

Linda Richter

“The Shakespeare’s mine, but you can have it” –

Postcolonial Rewrites of Shakespeare’s *Othello*

Walter Göbel, Therese Fischer-Seidel, Klaus Stierstorfer (Hg.)

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1 Introduction

Is Shakespeare less Shakespearean for taking his cue for the plot of *Othello*¹ from a story of Giambattista Giraldi Cinthio's *De Gli Hecatommithi*²? As a student of English Literature, one is inclined to say that this does not lessen Shakespeare's status as our Elizabethan Genius. But what about authors who take their cue from Shakespeare? Does relying on others to furnish one's plays with background, plot and characters diminish one's literary work? There are more than twenty texts that are indebted to Shakespeare's *Othello*. The first author to use *Othello* was probably John Ford with his play *Love's Sacrifice*³ (1633), followed by Mary Pix (*The False Friend, or, The Fate of Disobedience*⁴ (1699)) shortly after. Taking into account that Shakespeare took inspiration from Cinthio and many authors took inspiration from Shakespeare, it may be safe to perceive Shakespeare's text not as a starting point, but as part of a chain of *Othellos*. While the 17th to early 20th centuries produced just a few new *Othellos*, the number of *Othello*-based texts rose from the mid 20th century.⁵ While it is difficult to give a thorough explanation for this phenomenon, as it would be outside the focus of this dissertation, some hints can be found in John Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion."⁶ Barth describes such literature as ultimately postmodern, resulting in "the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities – by no means necessarily a cause for despair."⁷ Even if the author need not despair, the felt exhaustion seems to account for a certain lack of attempting to be original – which might explain the growing numbers of reworkings of old texts.

The authors use Shakespeare's play in order to present audiences with their own agenda in varying ways. There are plays that explain Iago's machinations by his homo-

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- 1 All references are to the following edition: William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann, 3rd ed., The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson, 1999).
 - 2 Giambattista Giraldi Cinthio, "From *Gli Hecatommithi*," trans. Geoffrey Bullough, Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, vol. 7 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) 239-252.
 - 3 John Ford, "Love's Sacrifice," *Five Plays*, ed. Havelock Ellis (London: Ernest Benn, 1960) 257-340.
 - 4 Mary Pix, "The False Friend, or, The Fate of Disobedience," *The Plays of Mary Pix and Catharine Trotter*, ed. Edna L. Steeves, vol. 1 (New York/London: Garland Publishing, 1982).
 - 5 For a list of *Othello*-rewrites, please see appendix.
 - 6 John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *The Friday Book. Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: Perigee Books, 1984) 62-76.
 - 7 Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion" 64.

sexual love for Othello,⁸ texts that depict Desdemona as a nymphomaniac,⁹ works that concentrate on how the situation today would be solved by an honest heart-to-heart talk (G.B. Shaw),¹⁰ and plays that criticise the overwhelmingly male world of ‘Academia’ and a certain way of re-writing history.¹¹ Other authors concentrate on the fact that Othello is probably the first Moor to be depicted as a main character in English drama, using his Otherness as a starting point to describe, lament or criticise today’s racist world. To be able to analyze texts based on *Othello* within the scope of this book, the corpus has to be narrowed down considerably. By excluding poems and novels the number of texts can be reduced and the task of comparing a one-page poem¹² with a three-hundred page novel¹³ with all the problematic theoretical and terminological problems involved, can be avoided. Additionally, some of the plays share a main topic: They are concerned with questions of postcoloniality (assuming that postcolonial plays are not only defined by the heritage of their author, but by their thematic aspects as well). Interestingly, the chronological order of these remaining plays coincides with geographical categories: The US-American postcolonial plays are exclusively from the 1960s and 1970s, the Canadian plays are younger, i.e. from the late 1970s and the 1990s. The oldest postcolonial play is from Uganda, the youngest from Finland. Whether this is of any relevance and whether the order can be explained by socio-political circumstances will be an interesting question to keep in mind during the analysis.

Each play will be analyzed in detail, searching for similarities to and differences from Shakespeare’s *Othello* in plot, characters, the characters’ relation to each other, language, words, and structure. This will help to give a picture of the author’s reliance on Shakespeare. It will be of interest how s/he uses *Othello* and Shakespeare to bring his or her own point across. Are there authors who specifically draw on Shakespeare (as opposed to the *Othello*-plot) as a source, and if so, to what use do they put the play? Would it make any difference to their play if *Othello* was a less successful play by, say, John Ford? Is it the plot or the fame of the author they are after? Finally, the question will be how original the play is: there is a vast difference between a version of *Othello* that has

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- 8 Sherwood Schwartz, *The Trial of Othello*, unpublished manuscript. The author would like to thank Mr Schwartz for providing her with a copy of his play.
 - 9 Paula Vogel, *Desdemona. A Play About a Handkerchief* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1994).
 - 10 G. B. Shaw, “How He Lied to Her Husband,” *John Bull’s Other Island with How He Lied to Her Husband and Major Barbara* (London: Constable and Company, 1931) 181-199.
 - 11 Ann-Marie McDonald, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* (New York: Grove Press, 1998).
 - 12 Derek Walcott, “Goats and Monkeys,” *Poems 1965-1980* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992) 21 f.
 - 13 Tayeb Salih, *Seasons of Migration to the North*, African Writers Series (London [et al.]: Heinemann, 1969).

