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Bring Back Bradley: Shakespearean criticism and the problem of graphocentrism

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In a journal article of 1996/97 entitled 'The Double History of Othello: performance against criticism' I discussed the differences between performance and reading, between the performance/audience reception of a play-script and the silent reading of the pages of that script, using Othello as a test case ('Practice', A Journal of Visual, Performing & Media Arts, Deakin University.) I concluded that we can read the written text of a play, but we cannot easily ‘read the play’, nor write about it. Performance exists in intimate relationship with writing, but is not the same as writing. The play-text, unmediated by performance, is not ‘the play’. The play is more accurately described as the performance of the text, that text being as a blueprint to a finished building, an orchestral score to a concert performance (James McCaughey, p.26.) These might appear highly Platonic models, but they imply, I believe, no falling into a ‘logocentric’or ‘phonocentric’ trap, no distrust or downgrading of the written words, but rather a deeper attentiveness to them, and an appreciation of how they differ from the words of novels, poems and other written texts. I am led to ask in the present essay how the literary critic can approach or read a play? The very conjunction here of ‘read’ and ‘play’ suggests a possible contradiction, even, and points to the danger of proceeding on a false premise. Which writers about plays have avoided this danger, and which haven’t? Is there not indeed a ‘graphocentric’ trap into which many academic commentators have fallen and continue to fall when discussing performance texts? By graphocentrism I mean the repression of performance, the privileging of reading over bodily (including vocal) presentation, the reception of play-scripts solely from the point of view of a reader. For just as there cannot be an adequate theatrical performance of a text-based play without a critical understanding of its text, equally there can be no adequate criticism of that play without a prior understanding of theatrical performance.

We have a quite intriguing reason to stay focused on Othello as we seek the answers to these questions. In the 1960s and 1970s Othello was mostly written about and taught in universities through a framework provided by the opposing approaches to Shakespearean drama of two famous writers, A.C. Bradley and F.R. Leavis. This was apt, since in 1958 Leavis chose Bradley’s lectures on Othello (published in 1904) as virtually the sole focus of attack on Bradley in The Common Pursuit ('Diabolic Intellect, or the Noble Hero'). By an interesting coincidence, the subsequent paradigm-shift in Renaissance studies – from Leavis ‘new criticism’ to the ‘new historicism’ – was once again marked substantially by the appearance of an essay on Othello: the final chapter of Stephen Greenblatt’s Renaissance Self-Fashioning (1980.) This coincidence is attributable in part no doubt to the prominence of Othello within the Shakespearean canon, but most likely partially also to Greenblatt's drawing toward his destiny, consciously or subconsciously, as a trendsetting critic in the tradition of Bradley and Leavis. Indeed, Greenblatt’s ‘new historicism' is easily identified as being renaissance
studies’ vanguard of that much larger movement: post-structuralist thinking itself.

Structuralism and post-structuralism, new criticism and new historicism….which of these ways of thinking are more useful when applied to performance? And can we safely assume the answers in relation to performance will be the same or similar to the answers in relation to poetry/narrative literature?

A theatre director approaching and planning the performance of a text needs to be as receptive as possible not only to the many possible nuances of each phrase, each image, but also to the structural features of the text as a whole. Yet this last phrase, ‘the text as a whole’, might sound an ‘essentialist’ warning to the contemporary critic: am I suggesting here that a play might exist in a relatively closed, cohesive economy, rather than in the more open, fragmentated, disseminated economy associated with post-structuralist reception of literature? Consider one of the most basic differences between performance and reading: if I see/hear Othello in the theatre, the experience takes about three hours or a little more and is uninterrupted (except by an intermission, if the director provides one.) If I read the text, the script of Othello, this activity is interrupted as often as I choose, and the reading takes as many hours, days or weeks to complete as I choose. We can begin to see already why a director has to think about structure, about the play as an entity, about what might happen within these three hours, about the limitations but also the potential of this continuum of performance, think in short about the play in a way that, were it not a play, but a poem or novel, might be excessively ‘essentialist’.

As we become familiar with Othello in this way, we begin to see that the play has very striking structural features. Probably the most striking of all is the way in which, after several very public scenes in the first half of the play, Acts three and four take the form of an extended, seldom interrupted scene between just two characters, Othello and Iago. At the moment of Act three, scene three, line 90, Desdemona and Emilia depart the stage, leaving Othello and Iago alone together. ‘Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul/ But I do love thee; and when I love thee not, /Chaos is come again.’ From this moment until deep into Act four, the action remains focused with infrequent interruption on Othello and Iago together.

