

Benjamin Steingass*

Othello*-dor: Racialized Odor In and On *Othello

Iago: O, 'tis foul in her (IV. i. 203)

Abstract: For Shakespearean scholars, the subject of scent in his work has remained relatively lukewarm to discussion. Shakespeare's use of smell is not only equal to that of his other senses, but smell's uniquely historical record both on and off the stage illuminate his works in more ways than currently perceived. Shakespeare's usage of smell is found throughout his works, and their importance on the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean stage present a playwright-director that was exceptionally in-tune with his audiences on the page and in person. Positioned at this culturally significant point in Shakespeare's career, one work's utilization of scent textually and theatrically fully explicates the importance of odor in a societal, racial, and domestic capacity: *Othello*. This article explores and establishes the importance of smell in relation to textual *Othello*, his "dyed in mummy" handkerchief, and Desdemona in the written tragedy. Additionally, it studies the heightened focus of smell in *Othello* on a metatheatric level for Shakespeare on his early modern stage, calling attention to the myriad of odors contained in and around his Renaissance theatre and the result effect this awareness would have had on his contemporary audiences in their experience of *Othello* as a uniquely smell-oriented show.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *Othello*, scent, odor, blackness, blackface, performance, textiles, dyeing, costuming.

Something is rotten in the state of Shakespearean studies (*Hamlet* I. iv. 90): that is, the very lack of focus on odor itself. While Shakespearean scholars have plunged the depths and scoured relentlessly on a multitude of topics, the subject of scent has remained relatively lukewarm to discussion. This is a shame, for Shakespeare's use of smell is not only equal to that of his other senses, but smell's uniquely historical record both on and off the stage illuminate his works in more ways than currently perceived. Shakespeare's usage of smell is found throughout his works, and their importance on the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean stage present a playwright-director that was exceptionally in-tune with

* Toledo Museum of Art.

his audiences on the page and in person. Positioned at this culturally significant point in Shakespeare's career, one work's utilization of scent textually and theatrically fully explicates the importance of odor in a societal, racial, and domestic capacity: *Othello*.

My purpose, therefore, is twofold: first, to explore and establish the importance of smell in relation to textual *Othello*, his "dyed in mummy" handkerchief, and Desdemona in the written tragedy; second, to explore the heightened focus of smell in *Othello* on a metatheatric level for Shakespeare on his early modern stage, calling attention to the myriad of odors contained in and around his Renaissance theatre and the result effect this awareness would have had on his contemporary audiences in their experience of *Othello* as a uniquely smell-oriented show.

To start, it is important to understand the difficulties surrounding the science and history of smell. When compared to the other major senses of the human body (sight, sound, touch, taste), smell remains an outlier in a number of aspects. First, descriptions of scent are often filtered through various linguistic mediums, in that they are frequently not direct comparisons. As Jonathan Harris states, "the words we use to represent smell tend not to be nominal, but comparative—an object smells *like* something" (468). Just as our bodies are able to perceive, process, and identify sounds, tastes, etc., we do the same with smell; the issue is not based in biology, but in language. When it comes to conveying senses, it is here smell deviates: unlike the "complex...array of terms for color and phonemes," Harris writes, we "have no such terminology for the spectrum of odor" (468). As a result of this failure in language, we are forced to relay odors through the other senses in referential manner.

In spite of this communicative failure, scent's indescribability presents an interesting phenomenon. While odor linguistically can be seen as a problem, it can likewise be presented an unrestrained opportunity; unlike the other senses, odor is capable of claiming more so as to identify itself. Odor, in this case, works descriptively and not prescriptively. With this idea established, an innovative approach has been utilized in addressing smell: the idea of "smell as the palimpsest" (472). In the same manner that a literary and physical palimpsest invokes the past when viewing the present, so too does this view of odor identification. However, the palimpsest fails to work as chronologically as intricate as scent memory and identification. "The centrifugal nature of smell," according to Harris, allows smell to simultaneously "smell *like* something else and hence to evoke the past by metonymic association" (472), ultimately placing the object of olfactory scrutiny both in the past and *in media res*, outside and inside of the object itself. Yet, as suggested above, this unique property of smell has caused its written and narrative history to falter.

