Michael Hattaway, « Over their Heads: Iago, Vices, and “Denotement” »,
« Theta VIII, Théâtre Tudor », 2009, pp. 89-104
mis en ligne en juillet 2009, <https://sceneeuropeenne.univ-tours.fr/theta/theta8>.

Theta VIII

est publié par le Centre d’Études Supérieures de la Renaissance,
dirigé par Philippe Vendrix,
Université François-Rabelais de Tours, CNRS/UMR 6576

Responsables scientifiques

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Date de création

Juillet 2009

Over their Heads: Iago, Vices, and "Denotement"

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I was cued to begin this paper by seeing Wilson Milam's 2007 *Othello* at Shakespeare's Globe in London. This is a production that, for me, generated a few fresh insights into a well-known text, rather more into early modern playing conditions. It is also a production that improved. I saw two performances six weeks apart: the company really needed that time to learn how to make the performance areas, the acoustics, and the audiences of the playhouse work for them. Although certain somewhat lack-lustre central performances did not really encourage me to test out my preferred "literary" readings of the text, my reading of the Globe and the theatrical forms possible in that space for me vindicated the whole Sam Wanamaker project: Shakespeare's Globe is *not* simply a theme park contributing to England's heritage industry. In general, this production displaced the comfortable notion that *Othello* registers a move towards realism and domestic tragedy and made me realise how much self-conscious theatricality there is in the play. These performances also confirmed for me that there are two Shakespeares: what Lukas Erne labels the "literary dramatist" and the professional actor-writer. I will, inevitably, and with some help from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much*

Ado about Nothing, try to bring these two figures into a creative relationship one with another.

The screen actor Eamonn Walker played Othello. He was like a proud stiff bear, mastiffed by a swift-thinking and sharp-biting Iago. It was an old-fashioned interpretation in that, for example, there was little exploration of the nature of the desire between Othello and Desdemona, and the hero displayed little theatricality or self-dramatising of the sort that we learned to look for after reading F. R. Leavis' account of the play, and which we would now be inclined to link to our thoughts about race and gender. (There was a nod towards political correctness in that actors of mixed race played Emilia and Bianca: Emilia disdained her white male husband, who, like Cassio, was attracted to a woman of colour, although he detested his black superior officer.) Overall Walker neither possessed charisma nor could really project, but he made a reasonable job of playing a decent man who was all too easily deceived, who believed what he heard and saw.

Indeed, the plot of *Othello* turns upon persuasion and deception, and it is typical of Shakespeare that this text is in fact metatheatrical: narrative topics of deception impinge on the play's form, and offer suggestive hints about playhouse illusion and the roles and activities of spectators. Shakespeare signals such an intention by the deployment of nonce-words or words invested with unfamiliar meanings, words that are concerned with seeing and believing: "supervisor",[1] "probal", "denotement". The hero demands from Iago "ocular proof" of Desdemona's adultery. What he sees and hears, of course, is a staged event within the staged event of the play as a whole. Othello "supervises" and overhears Bianca accusing Cassio of having had the handkerchief from a supposed mistress—whom Othello assumes to be Desdemona (IV.i.141-61). For this duped man, hearing is believing: "reality", the text therefore suggests, is just as problematic as "representation". Truth lies within us, Shakespeare implies, rather than in the world, and belief is likely to be delusional.

Shakespeare had already written a comedy based on this sort of thing, *Much Ado about Nothing*. That word "noting" (the Elizabethan pronunciation of "nothing") resonates beyond the play's title: it connotes the marking, reading, and, as we would say, decoding of reality. The word artfully sidesteps all problems of "belief". Iago, using an interesting neologism,[2] makes this explicit: he

1 *OED* notes that this is the first recorded use of the word in this sense.
2 See *OED*, "denotement".

says of Othello, he "hath devoted and given up himself to the contemplation, mark, and *denotement* of her parts and graces" (II.iii.287-89, emphasis added). Yes, lovers are perpetually not just passively admiring, but actively "reading" their partners. "Denotement", cognate with nothing/noting, might be a good word to describe not just Othello's attention to Desdemona but also our basic experience as theatre audiences. If, like Othello or the mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we seek from staged events belief rather than "denotement", confuse a sign for a reality, at best confusion or at worst chaos comes again. Much virtue in "denotement".

