

# *Othello* and the French Tradition in *Les enfants du paradis*

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**Abstract** The French have long both admired Shakespeare and despaired at finding a way to compete with his greatness. Voltaire imitated *Othello* in his play *Zaïre*, to great success, while perhaps the greatest French film, *The Children of Paradise* (*Les enfants du paradis*), includes a rousing staging of *the death of Desdemona* on the French stage of the 1830s. The main characters in the film each stress some aspect of how the French sought to incorporate Shakespeare while maintaining their own cultural identity.

**Key words** *Othello*; France; Voltaire; *Zaïre*; mime; jealousy

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In America today *Othello* is a play about racial justice. In Stephen Greenblatt's classic reading in his chapter in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, for example, Othello registers the strains not just of a man whose skin color is different from that of his Venetian employers, but of a man who cannot find the keys to a society to which he is always an outsider. So many studies focus on Othello's race that one almost forgets the enormous part jealousy plays both in defining Othello's character and moving the plot. And perhaps one should. Even Giraldi Cinthio's source story seems to be a warning to fathers to be on the look out for barbarians, particularly those men who would steal away their daughters. It may in fact be a only a partial reading of *Othello* to regard it as a play about jealousy. Nonetheless, that is how the play comes across in Marcel Carne's 1944 French film *Les enfants du paradis* (*Children of Paradise*). The way the film selects from the play and the themes it chooses to emphasize illustrate several features of Shakespeare on film. It translates certain lines, gives emphasis, leaves out a lot, draws inspiration, but most of all develops a portion of the original that is not really there, or there only in a liminal way. Each of the main characters reflects a certain way French culture subsumes and transforms Shakespeare. A mime, a woman who loves more than one man, a dandified criminal, an actor who uses Shakespeare to advance his own career, and an aristocrat whose stabbing satisfies the French dissatis-

faction with Othello's brutal strangling of Desdemona—each illustrates the historical French reaction to Shakespeare.

The success and scandal of Shakespeare's art have been topics of French literature since at least the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> His reputation soared at mid-century when the French started to adore anything English. Yet it was also variously thought that Shakespeare's language was low, he mixed comedy and tragedy, his plots were too complicated, and he did not really understand love. He was a child of nature, a genius, but his art was scandalous and catered to the common taste. It was hardly fit for women of society to watch. By contrast, the classic French theater of Corneille and Racine, a product of the ancien regime under Louise XIV, was considered stately and refined. The actors declaimed in the twelve-syllable rhymed couplets called alexandrines, and a good speech was as good as a good story. As George Steiner has suggested, the plot of a classical French play can turn on the shift of a nominative case noun from the formal *vous* to the family *tu* (*After Babel*, 46). There is no rush to the end. Historically the stage was a place for the upper classes, including refined women.

Behind much French thinking about Shakespeare lies Voltaire, who could never get over some of Iago's lines in the first scene about a black ram topping a white ewe. Such lines were written for the audience, not for the art. They pandered to the people. And how could one write a play about a Moor who strangles his wife? Such barbarities were a scandal to refinement. To correct the problem Voltaire wrote a play called *Zaïre* that is a version of *Othello* but more concerned with love than death: "Our [French] lovers," he said to the English, "speak as lovers, yours only as poets," by which, however, he meant that the French used the forms of gallantry popular at the court of Louis XV, not real passion (Haines 16).

Even as Shakespeare inspired the French, their attitude toward him was diffident. Voltaire corresponded widely and wrote two introductions to *Zaïre* but never mentioned *Othello*. His play was enormously popular: parodied, translated, and performed 488 times at the Comédie-Française between 1732 and 1936. Today it is thought that the play's improbabilities make it impossible to revive, that its attitude toward religion is contradictory, and even that its formal verse is weak, especially when compared to that of Racine, the master of the tragedy in alexandrines. But reading *Zaïre* reminds us of the fascination that certain Shakespearean passages could exert over readers. Voltaire's plot cannot bear comparison to Shakespeare's, but Orasmine's suicide speech, based on Othello's, is not bad. Orasmine, a Turkish sultan, is much more polished than Othello, and in complete contrast to Shakespeare's play, the Desdemona character, Zaïre, is in part responsible for his jealousy, since she discusses with Nérestan, her former prisoner companion and now rescuer, the conflict between her love for the sultan and the irreconcilable attraction of baptism and escape. Where Othello learns too late the truth of the handkerchief, Orasmine learns too late not that he has been deceived by his associate Coramine, as Iago deceives Othello, but that Nérestan is her brother, not lover. Although the plot creaks, it creates the right opportunity for Orasmine's final speech. As in Shakespeare, the repentant murderer suggests how events should be related, then surprises his audience

by killing himself. He uses the same weapon that he had use on *Zaire*, and he concludes his speech with an anaphora, that Saturday afternoon matinee figure of speech where the first word of a line is repeated. The drum-beat suggests how much Voltaire wished to duplicate the power of what the plot produces in Shakespeare:

