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CONTENTS

Series Preface vii

Notes on Contributors viii

Introduction 1

Lena Cowen Orlin

1 *Othello*, Theatre Boundaries, and Audience
Cognition 17

Laurie Maguire

2 'All's One': Cinthio, *Othello*, and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* 45

Lois Porter

3 'Speak[ing] Parrot' and Ovidian Echoes in
Othello: Recontextualizing Black Speech in the
Global Renaissance 63

Robert Hornback

4 *Othello's* Black Handkerchief 95

Ian Smith

5 Two Faced: The Problem of *Othello's* Visage 121
Amberreen Dadabhoy

Shakespeare's Nobody

Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld

There is something dissatisfying about Emilia's answer to one of Desdemona's questions in Act 4, scene 3 of *Othello*. Emilia prepares Desdemona for bed as Desdemona sings Barbary's song of "willow"² (4.3.26). In the midst of this song, Desdemona interrupts herself – 'Nay, that's not next' – and then she calls for Emilia to listen: 'Hark.' She follows this call with a question – 'who is't that knocks?' – to which Emilia responds, 't's the wind' (52–3). The first thing to say, here, is that Emilia provides the answer to a different question from the one that Desdemona asked. Desdemona's question presupposes that the sound at hand is the product of a human gesture: she asks, '*who* is't that knocks?' Emilia's answer implies but elides a crucial corrective to this presupposition: when Emilia says 't's the wind,' Emilia is also saying *It's nobody*. This elision has encouraged a range of readers to hear as tone what could have been represented by a diminutive – It's *just* the wind – and this tone has led critics to describe Emilia's answer, as with several of her responses to Desdemona in this scene, as reassuring: 'Come, come, you talk' (23), "'Tis neither here nor there' (58).¹

In his influential essay 'The Women's Voices in *Othello*,' Eamon Grennan suggests that the 'rich harmonies of this

conversation ... resolve the different values of the two women into complementary chords', and the sound of the women's voices thus becomes an aesthetic counterpart to 'the atmosphere of private freedom within this protected feminine enclosure'.² Oscillations between song and silence 'transport us to a zone of feeling where analysis becomes futile'; 'the point', Grennan continues, 'is that *we do feel*; that for the unreflecting moments while the song endures we are bound with Emilia to Desdemona in sympathy'.³ Grennan's own essay, hailed as a 'sensitive exegesis', a 'sensitive study', an 'affectionate reconsideration', and a 'careful study', has perhaps been so compelling because it stylistically shares in the rhythms of this reciprocity by way of (for example) his frequent and well-placed parentheses.⁴

While Act 4, scene 3 was routinely cut from performances of *Othello* through the early decades of the twentieth century, arguments for the rehabilitation and the significance of this scene have tended to operate under the sign of such affect.⁵ According to this line of interpretation, Desdemona's question – 'Hark, who is't that knocks?' – is significant as an instrument of calibration: by interrupting the lyrical soar of her song and returning us to the here-and-now of the scene, Desdemona's question regulates an aesthetic harmony that is both cause and effect of feminine sympathy and its attendant social harmony, while Emilia's response – 'It's the wind' – 'underlines again the reassuring reciprocity of speech between these two women'.⁶ Under this reading, the scene as a whole serves as a crucial mechanism in what Edward Pechter has called the 'affective economy' of the play: the lull in necessary action (the very reason why this scene was so easily cut) consolidates an audience's sympathy just prior to the murder of Act 5.⁷ This is why Kenneth Burke asked: 'might the fourth act be one that seeks to say pity-pity-pity repeatedly?'⁸ Where Burke, however, understood this pity as 'a device to "soften up" the audience', Heather James has argued that Shakespearean depictions and elicitations of pity can rouse a subject to action.⁹ Viewed as a model of social engagement, pity acts – not in the service

of a purging – but as a pivot between *gnosis* and *praxis*. Taken to an extreme, this paradigm raises the spectre of an audience that not only sympathizes with but also intervenes in the action of the play (that is, one that best plays its part by destroying the play itself).¹⁰

I would like to explore this exchange – Q. 'Hark, who is't that knocks?' / A. 'It's the wind' – in order to examine what I take to be the play's peculiar engagement with the ethics of audition and intervention.¹¹ Those who hear Emilia's response as 'reassuring' or as a dose of 'pragmatic common sense' presuppose, in short, that Emilia is right.¹² When Emilia answers 'It's the wind', she dismisses the possibility that somebody is knocking at Desdemona's door; the play would seem to follow suit inasmuch as nobody enters the room. And yet, the possibility prior to this moment that somebody might enter and intervene constitutes an epistemological and an ethical problem, for Emilia as for us. This essay is thus a thought experiment in the ethical valence of dramatic potentialities that do not actualize, and it will be guided by three questions:¹³

1. Does Emilia hear what Desdemona hears?
2. Does Desdemona hear what Disdemona heard?
3. Does Desdemona hear Nobody?

By 'Nobody', I mean the implied but elided corrective of Emilia's response, but I also argue that when Desdemona first names her murderer 'Nobody' during her brief revival from the dead, this act of naming hypostatizes the very potentiality that the play fails to actualize (5.2.122).¹⁴ The exchange in Act 4, scene 3 is admittedly brief but, by pushing at the misalignment of question and answer just a bit, I want to suggest that this moment has surprising explanatory power. The elided corrective of Emilia's response points to the possibility that the play could have gone otherwise than it will. This possibility is present within the scene as a kind of remainder to an initiated but imperfect act of dramatic invention, an

arrested *poiesis*: at this moment in Act 4, scene 3, we have a character for which no actor lends his body.

