and the Netherlands, and this could account for the immense popularity of specifically Shakespeare’s play about a noble Moor. Although one can only speculate, considering Spain and Portugal’s shared history and culture, these reasons could also account for the continuous Portuguese adoration of *Othello*.

As previously noted, Portugal has few records of its theatrical history and therefore little is known about the staging of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. What is known, is that foreign theatre groups have performed Shakespearean plays in Portugal, as well as operatic adaptations. An example of such a recorded foreign performance is one by Salvini, one of the most famous Othello actors in England, whose performance was enthusiastically received in Portugal in 1860 (Duarte 99). Salvini’s performances on the English stage partly shaped the new notion in England that the role of Othello is more suitable for southerners, for southerners have a fierce temperament. It would be interesting to find how Othello was acted out in such a southern land, Portugal, which supposedly would have more suitable actors for the leading part. However, the *Othello* performances in Portugal remained for the greater part



of the nineteenth century second hand. The first performance of *Othello* by a Portuguese theatre company, recorded in the national theatre database was not until 1882 (CETbase).

However, as mentioned before, very little is known about the staging of the play. Portuguese playwrights had staged black characters before, although, not the same kind of character as Othello (Afonso “Jealousy”). Black characters on the Portuguese stage were defined by prejudices and stereotypes, and were characters with a low status such as servants and poor workmen (Afonso “Jealousy”). As a noble black character, Shakespeare’s Othello was an exception on the Portuguese stage. Some Portuguese adapters of *Othello* choose to counter this representation of a noble black character, like the play *O Intrigante de Veneza*. This adaptation of *Othello* by José Maria Silva Leal, in 1839, uses strong language in term of race for descriptions of Othello. In the play almost all references to Othello are “the Blackman” or “the African,” there is not one reference to ‘the Moor’ as in *Othello* (Afonso “Jealousy”). Moreover, in the first scene of the fourth act Jacome, the equivalent of the Iago character, refers to Othello as “um vagabundo Africano” (a vagabond African) and tells Brabantio that his possible grandchildren will be “monstrosinhos africanos” (little African monsters) (Barbaz 4.1.20, 31). This adaptation of *Othello* illustrates one Portuguese view on Shakespeare’s remarkable character Othello. For the adaptation contains more reference to Othello as black than the original, but more importantly adds references as ‘vagabond African’ and ‘little African monsters’. This stronger racial language when describing Othello reveals the adapters intention to portray Othello as a ‘savage’ African. This view of Othello is also found in many staging of Othello in the English nineteenth century and the Dutch parody *Othello, of de Jaloersche Zwart*. Therefore, it seems this representation of Othello spread over Europe in the nineteenth century.

The popularity of Othello in Portugal is clear, as Othello was the first Shakespearean play to be translated into Portuguese and the first to be staged in Portuguese. Moreover, when

the anti-British attitude dominated Portuguese culture in the late nineteenth century and banned Shakespeare from the theatre, the operatic version of Othello remained popular. Although little is known about the staging of the play, Othello was like in some nations the first black hero in Portuguese literature and theatre. The black character was most likely performed by white actors in blackface, parallel to the staging history in England and the Netherlands. Therefore, it is clear that despite the relatively great influence of Moors in Portugal the staging of Othello did not differ significantly from the Northern countries England and the Netherlands.

## Conclusion

The introduction of Shakespeare in the Netherlands and Portugal was dominated by French influence. Because the first contact with Shakespearean work was by French translations and performances, the countries initially did not have a direct contact with Shakespeare's work. Moreover, this first view of Shakespeare by the French translations was not a clear one, as these translations were adapted to the taste of the author and culture, they were much altered versions of Shakespeare's plays. The French influence also affected the reception of Shakespeare in the Netherlands and Portugal, as the influence was dominant in the literary culture of both countries. Therefore, neoclassicism was central to the literature and drama in the Netherlands and Portugal. As a result, as Shakespeare's works did not follow the rules of classicism, the initial reception of Shakespeare was not enthusiastic. However, in the course of the eighteenth century, Shakespeare gradually enjoyed more popularity, becoming immensely popular in the nineteenth century. These centuries also brought a growing number of translations of plays and critical literature on Shakespeare and his works. Moreover, throughout the ages, different adaptations appeared in all three countries which were adapted to the taste of the theatrical culture of the given country. For example, in the Netherlands the crude language in Shakespeare's work had to be adapted to the classicist taste. Also, in the Portuguese adaptation by Brandão the play was edited to centralizes the dramatic aspect of *Othello*.

Notably, the Netherlands and Portugal have in common an adaptation of *Othello* that emphasizes Othello's race by using stronger racial language when describing his character. In the Netherlands, this is presented in the parody *Othello of de Jaloersche Zwart* and in Portugal in the play *O Intrigante de Venza*. These two adaptations announce the adapters views on the character of Othello as a 'savage' African. This view of Othello is also found in

the staging of *Othello* in the English nineteenth century, in which *Othello* was no longer considered a noble general but instead also viewed as a ‘savage’. This alteration in the representation of *Othello* could be explained by the tension concerning slavery and the increasing emphasis on racial difference in Europe in the nineteenth century. The staging of *Othello* seems to have been similar in England, the Netherlands and Portugal and was also subjected to changing views on race in Europe. However, little is known about the staging of *Othello* in the Netherlands and even less is known about the staging history in Portugal. *Othello*’s character has been portrayed light-skinned to black, wearing British army uniform to Moorish customs in England. Remarkably, the dominant portrayal in *all* three countries is likely to have been by a black skinned *Othello*, as that was the dominant theatrical tradition in all the countries. Despite the different histories and cultures of the countries, the interpretations of the *Othello* character in England, the Netherlands and Portugal are parallel.

In addition, England, the Netherlands and Portugal also shared the great *Othellos*, such as Salvini, one of the most famous *Othello* in England, who was also very popular in the Netherlands and Portugal. Moreover, the first staging of *Othello* by a black actor was in both the Netherlands and England done by the African-American Ira Aldridge. The difference however, lies in the reception of this *Othello* performance by a black actor, for whereas Aldridge was submitted to harsh, racist attacks in the English newspapers after his performance, his performance was in general received enthusiastically in the Netherlands, both by the audience and the media. This difference in reception seems to reflect the difference in racial discourse in the Dutch and English culture. The staging of the play’s leading character has changed continuously, throughout the ages, reflecting changing racial discourses in culture where the play is performed. Certainly, the mere staging of *Othello* cannot represent the English, Dutch or Portuguese national view on the play’s racial theme.

However, the staging of the character of Othello, either black, white, brown or olive-skinned, *can* reflect dominant cultural views on ethnicity.

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