Therefore, it may come as no surprise that the history of communicating the experience of smell, in particular within the confines of the Renaissance

stage, has been often a forlorn enterprise. Perhaps Holly Dugan puts it best in summarizing that “as stage properties,” smell has often been overlooked or avoided when dealing criticism of Elizabethan and Jacobean physical records of the theatre and stage, a clear result of the false claim that smell and “olfaction lacks both a history and an archive” (229). Despite historical abdication of smell, scholars have recently attempted to shift their focus to olfaction and its importance in the early modern theatre, both specifically in meta-theatrical and -textual connections of dramas to their performances.

For William Shakespeare, contemporary stage conditions were juxtaposed between the physical limitations of the stage itself to the drama forced to perform on it. “The stage had *property* but no *scenery*,” writes Muriel Bradbrook (30). Written dramas were able to indicate setting through stage directions; English history plays were easy to assume their settings, England; performed dramas did not share in this convenience. This posed an issue for playwright and director Shakespeare. Without the ability to establish setting through a physical landscape, Shakespeare had either determine setting through the use of language or the use of dramatic conventions. Linguistically, Shakespeare often attempts to establish a scene of scenery early in the first scene of the show. *The Comedy of Errors* (I. i. 29), *Measure for Measure* (I. i. 23), and *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* (I. i. 12), as well as other early-Shakespeare comedies, reference their location almost immediately in the show to establish a footing. In most extreme examples, shows like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *Troilus and Cressida* all announce location in their first spoken lines. This occurs even on the micro-level for Shakespearean shows: Hamlet’s first scene verbally places the characters standing guard on a cold midnight (I. i. 6-8), whereas Edgar has to orally announce to a blind Gloucester their arrival to Dover (IV. vi. 1-3).

On the other end of the spectrum, Shakespeare the director was pigeonholed into establishing his settings through dramatic staging conventions. Independent of the physical stage that remained relatively in stasis, scholars have begun to note Shakespeare the director’s distinct use of spectacle in his work. According to Stephen Orgel, the “device” for establishing a setting through spectacle forced poets-directors and playwright-directors to utilize “nearly every other art know to the age: painting, architecture, design, mechanics, lighting, music of both composer and performer, acting, choreography, and dancing both acrobatic and formal” (49). In this sense, the special effects of early modern drama played an equal, if not more important role in creating the settings for plays. The one feature noticeably absent from Orgel’s list: the deliberate and nuanced utilization of scent.

This negligence of odor was not historical, but rather, documental. Scent played a major role on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage; it merely has been deemed insignificant. In “Scent of a Woman,” Dugan argues, “Perfumes were powerful stage properties...on early modern professional stages” (246) for their

ability to capture not just natural phenomena associated with smells, but in their evocation of “early modern theatrical fantasies about gender and desire” (246). While Dugan limits her discussion to dramatic scent’s role in gender identity, her underlying work can be expanded to grapple with the importance of odor in setting racial identities—both a gendered and racial text and stage ‘smelled very differently, their aromatic properties suggest that olfaction was a crucial part of theatricality throughout the sixteenth century” (230). Scent in the Shakespearean drama and on the Shakespearean stage equally enacted the invisible and visible social differences, particularly in a distinctly “black” *Othello*. The incorporation of these two different features of drama, speech and spectacle, fluctuated throughout his career, placing *Othello* in a uniquely precarious position. “Whereas the first half of [Shakespeare’s] career witnessed a shift from spectacle to speech,” Douglas Bruster notes, “the second half saw a return to spectacle, as generic emphasis moved from history plays and comedies to tragedies and romances” (“The dramatic life...” 83). Essentially, “spectacle replaced scenery” on the stage in a way to appeal to “the demands of the more unsophisticated” audience members (30).