1. Does Emilia hear what Desdemona hears?

Desdemona's question suggests that she hears something. When Desdemona calls 'Hark', she commands Emilia to stop and listen, as if Emilia does not hear what she hears, or as if Emilia's bustle to fulfil her previous command – 'Prithee hie thee' – keeps Desdemona from hearing what she heard just a moment before (4.3.49).¹⁵ It is less clear whether Emilia hears anything at all. In the 1965 Laurence Olivier production, the wind begins to whistle just as Desdemona interrupts herself – 'Nay, that's not next' – and a double rap is audible. When Desdemona asks, 'Who is't that knocks?' Emilia wraps her arms around Desdemona and follows her answer with a kiss to the cheek.¹⁶ In Janet Suzman's 1989 production, by contrast, there is no noise and Emilia's first response is a worried look on her face. Emilia then incorporates an extended pause into her answer – 'It is [*pause*] the wind' – suggesting that she offers the causal explanation for a sound that never existed.¹⁷

The ear of the audience is aligned with Emilia's ear in both of these productions: we hear what Emilia hears, whether noise or silence, and we are therefore made to implicitly corroborate her account. If Emilia hears what Desdemona hears, the knock at the door may contribute to critical consensus concerning the shared intimacy of this scene (and the audience, hearing the knock that Desdemona and Emilia hear, gets to be on their side of the door). If Emilia does not hear what Desdemona hears, then we are not dealing with the same problem of competing accounts of the efficient cause. Instead, our problem is that Desdemona and Emilia do not access the same object of interpretation.¹⁸ A brief scene from

Antony and Cleopatra offers an illustrative counterpoint. Just before battle, First through Fourth Soldiers hear something:

SECOND SOLDIER Peace, what noise?
 FIRST SOLDIER List, list!
 SECOND SOLDIER Hark!
 FIRST SOLDIER Music i'th' air.
 THIRD SOLDIER Under the earth.
 FOURTH SOLDIER It signs well, does it not?
 THIRD SOLDIER No.
 FIRST SOLDIER Peace, I say!
 SECOND SOLDIER 'Tis the god, Hercules, whom Antony loved,
 Now leaves him.
 FIRST SOLDIER Walk. Let's see if other watchmen
 Do hear what we do.¹⁹

These soldiers all seem to hear the sound and their primary concern is one of meaning – 'It signs well, does it not?' – but First Soldier strays from this concern when he compels all of the other soldiers to seek corroboration from yet more soldiers: 'Let's see if other watchmen / Do hear what we do.' First Soldier asks, 'What should this mean?' but he seems at least as concerned with finding even more soldiers to say that they hear what he hears. If Desdemona and Emilia do not access the same object of interpretation, then Desdemona's question turns the lack of a knock into a palpable silence in Emilia's ear: 'who is't that knocks?' transforms absent noise into the staged presence of bounded, localized silence. To Jean Howard's distinction (via Arnheim) between living and dead silences on Shakespeare's stage, we might add the resurrected silence (one that comes to life only after Desdemona speaks).²⁰

The sound that prompts Desdemona's question is thus a contingent event. I do not mean that the existence of this sound is contingent on a given production or even that the truth-values of Desdemona's presupposition that somebody is knocking and Emilia's corrective that nobody is knocking

are contingent on who or what produced a sound that may or may not exist. I mean, instead, that *Othello* scripts this sound as a particular kind of event, an event that, to quote Boethius, 'tend[s] equally toward being or toward not being'.²¹ Unlike, say, the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*, *Othello* scripts no actions that necessarily produce or follow from the occasion of this sound. The knock may or may not occur. While this brief exchange has seemed significant primarily for returning the audience to the here-and-now of the scene, I want to suggest, instead, that the slight misalignment of question and answer insists on the vexed ontology of the contingent event. In his phenomenological study of the theatre, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, Bert O. States writes, 'if you press the concreteness of the here and now far enough, you arrive at the infrastructure of reality, or the laws that hold reality up. There is a point', he continues, 'where scrupulous attention to detail – for example, a photo of the pores of the skin – leads one back, or out, to the universe of geometric mass.'²² If the question that Desdemona asks – 'Hark, who is't that knocks?' – returns us to the here-and-now of the scene, Emilia's response encourages us to re-examine the 'infrastructure' of this particular world. The vexed ontology of the contingent event suggests that potentiality is a property or a possession of the play (a *hexis* or a 'having'); as Giorgio Agamben writes via Aristotle, 'potentiality is not simply non-being, simple privation, but rather the *existence of non-being*, the presence of an absence'.²³ A knock that may or may not occur is the theatre's metonymic substitution for the presence of a non-existent agent on the other side of Desdemona's door.

