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‘I am your own forever’: Iago, queer self-fashioning and the cinematic *Othellos* of Orson Welles and Oliver Parker

I

Arguably, *Othello* stands as one of the most celebrated – and one of the most disturbing – tragedies in the Shakespeare canon.¹ Almost certainly written immediately after *Hamlet*, the first documented performance of the play was on 1 November 1604. It might, as Lois Potter explains, ‘have been finished in time to be acted before the death of Elizabeth I and the plagues that closed the theatres for much of 1603–4, or the recorded performance may have been one of the first in James I’s reign’.² Regardless, *Othello* ‘belongs to a period when the London theatres were competing to produce plays of an apparently new genre, domestic drama’.³ Although the action unfolds in both Venice and Cyprus, and there are hints of nationalistic themes in the war that never materializes between

the Venetians and the invading Turks, *Othello* qualifies as a domestic tragedy simply because of the fact that it charts the terrible disintegration of a marriage – perhaps the most insular and intimate, and vulnerable, of human social institutions. And, given his gifts for originality and innovation, it makes perfect sense that Shakespeare was involved in his own idiosyncratic way with both the genesis and the evolution of what then constituted a form of theatrical representation unlike that which had come before and that Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences embraced with their characteristic enthusiasm for all things theatre.

As it travelled through time from the early seventeenth to the early twenty-first century, *Othello* would remain a popular but increasingly troubling work of drama. Concerns with the coarseness – particularly where sexual matters are involved – of the play's language were noted in the 1700s and 1800s. The offending lines were dealt with accordingly, usually by the means of elision in performance and publication.⁴ Furthermore, because of the unavoidable legacy of slavery as well as the institutionalized misogyny that pervades Western culture at large, *Othello* became even more of a problem play by the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. But, despite the evident difficulties related to the concepts of race, postcolonialism, gender, feminism and sexuality that the play traffics in, directors and actors have not shied away from bringing *Othello* to the big and the small screens alike. Including appropriations and more or less literal adaptations of the tragedy, Rothwell lists a total of twenty-five film and television productions of *Othello* as having appeared between 1908, when Vitagraph's ten-minute black-and-white silent version made its debut, and 2001, when Tim Blake Nelson's teen-oriented, Columbine-affected *O* once again brought the play to the attention of cinema audiences.⁵ This chapter will consider two of these movies: Orson Welles's *Othello* (1952) and Oliver Parker's *Othello* (1995). Both of these productions, it will be argued, deals with the queerness that is so clearly a part of Shakespeare's original playtext in specific

ways that are indicative of the historical periods from which they emerged and that represent, most particularly where the character of Iago is concerned, a specific form of what can be considered, appropriating the idea from Stephen Greenblatt, queer self-fashioning that has been overlooked in the extant criticism of these films.

II

Beyond the issues raised and explored on account of racial, postcolonial, gender, sexual and feminist concerns, *Othello* has also been the subject of a great deal of what can be in the broadest sense characterized as queer critical inquiry. Indeed, before delving into the specifics of the queerness and queer self-fashioning evident in the films that will serve as the exemplars for this chapter's discussion, it proves instructive to consider a few of the interventions that have been made into *Othello* as a written theatrical text from a queer perspective. This is useful because many of the insights and questions raised by this kind of analysis find their way into *Othello* in the two cinematic productions discussed below. As such, to start with, it can be noted that the queer line of interpretation of *Othello* is traceable back to the work of Stanley Edgar Hyman who, forty-five years ago, wrote that the character of Iago is 'motivated by strong latent homosexuality (or acts as does a person so motivated). This is not only abundantly clear in the play, but it is clearly of Shakespeare's deliberate contrivance' rather than a facet the playwright derived from his source materials.⁶ Directly comparing Iago to the character that, in Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*, served as Iago's prototype, Hyman goes on to insist that Shakespeare's Iago 'neither loves Desdemona nor believes for a moment that she loves Cassio ... It is he [Iago] who unconsciously loves both Othello and Cassio; that love is repressed and, by the defense mechanism called "reaction formation," turned into hate' – creating a set

of circumstances not to be found in Cinthio's story.⁷ This is a classic Freudian/psychoanalytic reading of Iago and, while there is no doubt that it was an insightful interpretation forty-five years ago, in the early twenty-first century it comes across as problematic.

It also seems that Hyman's analysis could only have been produced from a presumptively normative heterosexual reading position that results in a view of homosexuality as always already the opposite – rather than any kind of an equal in and of itself – of heterosexuality. This may be why Hyman's interpretation perceives Iago's homosexuality in the quasi-negative: as latent, unconscious and repressed. Within the superstructure that is hegemonic heterosexuality, homosexuality can only ever be hidden, unknown and regulated, as opposed to open, above board and uninhibited like its oppositional counterpart. Indeed, this is how, as Foucault has explained, especially in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, heterosexuality perpetuates itself as the gold standard of human interpersonal relations. By peremptorily defining and policing homosexuality, heterosexuality can control what it considers to be an alien Other on its own terms. Thus in Hyman's reading, because he is classified as a homosexual rather than a heterosexual, there is something inherently and fundamentally unnatural and wrong about Iago from the outset. He is, in Hyman's words, filled with 'contempt for women' and 'disgust with heterosexual love and marriage', three of the cornerstones at the heart of the patriarchal system that defines Western culture.⁸ Homosexuals, from this normative perspective, can only have dislike for women and an extreme discomfort with the very idea of opposite gender sexual activities and the institution of holy matrimony. Hyman seems to give no thought at all to the possibility that homosexuals can and do like women without wanting or needing to have sex with them, or to the possibility that there are other ways for human beings to love and to have stable, long-term relationships (the equivalent of heterosexual marriages) with people of the same gender.