Coupled with this change in the theatre is the underlying change in societal conditions in late Elizabethan England. From this lens, the shift can be seen as the result of Shakespeare’s conscious awareness of his audience’s attention of “a signal transitional period in English history” (*Drama in the Market...*, 1) that was found both ex- and internally to the stage. Theatrical techniques paralleled a changing perception in society for “language, religion, geography, and color” (Smith 9), which in turn “had a direct impact on the audience’s perception of [blackness]” (9). In the temporal battleground for control of the narrative is *Othello*, dated 1603-1604, during the proverbial apex of Shakespeare’s professional period. As a result of this placement occurring almost synchronically with this theorized shift, *Othello* adopts both the former emphasis on the power of scripted speech, couple with Shakespeare’s later desire for utilizing drama spectacle. Rather than jostling between these two tools, *Othello* conjoins both its text and its stage elements on the early modern stage to address its audience.

On a textual level, Shakespeare’s emphasis on olfactory language in relation to race and gender throughout *Othello* is clearly more than coincidental. Perhaps most noticeable in *Othello*’s obsession with scent is in regards to the titular character himself. Othello is repeatedly referred through and reduced to olfactory means. In learning of Desdemona’s marriage to Othello, Brabantio deems him a “foul thief” who “hast enchanted [Desdemona] (I. iii. 61-63). Further, Iago states, “one may smell in such a will most rank,/ Foul disproportion, though unnatural” (III. iii. 231-233). This “rank” is not only in “foul disproportion” to Othello’s military classification, but points to larger Elizabethan ideas of racialized odor. Further, this “will most rank” potentially

carries a doubly malicious and biting pun on the “will” of both the author—William—and rape, as similarly depicted in the alternative title of *Twelfth Night*: “What You Will” (Fineman 39). Smell was closely related to the since debunked humors system of medicine: “passions exercised an effect on the humors; they also affected individual odor” (38), Alain Corbin cites. Under the humoral system, “‘The Negro...*must* to some extent smell more strongly,’” Corbin references, “They represented the brutish, strongly animalized world” (38). For Iago and his fellow conspirators, Othello’s stench was not just metaphorical, but a literal result of his identity as a “Moor,” and much like other “animals”, “[Othello’s] hath blown his ranks into the air” (III. iv. 135).

Much like the text itself, *Othello*’s early modern staging played heavily on the importance of odor. This importance of odor to race on the stage can be found in relation to argument as presented by Ian Smith in his article, “Othello’s Black Handkerchief.” Shakespeare, in his specific emphasis on both the speech and the spectacle of his shows during *Othello*’s creation, would have dealt with the dramatic convention at the time of performing Othello as black. For Smith, this performance of blackness was not just limited to modern idea of a cosmetic “blackface”; rather, one popular way “to imitate the black skin of Moors or Africans on the stage was the covering of the actor’s body with black cloth” (4); the literal “rank garb” Iago refers to (II. i. 304). Not only that, but the very covering worn by actors to portray blackness was the same material used for the “ocular proof” (III. iii. 357): Othello’s handkerchief. Ultimately, these findings for Ian Smith suggested a “manufacturing” of blackness in *Othello*:

The black body in the early modern theatre is the product of artistic and artisanal creation—conceived, sewed, dyed, and fitted according to the body measurements of the actor and, more importantly, the ideological demands of race. (22)

I would like to further this idea by adding an additional qualifier that cohabitates both inter-textually and meta-theatrically: the black body in *Othello* is “conceived, sewed, dyed, fitted, and *scented*”. This scent not only reinforces the “foul” nature of Othello, but contributes to a more complicated understanding of the function of smell within the tragedy.