In the first half of the play the attention of the audience alternates, moving to and fro between Othello and Iago, who at no stage are left alone together on stage without other characters accompanying them. First there is Othello’s impromptu public trial, then the storm at sea, then the near riot in Cyprus. In each of these three long scenes (Act1scene3, Act2 scene1, Act2 scene3) Othello faces a challenge. Each of these three scenes is, however, split into two scenes, as first Othello, then Iago, commands the stage. Something similar happens each time: Othello responds to the challenge, leaves, the stage clears, and Iago is left, always Iago and just one other character: either Cassio or Roderigo. Furthermore, at each of these moments a scene in verse becomes a scene in prose; a scene with many characters becomes a scene with only two characters; a scene largely about Othello becomes a scene largely about Iago; a scene in which an audience might identify with an Othello under threat becomes a scene in which an audience might become complicit with an Iago who issues a further challenge.

In becoming, half way through, intimate scenes between just two characters, these major scenes prefigure therefore the transition from this whole first phase of the play into the second phase (Othello and Iago together.) First Roderigo is ‘gulled’ (twice), then Cassio, and finally, in the much longer central sequence running through acts three and four, Othello. Roderigo’s initial gulling is comedic: Othello has won out against Brabantio’s charge of witchcraft, the stage clears, and Roderigo is left, too heartbroken to move. Verse suddenly gives way to prose, and Wilson Knight’s fervent ‘Othello Music’ turns into a scherzo.

Rod. Iago!
Iago: What sayest thou, noble heart?
Rod: What will I do, thinkest thou?
Iago: Why, go to bed and sleep.
Rod: I will incontinently drown myself.

A director of *Othello* might note here not only a huge shift in key, pitch and tone (the previous lines were: ‘Come, Desdemona, I have but an hour/Of love, of worldly matters and direction/To spend with thee. We must obey the time.’), but ponder an audience’s likely need for release after the draining high-seriousness of what has gone before. Moreover, this structure might easily induce an audience to assent to the imminent duping of Roderigo, because through that duping the plot of the play is regenerated: if a new challenge to Othello were not somehow mounted, the play would be over. With Othello’s deliverance from the storm (semi-devil Iago’s next challenge) a similar situation applies: Roderigo must again be seduced, in order that Othello may remain assailable. The action has moved to Cyprus, and now Roderigo’s submission gives way to Cassio’s. By the time Othello is left alone with Iago in act three, his own fall begins to seem inevitable: what needs to be examined is not why he does fall, as literary critics have pondered *ad infinitum*, but why we assent; and the roots of our acquiescence lie in this earlier comedy.

Impromptu court-case; storm; near riot; as these unfold, Iago’s influence grows. He is not the cause of Brabantio’s suit, but a catalyst only. Of the storm he may indeed be the cause, given the strong suggestions of his supernatural power. Of the near-riot, however, he is clearly the cause, and by the end of Act two he has power not only over Roderigo and Cassio, but, to a degree, over Desdemona as well. The distinction between Iago and Shakespeare, plot-maker and playwright, has by now become so blurred that Iago will be able to place Cassio and Desdemona in a scene, as it were, predetermine their behaviour, and make Othello into their audience. The other audience, in the ‘auditorium’ (and on the platform), might be appalled as it was not in Act one, but it will be too late to leave the theatre; they have long since acquiesced in Iago’s ‘playfulness’, and are still attending closely if uncomfortably to what they came and paid to share in: the making of a play.

To elaborate on what I claimed above about our need in writing about performance-texts to be both "structuralist" and "post-structuralist" in our approach: we need to be receptive both to the many possible nuances of each phrase of a play and at the same time to these emerging criteria of performance, including the larger structure, the continuum, of which each phrase is a part. Indeed, we should test any possibly brilliant close reading of a phrase or image against these very criteria. Unfortunately, this is just what even the most celebrated academic writers with very few exceptions fail to do.

**Stephen Greenblatt**

Let us begin with Stephen Greenblatt’s famous reading of Iago’s "After some time, to abuse Othello’s ear/That he is too familiar with his wife"(*Othello*, I-iii, 377-78). The pertinent section of Iago’s soliloquy is as follows:

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Cassio’s a proper man: let me see now;
To get his place and to plume up my will
After some time, to abuse Othello’s ear
That he is too familiar with his wife;
He hath a person and a smooth dispose
To be suspected, framed to make women false.
The Moor is of a free and open nature,
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
And will as tenderly be led by the nose
As asses are. (lines 374-384, New Cambridge edition)
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In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) Greenblatt writes of the ambiguity of the third person pronoun ‘he’ in ‘That he is too familiar with his wife’.

this ambiguity is felicitous; indeed, though scarcely visible at this point, it is the dark essence of lago’s whole enterprise which is, as we shall see, to play upon Othello’s buried perception of his own sexual relations with Desdemona as adulterous. (p.332)

Greenblatt returns to this "felicitous ambiguity" fifteen pages later.