Hyman proceeds to claim that Iago's supposition that Othello is having an ongoing sexual affair with Iago's wife, Emilia, is nothing less than Iago's 'unconscious wish that Othello go to bed with him' instead, and that Iago is thus jealous of Desdemona because she is the one Othello goes to bed with rather than Iago himself.⁹ But the unwritten assumption here is that Othello and Iago have never slept together as lovers prior to, or even at some point during, for that matter, the action of *Othello* proper. Given that both are part of an all-male milieu – military service – known throughout recorded history for the prevalence of homoerotic couplings within its ranks – such a conjecture warrants some qualification. Be that as it may, Cassio's dream about making love to Desdemona that Iago 'reluctantly' relates to Othello then becomes the fantastical means by which Iago transforms himself into the imagined object of sexual desire that is, in turn, pursued by both Cassio and Othello – two exceptionally virile men that Iago longs to be ravished by, perhaps simultaneously – while in a state of decadent homosexual excess. Taking all of these forces into account leads Hyman to the perhaps inevitable conclusion that Iago's suggestion to Othello that, rather than poison her, Othello should strangle Desdemona in the very bed where they sleep and have sex, is 'in this context a strikingly homosexual wish, the transformation of the heterosexual act into murder', a murder that would for all intents and purposes remove Desdemona as an impediment to Iago's sublimated desire to be with Othello as his one and only friend and, more importantly, lover.¹⁰ A 'strikingly homosexual wish'? This disturbing pronouncement serves in effect to stereotype all homosexuals – as opposed to only just Iago, a *character* in a Shakespearean tragedy – as psychopaths whose sole option is to kill women in order to have the opportunity to be with the men they desire and cannot secure for themselves in any other way than by eliminating the competition. Later quoting Desdemona's last words, Hyman manages yet again to equate the 'homosexual motivations' that brought about her death at Othello's – and, by extension,

Iago's – hands with the unnatural and the foul.¹¹ There can be no question that Iago is the villain of *Othello*; however, he is not, as Hyman seems to believe, villainous solely because he is a homosexual in the (out)dated psychoanalytic sense of that word. He is evil simply because he is evil and regardless of his sexual desires.

Ben Saunders' more recent discussion of Iago's use of the term 'clyster-pipes' (2.1.176) in reference to Cassio's kissing of his fingers while he talks to Desdemona after their arrival on Cyprus seems to pick up the psychoanalytic thread where Hyman left off despite Saunders's disavowal that he does 'not see Iago's clyster-pipes as a means to reintroduce ... a traditional Freudian interpretation of the character as a "repressed homosexual"'.¹² This is because, Saunders explains, while such a reading comes across to him as being 'perceptive in its acknowledgement of the dynamic role played by male-male desire', it is also a critical practice best avoided given the fact that the resulting 'dogmatically Freudian accounts of sexuality are frequently homophobic and dependent on categories of sexual identity that cannot be applied to Renaissance texts without anachronism'.¹³ Nevertheless, Saunders proceeds to construct an elaborate gloss of Iago's clyster-pipes as symbolic of enema tubes that would be used in the purgation of bodily waste. Hence by conflating clyster-pipes and enema tubes together in this manner, Cassio's fingers become instruments that have been in, significantly at the outset of Saunders's argument, an unidentified character's anus.¹⁴ What follows is Saunders' attempt to convince his readers that Iago represents 'a portrait of the villain as anal-retentive artist'¹⁵ who, quite queerly, absolutely revels in the myriad pleasures of clyster-pipe/enema tube-induced eliminations.

The detritus Iago enjoys expelling in this manner is Desdemona, with her 'excessive [heterosexual] desire'¹⁶ for Othello, as well as Othello himself, whom Iago cannot countenance because of his status as a Moor whose dark skin brands him the equivalent of a waste product unworthy of participating in civilized, white, patriarchal, Christian culture.¹⁷

Thus, as Saunders concludes, Iago's "monstrous birth" [Iago's plan to destroy Othello by convincing him that Desdemona is cuckolding him with Cassio] is no welcome and innocent baby, then, 'but rather a tremendous evacuation—the inevitable and horrific consequence of a "diet of revenge". And the complete success of Iago's enema is attested to when this masterful' manipulator refuses to speak after all of his misdeeds have been revealed and he stands in the custody of the Venetian authorities¹⁸ at the very end of the play. There is, in other words, nothing left for him to expel at this point from his mind or body. The thorough purge of wastes that Iago sought and took such pleasure in effecting has been achieved; he is left to wallow in the satisfied silence and relief of a post-enema-induced bliss – or stupor.

But it can be argued that Saunders' psychoanalytic reading of Iago's clyster-pipes is not so far removed from Hyman's as he would have his readers believe. The ultimate purgation of Desdemona and Othello that Iago has given such monstrous 'birth' to could also be seen, in Hyman's words, as a 'strikingly homosexual wish' that subjects heterosexuals to eradication by murder – a murder that, no matter how vicariously, Iago as, specifically, a male homosexual takes great erotic pleasure in bringing about. The Iago that emerges from the interpretation that Saunders constructs in his essay is just as deviant and not at all normal (read: not heterosexual) as the Iago that Hyman constructs in his study. The heteronormative presumption that informs Saunders' essay is that straight males and their literary representations would never derive sexual enjoyment from the administration of an enema to themselves or any other person. Such satisfaction is something only gay or queer males who, like Iago, are deemed to be sick and perverted, are capable of experiencing. However, the point bears repeating: Iago is not evil because his erotic desires are non-heteronormative; he is evil simply because he is evil.

On the other side of the interpretive coin, Little and Robert Matz are two scholars whose criticism of *Othello* is arguably more nuanced as regards the play's repeated evocations

of male same-sex queerness. Indeed, both Little and Matz read *Othello* without being heterosexist, to borrow again Sinfield's titular phrasing, and thus they part company with Hyman and Saunders. In his piece, Little uses the Freudian-psychoanalytic concept of the primal scene to interrogate the racial anxieties that pervade the dramatic text of *Othello*. These anxieties, he insists, are both reflected and refracted in the play's treatment of sexuality. Indeed, Little argues that the way *Othello* 'responds to and creates these anxieties is by mocking the sexual coupling of Othello and Desdemona and by associating it with other culturally horrifying scenes of sexuality, especially bestiality and homosexuality'.¹⁹ Little makes a strong case for reading Iago/Cassio's dream as a description of a homosexual encounter between the ensign and the lieutenant. Thus the 'image hidden from, but being made visible for, Othello is supposedly of Desdemona and Cassio, while Iago presents a homoerotic scene involving the sexual interaction between Cassio and himself'.²⁰ Little adds that Othello's verbal reaction to Iago's account of Cassio's dream, which includes the doubly invoked adjective 'monstrous' (3.3.428), 'rather than missing the sex scene of Iago and Cassio, can be seen as immediately directed towards this sexual coupling'.²¹ In other words, the term monstrous is used initially to characterize not Iago's homosexuality, but rather Cassio's heterosexuality. And it is monstrous in the same grotesque manner that would apply to the transgressions of bestiality (called to mind when, in 1.1, Iago crudely compares Othello and Desdemona to, respectively, a black ram and a white ewe) and adultery (the spectre of which Iago brings forth in his many implications that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair that Othello knew nothing about before Iago's revealing it to him) that are instantiated concurrently as the dramatic action of *Othello* unfolds.²² It is not therefore that bestiality, adultery or homosexuality in and of themselves are monstrous, but, rather, that the persons who would dare to engage in such transgressive acts at the expense of other 'normal or state/religiously sanctioned acts'

are monstrous. Cassio is thus monstrous to Othello because of his alleged affair with Desdemona and not the fact that this expressly forbidden coupling is couched within the context of a homosexual dream narrative involving Cassio and Iago.