Renaissance and Baroque England was equipped with numerous ways to dye fabrics black both on and off the stage. In M. Channing Linthicum’s *Costume in the Drama of Shakespeare...*, English costume manufacturers had various classes of dyes: “plants and woods...minerals...insects...salt and lye...ashes and such obnoxious sources as brine of pickled fish” (2)¹. Of the

¹ Perhaps my favorite source for dye: “animal or human excretions.” While this is never cited as a source for dyeing material black, it would certainly have established a “foul” and “rank” Othello.

plants and woods category, two important dyes were employed for blackening: madder and woad. “Madder was a climbing herb,” Linthicum explains, “the dye of whose root, when combined...with woad, it produced black” (2-3). While madder’s smell was rather nondescript, woad’s was incredibly pungent. In *Poetaster*, Ben Jonson places the smell of woad in contrast with the incense of frankincense (II. ii. 57). Perhaps most indicative of woad’s unpleasant smell comes Queen Elizabeth herself, who “in 1580, forbade the planting of woad within eight miles of the royal residences” (Linthicum 3). Although she eventually revoked this decree², she still found the smell repulsive, reportedly noted that, ““when she cometh on Progress to see you in your Countries; she be not driven out of your Towns by suffering it to infect the Air too near them”” (qtd. 4). Moreover, woad’s olfactory effects have been noted to linger well past the dying process, as dyers “wore their labor on their hands” (Uhlman 182) through the lasting stain and smell, barring these manufacturers from joining local trade guilds (183).

Further, the conflation of Othello’s material black skin to the material of his handkerchief can also be accounted for through an olfactory interpretation. In describing the origins of his handkerchief, Othello states its Egyptian history:

The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,
And it was dyed in mummy which the skillful
Conserved of maidens’ hearts. (III. iv. 74-76)

As Smith explores in his aforementioned article, being “dyed in mummy” offers a pointed description of the prop. “Samuel Johnson, citing the ‘mummy’ reference in *Othello* in his *Dictionary*,” Smith relays, “describes the ‘liquor’ emanating from mummified bodies as ‘a thick, opaque and viscous fluid, of a blackish and strong but not disagreeable smell’” (qtd. 19). However, Johnson’s “strong by not disagreeable smell” is not unanimous among those involved in thanatology and remains. Platearius writes that, “Mummia...is black, ill-smelling, shiny, and massive” (qtd. Dannefeldt 164); botanist Pierre Pomet noted bad-quality mumia “[stunk] of Pitch” (qtd. 179); Pliny the Elder identified the liquid dye of mumia as “pissasphalt...[a] natural mixture of pitch and asphalt” (qtd. 164).

On a textual level, in marrying Othello, Desdemona’s “heart’s subdued/ Even to the very quality of my lord” (I. iii. 245-246). The quality is not just a metaphorical resonance, but is additionally a very literal dawning of Othello’s nature, including his very smell. The “dyed in mummy,” sulfuric-pitch smelling handkerchief is thus a symbol of the relationship between Othello and his bride becoming one in nature. Thus, physically and olfactory, Othello’s handkerchief

² A whopping twenty years later in 1601 (quite a period to hold a grudge against a smell).

is a reminder to both characters of Desdemona's racial and spiritual mixing; as Emilia states:

Let husbands know
 Their wives have sense like them: they see and smell
 And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
 As husbands have. What is it that they do
 When they change us for others? Is it sport?
 I think it is: and doth affection breed it?
 I think it doth: is't frailty that thus errs?
 It is so too. And have not we affections,
 Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
 Then let them use us well: else let them know
 The ills we do their ills instruct us so. (IV. iii. 96-106)

On one level, Emilia's view of marriage can be read as the need for husbands to recognize that wives and women possess the same physical abilities to see, smell, and taste; the use of the senses are not limited to men. This "like"-ness, then, can be further extended in her soliloquy, where the "desire for sport," or infidelity, can be found in men and women alike. Essentially, she claims that both men and women "smell" for sport equally; furthermore, in her final couplet, she even goes as far as to indicate that any infidelity committed by wives is the result of men themselves in that they "instruct us so."

However, Emilia's soliloquy can likewise be seen in another light. The "like"-ness is rather a result of marital mixing, where the tastes, sights, and smells of the two conform and identify solely with the husband. Therefore, a matrimonially chaste Desdemona would no longer retain her own smell; she would thus smell akin to Othello and all his "foulness." Returning to her final couplet, any "ills" of infidelity by wives are thus created and established by husbandry imagination; if the two share the same smelling essence, one that is fundamentally rooted in the husband's "like"-ness, adultery by the wives are merely extensions of the husbands, creating a smelling arborous of sort.