Dis-leur qu' à ses genoux j' avais mis mes états ;  
 Dis-leur que dans son sang cette main s' est plongée ;  
 Dis que je l' adorais, et que je l' ai vengée. ( Il se tue. )  
 [ Tell them that I laid my kingdom at her feet ; tell them that I plunged this hand  
 into her blood ; tell them that I adored her, and that I have avenged her. ( He  
 kills himself. ) ]<sup>2</sup>

As Voltaire's borrowing indicates, disdain for Shakespeare is a French pose, but so is adoration. Everyone from Voltaire on down loved the ghosts, which provided what Aristotle called the "probable impossible" and the French *vraisemblance* (Haines 30). It is interesting that the nineteenth-century Germans stressed the folk aspects of Shakespeare such as fairies and the supernatural and rejected his cosmopolitanism as too French. The French actors of the Comédie-Française started adopting the pantomime, practicing before mirrors, showing emotion, impressing spectators like Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, Alfred de Musset, Théophile Gautier, and Hector Berlioz (Pemble 9). Berlioz saw *Hamlet* in September 1827, shortly after having heard Beethoven for the first time, and realized Voltaire's disdain was wrong about Shakespeare. He fell in love with and later pursued the English actress Harriet Smithson, who played Juliet and Ophelia. Berlioz finally met and married Harriet in 1833, although he had little English and she spoke only rudimentary French. In 1839 his *Roméo et Juliette* became a greatest success. It did not follow Shakespeare's text but relied on Garrick's version of the play he had seen in 1827. He flourished, but the woman who had played Juliet lost her career and her looks.

The fortunes of Othello have been traced by Margaret Gilman in her book *Othello in France* (Paris, 1925). In 1717 a piece called the *Dissertation sur la poésie anglaise* focused on Desdemona's death by strangulation. If she was choked, how could she then talk to Emilia? The first translation, by Pierre-Simon La Place in 1745, eliminated coarse scenes, including Desdemona's murder. Iago's scenes are reduced, foreshadowing how the great Shakespearean theme of his inexplicable evil never does find its full equivalent in France. In 1785 a M. Butini produced a stage version, never produced, that featured a white Othello, the three unities, and an absent Iago in the final scene (Gilman 45). A 1793 version by Jean-François Ducis made Othello's skin yellow and leathery (Gilman 59 cites Ducis: "le teint jaune et cuivré... de ne point révolter l'oeil du public, et surtout celui des femmes"). It included some thoughts on the state of the French Revolution, which by 1792 had turned into a reign of terror, complete with spying, punishment, and vengeance rather than justice (Gilman 71). Nonetheless Ducis gave the play a happy ending, a tradition that will last through *Les enfants du paradis*. His plot became the basis for an opera by Giachino Rossini in 1816, centered on Desdemona (Gilman 90) which was translated into

French from Italian. In it Othello swears to get vengeance when the Iago figure presents him with an intercepted letter, written by Desdemona to the Doge's son, whom her father is forcing her to marry. Opera, it turned out, was the perfect venue for Shakespeare, since it did not have the formal requirements of tragedy such as the three unities or the notion that only upper class subjects were suitable.

As a result of the opera, Othello's story was very well known in France when the great poet Alfred de Vigny translated Othello and had it produced at the Comédie-Française in 1829. He added a long preface about the need to reform the French drama, what he called l'exécution, the call for realism that is one of the themes of *Les enfants du paradis* (Gilman 96). In his version Othello is not a blackamoor, with short, curly hair, but has "le teint d' Abd-el-Kadir" (letter of September 27, 1857, qtd. in Gilman 102).