Recently Andrew Gurr reminded us that Shakespeare's contemporaries tended to speak of "hearing" a play. That this does *not* seem to be an implicit claim for the ascendancy of the theatre poet over those responsible for the production is evinced by the exchange between Egeus and Theseus towards the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

> *Egeus.* Hard-handed men that work in Athens here,
> Which never laboured in their minds till now,
> And now have toiled their unbreathed memories
> With this same play against your nuptial.
> *Theseus.* And we will *hear* it.
> *Egeus.* No, my noble lord,
> It is not for you. I have *heard* it over,
> And it is *nothing, nothing in the world*,
> Unless you can find sport in their intents
> Extremely stretched, and conned with cruel pain
> To do you service.
> *Theseus.* I will *hear* that play;
> For never anything can be amiss
> When simpleness and duty tender it. (V.i.72-83, emphasis added)

What this may also suggest is that credibility, the capacity to instil audience "belief" through the illusion of well-wrought visual images, is not a prime criterion of excellence: the mechanicals are mocked because *they* think it is. Without being too ingenious, it may be that those synaesthetic jokes—"I see a voice. . . . / To spy an I can hear my Thisbe's face" (V.i.187-88)—suggest their complete incapacity for any kind of denotement. They cannot "note in the world" because they cannot apprehend the code, let alone comprehend what is coded.

Moreover, other factors, for example the use of music (another form of "noting"), serves to choke off "belief". Instrumentalists were frequently hired in London playhouses, and although it seems they sometimes occupied a "music-room" above the stage (Hattaway, pp. 29-30; Schütz), there is no evidence that they always remained in such designated sites, and may well have shared playing-space with actors. In our *Othello* this certainly happened: the wind instrument scene (III.i) was retained, with the musicians on the stage. Earlier (II.ii) the musicians, playing Elizabethan instruments, had mocked Othello's authority by sounding mocking flourishes as his herald's proclamation was read. In fact there was a kind of merry war between musicians and players: when, at the beginning, the play's herald was acting as playhouse presenter, they cheekily interrupted his request to kill mobile phones by tootling the Vodafone ring-tone. Towards the end, a truce was called and they came onstage to accompany Desdemona after she had begun her song of willow.

What was most significant was the way the production was book-ended by significant appearances by this playhouse band. First, an induction: for five minutes before the production they warmed the audience up, playing cheery ditties to which the audience was encouraged to clap along—this happened also during the interval. At its end, the production acknowledged the tradition of the terminal jig (Hattaway, pp. 67-69). After the bed, with its tragic loading of the bodies of Desdemona, Emilia, and Othello had been drawn off and the play had ended, the instrumentalists played another joyous number. Players taking smaller roles emerged first, and mooched about the stage to the music, the principals came back for what seemed an orthodox bow, but they too joined the dance—Othello only reluctantly. Iago did not dance at all. Perhaps this jig's sanitised grotesque set off the tragic effect. But I read it as a celebration of collaboration and of the company's skills, a reminder that theatrical pleasure is kindled by *representing* the characters in a text and not by *becoming* them. (As we shall see, this distinction is not as clear-cut as is customarily thought.)

Music can bond performers and hearers. There were further analogies to musical art: occasionally a player's delivery of a long speech (in Elizabethan English, a "passion") drew a round of applause as a well-sung aria does in an opera. Overall the company was pleased to have the pace of its performance cued by the audience—a contrast with a wretched performance of Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* that I saw at the same playhouse in 1997, where the *company*, which obviously had no trust in the play, cued the audience to reductive responses to its

content, hissing villainy, booing politically incorrect remarks, and sighing with feigned pleasure at what they took to be sentimental passages. At *Othello* I found myself noting the big laughs of the afternoon: sometimes they surprised me, but I could not say that they came from Hamlet's "incapable groundlings", from a reductive view of the text.