How, then, without ‘ocular proof’ and in the face of both love and common sense is Othello so thoroughly persuaded? To answer this, we must recall the syntactic ambiguity we noted earlier – ‘to abuse Othello’s ear/That he is too familiar with his wife’ – and turn to a still darker aspect of orthodox Christian doctrine, an aspect central both to the confessional system and to Protestant self-scrutiny. Omnis amator feruentior est adulter, goes the Stoic epigram, and Saint Jerome does not hesitate to draw the inevitable inference: ‘An adulterer is he who is too ardent a lover of his wife.’ Jerome quotes Seneca: ‘All love of another’s wife is shameful; so too, too much of your own...Let them show themselves to their wives not as lovers, but as husbands.’ The words echo through more than a thousand years of Christian writing on marriage..... (pp.247-8)

It is a most interesting reading, although at the same time it is hardly a radical departure from ‘new criticism’ in that it conforms to a very familiar pattern of probing Othello’s (along with most tragic protagonists’) apparent psychological makeup with a view to locating the hubris which might in turn help to explain his downfall. It can be argued that Othello falls not substantially (if at all) because of his own "character", but rather because of the immense (indeed partially supernatural) power of lago. Is Othello the only character in the play seduced by lago’s apparent honesty? Not at all: everybody else is seduced just as decisively, not only Roderigo and Cassio, as noted above, but Desdemona, Emilia, Ludovico.....everyone. The point here, however, is neither to praise nor to challenge Greenblatt’s reading. Any word, phrase or image from a text is indeed open to an infinite number of readings. As I have indicated, the problem here is not the reading itself, but Greenblatt’s failure to test the reading against the criteria of performance of which I have been speaking.

These are not the words of a novel or of a poem, but the words of a play. They were first made in and for the theatre. The performance of a play is immediate, that is: not mediated by a narrator (or narrators.) A single line, phrase or word exists in this "im-mediacy" of live performance, therefore, in a different relationship to the words surrounding it than the relationship between the various words that make up a novel or a poem. In the cases of novels and poems consideration of the wider passage is less urgent. Live theatre’s lack of mediation, its immediacy, makes for this urgency, makes the various parts that comprise a soliloquy, or whole scene, or indeed whole play, cohere, makes them more dependent on each other than the words of poems or of narrative literature.

So let us view Greenblatt’s reading as part of a whole performance. Consider first the wider passage from lago’s soliloquy, quoted above, from which Greenblatt has located the "he" in question. Does consideration of this wider passage give strength to or detract from the conviction of Greenblatt’s reading? We need to test Greenblatt’s theory about this "he" firstly against the immediate context, the background, of the live speechmaking of which it forms a part.

Certainly, the proper noun closest to the "he" in question is the "Othello’s" of the preceding line. This goes nicely with Greenblatt’s reading. Now let’s go back a little further.
The passage begins not with Othello, but with Cassio. "Cassio's a proper man": a handsome man, we might say four hundred years later.

let me see now;
To get his place and to plume up my will

It is Cassio's place, to which Iago refers here, is it not? Yes, but it could of course be Othello's too: to get Othello's place, to be in a position, like Othello, of greater not lesser power; to get into Othello's marital "place" maybe. There's no denying the resonances of Greenblatt's reading. On the other hand, it was Cassio who was promoted to lieutenant ahead of Iago. It is Cassio who is mentioned in the previous line. And then, moving forward to later in the play, to its very centre: when Iago does "abuse Othello's ear", whom does he accuse of being too familiar with Othello's wife? Othello himself as well as Cassio? Clearly not: "My noble lord……..Did Michael Cassio, / When you wooed my lady, know of your love?" (III-iii, 92-94) The three long scenes which will dominate the play's central section (Ill-iii, Ill-iv, IV-i) are almost exclusively devoted to Iago's abuse of Othello's ear explicitly in relation to Cassio and only Cassio. And notice the place in the broad structure of the play of the words of Iago which I have just quoted. These words directly follow that huge turning point (discussed in my fourth paragraph, above): the precise point at which the very public scenes dominating the first two acts (trial, storm, riot) give way to the intense intimacy of Othello and Iago left alone together.

When Iago soliloquises in this play, he plans what he will do next, and then we, his audience in the theatre, hear and see him go on to say and do precisely what was planned. We do not merely overhear it, however. We are not as passive as a film or television audience, or an audience in a proscenium arch theatre. In Shakespeare's theatre the audience is more active: here we are participants in a live action taking place in our midst. The very architecture of the Globe and the other spaces in which these plays were first performed confirms this. We are accomplices, initially excited (in the case of Othello) by the plot that we assented to, and then appalled as the action unfolds by the consequences of that complicitness, appalled by the play that we have helped to make.