2. Does Desdemona hear what Disdemona heard?

In Shakespeare's source tale, Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*, there are two kinds of proof that convince the Moor of Disdemona's

guilt. The first kind of proof is the napkin: noting that Disdemona 'sometimes carried with her a handkerchief embroidered most delicately in the Moorish fashion, which the Moor had given her and which was treasured by the Lady and her husband too, the Ensign planned to take it from her secretly, and thereby prepare for her final ruin'.²⁴ Before, however, the Moor has even learned that the handkerchief is missing, he is troubled by the second kind of proof: a knock at the door. The Ensign has already told the Moor that Disdemona 'takes her pleasure with' the Corporal 'whenever he comes to your house' (245). In response, the Moor threatens the Ensign, 'if you do not make me see with my own eyes what you have told me', and the Ensign's accusation is accidentally corroborated by the single act of 'Fortune' in Cinthio's tale (246). Recognizing the handkerchief that the Ensign placed on his bedroom floor, the Corporal intends to return the item to Disdemona:

So he waited till the Moor had gone out, then went to the back door and knocked. Fortune, it seems, had conspired with the Ensign to bring about the death of the unhappy lady; for just then the Moor came home, and hearing a knock on the door went to the window and shouted angrily: 'Who is knocking?' The Corporal, hearing the Moor's voice and fearing that he might come down and attack him, fled without answering. The Moor ran down the stairs, and, opening the outside door, went out into the street and looked around, but could see nobody.

The window through which the Moor shouts is a counterintuitive device: this window allows the Moor to ask the very question we might instead expect it to help answer – 'Who is knocking?' For an answer, the Moor must run downstairs and open the door. Finding 'nobody', the Moor then 'ask[s] his wife who had knocked on the door'. Ignorant, Disdemona 'reple[s] truthfully that she d[oes] not know'. To this, the Moor insists '[i]t looked to me like the Corporal',

though the narrative makes it clear that when he opened the door he 'could see nobody': 'I do not know', Desdemona responds, 'whether it was he or somebody else' (247). Where the Moor saw 'nobody', he names 'the Corporal'. For Desdemona, where there was 'nobody', there might have been the Corporal but, equally, there might have been 'somebody else'. In Cinthio, there is no question but that the knock at the door is the product of a human gesture; the debate, instead, turns on how to interpret the absence of the efficient cause. Is 'nobody' one particular person or is 'nobody' any number of persons, also called 'somebody'?

Cinthio revisits and rewrites this moment when the Moor and the Ensign conspire to kill Desdemona. Determined to beat her with a 'stocking filled with sand', the Ensign hides in the closet as the pair lie down to sleep – 'in accordance with their plan', the Ensign 'mak[es] some sort of noise'. The Moor asks Desdemona:

'Did you hear that noise?'

'Yes, I heard it,' she replied.

'Get up,' said the Moor, 'and see what it is.'

As Desdemona approaches the closet door, the Ensign jumps out and delivers 'a frightful blow in the small of her back' (250). In our earlier scene, the Moor's investigation of a knock at the door led him to discover 'nobody' where the Corporal had stood just a moment before. The Ensign's charge, that Desdemona 'takes her pleasure with him whenever he comes to your house', was implicitly corroborated by the timing of that knock – just as the Moor arrived home (245). The Moor, however, desires a physical impossibility: he wants to 'see' with his own 'eyes' what occurs in his house at the very moment he (along with his eyes) is absent from that house (246). The Moor and the Ensign's 'plan' restages the earlier missed connection as if to actualize this physical impossibility. The imperative commands – "Get up", said the Moor, "and see what it is" – allow the Moor to watch his wife open the

door (any door will do) to another man (any man). In the performance of this 'plan', the Ensign plays the Corporal, Desdemona plays the Ensign's version of Desdemona, and the Moor plays the part of his own absence.

In Orson Welles's 1952 film adaptation of Act 4, scene 3 of *Othello*, the camera is fixed on the floor of a stone corridor as an approaching figure becomes visible by the disproportionate shadow it casts – an elongated head.²⁵ The sound of a closing gate and its visual counterpart (the shadows cast by parallel, vertical bars sliding across the screen) provide the transition into a thoroughly gothic, interior space. The closing gate produces the sound that prompts Desdemona's question – 'who is't that knocks?' – and Emilia's answer, the audience knows, is wrong – though the audience does not yet know to whom this shadow belongs (it could belong to any number of characters). The correct answer emerges only as the final shot reveals Othello, stepping out from behind a nearby pillar where he has been listening. *Othello* are, here, turned into scenic bookends, with the result that this abridged performance of Act 4, scene 3 is overheard by somebody and the question – *who* is that somebody? – remains open until the scene's close.