Furthermore, in receiving Othello's black scented handkerchief, Desdemona receives a physical and olfactory reminder of this smelly miscegenation. While Desdemona retains her physical whiteness, through marriage, she is naturally attached to the distinctly non-white "foulness" of Othello and his handkerchief. Further, this "foul" association is only physical; both "black Othello" (II. iii. 30) and "white" Desdemona (I. i. 86) are spiritually *unfoul*. In Othello's recognition that, "My name, that was as fresh/ As Dian's visage is now begrimed and black/ As mine own face" (III. iii. 385), there is clear distinction between the "foulness" associated to the body and the "foulness" of the soul, which Othello sees as separate from his own racial status.

The dichotomy between her “sweet” spirit and her “foul” odor, however, is not lost on other characters.

It is not surprising then to see this odious “pitchy bitumen” (20) metaphor appear in Iago’s attempt to frame Desdemona. In stereotyping Othello’s blackness as an indicator that he can “as tenderly be led by th’ nose/ As asses are” (I. iii. 393-394), Iago is aware of the importance of smell in his plotting against “the Moor.” In stealing the “napkin” (III. iii. 286), Iago physically removes the olfactory reminder of Desdemona’s relationship to Othello. As a result, Desdemona’s scent changes from “foul” to “sweet”, thus paradoxically changing her spirit from “sweet” to “foul.” In removing the “olfactory proof” of their relationship, Iago lays the groundwork for his “odious, damned lie” (V. ii. 177), leading Othello “by th’ nose” to smell out his own verdict. Upon learning the handkerchief is “not about [her]” (III. iv. 54), Othello’s scent and spiritual recognition of Desdemona completely changes. Othello casts her “foul” spirit to “Fire and brimstone!” (IV. i. 234) where it will “rot” (IV. i. 184). Paradoxically, Othello recognizes her scent is no longer the “foul” odor associated with him, but rather something more sensual:

Othello: O thou weed,
Who art so lovely fair, and smell’st so sweet,
That the sense aches at thee, would thou hadst never been born!...
The bawdy wind that kisses all it meets
Is hushed within the hollow mine of earth
And will not hear’t. What committed?
Desdemona: By heavens, you do me wrong!
Othello: Are not you a strumpet? (IV. ii. 65-80)

Rather than connecting Desdemona’s scent to his own “foul” odor, Othello implicates Desdemona’s new smell to “fair” and “sweet” Bianca (III. 4. 169 and 179), the sexual promiscuous “huswife” (IV. i. 96). To Othello, this sexually associated “sweet” odor is an affirmation of her spiritual “rot;” Iago’s assessment that “tis’ foul *in* her” (IV. i. 205), not *of* her; her spirit is foul, her smell no longer is pursued further by Othello, coming to a climax in the final scene of the tragedy.

Eventually, this identification of Desdemona smelling as “a fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman” (IV. i. 180-181) drives Othello to potential murder. It is here we revisit the final moments at Desdemona’s fragrant bedside:

Othello: When I have pluck’d thy rose,
I cannot give it vital growth again,
It must needs wither:—I’ll smell it on the tree.—
O, balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword!—One more, one more;—

Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
And love thee after.—One more, and this the last;
So sweet was ne’er so fatal. I must weep,
But they are cruel tears: this sorrow’s heavenly;
It strikes where it doth love.—She wakes. (V. ii.12-22)

Othello smelling Desdemona as “rose...balmy breath” is the final proof he needs. As Alison Findlay notes, “Breath carries an erotic attraction” (59) that would be recalled by lovers in an intimate setting; however, “sense of smell was the sense of violent appetites...sweet sensations,” Corbin suggests of early modern Europe, “Consequently, blacks, who had remained nearer to the beast...were more sensitive to the sexual power of odors” (187). Othello, smelling Desdemona in such an intimate setting, fall victim to his own racialization being “more sensitive to the sexual power of odors” and recognizes her “sweet” scent as the “olfactory proof” of her infidelity. Summed up best by Danielle Nagler, “Desdemona does not smell true to Othello because both her natural and redefined smells suggest what is morally reprehensible lies within her” (55).