Meanwhile, how relationships of all kinds, but especially those between men, were policed during the early modern period in England is the larger subject of Matz's work. Where *Othello* is concerned, he notes that, 'in seeking to discredit Cassio, he [Iago] also seeks to displace Desdemona as Othello's "bedfellow",²³ or, following Bray, as the person who is in the privileged position of sharing the most public and private intimacy possible with another individual of some influence. Since 'intimacy means access', for Matz, too, the relationship Iago seeks to (re)establish with Othello by removing Desdemona from the equation encompasses the homoerotic in addition to the homosocial.²⁴ Indeed, the 'supposed desire between Cassio and Desdemona substitutes even more clearly for the desire that Iago continually pursues and is pursuing in the dream' he relates about Othello's wife and his lieutenant, a dream that, for Matz, plainly evokes 'his [Iago's] own desire to win back Othello's love'.²⁵ Desdemona is then no more than the means to Iago's ultimate end: manifesting materially his intimate, erotic, exclusive and entirely self-serving (re)union with Othello.

III

As is perhaps obvious from the information presented above, interpretation of the text of *Othello* from a queer perspective has not yielded any kind of a consensus. Even so, such inquiry does provide a particular foundation from which to approach the study of how directors like Welles and Parker have dealt with the play's inherent queerness in the cinema. Starting with the first of these filmmakers, it can be noted that, although it was largely vilified when it premiered in Europe and later in

America, in the early and the mid-1950s, respectively, Welles's *Othello*²⁶ gained a great deal of both popular and critical currency when it was restored and re-released, largely through the efforts of the director's youngest daughter, Beatrice Welles-Smith, in 1992. The movie opens with an extreme close-up of a seemingly dark-skinned man, whose head is upside down to the viewer, lying in state; an insistent drumbeat and, very soon thereafter, sinister piano notes accompany this sobering image. Haunting choir music begins to sound as the body is lifted by hooded pallbearers who, underneath a blindingly bright sky, lead a funeral procession along the grounds of a vaguely medieval Moorish castle. Suddenly, across this tableau, a slight-looking man is led like a dog in chains and, before long, is thrown into a cage and hoisted high into the air for all to see him in his imprisonment. The man can do no more than look out through the iron bars on the somber memorial service taking place below, his expression grim but unrepentant. Thus Welles transforms and adapts the ending of Shakespeare's *Othello* into a compelling visual prologue to his cinematic adaptation of the play. Following a brief voiceover introduction to the major characters and the story that brings them together, the film proper begins. And though the production is not overtly homoerotic *per se*, it still yields insights that are worth considering from a queer perspective. It has, in fact, a noticeably queer ethos.

Critics from Michael Anderegg to Rothwell agree that Welles's *Othello* qualifies as an example of American film noir, a cinematic genre that finds its origins in the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, given the specificity of the director's emphasis on Iago's machinations in the production, the latter describes the movie as a 'foray into entrapment and fear [that] carries the movie into the realm of film noir, the Hollywood B movies that reflected the dark, paranoid side of America obscured by the genial fatuousness of the Eisenhower years'.²⁷ According to William Park, film noir is 'defined by a subject, a locale and a character. It consists of all three. Its subject is crime, almost always murder but sometimes a theft. Its locale is the

contemporary world, usually a city at night. Its character is a fallible or tarnished man or woman'.²⁸ These elements are in turn complemented by 'expressionistic camera work' and 'narrative devices such as the voice over and flashback' to create the overall claustrophobic effect.²⁹ Where the subject of crime is concerned, because it both rearranges and extrapolates on the end of Shakespeare's original, Welles's *Othello* creates the uncanny effect of placing the viewer in the position of the detective or investigator who is trying to figure out what led to the deaths of Othello and Desdemona and, perhaps more importantly, who was responsible for such heinous acts. Welles's *Othello* does not lead, as in its source text, to the commission of these transgressions; rather, it begins with them, and thus it follows the traditional storytelling trajectory of film noir. As the costumes, the locations, which range all the way from Morocco to Venice and many points in between, and the cinematography make clear, the film is not set in a contemporary city at night but, rather, in Cyprus and at seemingly all hours. Arguably, though, the exotic look and feel of Welles's imagined Mediterranean world substitutes well as a stand-in for the sprawling and usually anonymous metropolis commonly found in film noir. In addition, if nothing else, *Othello* qualifies as a fallible film noir character around which the drama of a man who thinks he has been wronged by his wife and is seeking vengeance for that wrong swirls. These generic features are also punctuated by the two things that contribute to film noir's evocation of claustrophobia: expressionistic camera work – something perhaps most notable in Welles's penchant for staging his scenes from disorienting visual angles – and the incorporation of myriad jump-cuts, as well as the use of voiceover and flashback. Indeed, almost the whole of the movie is one long, extended flashback.