For Victor Hugo, Shakespeare was a god. Hugo held séances during his twenty years of exile on the English Channel islands of Guernsey and Jersey, during which Shakespeare conveniently spoke to him in French, since he could not understand English (Pemble 10). His son François-Victor Hugo translated Shakespeare's complete works with good vocabulary and exactness in his 18 volume *Oeuvres complètes de W. Shakespeare* (Paris 1859–1866). Volume V is titled "Le Jaloux" and features Othello along with *Cymbeline*, illustrating the French fascination with jealousy that will culminate when Frédéric Lemaître in *Les enfants du paradis* exploits the theme by playing Othello.

The magnetism of certain set speeches that we see in Voltaire's *Zaïre* appear in various French films. *The Winter's Tale* underlies *Conte d'hiver*; we find rehearsals for a production of Shakespeare's *Pericles in Paris nous appartient* (dir. Jacques Rivette, 1960) and for *Richard III in L'important c'est d'aimer* (dir. Andrej Zulawski, 1975).<sup>3</sup> But nothing surpasses Frédéric Lemaître's speech as he murders his stage Desdemona in Marcel Carné's film *Les enfants du paradis* (*The Children of Paradise*, dir. Marcel Carné, 1945). Filmed in Vichy France in 1944 and finished after the liberation, it is considered one of the greatest of French films. For years in the 1950s and 1960s it was continuously shown along with *Casablanca* at the Brattle Street Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In *Les enfants du paradis* we see the classic themes of the French love-and-hate affair with Shakespeare. The film revolves around a woman of the demi-monde named Garance who is loved by four men, each jealous of the attention others pay to her. It is set in the theater world of 1830s Paris, a time, according to the credits, when the old classical style of declaiming texts was being replaced by a more emotional, realistic style. The narrative to the DVD set presents this as a war between two schools of French actors. But if we turn to our books about the influence of Shakespeare in France, we learn that in fact a series of performances in 1827 by English actors spurred a revolution in French acting. The film portrays this shift when the upstart actor Frédéric Lemaître turns a sentimental play into a farce and then performs Othello with a realism made all the more intense because his rivals for Garance watch him from the audience as he kills Desdemona.

Delight in the demi-monde world of courtesans, disdain for Shakespeare, a thea-

ter that played to a social class rather than a nation, as Shakespeare does by promoting English culture—all these appear in the film. One notices the elevated diction too, and a certain formal correctness that cannot be discerned by looking at just this one scene. There is also that particularly French idea of art as the mirror of society, one that finds its way to the foreign student of French literature through classic works like Alain Fournier's popular novel *Le Grand Meaulnes* (1913). This blending is, of course, a theme of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and also *Hamlet*, where the play within the play mirrors the reality of King Hamlet's murder. Yet art and illusion can be found in almost all drama. The central theme of Shakespeare's influence in France, rather, jealousy, which both is and is not at the heart of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

In America today we usually think about *Othello* in terms of race and how Iago improvises his way to undoing his military commander. But for Les enfants du paradis, and in particular for the actor Frédéric Lemaître, *Othello* is a play about jealousy. In the film the character Garance is a high-class prostitute loved by four men: the mime Baptiste Debureau, whose love is hopeless; the actor Frédéric Lemaître, who seduces her but can live without her; a dandified criminal named Pierre François Lacenaire, who joins the crowd almost as if just to keep up appearances; and Édouard de Montray, an aristocrat who at the half-way point of this two-part film offers her his protection in exchange for her becoming his mistress. Each of the characters can be used to illustrate a particular aspect of the appropriation of Shakespeare into French culture.

The mime Baptiste Debureau (played by Jean-Louis Barrault, the teacher of Marcel Marceau) is perhaps the least Shakespearean character because he works without words. Of course there were undoubtedly great moments of miming in Shakespeare's theater, but they could not be known from the text alone, which represents such a challenge to interpreters in any country or culture. Baptiste's character is almost a parody of the French attraction to Shakespeare. He loves Garance but always from a distance, the way France loves Shakespeare as much by reputation as intimate knowledge. Meanwhile Baptiste is loved by a woman named Nathalie, who eventually marries him and bears him children. Nonetheless Baptiste carries a torch for Garance, almost in the same way as the French theater somehow longed for its own Shakespeare.

Unknown to Baptiste, Garance loves him, but knows she cannot live with him. Eventually a false accusation forces her to live with an aristocratic protector, Édouard de Montray. As the film climaxes, however, she returns to Paris after traveling with the Count and begins attending Baptiste's performances in secret. She is met in her private box by the actor Frédéric Lemaître, who has come to watch his rival in the theater. Lemaître suddenly realizes that his former lover in fact loves Baptiste and declares, perhaps a bit too pompously to be credible, that he himself now feels jealousy and so is ready properly to perform Shakespeare's *Othello*, having felt the proper emotional motivation.