Yet, almost ironically, this change in smell is ultimately a construct of Othello’s own doing. Returning to Emilia’s soliloquy, any infidelity on Desdemona’s part would be a result of Othello’s own doing, as their “smells” have a shared “like”-ness to Othello as the husband. Thus, in smelling the sweetness of Desdemona, Othello projects a false smell upon her, one that he fundamentally has created for her; the “ill” Desdemona committed was “instructed” by Othello’s misguided logic, an olfactory, self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. Should Othello *believe* Desdemona “turn’d to folly” (V. ii. 162), the mental distrust is the very “ill” that “instructs” Desdemona to “ill” and smell Biancan “sweet,” and not a Moorish “foul.” Only once Emilia unweaves Iago’s incriminating plot, does Othello realize his mistake, that “[Desdemona] was foul!” (V. ii. 197) in the same way that he himself is olfactory “foul” like the “dyed in mummy” handkerchief.

Following the events of the written tragedy are, as one may expect, tragic. Yet, placing the events on the late Elizabethan stage create an even more interactive and scent based experience for the audience, allowing the audience to almost participate in the sensual experience of *Othello*. If Smith’s assessment that Othello would have been portrayed by “covering... the actor’s body with black cloth” (4) and the “dyed in mummy” handkerchief is “a substitute self, a metonymic memento” (14) to Desdemona to serve as a constant “reminder of her black Africa love” (20), while simultaneously serving as a reminder of “black cloth and other materials used in... performances to fabricate and reproduce black skin” (21) is true, then the role of scent on stage exponentially compounds these ideas.

At a historically significant moment in the production of Shakespeare as playwright-director with an emphasis on both text and spectacle, not only would the visual of a white actor garbed in black cloth strike audiences, but so too would the lingering smell of the very dye used to material, just as it had been on the fabric dyers hands. Unlike the “foul” and “pitchy bitumen” (Smith 20) smells of *Othello* and his handkerchief within the text of the show, the staged *Othello* would smell of a lingering reminder of the woad scent or of the Globe’s foul atmosphere itself.

With a grain of salt, it is important to note the documented extent to of woad’s persisting scent in the Renaissance and Baroque theatre is difficult to place. While costumes from the Elizabethan period through the present have been documented as retaining a specifically “wet dog” stench, as reported by Folger’s historian Caryn Lazzuri, these may equally be the result of costumes being worn “night after night of performance, and never deeply cleaned afterwards.” Furthermore, one account shows that the Empress Josephine’s pungent use of “musk, ambergris, and civet” in her relationship with Napoleon was so prolific that “sixty years later her boudoir at Malmaison still retained the odor of the musk that had saturated it” (Corbin 196). Pungent smells have a way of lasting. However, the handkerchief’s woad-y smell may still have been simply overpowered by the theatre itself. Especially significant is the fact that groundlings at Shakespeare’s main theatre, the Globe, were additionally termed “stinkards” by the literate bourgeoisie, referring to potentially both their odious and odorous state as common citizens (Dugan 248). Compounding this issue is the historical problem that the theatres themselves most likely would have smelled quite rank. As Tiffany Stern states, for theatres like the Globe and the Hope Theatre that occupied the near or the same physical spaces as the sport of bear bating, the audience would most likely be surrounded by the “smell of blood and urine and death” (Witmore).