Welles's *Othello* is a queer Shakespeare film that also fits comfortably within the genre of film noir – or vice versa. Richard Dyer explains that among the 'first widely available images of homosexuality in our time were those provided by the

American film noir. Given the dearth of alternative images, it is reasonable to suppose that these had an important influence on both public ideas about homosexuality and, damagingly, gay self-images.³⁰ As might be suspected, these images were not at all flattering; indeed, they can now be understood as stereotypical and reactionary despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that they were in accord with the prevailing heteronormative views of the time. Dyer goes so far as to label them 'aspects of the armoury of gay oppression'³¹ many at the time used to disparage homosexuals and homosexuality. Interestingly, he proceeds to delineate the recurring iconography of gays' representation in film noir as follows: 'fastidious dress; crimped hair; perfume; manicured nails; love of art; bitchy wit; knowledge of clothes, jewellery, perfume; love of music; gaudy clothes; fussy hairstyles; love of fine cuisine'.³² It is through this constellation of signifiers that in film noir '[g]ays are thus defined by everything but the very thing that makes us different' with that thing being, of course, sexual identity and the sexual desires that identity engenders, which could not be represented literally on the silver screen during the 1940s and 1950s because of censorship on the part of conservative regimes, particularly the Catholic Church and the cinema industry's resulting self-policing of its productions.³³ Based on these observations Dyer concludes that, in film noir, the

ideological pairing of male homosexuality with luxury and decadence (with connotations of impotence and sterility) is of a piece with the commonplace [and misogynistic] linking of women with luxury (women as expensive things to win and keep, women as bearers of their husbands' wealth) and decadence (women as beings without sexuality save for the presence of men). The feeling that gay men are *like* women yet *not* women produces the 'perverse' tone of this mode of iconographic representation.³⁴

Although, considering its somewhat troubled reception history it must have been a minor one compared to other

more prominent examples of the genre, the role Welles's *Othello* played in this overarching dissemination of pop culture knowledge about gays and homosexuality through the medium of film noir is, queerly, apparent in retrospect.

Like all of the other male characters in Welles's *Othello* save the great Venetian general himself, Iago's (Micheál MacLiammóir) hair is shoulder-length rather than crimped, and always in a state of some disarray. What sets this Iago apart as far as this aspect of his appearance is that his hair always looks stringy and greasy. It is as if he does not care in the least about the image his coiffure presents to others. This unkempt as opposed to fussy hair quality contributes to the aura of the 'not quite right' (i.e. the 'not quite straight') that surrounds this Iago. Whether or not he has interests in perfume, manicured nails, fine dining, art and/or music, as Dyer's rubric suggests, is left to the viewer's speculation. Where clothes are concerned, on many occasions in the production, when he is not in the requisite tights the filmmakers' costume designers employ to mimic, more or less correctly, early modern male dress, Iago is pictured wearing a long flowing cloak complete with a willowy hood that frames his face like a veil. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this garment has the effect of muting his masculinity while heightening his non-heteronormative effeminacy (see Figure 20). Of course, the obvious symbolism of Iago's cloak ought not to be ignored; it is, after all, a piece of clothing that, given its specificity, suggests whomever is wearing it is hiding something sinister about himself from the rest of the world. This is apropos since Welles's Iago, following Shakespeare's original, *is* disguising his malevolent nature from one and all he associates with so that he can execute the vengeance he desires for having, he feels, been so wronged by Othello in being passed over for promotion to the rank of lieutenant. Not incidentally, the cloak also makes plain Dyer's point that in film noir – and the larger homophobic culture that gave birth to the genre – gay men are represented as *like* women, yet, at the same time, *not* women. Dressed as he is at a number of points in Welles's *Othello*,

FIGURE 20 *Iago* (Micheál MacLiammóir) effeminately cloaked and hooded in *Othello*, dir. Orson Welles, 1952.

Iago looks like a woman who is not actually a woman. Hence, from a reactionary heteronormative perspective, Iago is, in such garb, a perverse – a queer – mixture of the masculine and the feminine rather than being an obvious example of one or the other as he should be in accord with the usual gender, and their corresponding sexual, binaries. He is, to put it in slightly different terms, the ultimate horror: a gay man hiding in plain sight who has nefarious homoerotic designs on the straighter-than-straight hero whose honour and masculinity must be protected at all costs from such predators.

As portrayed by MacLiammóir, his Iago often gives voice to the bitchy wit Dyer claims is part and parcel of the film noir depiction of gay men. This is true even though most of his lines were supplied by Shakespeare and incorporated without much if any alteration by Welles into his screenplay for *Othello*. For instance, as the story proper gets underway and Iago is feigning commiseration with the inordinately besotted Roderigo (Robert Coote), the latter asks Iago what he should do now that the object of his desire, Desdemona

(Suzanne Clautier), is married to Othello (Welles) instead of himself. Iago responds by rolling his eyes behind Roderigo's back and telling the other man that he should 'go to bed and sleep' (1.3.305) in a tone dripping with exaggerated sarcasm. That Iago does not respect him in the least, and could not care less about his romantic misfortune, is completely lost on Roderigo who blurts out: 'I will incontinently drown myself' (1.3.306). With evident asperity, Iago proclaims, 'Oh villainous' (1.3.312) in response to Roderigo's assertion. But, of course, it is perfectly clear that Iago would shed no tears if Roderigo were to kill himself over Desdemona. Nevertheless, because he needs Roderigo's financial resources, Iago adds: 'Ere I would say I would drown myself for ... love ... I would change my humanity with a baboon' (1.3.315–17). MacLiammóir utters each word of this exchange with both admirable precision and a pronounced lisp that does everything to heighten the entirely caustic effect. Underneath the off-kilter humour, however, lies the bitter anger of someone who is deeply unhappy with how he has been treated by life and his fellow man, an experience not at all unfamiliar to queer folk the world over and, sometimes, dealt with by them in the same or similar passive-aggressive manner.

Though once again the words are Shakespeare's, it is difficult not to wonder if MacLiammóir's own homosexuality infuses his performance of Iago in this portion of *Othello* with the kind of bitchy wit – produced by the actor's idiosyncratic combination of inflection and gesture – demonstrated in the lines quoted above. It is Potter, among other critics, who calls attention to MacLiammóir's non-normative sexual identity in her extended analysis of Welles's film. In doing so she cites and interprets a key passage from the actor's published diary that details his involvements on and off set during the lengthy production of *Othello*, which extended from the end of January 1949 to the beginning of March 1950. At a dinner in Paris attended by MacLiammóir, Welles and a number of actresses, all of whom were, at the time, vying to play the role of Desdemona, Welles insisted that the character of Iago 'was

in his opinion impotent' and that 'this secret malady was, in fact, to be the keystone of the actor's approach' to the role.³⁵ Moments later, with far more animation, the director went on: "Impotent", he roared in (surely somewhat forced) rich bass baritone, "that's why he hates life so much – they always do".³⁶ About this anecdote, Potter remarks that MacLiammóir could not have been unaware in these moments he recorded for posterity that Welles was 'taunting him in public' about his homosexuality and, furthermore, that the auteur was especially wary 'of the reality of the "all-male" persona being projected' into the cinematic narrative of *Othello* he was in the process of constructing.³⁷ However, it seems that such a reading ought to be tempered with additional thought.