There is precedent for Welles's answer to this question: apparently influenced by Rossini's *Otello*, Delacroix sketched a pencil composition of the unpinning scene in 1825; in his 1853 painting, an oil lamp that had been at Desdemona's elbow in 1825 is now lowered and brought forward so as to open up space to a background in which Othello lurks, unnoticed by the two women.²⁶ Such adaptations validate Desdemona's anxiety but they do so only by actualizing in one particular body what is, significantly, disembodied in the play. In *Othello*, the knock that Desdemona hears raises the possibility that somebody might enter and intervene only to put nobody in the place of that somebody; in the Delacroix adaptation, somebody is always only Othello and the imagined intervention is always only the murder that will take place anyway. In between his scenic bookends, Welles comes closest

to capturing the potentiality of Shakespeare's text: the shadow that lingers without a body just outside Desdemona's closer.²⁷

3. Does Desdemona hear nobody?

It is not actually the knock at the door that returns Desdemona to the here-and-now of Act 4, scene 3. Desdemona interrupts herself – 'Nay, that's not next' – just *before* she hears a knock at the door. When Desdemona calls 'Hark', she could be calling for Emilia to listen for the words she cannot remember.²⁸ Desdemona, it seems, sings her lyrics out of order.²⁹

DESDEMONA [Speaks.] Prithce hie thee: he'll come anon.
Sing all a green willow must be my garland.
Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve—
[Speaks.] Nay, that's not next. Hark, who is't
that knocks?
EMILIA It's the wind.

(4.3.49–53)

We do not know the precise version of the song that Shakespeare had before him (or in his ear), but it is fairly clear that Desdemona's line about blame was meant to come later. In Shakespeare's probable source, the singer is gendered male and the false lover, female, and the line reads: 'Let nobody blame me, her scorns I do prove.'³⁰ What is interesting about *Othello's* revision is that Desdemona's words allow for a conflation impossible to the previous incarnation: 'his scorn' might belong, not to the object of blame, but to the subject who blames. In Desdemona's revision, the language of her song (if even in spite of herself) does not simply permit but calls into being, compels into existence, a 'nobody' to fulfill her command, a 'nobody' who ought to blame, a 'nobody' of whose 'scorn', she declares 'I approve': 'Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve.'³¹ It is at this moment of predication,

when Desdemona's language posits the existence of the very thing she putatively denies, that she interrupts herself – 'Nay, that's not next' – and then, hears a knock at the door (after which nobody enters the room).

This moment dramatizes an act of arrested *poiesis*: the initiated but imperfect genesis of a dramatic character. Most simply, Desdemona's grammar predicates a character – 'Nobody' – for which no actor supplies a body. The category of 'absent characters' is an illustrative counterpoint to the peculiar ontology of 'Nobody'. 'It is when a character is expected', Kristian Smidt writes, 'and still does not materialize that an absence attracts our attention': 'sometimes', he continues, 'we are not led to expect a visible appearance, but we are made aware of the absent person as an influence, which may be all the more pervasive or ominous for being incorporeal.'³² In *Othello*, however, 'Nobody' makes us aware – not so much of an influence – as of a *lack* of influence: he is the non-existent agent responsible for the intervention that could have (but did not) occur.

The technical operations of this claim are made explicit in the comic subplot of the anonymously authored *Nobody and Somebody* (1606): this subplot turns on two grammatical jokes that it repeats (over and over again) with slight variations.³³ The first joke runs something like this. A character named 'First Man' asks another character named 'Wife' a question: 'Minion, where have you been all this night?' (489). Wife answers: 'I have been with Nobody' (492), 'Lie with me, why Nobody' (496), 'God's life husband, you do me wrong; I lay with Nobody' (501); all the while, the unfortunately named 'Nobody' responds, with mounting frustration – 'Tis a lie good man! believe her not, she was not with me' (493–4), 'Oh monstrous! They would make me a whoremaster' (497), and 'I will endure no longer in this climate' (504). Wife's grammar posits the existence of the very thing she would seem to deny, and the character named 'Nobody' is predicated of the same speech acts that he claims to be false.

The first joke turns on actions which *have* occurred but

for which a non-existent agent – ‘Nobody’ – replaces the actual agent.³⁴ Wife (it appears) has slept with ‘somebody’ but ‘Nobody’ is blamed in his stead. The second joke, by contrast, turns on actions that *have not* occurred: ‘Nobody’ is also the non-existent agent responsible for all of the good deeds that no one bothers to perform (e.g. feeding the poor).³⁵ It is in this sense that we might understand Roderigo’s line as he lies bleeding on the ground. Both Roderigo and Cassio cry out while Lodovico teeters on the edge of action:

LODOVICO Two or three groan. It is a heavy night;

These may be counterfeit, let’s think’t unsafe
To come in to the cry without more help.

RODERIGO Nobody come? then shall I bleed to death.
(5.1.42–5)

Roderigo’s ‘then’ asserts a causal connection between the fact of Nobody’s arrival and the death he anticipates (actually, Iago will come along and stab him). This causal account pinpoints Lodovico’s refusal to intervene; indeed, his thought process sounds more like a retrospective justification than an assessment of his surroundings – ‘let’s think’t unsafe’, *shall we?* Poised on the edge of action, placed in the *platea*, Lodovico might extend that justification to the audience – ‘let’s’. His casual contraction offers the audience a gift.