Take a brief example such as Iago's

I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin
And let him find it (III-iii, 322-3)

It is more than simply important information. Without being "phonocentric" let us try to sense what might happen in the theatre here. The plainness of the content of this line-and-a-half (the relative simplicity, the ordinariness, of the action planned) if anything only heightens the extra-ordinary, quite mesmerising qualities of this blank verse: the alliterative effect of the four 'l' sounds, the heart-beat effect of the iambic rhythm. What is important here is not only the information conveyed, but the relationship which defines every act of theatre, the relationship between actor, in this case a speaker, and audience. And since lago, the actor here, is "plotting", he is, as I noted earlier, particularly closely associated with the author of the text, the playwright, and for all of these reasons our, the audience's, relationship to him is all the more close and dangerous: without our "assent", the plot and the very play end right here.

Returning to Greenblatt's reading of the line from the earlier soliloquy: what happens if the lines are rehearsed by an actor with a view to testing Greenblatt's reading? Here the problem is not so much that the test invalidates the reading, but rather that the performance of the lines actually resists the test: for how can their utterance within the continuum of a live performance suggest a "scarcely visible" meaning? Since a nod in the direction of Othello's most recent exit is not feasible (Othello was not present in the preceding scene, a long dialogue between lago and Roderigo) the only possible
approach seems to be to introduce pauses before and after ‘he’ in order to produce
Greenblatt’s second meaning. However, rather than successfully conveying it, these
seem merely to create an utterance at once unclear and contrivedly portentous. They
also cut across that very even, pulsating, rhythmic movement of Iago’s verse of which
I was just speaking, and in doing so weaken other readings. Within the continuum of
live performance, the performer must then choose between these meanings,
something a reader of the text as narrative literature is not compelled to do.
Furthermore, in performance this emphasis on the ‘he’ is likely to make Iago himself
seem conscious of at least the portentousness referred to above, if not of Greenblatt’s
reading itself. Without the emphasis the reading remains ‘scarcely visible’ (and
untested); with the pauses around ‘he’ it might perhaps be perceived, but only on the
condition that Iago becomes its deliberate herald, a villain smugly omniscient rather
than compulsively driven. Once again the performer must choose, and if the text is
being considered in the context of performance, the reader must do likewise.
‘Felicitous’ and ‘the essence of Iago’s whole enterprise, yet ‘scarcely visible’.
Greenblatt’s reading, which isolates a textual detail from its immediate context, cannot
be substantiated by that context, the marginalising of which forces him back somewhat
into new critical mode, into strained psychologising from afar. His view of Othello
himself is likewise remarkably close to Leavis’:

it is Othello himself who is fully implicated in the situation of the Sidney
sonnet: that one can win pity for oneself only by becoming a tale of oneself,
and hence ceasing to be oneself….And even Othello, in his moment of
triumph, has a dim intimation of this fate: a half-dozen lines after he has
recalled ‘the Cannibals, that each other eat’, he remarks complacently, but
with an unmistakable undertone of anxiety, that Desdemona would come
‘and with a greedy ear/ Devour up my discourse’ (I-iii. 149-50)

Where a scarcely visible suggestion was the essence of Iago’s whole enterprise, here a
‘dim intimation’ becomes an ‘unmistakable undertone’: there is a tension not only
between these two phrases but within the second. If it is unmistakable, why not just
say ‘tone’? If it is an undertone (and dim) is it really unmistakable? Certainly it is
possible that Desdemona’s devouring of Othello’s discourse disturbs him. It is equally
possible that he is delighted by her eagerness and no more disturbed by it than he had
been by the cannibals of six lines earlier. ‘Devour’ might suggest a castration-anxiety
(as is attributed to Othello by several critics, including Marilyn French and Karen
Newman) or it could on the other hand be a matter of Desdemona’s response matching
Othello’s story, much to the latter’s wonder and contentment. Both are possible
readings, neither ‘unmistakable’. ‘Unmistakable’ recalls the essentialism of Leavis ‘the
text is plain enough’ (The Common Pursuit, p.144) and both the morally superior tone
and the content of ‘one can win pity for oneself only by becoming a tale of oneself’
recall Leavis’ ‘self-dramatising’ Othello, as indeed does this Othello who talks
‘complacently’ before the senators. Once again these views need to be tested in
rehearsal and/or by reference to the immediate context of the readings on which they
are based. The immediate context of ‘Devour up my discourse’ is an uttered speech,
the context of which in turn is a depicted situation of Othello being called upon to
defend himself against Brabantio’s charge. There is a pragmatic consideration here
which is dismissed by Leavis and Greenblatt, or which eludes them: for Othello it is
crucial that Desdemona’s voluntary, hungry love be vividly described. Othello himself
anticipates this situation in the previous scene:

Let him do his spite;
My services, which I have done the signiory
Shall out-tongue his complaints.