Sound effects were also intermittently metatheatrical. A thunder device sounded under Iago's couplet at the end of Act One: "I ha't. It is engendered. Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light" (I.iii.385-86). In a nice piece of invention, melodrama turned to sound-effect, the rumbling continued under the Gentleman's description of the storm, which opens Act Two. A shot from the playhouse cannon scared the playhouse pigeons, and the tolling of the "dreadful bell" (II.iii.168) was obviously tolled not from a tower in "Cyprus" but from the playhouse tower. Signs are perpetually being translated from one function to another.

Reminders of the playhouse company were as unobtrusive as allusions to the playhouse machinery. The actors playing the Duke and Brabantio doubled as servants in the "Cypriot" part of the play. In my fancy, a disguised Brabantio had made his way to Cyprus to keep an eye on his daughter, the Duke was showing remorse for his jocular delivery of "I think this tale would win my daughter, too" (I.iii.170), which had raised a hearty laugh and demolished the effect of Othello's wondrous tales of "disastrous chances" and "moving accidents". At that moment, were we laughing at romantic extravagance, at Othello, or at Walker's performance?

As for properties, torches were prominent in the opening sequences. In the 1930's Jiri Veltrusky, a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, famously but tendentiously said that "everything on stage is a sign" (p. 84). The fact that the torches actually blazed in broad daylight created a "reality effect" (Barthes), but the fact that they were unnecessary showed that they were indeed signs of night. When, towards the end of the play, Iago came on with his torch, it served a different purpose, proleptically looking forward to, or indexing, Othello's "put out the light" (V.ii.7).

As days drew in, of course, these torches might have become functional: Meg Twycross gives examples of practical lighting in medieval theatre (p. 53), and there is some evidence from Shakespeare's time that, in order to attract more customers, companies began playing so late that lighting would have been necessary by the end of performances (Hattaway, p. 56). Signs become realities. In

our Globe production I saw the play in high summer, which meant that the fight between Roderigo and Cassio was totally stylised—in fact it amusingly quoted from the famous Beijing Opera set-piece, *San Chakou* ("Fighting in the Dark").[3] Such devices and much else served as defamiliarisation devices, mingling delight at a sense of actuality with delight in theatrical art.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare writes tellingly about the use of portable properties to enhance characterisation. Quince pronounces:

> one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern and say he comes to *disfigure*, or to *present*, the person of Moonshine. (III.i.57, emphasis added)

"Disfigure" seems to be more than a malapropism for "figure" ("portray"): perhaps Quince is implying that although iconic properties are needed in this instance to complete the sign, these will in fact defeat his desire for illusion. As for "present", I am not certain that it means, as several modern editors consider, "personate" or "represent".[4] Rather I think it means "introduce", its etymological sense, particularly "to introduce at court or to society, or before a sovereign or other distinguished person" (*OED*). If I am right, this meaning deconstructs the familiar binary of *presentation* (in the sense of exhibiting skills) and the *representation* of a character's feelings. The notion implies a double identity, player and character, reminding us of Bertolt Brecht's informing notion of the actor as demonstrator. Yet again, the engendering of illusion or "belief" does not seem to come into it.

However, there are two well-known testimonies to players creating a sense of lifelikeness in early performances of *Othello*. In 1610 Henry Jackson, a member of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, described the accomplishment of the boy member of the King's Men who played Desdemona in a local performance:

> that famous Desdemona killed before before us by her husband, although she [*sic*] always acted her whole part supremely well, yet when she was killed she was even more moving, for when she fell back upon the bed she implored the pity of the spectators by her very face. (Trans. from the Latin and cited in Salgado, ed., p. 30)

The anonymous author of the funeral elegy for Richard Burbage (1619) celebrated the player's ability to become the part he played:

3 Similarities have been noted before: see Fei and Sun.

4 So glossed in Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Brooks, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Holland; see also *Love's Labour's Lost*, V.i.115ff.