If as Potter suggests Welles was openly 'taunting' MacLiammóir about his sexual proclivities, MacLiammóir does not say as much anywhere in *Put Money in Thy Purse*. Had he been offended by Welles's remarks it seems likely he would have expressed that feeling. Indeed, the overarching impression to be taken from *Put Money In Thy Purse* is that both Welles – who, after all, wrote a Foreword to the memoir that is equal parts praise for MacLiammóir and self-deprecation – and MacLiammóir had a great deal of professional and personal respect for one another. From the remove of nearly seventy years, Welles's words do come across as rather unkind and, perhaps more importantly, simultaneously evocative of then prevailing stereotypes, fuelled by misinformation and fear, about gay men who, from a strictly heteronormative perspective, were thought to be impotent because of their lack of 'normal' sexual desire for women. In relation to homosexuals and film noir, Dyer explains it this way: 'Such an image [i.e. of the impotent man] is amplified in the gay characters by the culturally widespread notion (reinforced by the non-sexuality of the gay iconography) that gays are intensely physical beings who cannot "do anything" physically and hence vibrate with frustrated twisted sexual energy.'³⁸ From this perspective, MacLiammóir's Iago cannot 'do anything' sexually with Othello because Othello

is straight, thus Iago is little more than a dangerous bundle of sexual frustration that will eventually manifest itself in the form of bloody vengeance. The idea that two men could reciprocate romantic, affective and erotic – inclusive of the sexual – desire for each other was still a rather alien one to most of the general public of the time period and would remain so until at least the Stonewall Riots in 1969 in New York City, if not for a long while after that momentous event.

It is also difficult not to wish that Potter had expanded on her interpretation about Welles being wary of the 'reality' of the all-male ethos at the heart of his *Othello*. Presumably she means that Welles was concerned about the 'reality' of the homosexual/homoerotic aspects of the written text being more pronounced in cinematic form, particularly as regards the relationships Iago has with Roderigo, Cassio and Othello himself in the film. But as will be developed more fully below, the finished product does not bear out such a hypothesis, at least not in the most simplistic sense. For the moment it is sufficient to offer the reminder that Benshoff and Griffin note that one way to 'define queer film could be via its authorship: films might be considered queer when they are written, directed or produced by queer people or perhaps when they star lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer actors'.³⁹ In retrospect, then, knowledge of MacLiammóir's homosexuality, a fact 1950s European and American film audiences would have been unlikely to be aware of, allows queer and queer-allied twenty-first-century viewers of Welles's *Othello* to recoup a part of their heritage that had hitherto remained hidden from them. This understanding in turn activates another of Benshoff and Griffin's definitions of queer film: that 'all films might be potentially queer if read from a queer viewing position'.⁴⁰ Though not by any means heroic or admirable, the Iago that emerges under interpretive pressure of this type is queer kith and kin. Heteronormative audience members might well find MacLiammóir's Iago simply weird or odd in addition to being discomfiting; it is to be hoped that queer audiences, on the other hand, have the inherent ability to take a more nuanced

view of the character. Their Iago may be one man in love with another (Othello) who has been deeply hurt because of that love – no matter how one-sided – and responds to that hurt in spectacular fashion.

The project of queering Welles's *Othello* can be continued in light of Daniel Juan Gil's fascinating work on the film in relation to the director's productions of, respectively, *Macbeth* (1948) and *Chimes at Midnight* (1965). In this analysis Gil argues that, where *Othello* is concerned, Welles effects an idiosyncratic visual grammar of sexuality. To accomplish this feat Welles uses a 'version of the shot/reverse shot technique' – the cinematic way of conveying the sense of two characters having a more or less private, back-and-forth conversation with each other – to represent 'a socially deviant form of sexualized bonding' as occurring between Iago and Othello.⁴⁹ As Gil explains it, in the first third of Welles's *Othello* Othello and Desdemona almost never appear in scenes that show them talking to one another in accord with the shot/reverse shot convention as might be expected of a newly married couple in the process of forging their just-begun marital relationship. Instead, they favour 'side-by-side, often non-linguistic [i.e. lacking dialogue], often public appearances' that can be read as a rather impersonal way of associating.⁴² Of course, the same seems to apply to Othello and Iago; but that, Gil insists, only holds true until the precise moment when Iago begins to poison Othello's mind about Desdemona's sexual faithlessness. It is at this point that the conversationally intimate 'shot/reverse shot becomes the perfect visual emblem for Iago's inexplicable, antisocial scheming' against Othello.⁴³ Issue can be taken with Gil's use of the term 'inexplicable' here in his otherwise insightful analysis. In Welles's *Othello* Iago's motives for striking back at Othello are no more, nor less, inexplicable than they are in Shakespeare's original playtext. 'I hate the Moor' (1.3.385), Iago tells Roderigo as the two are standing at the back of the Venetian church in which Othello and Desdemona are bound in holy matrimony. Not long thereafter, Iago insists: 'I know my price, I am worth

no worse a place' (1.1.10), giving voice to his complaint that the Florentine, Cassio, has been promoted to the position of lieutenant to Othello even though Iago, 'God bless the mark', is 'Othello's ensign' (1.1.32). Thus, contra Gil, it seems perfectly clear that Welles's Iago, like Shakespeare's original, is acting out of a lethal combination of jealousy, spite and malice at being so slighted.

But perhaps what Gil finds really inexplicable, like many *Othello* critics before him, is the excessiveness of Iago's desire for vengeance, which does, on the surface at least, appear completely out of proportion in comparison to the 'wrong' he thinks he has suffered. At the same time, however, Gil does seem to find an explanation for this immoderation in what he considers to be Iago's unrequited longing for Othello, which, in turn, becomes part and parcel of the visual grammar of sexuality evident in Welles's *Othello* that he takes such pains to delineate in his work. Of course, the spectre of Freud and the traditional heteronormative psychoanalytic understanding of male homosexuality haunts Gil's interpretation. Hence Iago's desire for Othello is sublimated, or 'impotent' as Welles put it, and only gains what can be characterized as a (homo)sexualized intelligibility as his all-consuming thirst for revenge, which is represented onscreen in accord with the visual grammar Gil anatomizes, inclusive as it is of the shot/reverse shot intimacy experienced by Othello and Iago as they, as a queer couple, spiral ever further into extreme anti-sociality. The homoeroticism at the core of these circumstances is thus perverted into something ugly and ultimately deadly. Iago's penetration of Othello is always only ever symbolic or figurative rather than literal; verbal rather than physical; suggestive rather than concrete. Still, it remains one man's penetration of another man nonetheless, and that penetration can be understood in, broadly speaking, queer, sexual and/or homoerotic terms. Gil's visual grammar of sexuality provides one means of mapping that penetration in a visceral and critical way that is particularly attuned to the language of Welles's film.