Othello realises that he faces a test of speechmaking, a courtroom conflict with
Brabantio, in which the performed language of one of them will win out. A reading of
the later speech which takes account of this earlier speech might judiciously allow for
an element of calculation: Othello senses or even foresees that the reason Desdemona ran away with him, and the reason the senators will most likely give weight to the option of acquitting him, coincide, and deliberately frames the later speech accordingly. This is not to deny that Desdemona devoured his earlier story or to deny a possible nuance of sexual anxiety; but in this more methodologically advanced reading Othello would in neither scene be complacent, but rather, determinedly cool and practical under pressure.

Consider again the possible responses of an implied audience in the theatre. A complacent Othello, the Othello of Leavis, Greenblatt and hosts of their followers, will forfeit the empathy of an audience at once, right here in the senate chamber. What are the implications of this for the structure of the evening/afternoon performance? An Othello who speaks confidently but uncomplacently will on the other hand most likely secure that empathy: empathy with a man already plotted against behind his back but in the audience’s presence in I-i (by a self-confessed liar), a black man first met by the audience within seconds of facing a crowd of armed, angry, racist whites, a man acting coolly in a crisis, just when he might have panicked and so appeared to indicate a guilt of witchcraft which was not his.

The continuum of performance requires, moreover, a consideration not only of audience response from moment to moment but also of audience response to Act One in the context of the play as a performed whole, pointing to the implications for Acts Three and Four of these two opposed readings. The downfall of an Othello with whom an audience has empathised will be deeply felt, for such an audience has undergone, in the words of Ross Chambers, ‘the seduction of his magnetic personality, much as the Duke has.’ (1984, p.5) Greenblatt does use the term ‘empathy’, but in his essay it does not embrace the response of the audience but, like his ‘improvisation’, refers specifically to Iago’s seduction of Othello. Clearly the downfall of an unappealing, complacent Othello will be less affecting, will be witnessed from the outside, as it were, maintaining that moral detachment toward which both Leavis and Greenblatt tend. This Othello will be much more comfortable. Is Othello a comfortable play? I referred earlier to theatre architecture. Which version does the architecture of Globe, Blackfriars and the court theatres, the spaces in which Shakespeare’s plays were first made, more lend itself to? Which leaves room for a more interesting Iago? Greenblatt does not address these questions.

Finally, it is difficult to reconcile Greenblatt’s Desdemona with this, his Othello. If Othello has already ceased ‘to be himself’, then Desdemona’s reaction to him whose status is ‘a text’ (p.238) must surely be at least partly a corresponding fiction, a mirage of sexual love, a mistake associable with her youth and protectedness, in Auden’s words ‘the romantic crush of a silly schoolgirl’ (‘The Joker in the Pack’, 1948, p.268.) This is in contrast with Greenblatt’s Desdemona, whose response to reunion with her husband in II-i ‘denies the possibility of….narrative control and offers instead a vision of unabating increase’ and ‘eroticizes everything to which it responds’ (p.243) and whose declaration of love before the senators is ‘frankly, though by no means exclusively sexual’ (p.250.) Greenblatt contrasts her frankness before the senators with Othello’s eagerness ‘to ward off this shame’, quoting Othello’s denial that he sought ‘To please the palate of my appetite, / Nor to comply with heat, the young affects/ In me defunct’ (p.209.) Why, then, is Othello, in Greenblatt’s own words, absolutely contented and ecstatically accepting of sexuality in reunion with Desdemona on the shores of Cyprus? (P.243)

Credible answers emerge from the immediate contexts of the two moments. On arrival in Cyprus Othello is at the absolute height of his fortune. Here, in the earlier scene, he is an old black ram accused of tupping a white ewe, a lone black person in the midst of an all-white gathering, called upon to defend himself against a vigorous and fiery prosecution, a charge of criminally seducing a young girl whom he admits to having surreptitiously ‘ta’en away’ and married. Explicitness about his sexual feelings toward Desdemona would hardly help his task here: to defend this case. Greenblatt’s
substantiation of his reading comes from what ‘Ambrose observed centuries earlier’ about sexual passion being shameful for the old’ (pp.249-50.) Without support from the passage’s immediate surroundings, reference to the other characters and an examination of the continuing exchange between actors and audience, it is not highly persuasive.

Yet Greenblatt has not invariably ignored theatrical performance. Toward the end of an essay of 1986, in discussing the alleged autonomy of art, he turns his attention from an account of the exorcisms at Loudun to a discussion of several depictions of demonic possession in Shakespeare's plays, going on to assert

We need a critical method that is adequate to the daylight performances of the public theatre, to performances in which the presence of other spectators and the sight of the playhouse walls are not obscured, the sounds of the street just beyond these walls are not completely stilled......a daylight method of interpretation would enhance this visibility in a way that terms like ‘raw material’ or ‘background’ or ‘source’ do not. These terms are typically used to cordon art off from surrounding cultural discourses, in order to confer upon the literary a formal transcendence not only of the circumstances that attended its making but all of the particular circumstances and beliefs. (‘Loudun and London’, p.343.)