During Desdemona’s brief revival from the dead in Act 5, scene 2, Emilia asks her a question: ‘O, who hath done / This deed?’ (5.2.121–2). The primary meaning of ‘deed’ is surely murder: when Desdemona names her murderer ‘Nobody’, she relieves Othello of responsibility for the crime by invoking a peculiarly literary legal loophole – ‘the attribution of a homicide to a fictional persona in order to exculpate the accused’.³⁶ The ambiguity of Emilia’s *deixis*, however, invites the second of *Nobody and Somebody’s* jokes: who is responsible for the intervention that never occurred? Nobody. If we take the satirical thrust of this joke seriously, the answer to Emilia’s question is also an admonishment to

the audience. As the non-existent agent of actions that no one bothers to perform, the character of Nobody is always triangulated through the audience who *ought to* (but does not) perform those actions.³⁷ A 1997 production of *Othello* at the National Theatre manifested in a stage property what I am trying to articulate by way of a sound effect. In his review of this production, Robert Butler noted that the discarded handkerchief was left on stage during the intermission of this performance: the handkerchief seemed to be ‘challenging one of us to pick it up and prevent a tragedy’.³⁸ This production scripts the audience as complicit by way of a missed opportunity that is itself already foreclosed upon by the conventions of dramatic form. The challenge to ‘prevent a tragedy’ is something like the play soliciting its own destruction.

Desdemona’s question – ‘who is’t that knocks’ – presupposes that an act has occurred, and her enquiry into the efficient cause of that sound opens up the possibility that somebody will enter and intervene. By this light, what is most significant about Emilia’s response is not that she answers a question other than the one that Desdemona asked but instead, that she answers *at all*. Desdemona’s question was never *for* Emilia (it was directed, instead, at the other side of the door). By contrast, if Emilia’s dismissal suggests that a knock has not occurred, then Desdemona’s question points up an absence: her question makes room for, clears out a space on stage for, the non-existent agent of an action that never occurs. States defines the actor as the ‘original of the poet’s “copy”’ in the sense that *he is the being who grants it an existence*.³⁹ ‘All dramatic texts’, States continues, ‘are hypotheses’ that the actor validates as ‘nature validates the vision of the physicist by acting naturally’. Without an actor’s body, however, the possibility of intervention becomes a hypothesis that will never be validated, an unanswered ‘yearning’ of the play.³⁹

Emilia attempts to answer this ‘yearning’ twice but, both times, belatedly. She answers it first with her confession of that crucial piece of knowledge withheld throughout Act 4, scene 3: ‘that handkerchief thou speak’st of / I found by fortune

and did give my husband' (5.2.223–4). In Cinthio, a single act of 'Fortune' prohibited the return of the handkerchief. When the Corporal knocked on Desdemona's door, 'Fortune, it seems, had conspired with the Ensign to bring about the death of the unhappy lady; for just then the Moor came home and, hearing a knock on the door, went to the window and shouted angrily: "Who is knocking?" In Cinthio, 'Fortune' is the name of the agent who keeps the handkerchief away from Desdemona. 'Fortune' actively 'conspires' with the Ensign in her capacity as a goddess: she brings about that which was not a necessary but a contingent event. In *Othello*, Emilia's invocation of 'fortune', as Harry Berger, Jr. has suggested, 'is less than the whole story'.⁴⁰ And yet, if we take 'fortune' here to be precisely opposed to that which is necessary, Cinthio's goddess reduced to chance, then to say that Emilia 'found' the handkerchief 'by fortune' is to establish the structural conditions for ethical action as such: Emilia's actions were not necessary – she could have acted otherwise.⁴¹ This is, to be sure, a reading in which Emilia sidles up to an admission of guilt from an oblique angle, but that prepositional phrase 'by fortune', loosely attached to a sentence that could have proceeded without it, does not so much shift blame onto Cinthio's conspiring goddess as it admits for the possibility that this play could have gone otherwise than it did.

It is with this possibility in mind that I would like to turn to Emilia's second answer to the play's 'yearning' for intervention. After Iago stabs her, Emilia requests to be laid alongside the dead Desdemona, to whom she begins to speak:

What did thy song bode, lady?

Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan

And die in music. [*Sings.*] Willow, willow, willow,

(5.2.244–6)

Just before her reprisal of the willow song, Emilia calls for Desdemona to listen – 'Hark' – and she follows this call with a question: 'canst thou hear me?' Emilia's question is, I think,

a belated attempt to stand on the other side of Desdemona's door. Emilia's question has a semantic value distinct from a knock but if we were to develop a system for punctuating sounds, the punctuation of a 'knock' would be something like a question mark: a knock solicits, as its answer, the act of opening a door. If, in Act 4, scene 3, the knock at the door is a contingent event – an event that may or may not be – it is because it is a future contingent (it has not yet come to pass).⁴² As it turns out, Desdemona's question *was* for Emilia (only, the Emilia of Act 5). When, in her final lines, Emilia echoes Desdemona's call to listen – 'Hark' – and then substitutes her question for the knock – 'canst thou hear me?' – she lends a body to the implied but elided corrective of her earlier dismissal.