> He's gone, and with him what a world are dead,
> Which he reviv'd, to be revivèd so
> No more: young Hamlet, old Hieronimo,
> Kind Lear, the grievèd Moor, and more beside
> That lived in him, have now forever died. (Cited in Wickham, Berry, and Ingram, eds., p. 182)

All one can say is that these are probably rhetorical compliments rather than considered accounts of the processes of theatre.

As for the acting areas, the Globe stage, as in the case of medieval theatre, could be both localised and unlocalised, using the conventions we associate with both *locus* and *platea* (Weimann; Dillon, pp. 4-5, 88-89). *Loci* might be scaffolds permanently in view, occasionally used. In texts like those of *The Castle of Perseverance* and *Magnificence*, the word *platea* is, in stage directions, translated simply as "the place", in the latter case the centre of a hall. In such fields of play actors took part in the games of love or intrigue, of war or flyting. Like members of opposing sports teams they were sometimes badged—wearing costumes or properties that owed more to theatrical convention than to reality. The evil Lorenzo seems to wear a black mask in *The Spanish Tragedy* title-page engraving (Foakes, pp. 104-6). Could Iago have worn a mask like that of Lorenzo?

Most of my thoughts about the Globe *Othello* were generated by two of its aspects: both derived from these complementary uses of theatre space. First, the degree to which Iago acknowledged—and spoke directly to—the audience. The player "presented" Iago. (Of this direct address, more later.) Second, I was struck by the way that the director and designer used the elevation of the Globe stage in an intriguing manner. (The front of the Globe stage is just below head height.[5]) Indeed, a feature of productions at the Globe in the 2007 season was that extensions were built out from the stage into the yard, as if to experiment with and exploit the possibilities of this particular theatrical perspective. For *Othello*, substantial stairs were built into the yard from the middle of the front of the stage and at its two corners. This drew attention to the way the Globe could function in the manner of a medieval place-and-scaffold playhouse (Twycross, pp. 56-65). In the opening sequence Iago stood at the top of the central staircase, over Roderigo, who was half-way down. The foot of each stair was manned by one of the playhouse stewards, but, at least when I was there, they were not

5 Twycross, p. 47, places the height of pageant wagons at from four to five feet.

called upon to "stitle", marshal the audience, as, it seems, happened in *The Castle of Perseverance*. In *The Merchant of Venice* a canal bridge reached out from the stage, and for *Love's Labour's Lost* two zig-zag walkways, reaching out from the stage almost to the entrances to the yard, made these both entrances into the playhouse and on to the stage.

My reading of their effect, in *Othello* at least, was counter-intuitive: it seemed that these structures were not used to overcome theatrical distance, to bridge an ontological gap between players and audience, but rather, by elevating the players over the heads of the audience, to them make more distinctive. In medieval theatre, of course, it was authority figures, God, Mercy, etc., that had been placed aloft, often appearing as enthroned kings (Twycross, p. 60). This sort of reverence had disappeared by the age of Shakespeare. Moreover, there can be no doubt that modern re-productions of mystery (cycle), miracle (saints' lives), or morality plays cannot build upon an element of fervency among spectators which, we assume, obtained at the time of their first performances. Medieval audiences would have been expecting some sort of theodicy or epiphany. The plays were formulaic: good or holiness always triumphs.

That obviously does not happen in *Othello*: in this Renaissance tragedy there is no antidote to Iago's poison; agency has been wrested from God to man. In the secularised world of *Othello*—there is practically nothing of the supernatural in the play—divine powers have been displaced by men, busy making their own history. Othello is not granted recognition into the order of things, Aristotelian *anagnorisis*, but, as T. S. Eliot pointed out, he simply cheers himself up. This staging made Iago ever more powerful, as he exploited the unstable equilibriums of Venetian society.