Yes, we need a critical method that is adequate to the performances, adequate to a theory of performance, indeed to the criteria of performance emerging in the present study. In Greenblatt’s essay on Othello in Renaissance Self-Fashioning, however, there is no sign of such a method, and the consideration of what takes place ‘just beyond these walls’ is not only not completely stilled, it drowns out the performance completely: whilst the daylight (and later) performances of Othello are not mentioned at all, of their surrounding cultural discourses there is a superb array. The result of this imbalance is precisely to cordon off the performances, original and other, from Greenblatt’s account of text and cultural context, and to confer upon these a transcendence over performance formerly conferred upon the text alone (graphocentrism.) Even in the passage above from ‘Loudun and London’ Greenblatt is clearly less interested in the performance (which is used – like Iago’s improvisation and role-play in Renaissance Self-Fashioning – rather as a metaphor, this time for new historicism itself) than in the cultural negotiations which produce it.

Greenblatt, like most Shakespearian scholars from the very first (Thomas Rymer) to the present day, has fallen squarely into a graphocentric trap. (More about Rymer, and some of the others, in a moment.) The prominent terms of the vocabulary of Greenblatt’s essay are ‘story’, ‘fiction’, ‘inscribe’ and, above all, ‘narrative’: Iago is ‘the inventor of comic narrative.’ Othello’s loss of himself derives from his ‘submission to narrative self-fashioning.’ There is nothing to suggest that these terms are used in Ross Chambers’ sense, to denote the experience of the audience during theatrical performance.

It is the special property of the theatre that words can never be proffered there independently of a represented context, so the audience of Othello sees the Moor working his verbal charms through the situational power of his noble presence (p.5)

Similarly, Iago’s ‘role-play’ and ‘improvisation’ convey a limited meaning in Greenblatt’s essay. Through Iago’s on-stage role-play and improvisation of plot Shakespeare actually extends our definition of the actor’s art: we come to see that these activities are not practiced merely by stage-villains but in the world symbolised by the theatre-building, come to see through Iago the stage-actor as metaphor par excellence of the psychopathic role player in life abroad. For Greenblatt, who addresses both the words of the text and this ‘world’ beyond the theatre walls, but not the immediate context in which the world becomes a stage, these terms cannot be allowed their full resonance.
and become reflective almost solely of an historical event, the sixteenth-century Spanish invasion which suggests to him the narrative of Othello’s duping. It is a useful metaphor, but the play remains in 1980 as much a novel as it was in the writings of F.R.Leavis.

Let me close by briefly surveying further the vast history of Othello-criticism from Rymer to Greenblatt with particular reference to the problem of graphocentrism.

**Thomas Rymer**

Possibly the first attempt by a published writer at a sustained, methodical study of a play by Shakespeare is the seventh chapter of Thomas Rymer’s *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693), an essay on *Othello*. Rymer was a critic highly regarded in his own time and seems to have written in marked consistency with the dominant critical principles of the early eighteenth century. The critics of that period, whether in separate essays or in journals, attacked Shakespeare’s plays more often than they praised them, usually because, like Rymer they found that the plays persistently broke the rules of Aristotelian drama (Brian Vickers, ed. *The Critical Heritage: Shakespeare*, 1974, pp.1-2). Rymer works right through the neo-Aristotelian categories and attacks *Othello* under each head. He finds Shakespeare to have broken the unities of time and space (p.142). He finds Iago and Roderigo to have been ‘not of quality to be familiar with Brabantio’ and that they had no ‘provocation from him, to deserve a rude thing at their hands’ (p.136) But for Rymer Iago is the most ‘intolerable’, for ‘never in Tragedy, nor in Comedy, nor in Nature was a Souldier with his Character’ (p.134.) This last alleged violation of the Horatian-Aristotelian criteria anticipates the so-called problem probed by critics ever since: the seemingly endless search for Iago’s motivation. It did not occur to Rymer that there might in this matter be method in Shakespeare’s madness, that Iago might in fact not be simply a ‘Souldier’, not simply a man, but actually a demi-devil, as Othello calls him in Act Five, nor purely a ‘character’, but a descendent of the Vice, Envy and other figures of the medieval-allegorical drama. Like a host of critics after him, Rymer, in his disdain for theatrical performance, never considered the play-text’s place within the *history of theatre* which in part gave rise to it.