Conclusion

A history of *Othello* criticism could be written as a series of substitutions for Desdemona's 'Nobody'. Criticism has, that is, treated 'Nobody' as a kind of cipher – for Iago, Othello, Emilia, and even Desdemona, who provided that first substitution: 'Nobody. I myself. Farewell' (5.2.122). In '*Othello*: A Bloody Farce', the play's notorious eighteenth-century critic, Thomas Rymer, provides a different substitution. He blames Shakespeare:

A noble Venetian lady is to be murdered by our poet: in sober sadness, purely for being a fool. No pagan poet but would have found some machine for her deliverance ... Has our Christian poetry no generosity, nor bowels? Ha, Sir Lancelotti Ha, St. George! Will no ghost leave the shades for us in extremity, to save a distressed damsel?⁴³

According to Rymer, the playwright enters into the diegesis of the play as the murderer of his character. This account reverses the legal loophole invoked by Desdemona: instead of inventing

a fictional persona – for example, ‘Nobody’ – and blaming that persona for an actual event, Rymmer instead inculpates an historical being in the death of a fictional persona.⁴⁴ What is Shakespeare’s instrument of murder? Shakespeare murders by withholding the character that might have intervened – the knights of romance or even, a ‘ghost’. Shakespeare withholds and produces poetry that, according to Rymmer, is incapable of pity because it lacks the proper body for pity: Shakespeare’s poetry has no ‘bowels’. By Rymmer’s account, Shakespeare is Nobody: he is the agent just outside the threshold of the causal world of the play and he commits, by virtue of what he did not write, murder.

Notes

This essay is indebted to a number of careful readers, including Aaron Kunin, J. K. Barret, Harry Berger, Jr., Lena Orlin, and especially Katherine Schaap Williams. This essay owes a special debt to the ingenuity and diligence of the students in my 2011 *Othello* seminar at Pomona College as well as the participants in the 2012 SAA seminar devoted to *Othello*.

- 1 E.g. Kenneth Gross writes, ‘It is nothing but the wind, Emilia reassures her’, though his subsequent concessive clause, ‘but the wind too is contaminated in this play’, registers the dissatisfaction that motivates this essay (*Shakespeare’s Noise* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001], 125).
- 2 ‘The Women’s Voices in *Othello*: Speech, Song, Silence’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38.3 (1987): 279, 277. Grennan builds from the work of early feminist scholars who sought to correct the critical tradition’s exclusive focus on Othello and Iago. Carol Thomas Neely reads this scene as the culmination of a ‘growing intimacy’ between the two women, an intimacy born from a ‘sympathy’ that ‘stretches from Emilia and Desdemona to include Barbary and the protagonist of the song – all victims of male perfidy’ (*Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare’s Plays* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985], 123). Carole

McKewin describes Desdemona’s closet as a ‘counter-universe’ characterized by a ‘feminine friendship that is affectionate and frank, generous and nurturing’ (‘Counsels of Gall and Grace: Intimate Conversations Between Women in Shakespeare’s Plays’, in *The Woman’s Part*, eds Carolyn Ruth Swift et al. [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980], 128).

- 3 Grennan, 279.
- 4 See Ruth Vanita, “‘Proper’ Men and “‘Fallen’ Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in *Othello*”, *SEL* 34 (1994): 355, note 21; Denise A. Walen, ‘Unpinning Desdemona’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58.4 (2007): 496; Edward Pechter, ‘Why Should We Call her Whore? Bianca in *Othello*’, in *Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century*, eds Jonathan Bate et al. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 372, note 8; Kent Cartwright, *Shakespearean Tragedy and its Double* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 144, note 15. For Grennan’s use of parentheses, see e.g. ‘Although they seem to value things differently (and to value different things), their speech nevertheless suggests that they can share, unthreatened, with one another their respective sense of the world’ (279).
- 5 Two exceptions to this characterization consider the theatrical labour of this scene. Carol Chillington Rutter explores the act of ‘unpinning’ Desdemona in ‘Unpinning Desdemona (Again) or “Who would be roll’d with Wenches in a shew?”’, *Shakespeare Bulletin* 28.1 (2010): 111–32. By this account, Desdemona’s interruptions ‘operate as delaying mechanisms while [the song’s] mournful tempo, almost sedative, draws out the story that covers Emilia’s frantic need to “dispatch”’ (127). Martha Ronk also sees this scene as ‘theatrical, performative, artificial – a play within a play, slowed and curtailed off from the rest of the action at least for the time being’ in ‘Desdemona’s Self-Presentation’, *English Literary Renaissance* 35 (2005): 61–2. While significantly more attentive to the technology of theatrical and poetic labour, these analyses nevertheless subordinate tensions between the two characters to the actors’ collaborative production of an ‘intimate place of (female) undressing’ (Rutter, 114) or ‘a room designed for privacy and intimacy, both enclosed and intimate’ (Ronk, 65).
- 6 Grennan, 280.