Lemaître's definition of *Othello* solely in terms of jealousy illustrates how knowledge of a Shakespeare play begins with a limited understanding of the play. By defi-

ning the play as about jealousy Lemaître is able to wrap himself in Shakespeare's mantle and give his stage an artistic aura it needed. As Alex C. Y. Huang argues throughout his book *Chinese Shakespeares*, Shakespeare serves as a representation of himself, a form that can be appropriated by a foreign culture. For Lemaître the play gives him a way to break away from the outworn conventions of French drama. It may be that the film's authors realize there is much more to Othello than a portrait of jealousy, and that they transferred some of Iago's evil to the villainous Lacenaire and the self-involved Count de Montray. But Lemaître strikes the popular note. We may find his portrayal of Othello murdering Desdemona—the part of his play the film shows—melodramatic, but in the world of the film it is meant to be brilliant, emotional, and new. Watching from a box in the balcony where he sits with Garance, de Montray feels the jealousy toward Lemaître that on stage Lemaître as Othello expresses for Cassio. It makes for great cinema, and is on a par with the theatrical artificiality in Andrej Zulaski's *L'important c'est d'aimer*, where an actress struggles to play Shakespeare's Lady Anne in French:

Lemaître (playing Othello): Get me some poison, Iago, this night. [Portez-moi du poison, Iago, ce soir.] I'll not expostulate with her lets her body and her beauty unprovide my mind.

Iago: Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated.

Lemaître (playing Othello): Yes, let her rot and perish and be damned tonight for she shall not live. . . . [His voice continues as the camera shifts: "Non, ma coeur est chargé avec. . ."]

Montray: Such savagery and lack of decorum. I can't say I like this Monsieur Shakespeare. True, one goes to the theater today not for the play, but for the actors. Garance: You insisted on coming, my friend.

Montray: No doubt I had my reasons.

Lemaître (playing Othello): Hang her! I do but say what she is. The pity of it, Iago. The pity of it. . . .

. . . . [after Garance insists to Montray that his rival is not Lemaître and a cut away to Baptiste entering the theater]

Lemaître (playing Othello): That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee, thou gavest to Cassio.

Desdemona: No by my life and soul. Send for the man and ask him.

Lemaître (playing Othello): Sweet soul, take heed. Take heed of perjury. Thou art on thy deathbed.

Montray (to Garance): Dying: easily said, and just as easily done.

Garance: Why do you laugh?

Montray: Because if we duel in the morning, he won't be here to talk of death in the evening.

Garance: You are mad, Edouard.

Montray: Why should you care, if it's not him you love?

Desdemona: Kill me tomorrow. Let me live tonight.

Lemaître (playing Othello): Nay, if you strive—

Desdemona: But half an hour. But while I say one prayer. . .

Lemaître (playing Othello): Being done there is but one pause.

Desdemona: But while I say one prayer.

Lemaître (playing Othello): It is too late. [Othello smothers her. The curtain falls. The audience applauds enthusiastically. ]<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to Lemaître, whose jealousy is more theatrical than real, the genuinely jealous character in *Les enfants du paradis* is Count Édouard de Montray. Suspecting that Garance loves Lemaître, he insults his rival by insulting Shakespeare, as he and his aristocratic friends repeat the centuries-old French accusations that Shakespeare is naïve and coarse, not fit for gentle ears:

Montray: Monsieur, you play your bloodthirsty brute so naturally.

Lemaître: You are too kind. I merely played him as Shakespeare wrote him, as natural as possible

Montray: A peculiar person, this Shakespeare. I hear he made his literary debut as a butcher's apprentice.

Lemaître: Why not?

Montray: Which would explain the bestial nature of his plays and his popularity among dockers and carters.

Lemaître: And kings!

First Aristocrat: I see why I found this play so distasteful and shocking. I'll buy my coachman a seat. It's worth trying.

Lemaître: Then allow me to offer you a box. . . for your [put a space after box before the period] horses! It's worth trying!