Yet, the early modern Globe’s characteristics still contributed to *Othello*’s obsession with scent and the theatrics of smell; for a show so focused on the experience of smelling, the very content of the show primes the audience to become aware of their olfactory surroundings. This olfactory priming is still employed today on the stage: the Broadway musical *Waitress*, a show about a waitress who attempts to escape her downtrodden life through baking pies at a greasy diner, installed a pie oven to pump the smell of apple pie through the foyer and air ducts of their original Broadway home³. As lead producer Barry Weissler stated, “‘I wanted that aroma, and I wanted it desperately...It’s a wonderful intense surround for the show’” (Paulson 4). The resulting effect adds “an olfactory extension to the show’s set, which replicates a small-town diner specializing in fresh pies” (4). Rather than smelling the specific pies that

³ Having seen the original Broadway production, I can confirm this detail.

the main character “bakes” on stage, the audience is already primed and shaped to experience the show beyond merely sight and sound. Just as the pies onstage evoke a heightened awareness and connection to the narrative, so too the Globe’s stench of death, rot, and blood would evoke the foul odor in *Othello*.

Thus, the spectacle of the staged Othello’s scented black body is relayed further in the incorporation of both the handkerchief of the same black material and the pungent Globe atmosphere. Onstage, Desdemona possessing the woad black handkerchief would literally smell the same as Othello’s body. The actor playing Desdemona would ideally continue to emit the same woad black odor while Othello is offstage. Thus, in accidentally quitting herself of the handkerchief on stage, the actor playing Desdemona would no longer smell akin to Othello, just as textual Desdemona’s loss of the “dyed in mummy” handkerchief loses her “foul,” “very quality of [her] lord.” On stage, it is not the “ocular proof” alone Othello needs to convince himself of Desdemona’s sham infidelity; it is the “olfactory proof,” one shared by the actors portraying the various characters with the spectacle-dependent groundlings enveloped with the foul smell of the Globe. Only once both the actor playing Othello and the groundlings takes “One more, one more;—” (V. ii. 17) sniff of the sleeping actor Desdemona does he fully vicariously smell and experience the indescribably scent based tragedy found in *Othello*, one that is continuously pressing on those the audience in the repeated reminder of their notably smelly surroundings. Perhaps putting it best, the audience shares a vicarious experience with Emilia throughout the course of the staged tragedy in her decree:

EMILIA: Villany, villany, villany!

I think upon’t,—I think,—I smell’t;—O villany!—(V. ii. 187-188)

On the whole, smell and its inculcated emotional associates work for Shakespeare the playwright-director in a hyper fixation within *Othello*. For the educated readers and distanced viewers of *Othello*, playwright Shakespeare utilizes the language and speech of odor to “evokes Othello’s own bestiality created out of the possibility of Desdemona’s adulterous lust” (Nagler 47), and his misapprehension, founded, as elsewhere in the play, upon partial knowledge. As a result, the very possibility of Desdemona smelling “ill” is begot through Othello’s own flawed smelling, being “led by the nose.”

Furthermore, it is imperative to understand how this blackface technology of costuming helped forge a lasting connection between black and blackened skin, contamination, and the idea of a primordial body repulsion. Both the physical scent of Othello’s literal blackened figure on the early modern stage through his dyed costume and the smell of *Othello* the racialized play being performed in a theatre of heightened scent-awareness further make bedfellows of the dichotomies of a constructed racist ideologies (Saunders 148-176). The

fixedly black or blackened character and black staged play support a white supremacist belief in a hierarchical, essentialized race wherein white characters and white staged plays are “sweet,” and black characters and black staged plays are “foul.” The perpetuation and continuation of these racist and racialize connections have yet to be fully addressed, dismissed, and destroyed.

Similarly the spectacle-dependent viewers of staged *Othello* “smell’t” the villainy around them in a meta-theatric sense. Shakespeare’s contemporary audience would be engrossed with and in odor, evoked through the recognizably “foul” woad dyed cloth of *Othello*, the repeated occasions of physical sniffing staged before them, and the hyper emphasized dialogue pertaining to odor, all of which prime the audience’s consciousness to an awareness of their placement within the uniquely piquant setting of the Globe Theatre. Thus, through both textual and theatrical priming, both Shakespearean character and spectator alike are drawn in to smell the “foul” tragedy both in and around *Othello*.

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