Despite its capaciousness, Gil's essay elides discussion of one part of Welles's *Othello* that seems to confirm, or at least to extend, his overall hypothesis regarding the visual grammar of sexuality the film evidences. This occurs approximately two thirds of the way into the production and involves the specificity of the fact that Welles chooses to set the scenes of Roderigo's unsuccessful attempt to murder Cassio, and that of Iago's later successful slaying of Roderigo, within the depths of an all-male sauna (see Figure 21). As the screen capture below makes clear, this is a place of decadence and opulence. It is also, not incidentally, the kind of location in which a homosexual like Iago would be expected to appear. Exposed male flesh is visible from the foreground to the background of the composition, though strategically placed white towels conceal both genitalia and buttocks. One of the men gathered here is being massaged by a grim-faced attendant while the entire company is being treated to the sounds of guitar music as they relax and unwind. Meanwhile, another man is lying

FIGURE 21 *Inside the Cypriot sauna, where, a short while later, Iago (Micheál MacLiammóir) will stab Roderigo (Robert Coote) to death in Othello, dir. Orson Welles, 1952.*

almost prone on a table in the lower left-hand corner of the shot; he seems to be in a deep conversation of some sort with the two other men who are very nearby. The whole aura of this setting is at once provocative and suggestive; this is particularly true for anyone with knowledge of gay and queer history. Saunas, also known as bathhouses in their more contemporary late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American incarnations, have been relatively safe places where gay men have met each other for camaraderie and to have sexual relations for eons. Thus there can be no mistaking the connotations of such a place in relation to the character of Iago. No matter how platonic it may appear, a queer homoeroticism seethes just below the surface and around the edges of this space. It is perhaps not surprising then that Welles stages Iago's murder of Roderigo in the Cypriot sauna. After having failed to kill Cassio and sending everyone in the sauna into a panic, Roderigo makes the mistake of seeking Iago out. When the two are alone, Iago stabs Roderigo to death using a long sword. The Freudian/psychoanalytic reading of this action endorses the symbolic, homoerotic sexuality at the heart of this murder. In stabbing Roderigo, Iago has penetrated another man with his (substitute) phallus and has, thus, succeeded in having what can be considered the most perverse kind of sex possible with the unfortunate fop: near necrophilia. He has finally 'done something' with a member of his own gender and moved beyond the strictures of sublimation and impotence. The problem lies in the fact that he had to kill another human being to do so. He has thus become not just a criminal, but a criminal homosexual, who must be punished for his abhorrent behaviour.

As noted above, in a sentiment to which a provisional disagreement was ventured, Potter claims that Welles's *Othello* betrays the director's wariness of the film's all-male ethos. It demands arguing that, on the contrary, Welles exploits the homosociality and the homoeroticism inherent in his source material to a significant extent. In fact, it seems that rather than shying away from either Welles deliberately uses

the potent combination of homosociality and homoeroticism bequeathed to him by Shakespeare to tell what amounts to a cautionary tale about homosexuals infused with homophobic conventions – at least for those who are able and willing to read his cinematic text from a queer perspective. That in so doing Welles manages to conflate homosexuality with murderous deviance is problematic because it fits a little too neatly with then prevalent ideas about homosexuals: that they are sad, lonely, angry people who will never be able to live life to the fullest because of their ‘abnormality’ and will, if pushed too far, kill in order to compensate for their normative failures. Yet in most quarters during the mid-twentieth century, this is exactly the kind of thinking that was commonplace. Welles’s *Othello* thus stands as one important queer artefact from a thankfully bygone era in Western history.

IV

Starring Laurence Fishburne in the title role, Oliver Parker’s *Othello*⁴⁴ begins in Venice and in the rather disturbing gloom of night. Gondolas furtively skirt the famed waterways of the darkened city, and Iago (Kenneth Branagh) is first encountered in the film with Roderigo (Michael Maloney) as they witness, in stealth – and in homage to Welles’s *Othello* – Othello’s marriage to Desdemona that takes place in a medieval Venetian church. After bride and groom kiss, Iago launches into his complaint about Othello’s promotion of Michael Cassio (Nathaniel Parker) – instead of himself – to the position of lieutenant in the military organization in which they both serve the city-state of Venice: ‘[B]y the faith of man, / I know my price, I am worth no worse a place’ (1.1.9–10). As spoken by Branagh, these words are filled with a potent mixture of bitterness and cynicism; they do a good job of explaining, at least initially, why Iago is so angry with Othello. But awareness of the homoerotic valence that inspires

these sentiments, an awareness that, again following Benshoff and Griffin, informed queer Shakespeare spectators of Parker's *Othello* may bring to their experience of the film, renders Iago's feelings here somewhat more understandable rather than mysterious and abject.

At this juncture, two scenarios involving Iago and Othello emerge. The first is that the relationship between these two men has already – at some time in the past and, therefore, outside of the play/film proper – surpassed the platonic and the professional to include the physical and the sexual. For all intents then Othello's choosing of another man as his lieutenant could also signal to Iago that his superior has decided to end their affair and replace him in the bedroom with Cassio. No matter their sexual identity or preferences, not many people, male or female, would be able to respond with anything akin to equanimity in such circumstances. The second possibility is, of course, that Iago's deeper feelings for Othello have always been unrecognized and/or unrequited by the general and, with the out-of-the-blue promotion of Cassio, are destined to remain so. Although the latter seems more likely in regard to both the written and the cinematic *Othellos* under discussion here, in either case, the crucial point to understand is that Iago suffers the pain of what he considers to be an absolute rejection – and he lashes out accordingly. In terms of the visual representation of male homoeroticism, it proves significant that as part of this overall expository sequence, Parker also shows Cassio's promotion through the equivalent of Iago's mind's eye. The moment includes Othello's giving of an ornate knife as a gift to Cassio and, more significantly, the embrace of the two men as Cassio is welcomed into Othello's service. These images drive the point home that Iago has been set aside for another man. Iago's remembrance of Othello and Cassio's union here suggests that Iago understands he will likely never again experience such an intimacy with the general, unless he takes some kind of drastic action.