The Count and his friend represent the French upper classes for whom a character in the play of the French critic Cubières asked the rhetorical question, "Did ancient kings made love in Alexandrines?" The answer, surprisingly to us, was yes (Haines 34). The point is that one went to the theater to learn something about princes and high behavior, not the shenanigans of the lower classes.

Édouard de Montray is in the process of provoking Lemaître into a duel when Lacenaire shows him that his true rival is Baptiste. The Count de Montray's murderous rage finds itself blocked. He cannot accuse or kill Garance; he never has had her emotional loyalty. As a man of honor he can hardly challenge Lemaître and Baptiste. It would be meaningless to duel either one, since they are not part of his aristocratic world. At this point Lacenaire steps in. A rather asexual dandy, he has no interest in Garance except to make trouble, and needs to utter only a few insults before he and the Count are committed to a duel the next day. In a nice little touch that perhaps captures Othello's reference to his exploits in Aleppo, Lacenaire finds Montray in a Turkish bath and murders him there rather than wait for a duel.<sup>5</sup> He thus transfers what French tradition had regarded as the unacceptable stabbing of Desdemona by the barbarian Othello into the more properly French revolutionary theme of the striking

down of a rich aristocrat, even by a man who is little more than a member of the vile canaille.

Shakespeare has comic duels, which probably connect with the comic tradition of the commedia dell'arte that influenced French theater too. The confrontation of the drunken Lemaître with de Montray compares to the confrontation of Viola and Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*. But Shakespeare's plays have no one like Garance. She is a high-class prostitute who has sought the protection of a wealthy aristocrat—something common enough in Shakespeare day, when it is highly likely that Emilia Lanyer, the dark lady of the sonnets, was a kept woman in the household of the Lord Chamberlain who sponsored Shakespeare's own theater company. Shakespeare shows no real sympathy for common prostitute, and as common as the keeping of more fashionable mistresses must have been, we rarely see such a woman in any play. Iago accuses Bianca of being such a woman, but it seems that she loves Cassio rather than that she is a professional woman. The French film makes up for Shakespeare's lack in the figure of Garance, who has not one but four men in love with her.

*Les enfants du paradis* focuses on the love triangle, or rather, triangles, since four men love Garance. The competition of two men for a woman who loves both is a particularly French plot device that is surprisingly absent in Shakespeare's plays, though it does appear in his sonnets. Romeo has no rival for Juliet. She is never interested in Paris. Valentine in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is willing to give Silvia to his friend Proteus, and Demetrius intrudes on the relationship between Hermia and Lysander in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but Silvia and Hermia have no interest in the extra man. Theirs is not the story of François Truffaut's *Jules et Jim*. Directors like to suggest that Juliet's mother is attracted to Tybalt. It makes sense that a woman said to be twice Juliet's age and therefore about 28 and married to a man who has not danced for "five and twenty years" (*Romeo and Juliet* 1.5.37) should find a younger man attractive. But the play gives no hint of such a liaison. We never see Lady Capulet and Tybalt together. The love triangle that Othello imagines does not exist, since there is no evidence of a liaison between Cassio and Desdemona.

No woman in Shakespeare is emotionally torn by her love for two attractive men. There are duels, but none for honor alone, without regard to nationalism, or for the honor of a woman, as there are in French literature and *Les enfants du paradis*. Shakespeare's verse is rich in vocabulary. It has nuance, but does not depend on it as exclusively as classical French theater, where often what is said hardly matters, only the way it is said. To bring Shakespeare into France successfully requires genius and the ability to transpose, to find equivalents and make substitutions. *Les enfants du paradis* does not look directly at Othello, but it captures enough of it to merit an honored place in the history of intercultural transpositions.

### [ Notes ]

1. For accounts of the history of Shakespeare and France I have relied on Haines, Pemble, Gilman, and Lounsbury.



2. *Zaïre*, act 5, final scene, in Voltaire, *Complete Works*, 8:522. My translation
3. Richard Burt, "Mobilizing Foreign Shakespeare's in Media," 232, lists movies that include scenes from Shakespeare.
4. Quotations from *Les enfants du paradis* are taken from the English subtitles for convenience. I include an untranslated remark in French and a summary of the end. The film mirrors what is happening on stage between Othello and Desdemona, in italics, with the jealousy that seizes Édouard de Montray as he sits with Garance.
5. Mirella Jona Affron, in "'Les enfants du paradis': Play of Genres," 48, argues that the Turkish element is part of the melodrama that, more than Shakespearean tragedy, defines the genre of the movie.

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