Rymer refers to Shakespeare habitually as ‘Author’ and ‘Poet’, never as playwright. This is typical of Shakespeare-scholars of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and a large portion of the twentieth) though in some writings the term ‘Dramatick poet’ also occurs. Rymer does use the words ‘stage’ and ‘audience’ and does not equate *Othello* wholly with the text on which the play is based. The repression of performance in his essay comes about rather through the contemptuous attitude which accompanies every reference to stage and audience. (‘Author’ and ‘Poet’ are indeed clearly associated with Rymer’s customary confusion of Shakespeare himself with the characters of the play, as if Shakespeare had, like the much preferred Cinthio, written a work of narrative literature, not a play. For example, on page 134 he claims ‘Shakespeare in this play calls ‘em the *supersubtle venetians*.’) Of the central scene of III-iii he asks

> Whence comes it then, that this is the top scene, the scene that raises Othello above all other Tragedies on our Theatres? It is purely from the Action, from the Mops and the Mows, the Grimace, the Grins and Gesticulation. Such scenes as this made all the World run after Harlequin and Scaraamuccio. (p.149)

These ‘actions’, crucial to the craft of live performance, exist in direct relationship with the words of the text accompanying them. Yet, for Rymer, compelling poetry was a high achievement, compelling ‘Action’ something to be sneered at. Once again Rymer was no strange exception to his times in this matter, no lone eccentric in an otherwise tolerant era. Three decades before publication of *A Short View of Tragedy* the theatres were still closed (and had been so throughout the two decades before that.) Rymer’s views on performance anticipated strongly those of Alexander Pope. (In *The Works of*
Shakespeare, 1725, Pope writes 'It must be allowed that Stage-Poetry of all other is more particularly levell’d to please the Populace……The audience was generally composed of the meaner sort of people') and almost pale in comparison with the vehemence of some nineteenth and twentieth century writings. In a book called Shakespeare, from the English Men of Letters series, Walter Raleigh wrote in 1907 ‘The readers of Shakespeare took over from the fickle players the trust and inheritance of his fame….his continued vogue upon the stage is the smallest part of his immortality’, and claimed that Milton thought of Shakespeare simply as ‘the author of a marvellous book’ (London: MacMillan, p.2.) Whilst the language of Bardolatry (a term coined by George Bernard Shaw six years before the publication of Raleigh’s book) was not to reach its peak until the late-eighteenth century and later, its origins are traceable to earlier attitudes both to the initial performances of the plays and to their first publication in that ‘marvellous book’ of 1623, a date which can be viewed as marking the institutionalisation of their ‘author’ as individual genius, the sacred monument of English Literature.

S.T.Coleridge and Samuel Johnson

Coleridge’s writings on Shakespeare’s plays show little concern with their performance. In the notes on Othello he does touch on Samuel Johnson’s suggestion that the play should have opened with the arrival of Othello in Cyprus, which in turn leads to a short discussion of the unities of time and space. There is otherwise little to suggest that the words of the text of this ‘greatest of poets’ are words for performance (Shakespearean Criticism vol.2, p.48.) Whilst the notes are, like the chapter of Rymer, of interest to a huge cluster of writers of the 1980s and 1990s exploring the play in terms of gender and race, their relevance to the present essay appears strictly limited: for Coleridge, as for Rymer, Pope and Samuel Johnson, the text of the play forms part of an essentially literary tradition.

Johnson wrote in 1765 ‘A play read, affects the mind like a play acted' ('Preface to Shakespeare'.) His relationship to the theatre was quite complex, not least of all because of his ambivalent relationship with David Garrick, his former student, and the age’s most eminent actor. These were times of marked tampering by performers with the written texts of Shakespeare’s plays, the transformation for example of the last scene of King Lear, to provide a happy ending. Johnson, himself both editor of the plays and a playwright, was opposed to such tampering, and this opposition explains partially perhaps his dictum’s annexation of performance and reduction of the audience thereby to a single person, like a reader. A further explanation lies in a puritanical element in his attitude toward the bodily performance of the theatre, traces of a moralism associated with the deeply ingrained ideas which had brought about the closure of the theatres in Shakespeare’s own time (During the rehearsal-period of his play Irene Johnson is said to have refused to visit the actor’s Green Room, explaining to Garrick that ‘the silk stockings and white bosoms of your actresses do make my genitals to quiver’, Boswell, Life of Johnson.) Johnson was relatively but not completely free of such attitudes; and, whilst the roots of his writings lie more in seventeenth-century humanism than in the philosophy of Descartes, the mind-body dualism suggested by his dictum, together with its assumption of both reader and audience as an individual, do strongly recall the neo-Cartesian tradition, and especially the paradigm of consciousness: of individual, rational thought as the creator of meaning. In seeking to establish a critical approach adequate to the bodily performance of plays in public theatres, and in accordance with the notion of ‘performance’ as actor-audience exchange rather than individual action, we need to move beyond the assumptions implicit in Johnson’s dictum, to reconceive the paradigm of consciousness in the light of communicative interaction. Even in the relatively closed economy I have been describing, theatre is never the product solely of an individual reading of a play, but the result of a collaboration between director, actors, author, designers and crew, and of the interaction between audiences and this result.