been modernized in terms of language only and merely turns Othello into a manager instead of a General, without changing sentences and the content of the play, and a version that keeps the names and relations of the characters, but interprets the story in a radically new way. On another, more abstract level, the relations of the plays to each other is interesting. Is there such a thing as a thematic or stylistic US-American or even North American tradition of rewriting *Othello*? Or, maybe, a chronological development from one way of interpreting *Othello* or of handling the plot to another? Or maybe both? Are there any similarities between plays from different countries and cultures? How can the apparent lack of postcolonial plays from before the 1960s possibly be explained? And are there any plays that are specifically Black or White? Can one tell the author's ethnicity from his or her play? These questions will hopefully be answered in the conclusion.

The examination of the plays will follow a rough chronological and geographical order, beginning with the oldest, Ugandan play (1969). The US-American plays will be analyzed after that, ranging from 1964 to 1979. The Canadian plays are next in line, they were written in 1977 and 1997. The Finnish play, as the youngest (2003) will be examined last. Within each analysis, I will focus on similarities to Shakespeare's play in plot and characters, on quotations from Shakespeare, and on the play's treatment of postcolonial questions.

1.1 The Background: A Working Terminology of Rewrites

Before beginning the analysis, there are questions concerning the theory of rewrites to address. Julie Sanders' list of possible terminology expressions is extensive, yet in no way comprehensive:

variation, version, interpretation, imitation, proximation, supplement, increment, improvisation, prequel, sequel, continuation, addition, paratext, hypertext, palimpsest, graft, rewriting, reworking, refashioning, re-vision, re-evaluation.¹⁴

Julie Sander's list is from 2006; it appears that the terminology has not become much clearer nowadays.

The theory of intertextuality is probably the first theory concerning the type of literary work analyzed in this study. This has been heavily influenced by poststructuralist authors like Julia Kristeva (who invented the term 'intertextuality' to describe the relations between word, author and reader on the one hand and word and contemporary or older text on the other hand¹⁵) and Roland Barthes. Barthes says that "to try to find the

14 Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, The New Critical Idiom (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006) 3.

15 Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," *Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980) 64-91. 66.

‘sources’, the ‘influences’ of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation”,¹⁶ and he proclaims that the author as such does not exist, but that texts essentially write themselves through a scriptor. His theory has merit only if one takes his view into account of a text as something that essentially invents itself into being, which seems to me a somewhat extreme position. The view that writing is not necessarily the result of a more or less conscious effort of a person and that searching for the source of a text is useless because it doesn’t exist is what I cannot accept. Kristeva’s position that all things are connected with each other, that each and every text interacts with every other text that has been written or will be written at one point in time is somewhat extremist and debatable and not always helpful as an analytical tool. In this case, any attempt to develop the theory of intertextuality must be futile: If each and every text is related to every other text, why bother to differentiate between types of intertextuality? Consequently, Kristeva’s later texts on intertextuality can only be understood when her view of the world as interrelated in general is taken into account.

G rard Genette sees this problem and uses ‘intertextuality’ in a much more precise way. He is concerned with the ways texts are related to other texts and attempts a differentiation into five types, two of which are especially interesting for this study: ‘Intertextuality’ is Genette’s term for the presence of one or more texts in another text. This presence can be achieved by quotation, allusion or plagiarism (which he defines as “nicht deklarierte, aber immer noch w rtliche Entlehnung.”¹⁷) ‘Hypertextuality’ is defined by the relation of a hypertext overshadowing, but not commenting on, a hypotext.¹⁸ Genette then defines more than 30 ways of transforming and transpositioning a hypotext. This classification is too elaborate and too fine to be practical: Any attempt to file a play under one of Genette’s headings would probably end in the realization that it may well fit two or more further classes as well. Hypertextuality and intertextuality are more closely related than Genette says: An author might well choose to quote from his hypotext, and as my analysis will show, authors very often do so. A play that is hypertextual in Genette’s sense can thus also be intertextual, and vice versa.

‘Adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’ are two terms that are used frequently to describe the type of literary text to be discussed here. But popular as they may be, their potential for giving rise to misunderstandings is great. None of these terms has been included in dictionaries of literary terms with a definition that reflects this usage. In her 1992 *NTC Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Kathleen Morner has no entry for ‘intertextuality’ or ‘appropriation.’¹⁹ She cites ‘adaptation’ as “1. A re-rendering of a work originally

16 Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” *Image, Music, Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995) 155-164. 160.

17 Genette, *Palimpseste* 10.

18 Genette, *Palimpseste* 15.

19 Kathleen Morner, *NTC’s Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Lincolnwood, Ill.: National Textbook Co., 1992).