Shakespeare insists that even Othello recognises that Iago comes from an emergent secularism: "I look down towards his feet, but that's a fable. / If that thou be'st a devil I cannot kill thee. [*He wounds Iago*]" (V.ii.283-84). Yet there are obviously residues from religious drama, from Vice figures in medieval mysteries and moralities. My first observation is that these must have been read differently according to whether or not they operated on the same level as the audience—either within the "place", in a place-and-scaffold performance like that called for by *The Castle of Perseverance,* or on a low dias in a great hall—or were stationed "aloft" on pageant wagons or booth stages. When Vices entered there are sometimes indications that they pushed their way through audience members. In *Mankind*, which I take to be typical, the entrance of Mischief is essentially

an *interruption* of the "talkyng delectable" (l. 65) offered by Mercy. Mischief serves to modulate the *tone* of the play. (Unfortunately, the manuscript page with the entrances of Newguise, Now-a-days, and Nought is missing.) However, Mischief may very well have, like the Wife in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, "come up". In *Hick Scorner*, written for performance in a great hall (Twycross, p. 66), Freewill bursts into an unlocalised playing space, which one assumes was at roughly the same level as that occupied by the spectators.

Entrances would also have a different effect if they were made through the hangings in front of a tiring-house or an outdoor booth-theatre—obviously part of the theatrical machinery, particularly if these were painted cloths—rather than, say, the entrance to a neighbour room in a hall or inn. They could also have been "discovered" by the drawing of these hangings. Meaning and effect would have been further modulated along the spectrum that runs from naturalism to allegory, according to whether or not the play was being performed outdoors or indoors, and whether players wore workaday attire or what Henslowe later designated as "antics' coats" (cited in Rutter, ed., p. 135).

At the Globe, the many entrances through the crowd of groundlings served as short inductions to each of the performances. These did not always simply create "reality effects", encourage the spectators to become more involved with the story or the characters, although some certainly did. Brabantio pushed through the crush in the yard for his audience with the Doge. The stage thus then became temporally a *locus.* He then turned to address the spectators directly, generating an uncomfortable sense that we, together in one place, were being asked to collude in racism.[6] The opening entrance by Iago and Roderigo had been different: they burst through the groundlings in order to occupy the stage, at that moment unlocalised, a *platea*. Roderigo's opening "Tush" seemed a bit like a Vice's preliminary injection "Peace" (Twycross, p. 55), a rhetorical marker addressed to both Iago and the playhouse auditors.

More significantly, however, these scaffolds in the yard of the Globe demonstrated that the audience was an essential part of the process of theatre. One might see this from two perspectives: as metatheatrical moments, reminders to the audience that they too inhabited a stage-play world, or as sign that they were sharing space with the players going to their place of work. As Bernard Beckerman wrote, "The actors did not regard the stage as a place but as a plat-

6 On this see Walker's blog.

form from which to project a story" (p. 164). This indeed called for perseverance, as the audience at the Globe can offer rival attractions: someone fainted in the yard at one of the performances I saw and had to be carted out. Meanwhile a Rubensesque young mother stood squarely in front of the middle stair flamboyantly breast-feeding her baby throughout the play. One thought of the poems by W. H. Auden ("Musée des Beaux Arts") and William Carlos Williams ("Landscape with the Fall of Icarus") that celebrate the way in which, in Breughel's famous Icarus painting, a ploughman who occupies the foreground of the picture is quite unfazed by the tragedy of Icarus happening over his shoulder.

The extra scaffolds also, presumably unintentionally, reminded us that, unlike those in modern theatres, not all seats or standing places in the Globe have an unrestricted view or one that provides a frontal perspective on the action—necessary for any illusion or a sense of realism.[7] That Venetian bridge in *The Merchant of Venice*, despite its semiotic intention (memories of the Rialto), created a kind of contradiction, serving to emphasize how much of the playing area served as *platea* rather than *locus*. (It did, however, enable me to see the players—from my box at the side, all too much on the stage itself was obscured by the enormous stage pillar—and the structure was used to excellent effect for "If you prick us, do we not bleed" (III.i.50-51). This bridge was the equivalent of those shots of gondolas that appear in every film of *Othello*: they are there to *authenticate* the film. For me that demonstrates that their directors do not have trust in their own endeavour, and also that they condescend to the audience. Such devices and their equivalents are inappropriate in theatres.