- 7 Edward Pechter, *Othello and Interpretive Traditions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 126; see also 113–40.
- 8 Kenneth Burke, 'Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method', *The Hudson Review* 4.2. (1951): 174.
- 9 Burke, 175; Heather James, 'Dido's Ear: Tragedy and the Politics of Response', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52.3 (2001): 360–82. James concludes: 'Dido's listening figure instantiates, for Shakespeare, an anti-Aristotelian idea of tragedy: the plot builds up sympathy, frustration, and outrage but effects no catharsis. Political disaster ... may consequently originate in the way she listens: intent, pliant, yet terrifying, she paradoxically redeems and threatens the performance to which she rapidly attends. Shakespeare's Dido consequently evokes the theater's potential for generating a dangerous political agency that leaves the playwright vulnerable to intents he may wish to disown' (382).
- 10 See Pechter for a survey of moments of theatrical breakdown and intervention in *Othello's* stage history (*Othello and Interpretive Traditions*, 11–14). Also reviewed by Lena Orlin in the introduction to this volume. The audience of Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1967 short film adaptation *Che Cosa Sono Le Nuvole?* (*What Are Clouds Like?*) threatens Othello, 'If you lay a finger on Desdemona, we'll teach you!' and then storm the stage and attack 'Iago' and 'Othello' before the two can kill 'Desdemona'; see Sonia Massai, 'Subjection and Redemption in Pasolini's *Othello*', in *World-Wide Shakespeares*, ed. Sonia Massai (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 96. Massai writes: 'by storming the stage, Pasolini's popular audience claim the right to rewrite the plot and to free the characters from its foregone, tragic resolution. The fictive audience, in other words, claim authorial agency for themselves and deny representation of any single authorizing point of origin' (101). I am grateful to Aaron Kunin for introducing me to this film.
- 11 My attention to the vexed ontology of sound in the play is indebted to such studies as: Harry Berger, Jr., *Imaginary Audition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Kenneth Gross, *Shakespeare's Noise*.
- 12 Grennan, 280; Pechter, *Othello and Interpretive Traditions*, 117. Whereas Emilia is understood as pragmatic, the tendency has been to hystericize Desdemona. E.g. John Russell Brown's gloss on this moment: 'Desdemona has become hyper-sensitive. She thinks someone knocks when it is only the wind'; see *Shakespeare: The Tragedies* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 211.
- 13 Kenneth Burke describes the plot of *Othello* as the interplay of potentialities and actualizations: 'the ways in which the playwright builds up "potentialities" (that is, gives the audience a more or less vague or explicit "in our next" feeling at the end of each scene, and subsequently transforms such promises into fulfillments). The potentialities of one scene would thus become the actualizations of the next, while these in turn would be potentialities, from the standpoint of unfoldings still to come' (189–90). The knock at Desdemona's door throws a wrench into this design and compels us to consider the work of potentialities that do not actualize.
- 14 My argument is indebted to Luke Wilson's investigation of the 'paradox of action without an agent' (216) in early modern England, a paradox that he understands as a historical 'precursor' of 'poststructuralist hysteresis of action': 'the rhetorical strategy by which intentions and practical schemes are enabled to persist, conceptually, in hypostatized form, without or apart from subjects' (*Theaters of Intention* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000], 30).
- 15 In Verdi's *Otello*, Desdemona repeats her call to stop and listen: 'Listen. I hear a sigh. / Quiet. Who knocks on the door?' (trans. Burton D. Fisher [Coral Gables: Opera Journeys Publishing, 2001], 61).
- 16 *Othello*, directed by Stuart Burge (1965; Warner Brothers Home Video, 2007), DVD.
- 17 *Othello*, directed by Janet Suzman (Focus Films, 1989), 'Video.
- 18 In 'The History of Air', Carla Mazzo examines a similar moment in *Hamlet*, though the sense in question is sight rather than sound: 'when Gertrude sees "nothing at all" while Hamlet sees a spirit, we have, to state the obvious, a failure of consensus. But this problem is integral to the status of theater ... Shakespeare was confronting as well as dramatizing

- the limits of his own medium, or dramatic instrument, to subject that element of air to a form of “capture” capable of producing collective consensus’ (*South Central Review* 26.1 and 2 [2009]: 161).
- 19 Antony and Cleopatra, ed. Ania Loomba (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 4.3.9–16.
- 20 Jean E. Howard, *Shakespeare’s Art of Orchestration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 82. ‘Dead Silences’, Howard writes, ‘are those – such as occur between the movements of a symphony – which mark the formal divisions of the piece and occur when sound is not expected.’ ‘More interesting’, she continues, ‘are those live silences which have the power to create suspense and produce strong reactions precisely because they occur when sound is expected.’
- 21 Boethius, *Commentarii in librum Aristotelis Peri Hermeneias*, quoted by Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Fortune’s Faces: The Roman de la Rose and the Poetics of Contingency* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 21. See Heller-Roazen, more generally, 11–28.
- 22 Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 80–1. I am grateful to Katherine Schaap Williams for introducing me to this study.
- 23 Giorgio Agamben, ‘On Potentiality’, in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 179.
- 24 G. B. Giraldi Cinthio, from *Gli Hecatommithi* (1566), trans. by the editor in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, 8 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 7: 246.
- 25 *Othello*, directed by Orson Welles (Mercury Productions, 1952), Video.
- 26 ‘Desdemona and Emilia’ in *The Paintings of Eugène Delacroix*, ed. Lee Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3: 126. For a reproduction of the reverse lithograph of the 1825 composition, see vol. 4, plate 116.
- 27 G. R. Elliott may come closer to this reading, though he understands that shadow as a supernatural force: ‘in a