The queer nature of Iago's character becomes even more explicit as Parker's *Othello* continues. For instance, a portion

of what corresponds to Shakespeare's 2.1, a scene that involves Iago and Roderigo, takes place underneath a large wooden cart at night during the riotous celebration of Othello and Desdemona's marriage on the island of Cyprus. Iago and Roderigo talk as they lie next to one another on the ground while a male and female couple enjoys rather energetic and noisy sexual relations in the cart directly above their heads. In reference to the relationship between Desdemona and Cassio he is in the process of fabricating to wreak his vengeance on Othello, as Iago speaks the suggestive line 'An index and obscure prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts' (2.1.244–5), he moves his face slowly, and ever closer, to that of Roderigo. In fact, Iago's actions here become so intimate that it almost seems as if he is about to kiss the insensate Roderigo full on the lips. Alas, however, Iago does not kiss the other man; he merely continues his rhetorical exercise by saying with as much bawdy innuendo as possible: 'They met so near with their lips that their breaths embraced together. Villainous thoughts, Roderigo! When these mutualities so marshal the way, hard at hand comes the master and main exercise, th'incorporate conclusion' (2.1.245–8). Though he stops short of actually kissing Roderigo, it is nevertheless intriguing that Iago allows their 'breaths to mingle' just as he has intimated Desdemona's and Cassio's have done in their illicit coupling. Furthermore, when he says the words 'hard at hand' (in itself a bawdy pun on both male arousal and the frenetic nature of copulation), Iago slowly and deliberately places his right hand on Roderigo's thigh, then continues to move that hand until it cups Roderigo's penis. For his part, Roderigo is so distraught about the fact that Desdemona does not love him and, seemingly, prefers Cassio as a lover in addition to Othello as a husband who also makes love to her, that he fails to notice the touch and/or location of Iago's hand on his person. It is either that or being groped by another man in such a manner is so commonplace an occurrence for him that in and of itself the sensation no longer registers on his consciousness. Of course, in this case, the former idea is far

more likely than the latter. Nevertheless, the homoeroticism Parker depicts here cannot be overlooked or dismissed – regardless of the fact that Iago is only ever using Roderigo for his own ends. That Iago just *might* consider Roderigo an extraneous sexual partner as well as his dupe only adds another layer to the overall opportunistic maliciousness of his character while simultaneously confirming the queer nature of his erotic desires.

As in Shakespeare's play itself the male homoeroticism reaches its peak in Parker's *Othello* during the depiction of Othello and Iago's bonding in 3.3. In the film this scene takes place upon the battlements of a medieval castle on Cyprus, and it includes the exchange of a blood vow between the two men, which is not, of course, an element in the source text. First, it is Othello who carves a gash into his palm with his knife; then, almost mesmerized, Iago follows suit immediately afterward. Then they clasp their bleeding hands together in complete solidarity with one another and Othello says, 'Now art thou my lieutenant' (3.3.495). At this point both men are on their knees and, significantly, they embrace. First, this hug is seen from a distance, then the shot changes to a near close-up of Iago as he holds Othello and is in turn held in Othello's arms. As evidenced by the fact that his eyes are squeezed shut in an attempt to hold back his tears, the look on Iago's face is one of almost painful yet at the same time exquisite relief (see Figure 22). It is as if he cannot believe that he is, once again, allowed to be so close and intimate with his beloved Othello. 'I am your own forever' Iago says, and it is as if each word is being ripped from the very depths of his soul (3.3.496). The image presented here is redolent with emotion; it shows just how deeply one man may feel for another.

It is important, however, to take into account what occurs leading up to Othello and Iago's heartfelt embrace. After kneeling on the ground in front of Iago Othello says: 'Now, by yond marble heaven, / In the due reverence of a sacred vow / I here engage my words' (3.3.463–5). Iago then joins Othello on his knees and proceeds to say:

FIGURE 22 *Othello* (Laurence Fishburne) and *Iago* (Kenneth Branagh) kneeling, swearing their vows to one another and embracing in 3.3 of *Othello*, dir. Oliver Parker, 1995.

Witness, you ever-burning lights above,
 You elements that clip us round about,
 Witness that here Iago doth give up
 The execution of his wit, hands, heart,
 To wronged Othello's service. Let him command,
 And to obey shall be in me remorse,
 What bloody business ever. (3.3.466–72)

Significantly at this point in the scene, Parker uses the intimate, conversational shot/reverse shot cinematic technique as Iago speaks and Othello hears these words – this swearing of their vows to one another. In his discussion of the written text, Smith describes this moment in *Othello* as a ‘parody of a [heterosexual] marriage rite’.⁴⁵ Of course, Smith was writing in the days before same-sex marriage became a reality in the contemporary Western world and a Constitutional right in America. But disregarding – only momentarily and with specific purpose – the homicidal inflections the plot of *Othello* invokes, this passage, and the visual counterpart Parker presents of it, offers what can be considered a serious

rendition of what a wedding ceremony between two men might well have been like if, as John Boswell and Alan A. Tulchin⁴⁶ have persuasively argued, such unions had been allowed to take place in early modern Europe. In any case, Parker's film both capitalizes on and makes vivid the male homoerotic potentiality inherent within this part of Shakespeare's play – and he manages to do so in a way that speaks volumes to the present moment of queer human history.

Interestingly, Parker offers one additional queerly homoerotic moment of note in his *Othello* that warrants attention. In the penultimate scene of the film, after the deaths Desdemona, Emilia and, finally, Othello himself, an angry Lodovico (Michael Sheen) forces Iago, who is on his knees and bleeding from several wounds, to gaze upon the heinous outcome of his deeds: 'Look on the tragic loading of this bed,' Lodovico orders him, 'This is thy work' (5.2.374–5). And Iago does turn his attention to the three lifeless bodies spread before him. But then, in complete and utter silence, Iago forces himself upward, on to the bed, and lays his head in the crook of Othello's leg (see Figure 23). Though undeniably grotesque, this singular action of Iago's reveals nothing if not the fact that his queer attachment to the general, his beloved Othello, lingers, even in the chaos of destruction and the finality of death.