A.C.Bradley
I have given my essay the title 'Bring Back Bradley' because of a wonderful quality that some of his writing possesses, even though most of the time he in fact falls as squarely into the graphocentric trap as any other writer discussed here.

Like the darlings of many generations, Bradley was undoubtedly 'the bete noir of the next' (Katharine Cook, 1972): his lectures on Shakespeare were still provoking rage more than fifty years after their publication in 1904. Up until the 1970s it is quite difficult to find a work of Shakespearian criticism which omits all reference to his name. In 1988 Peter Davison wrote that, despite the attacks by, amongst others, F.R. Leavis, 'his stock still rides high and with justice.....his passionate engagement with his subject is perennially attractive'. Whilst Davison's rather quaint phrasing itself recalls the Edwardian Bradley's, there are passages in the lectures which really do confirm what Davison is saying: the account of Emilia, for example, in lecture six. For Bradley, Emilia's retort 'A halter pardon him, and hell gnaw his bones' (IV-ii, 138) says what we long to say, and helps us. And who has not felt in the last scene how her glorious carelessness of her own life, and her outbursts against Othello...lift the overwhelming weight of calamity that oppresses us, and bring us an extraordinary lightening of the heart. (p.198)

The dispensing here with Bradley's customary term 'the reader' and the emphatic repetitions of 'we' suggest a body of people responding together: an audience. Here is the quality of 'engagement' to which Davison is referring. Elsewhere Bradley defines plays repeatedly as texts for reading rather than for performance. The phrasing of some later criticism, such as 'to the reader, or audience' are absent, and the premise is maintained throughout. The majority of earlier interpretations of Iago's character, for example, are described in lecture six as being 'inadequate not only to Shakespeare's conception, but, I believe, to the impressions of most readers of taste who are bewildered by analysis' (p.170.) Iago's 'extraordinary deadness of feeling' is something 'few readers are in danger of ignoring'. Bradley goes on to praise 'the poet who painted Macbeth and Shylock'; and in the end the improbability of the entire success of Iago's design 'forces itself on the reader' (p.190.)

There is in lecture six a sole explicit reference to the play as play rather than novel or poem, to which Bradley is led quite accidentally by probing the function of the soliloquies:

...with Shakespeare soliloquy generally gives information regarding the secret springs as well as the outward course of the plot; and, moreover, it is a curious point of technique with him that the soliloquies of his villains sometimes read almost like explanations offered to the audience (p.182.)

The fragility of this moment is evident in 'curious' (Bradley never goes on to explore why), 'almost' and 'read', the last of which terms leads to a familiar confusion: audiences do not read soliloquies, at least not in the sense in which Bradley appears to be using the word in 1904; they listen to them and look at the actor performing them. Why did Bradley find this ‘technique’ of explanation curious and pass on quickly to a new point rather than explore it further? The answer appears to lie in a failure to consider either the diverse dramatic genres on which Renaissance plays were based (an omission shared with, amongst many other later critics, Rymer) or the playing conditions in the theatres of Shakespeare’s time. The explanatory element in soliloquy goes back to the very first ‘actor’ in the Western tradition, Thespis, and flourishes in the plays of Euripides and others. In outdoor (medieval) and semi-outdoor (Globe) theatrespaces this direct ‘offer’, to use Bradley's term, at once secures the audience's attention (no easy matter in such spaces) and makes its members party to what is unfolding in their midst. To Bradley this is curious, for to him, as to a host of critics following him, the soliloquies are more readily associated with meditation and reflection. Yet Iago’s soliloquies work also, as we have already seen, as generation of
plot, as exposition, and as the fashioning of Iago as quasi-author figure.

Bradley's letters show that he went to the theatre, but he most likely would only have seen *Othello* performed on the other side of a proscenium-arch. Proscenium-arch theatre divides speaker from audience and hence lends itself to a view of soliloquy as private meditation rather than audience-address. Such playing conditions contrast sharply with those which pertained in, for example, the Globe, in which an actor standing on the front of the platform was in fact standing in the very middle of a circular or polygonal building, in an afternoon light embracing both himself and the audience which surrounded him on three sides.

In the light of this narrow perspective it is hardly surprising that Bradley's discussion cannot fathom the 'secret springs' of which he writes, and that his Iago remains as much a 'character' (p.186) as he was to Rymer, a 'thoroughly bad, cold man', in whose psychology 'there is no mystery'(p.188.)

Nevertheless, because of his passion and intuition, I prefer Bradley's lecture to all the other essays reviewed in the present discussion, even Greenblatt's.

In a future article I would like to explore the *Othello*-criticism of the last fifteen years, with a view mainly to establishing to what extent graphocentrism remains a problem in performance studies.

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