- sudden gust of “wind”, Desdemona ‘hears again [Othello’s] dreadful “scorn”, along with low summoning voices, so it seems, from the spiritual realm: “Hark, who is’t that knocks?”’ Elliott subsequently suggests that access to such ‘voices’ is due to a lack of self-control: ‘But quickly she controls herself’ (*Flaming Minister: A Study of Othello as Tragedy of Love and Hate* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1953], 204).
- 28 With thanks to Lena Orlin for suggesting this possibility.
- 29 For the complexities of both fictive and historical transmissions of this song, see Gavin Alexander, ‘Song in Shakespeare: Rhetoric, Identity, Agency’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare’s Poetry*, ed. Jonathan Post (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. 253–9. Of Emilia’s reprisal of the song just before she dies, Alexander writes: ‘An actor plays Emilia, who borrows Desdemona’s voice, which had been given her by another actor so that she could borrow Barbery’s voice and give life to the voice of a female lover based on the voice of a male lover in this converted, adapted, half-forgotten, remembered, revised ballad’ (258).
- 30 Ross W. Duffin, *Shakespeare’s Songbook* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 468.
- 31 This line is more often read as Desdemona half-remembering her earlier admonishment to Emilia: ‘my love doth so approve him / That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns / Prithee unpin me – have grace and favour’ (4.3.17–19).
- 32 ‘Shakespeare’s Absent Characters’, *English Studies* 61.5 (1980): 397. Joseph A. Porter’s discussion of the ‘ghost character’ of Valentine in *Romeo and Juliet* is also illuminating. Porter describes Valentine as a ‘symptom or by-product of Mercutio’s transformation’ from rival lover (in Shakespeare’s source) to friend (*Shakespeare’s Mercutio* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988], 7). Given the knock at the door in Cinthio’s tale, we might also consider ‘Nobody’ as a kind of ‘ghost character’ or a ‘by-product’ of adaptation.
- 33 While *Nobody and Somebody* was not published until 1606, its earliest version has been dated to c. 1592 (David L. Hay, ‘Introduction’ in *Nobody and Somebody* [New York: Garland,

- 1980], 63–6). For discussions of this play in relation to Shakespeare's interests in negation, see Richard Halpern, "'The Picture of Nobody': White Cannibalism in *The Tempest*", in *The Production of English Renaissance Culture*, eds David Lee Miller et al. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 276; Wilson, 216–62; Peter Womack, 'Nobody, Somebody and *King Lear*', *New Theater Quarterly* 23.3 (2007): 195–207. For Shakespeare and the wider *Nemo* tradition, see also Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 245–6. For a survey of the *Nemo* tradition, see Gerta Calman, 'The Picture of Nobody: An Iconographical Study', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 23 (1960): 60–104.
- 34 As Wilson explains, 'an act, understood as a function of its consequence and detached from the agent to which it would otherwise be ascribed, is linked instead to this nobody, this agent who is not one' (241).
- 35 'The second scheme', Wilson explains, 'works in the opposite way, starting with the deficiency or absence of a praiseworthy act and inferring, as it were, the consequent nonexistence of the agent, who is then, in a witty reversal, hypostatized as Nobody' (242).
- 36 Wilson, 218.
- 37 Wilson explains: "To say "Nobody did it" of an act that is done, is to rescue any particular person from taking responsibility for that act, whereas to say that "Nobody feeds the poor" is to say that others ought to do so' (242).
- 38 As quoted by Julie Hankey, ed., *Othello*, Shakespeare in Production, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 207.
- 39 Stares, 127.
- 40 Significantly, however, Berger withholds judgment: 'But even in my bitter book this moment is too sad for moral casuistry. If she fudges it must be because she perceives and acknowledges what she helped happen, because she anticipates my criticism enough to stand up to it and brave this moment out the best she can' (*A Fury in the Words: Love and Embarrassment in Shakespeare's Venice* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2013], 182).

- 41 For a discussion (via Cicero) of 'fortuna' as 'that by which a thing takes place in one way while being essentially capable of having taken place otherwise', see Heller-Roazen, 67.
- 42 This reading is indebted to Jonathan Gil Harris's suggestion that *Othello* 'refuses linear temporality': 'rather than a singular progression that can be geometrically plotted, time in *Othello* is a dynamic field whose contours keep shifting, bringing into startling and anachronistic proximity supposedly distant and disparate moments' (*Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009], 169).
- 43 '*Othello*: A Bloody Farce', in *A Casebook on Othello*, ed. Leonard F. Dean (New York: Crowell, 1961), 121.
- 44 Wilson describes a murder case at the Essex Assizes in 1570 in which the jury assigned blame to one fictional 'William Nemo' (219). Other names for fictional killers circulating in the early modern legal system included: 'John in le Wind', 'John Anoke', 'John Arstlie', 'John Atdeath', 'William Anoke', and 'William Death' (218).