VI

According to Stephen Greenblatt, in early modern England 'there were both selves and a sense that they could be fashioned'; furthermore, this self-fashioning involved the 'power to impose a shape upon oneself [that] is an aspect of the more general power to control [one's] identity', and it signalled a 'characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving' subjects manifested in the material world.⁴⁷ So reads the overarching claim of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, the

FIGURE 23 *Iago (Kenneth Branagh) lying in the crook of Othello's (Laurence Fishburne) leg at the conclusion of Othello, dir. Oliver Parker, 1995.*

brilliant study that marked the advent of New Historicism as a mode of literary criticism that continues, in the main, to dominate the field of Shakespeare studies. As would be expected from a critical practice like new historicism, with its unwavering commitment to the notion that individuals can only ever be the products of their times and, therefore, ought to be studied as such as opposed to through the lenses of any of the concerns of the present in which a critic is situated, self-fashioning always already occurs within a matrix of historically situated forces, including prevalent social customs, government policies, economic circumstances, religious doctrines, gender conventions, educational opportunities, familial and national traditions, and the like. The self that results from this kind of fashioning is very much a response – or a set of responses – to the larger cultural influences that surround it and which human beings must navigate in life.

Shakespeare's Iago is a fictionalized representation that epitomizes the self-fashioned English Renaissance man. He is also what Greenblatt characterizes in his work as an improviser *par excellence*. Key to Iago's improvisational success

is his ability to empathize. Drawing on the work of Daniel Lerner, Greenblatt initially defines empathy as the 'capacity to see oneself in the other fellow's situation'.⁴⁸ Though empathy is often a force for good, Iago uses it for the opposite purpose. Since Iago can, all too easily it seems, see himself in others' situations, his empathy allows him to take advantage of them and to do real damage to them, as evidenced by the thorough destruction he effects on Othello, Desdemona, Emilia, Cassio and Roderigo. Thus Greenblatt claims that '[w]hat Professor Lerner calls "empathy," Shakespeare calls "Iago"'.⁴⁹ Taking this idea one step further, what Lerner calls empathy, and what Shakespeare calls Iago, is called queer in this chapter. In this context, one of the indications of Iago's queerness is his steadfast determination to wreak evil rather than good using his capacity to see himself in others' circumstances. For instance, since he, without specific evidence of any kind, suspects that Othello has cuckolded him by having sex with his wife Emilia, Iago can imagine what Othello would feel like if it turned out that Desdemona was cuckolding him by having sex with Cassio (1.3.381–403). Though there is no truth whatsoever to the idea of Desdemona's unfaithfulness, Iago is able to improvise his way through to convincing Othello that the idea is a certainty and, thus, must be dealt with accordingly – by punishing Desdemona and Cassio with death. Here, Iago's rhetorical success can be read queerly; as a man, he has managed to penetrate another man in a way that is analogous to the kind of homosexual penetration that occurs during male same-sex intercourse. Indeed, on this point, Greenblatt notes that Iago 'is as intensely preoccupied [as Othello] with adultery, while his anxiety about his own sexuality may be gauged from the fact that he conceives of his very invention [of Desdemona's mythical infidelity], as the images of engendering suggest, as a kind of demonic semen that will bring forth monsters'.⁵⁰ And so it does as the drama of *Othello* unfolds.

Greenblatt contends – in keeping with one of the key precepts of self-fashioning, that it is subject to the cultural

forces at work in any given subject's particular historical situation – that Iago's success at making Othello believe Desdemona is an unfaithful wife is grounded in the wholly repressive views – views that pervaded the thinking and behaviour of people everywhere in early modern Europe – of the church on sexuality in any form. Put bluntly, to the church, sex was almost always bad, even when it occurred within the confines of marriage. Greenblatt explains that 'there are four motives for conjugal intercourse: to conceive offspring; to render the marital debt to one's partner so that he or she might avoid incontinency; to avoid fornication oneself; and to satisfy desire'.⁵¹ He goes on to add that the 'first two motives are without sin and excuse intercourse; the third is a venial sin; the fourth – to satisfy desire – is mortal. Among the many causes that underlie this institutional hostility to desire is the tenacious existence, in various forms, of the belief that pleasure constitutes a legitimate release from dogma and constraint' that the church simply could not countenance.⁵² The moment in 1.3 of the play when, summoned to speak before the Venetian Senate, Desdemona makes it plain to one and all that she has a passionate love – a passionate desire – for Othello, Desdemona falls afoul of the sexual prohibitions of the church that Christians had accepted whole cloth. 'This moment of erotic intensity,' Greenblatt writes, 'this frank acceptance of pleasure and submission to her spouse's pleasure is ... as much as Iago's slander the cause of Desdemona's death, for it awakens the deep current of sexual anxiety in Othello, anxiety that with Iago's help expresses itself in quite orthodox fashion as the perception of adultery.'⁵³ What Iago accomplishes by painting Desdemona as false to Othello, then, is Othello's sexual arousal – a queer arousal that has been engendered by another man; an arousal that will have devastating consequences for all concerned as it reaches its climax.

The textual queer self-fashioning of Iago elaborated on here is made strikingly apparent in the two films of *Othello* considered earlier in this chapter. Spanning a period of a little less than forty-five years, or the bulk of the second half of the

twentieth century, these movies also evidence specific ways of dealing cinematically with the queer male homoeroticism embedded by Shakespeare into his play. By treating Iago, even in highly coded form, as a gay/queer villain within an overarching noir structure, Welles's production manages to conflate homosexuality and psychology in a way that makes it seem as if Iago is the evil character he is because of his non-normative desires; this Iago is a sick individual who will stop at nothing – including the murder of innocents – to secure the kind of same-sex love he, being caught in the throes of sublimation, does not even realize is his prime motivation. This is a portrayal that fits then commonplace normative notions of homosexuals and homosexuality that were informed by fear and paranoia rather than understanding or compassion. Parker's *Othello*, on the other hand, is the only cinematic production of the play that, it can be argued, gets all things right as far as race and male homoeroticism are concerned. Not only is the title character, in the figure of an actor with the stature and countenance of Laurence Fishburne, sufficient to quell any stereotypical notions about race and sexuality, but Kenneth Branagh's Iago is a masculine – as opposed to an effeminate (like Micheál MacLiammóir's Iago) – antagonist who succeeds at being evil simply because he is evil and not because he also happens to be homosexual or, at the very least, bisexual in terms of his erotic desires. Of both, then, it is Parker's production that registers most fully what seems to be the cinema's increasing comfort and sophistication with representations of queerness in the Shakespeare film that, arguably, became more common – at least in terms of intelligibility – in the 1990s, especially when compared to the 1930s and films like Reinhardt and Dieterle's *Midsommer* and Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet*, than ever before in the history of the medium.