Now Ben Jonson loved to point out that from the yard the spectators were "understanders" in that the players were "over their heads".[8] Jonson did not seek identification between audience and actors but craved a full comprehension, "understanding" of the moral implications of his dramatic action. This is one aspect of dramatic irony. In this production, it seemed to me, a lot of energy came from players trying to make the processes of deception as plain as possible to the audience, while at the same time deferring any full awareness of the consequence of these deceptions. They were exploiting the hope that at the end, as in a morality play, there might be some restitution. In some ways this inverts the usual pattern of dramatic irony. This was particularly striking in the perform-

7 Cf. Orgel.
8 See Jonson, ed. Hattaway, p. 49n.

ance of Tim McInnerny, who played Iago, and who is himself a tall man. This Iago, with s or auditors are on the same level.

We might illustrate this distinction by comparing the entrance of Free Will in *Hick Scorner,* written about a century before *Othello*. He surges in, interrupting the Virtues:

> Aware, fellows, and stand a-room!
> How say you, am not I a goodly person?
> I trow you know not such a guest!
> What, sirs! I tell you my name is Free Will;
> I may choose whether I do good or ill,
> But for all that I will do as me list.
> My conditions ye know not, perdie;
> I can fight, chide and be merry.
> Full soon of my company ye would be weary
> And you knew all.
> What, fill the cup and make good cheer! (*Hick Scorner*, ll. 156-66)

Conceivably a drinking song was sung here—compare Iago's "And let me the cannikin clink" (II.iii.59-63)

Free Will and his fellows Imagination and Hick Scorner are incarnations of worldliness and licentiousness, cheerfully going to the Devil. After a wigging from Contemplation and Perseverance, Free Will recognises Pity and suddenly repents and asks for mercy, abandoning Imagination and Hick Scorner. *Hick Scorner* is, of course, a reworking of another morality, *Youth*, written a few months before. There conversion depends upon "grace", a notion not so prominent in the later play. Perhaps we see can see in this the beginnings of a reaction against Augustinian theology, in which grace played such an important role.

Elements of Shakespeare's dramaturgy may be medieval, but the ideology is modern:

> *Roderigo*. What should I do? I confess it is my shame to be so fond, but it is not in my virtue
> to amend it.
> *Iago*. Virtue? A fig! 'Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners, So that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce … the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. (I.iii.311-19)

This is not just a manifesto for festive licentiousness but also a programme for agency, for making things come to pass within the complex webs of a social situ-

ation. Iago's agency is proclaimed by his command over both Roderigo and the yard.

Like a Vice, Iago also plays the clown. In *Mankind,* Nought leads New Guise and Nowadays in the fescennine song:

> Yt ys wretyn wyth a colle, yt ys wretyn wyth a colle, …
> He þat schytyth wyth hys hoyll, he þat schytyth wyth hys hoyll, …
> But he wyppe hys ars clen, but he wyppe hys ars clen, …
> On hys breche yt xall be sen, on hys breche yt xall be sen. (ll.335-41)

Some scholar might deem this to be about confession and repentance: the fact that the lines are repeated suggests that the audience, directed from the stage, sang the repetitions in chorus. (I know that the words go nicely to "La danse des canards".[9])

Iago likewise led an onstage chorus in his snatch of song in Act Two, Scene Three: "King Stephen was and but a worthy peer" (II.iii.76-83). (Might Renaissance audiences have joined in?) This is the seventh stanza of a Scottish flyting ballad called "Bell, my wife" or "Tak your auld cloak about thee" (Percy, ed., 1: 191-92). It's about lack of distinction in dress and social equality, and with it Iago conjures anti-establishment sentiments. This also can explain the laugh Tim McInnerny conjured from "it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / He has done my office" (I.iii.369-70). Here he seemed to be conjuring racist sentiment: the audience was gulled into colluding with the thought that the idea of Emilia, a white woman, being attracted by a black man was absurd.

9 Geoff Lester pointed this out to me.

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