

Othello: The State of Play. Lena Cowen Orlin, ed.
Arden Shakespeare: The State of Play. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. xi + 290 pp.
\$26.95.

This second volume in the innovative Arden Shakespeare: The State of Play series (series editors Lena Cowen Orlin and Ann Thompson) comprises a selection of essays presented to a seminar at the annual meeting of the SAA. It aims to present the current “state of play” in commentary on a particular Shakespeare work, with “fresh work by emerging voices,” here Ambereen Dadabhoy, Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld, and Ian Smith, “and established scholars” (vii), here Lynn Enterline, Robert Hornback, Laurie Maguire, Lois Potter, David Schalkwyk, James Siemon, and Robert N. Watson. The volume includes a useful introduction by the editor and seminar convener, her own voice prominent in Shakespeare and specifically *Othello* study for some time now. The present volume augurs well for the series to come, which should prove attractive acquisitions for any but the most straitened university libraries.

Maguire concerns herself with breaches of theatrical boundaries. Responding to Edward Bullough's 1912 claim that *Othello* shortens the aesthetic distance normally balancing audience involvement in Shakespeare, and which separates comedy from tragedy and truth from falsehood, Maguire lays responsibility for the effect at the door of the liminal, Janus-faced Iago. Potter, also addressing boundary crossings, advances the ambitious and intriguing suggestion that Shakespeare might originally have written a short version of Cinthio's story containing only acts 3–5, which Middleton could have responded to with *A Yorkshire Tragedy* as a second part of a sequence meant for performance together, Shakespeare then returning to his own contribution to provide back drama in the play's acts 1–2.

Enterline reads *Othello* in the light of classical rhetoric and its practice in schools, contrasting the universal admiration for Virgil's uprightness with more complex stances toward the metamorphic eloquence of Ovid, both suspect and irresistibly imitable; she traces Othello's progress from Virgilian heroism to his final passionate speech that undoes, in Enterline's words, "the national, racial, and gendered distinctions that masters claimed they would produce in their students for the good of England's commonwealth" (170). The handkerchief works mischief in the volume passim and front and center in Smith's provocative "Othello's Black Handkerchief," which musters archival riches in support of shaky argument. Problems begin with the acceptance by Smith (like other recent commentators, including Orlin in her editor's introduction) of Linda Boose's 1975 fabrication of a white-linen square spotted with red. While Smith tacitly distances himself from Boose by mentioning the silk and qualifying the shape as square "or rectangle" (101), color is his main target, and here, too, he begs questions.

When Iago calls the handkerchief "spotted" with strawberries, he characteristically makes ambiguous a per se innocent idiom from embroidery. Susan Frye's *Pens and Needles: Women's Textualities in Early Modern England* (2011), a source Smith might have profited from, illustrates among embroidery spots (patterns) on a white or light ground two strawberry spots — fruit and leaves worked in black ("blackwork") in one, and in red and green in the other — neither case substantiating Boose; so Smith starts amiss vis à vis the embroidery, whose absence from the midair handkerchief pictured on the Arden 3 cover he takes no note of, possibly because his overriding concern is the ground, "dyed in mummy." Surveying some of the scholarship about mummy, some of which calls the pharmaceutical dark and some white, Smith plumps for the former, with an arbitrarily selected blackwork embroidery, as evidence for his black, "or at least very dark" (225), handkerchief, never mind, for instance, its consequent illegibility to the audience when Desdemona attempts to bind Othello's forehead with it.

This volume suffers from the occasional clunker, as with "of course any dead woman would be cold and pale" (Potter, 57), meaning any dead white woman. Editors of future works in the series might consider providing summaries of the seminars' lively on-site discussion.

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