

A MOOR PROPRE: CHARLES ALBERT FECHTER'S OTHELLO

A Thesis

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By

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Swift, light-footed, and strange,
with his own dark face in a rage,/

Scorning the time-honoured rules
Of the actor's conventional schools,/

Tenderly, thoughtfully, earnestly,
FECHTER comes on to the stage.

(From "The Three Othellos," Fun 9 Nov. 1861: 76.)

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To My Wife
Margaret Freehling Phillips

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.	iii
VITA.	iv
	PAGE
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.	1
II. GENERAL BACKGROUND AND EARLY LONDON CAREER	29
III. FECHTER'S "OTHELLO": A GENERAL EXAMINATION	71
IV. FECHTER'S "OTHELLO": A SPECIFIC EXAMINATION.	115
V. CONCLUSION.	162
BIBLIOGRAPHY	169

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In March of 1861, London audiences were enthralled by Charles Albert Fechter's Hamlet. Fechter was a London-born Frenchman who had studied at the Conservatoire, been a Pensionnaire with the Comédie Française, and had managed the Odéon in Paris before coming to the London stage in 1860. By most accounts, he brought to Hamlet a fresh perspective unburdened by an Englishman's fealty to tradition. He ignored the points traditionally made by previous Hamlets and approached the text with what was considered to be an underplayed, naturalistic and colloquial elocutionary style. His stage business emphasized Hamlet's humanity, his commonality with other men, as opposed to emphasizing Hamlet's status as an elevated, ideal figure; Fechter's Hamlet leaned against walls, sat on chairs and did other things which indicated deference to basic bodily needs. Donald M. Ehret's Master's thesis on Fechter's Hamlet, The Death Knell of Tradition: The Hamlet of Charles Albert Fechter (Ohio State, 1975), constructs a composite portrait of the Fechter version based on promptbooks and eyewitness accounts of three different Fechter revivals beginning

with the one in 1861. It is clear from reading Ehret's thesis and by taking a look at nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century periodical articles and retrospectives of Fechter's career, that Fechter biographers have viewed Hamlet as the actor's most important contribution to the theatre.

Less heralded and more pilloried is Fechter's portrayal of Shakespeare's Othello in October of 1861, followed by Fechter's impersonation of Iago in the spring of 1862. Here Fechter's impersonation once again shattered tradition and became the focus of much controversy in the journals. By all accounts, here was a portrayal of the Moor as no one had ever given. Although not all accounts were thoroughly laudatory (and the production had more than a few detractors), a significant number felt the effort praiseworthy, including The Evening Star and Dial critic who credited Fechter with the organization of a production "in strict accordance with the good principles of the modern school," and for "beginning . . . a revolution in histrionic art which is already beginning to bear precious fruits."¹

Fechter's Othello, as untraditional and anomalous as it was, has found itself eclipsed, in the estimate of theatre historians, by his Hamlet. Indeed, it is true

¹ Rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Evening Star and Dial [London] 24 Oct. 1861: 1.

that Fechter never revived Othello after 1862 even though Hamlet became a staple during his tenure both in England and the United States. Othello evidently did not have the long-term appeal generated by Hamlet, but it certainly was not the dismal failure described by George Odell who, in his Shakespeare From Betterton to Irving, maintains, quite without justification, that Fechter's "most ardent Hamlet-worshipper was forced to admit that his portrayal [of Othello] was a mistake."² Othello did have its share of detractors including George Henry Lewes who called Fechter's Hamlet "one of the very best, and his Othello one of the very worst, I have ever seen."³ John Coleman, while admitting that Fechter's effort was not without some merit, felt that Othello was a mistake, even though he had heard that Fechter's later impersonation of Iago was "an admirable and picturesque performance."⁴ Even Kate Field, Fechter's biographer and perhaps his biggest booster in the United States, devotes thirty pages to Hamlet while making only a few references to Othello. Part of this is due to the fact that Field knew Fechter only from his work in America; but the pattern remains: Fechter's Othello is

² George Odell, Shakespeare From Betterton to Irving, vol. 2 (1920; New York: Blom, 1963): 253.

³ George Henry Lewes, On Actors and the Art of Acting ([1878;] New York: Grove, 1957) 117.

⁴ John Coleman, Players and Playwrights I Have Known, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Philadelphia, 1890) 303.

seen as a failure even though he used in his impersonation the same naturalistic approach which had brought so much success to Hamlet.

Lewes' criticism may be dismissed as negative hyperbole in the matter of Fechter's public and critical reception, and Odell, invaluable as he is in his capacity as a chronicler, is a poor historian by today's standards. Even so, one wonders whether an atmosphere of cultural arrogance played a part in the Fechter bashing. Lewes attributes the alleged audience disillusionment with Fechter as being the result of the public, tiring of the novelty of Fechter's style, remembering "that he was a foreigner, and . . . [discovering] that he was not a tragedian."⁵ Lewes also implies that Fechter's success as Hamlet was due to the lack of challenge in the part itself, a part in which the critic asserts "no actor has been known to fail."⁶ Such an incredible statement, coupled with his remarks concerning Fechter's nationality suggest a trace of xenophobia.

Although it is difficult to establish Fechter's influence on subsequent portrayals of Othello, there is evidence to suggest that his effort inspired at least one other production. One particular promptbook of the production starring J.C. Cowper, available at the Folger

⁵ Lewes 117.

⁶ Lewes 117.

Library, is based on Fechter's acting edition. Coleman recounts that Fechter had a longstanding acquaintance with an English actor named Cowper who, during Fechter's final years, visited him on his farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.⁷ This is most probably the Cowper whose promptbook now belongs to the Folger Library. It is also interesting to note that, after Fechter's tenure on the London stage, more foreigners (not counting American actors who were essentially of the same ethnic sensibility as their British counterparts) brought their interpretations of Shakespeare before the British public: Stella Colas as Juliet and Tomasso Salvini as Othello, both of whom met with considerable success. Of course, to suggest that Fechter was in any way directly responsible for Salvini's triumph (or that of any other foreign actor) would be absurd. It is, however, entirely possible that Fechter's Gallic portrayals of Hamlet and Othello played some part in softening British prejudice against foreign interpretations of their national poet. This, of course, is speculation, and a study of foreign actors on the nineteenth-century English stage is beyond the scope of this work. Suffice it to say that, along with Emil Devrient (who performed in German, not English) and Madame Ristori, Fechter was one of the first foreigners (again, not including Americans) to interpret Shakespeare for the

⁷ Coleman 320.

British public. Fechter's historical importance has less to do with any direct influence he may have had on any particular actor and more to do with his role as a revolutionist, a theatre artist whose work reflected a decisive break with a longstanding paradigm.

The general area of my thesis concerns the nineteenth-century British actor's style, and how that style evolved throughout the century from a neoclassical, idealized approach to that of the Realists and Naturalists whose influence has extended into the late twentieth century. Although it is an oversimplification to suggest anything so linear as an evolutionary process, it is difficult to deny that the nineteenth century was a period of transition between acting paradigms which lead to the transformation of the English-speaking theatre. At some point, or perhaps at a number of intersecting and overlapping points, the last remnant of the neoclassical conception of the ideal type disappeared and, for a certain period, the paramountcy of the natural school was established to the extent that it was no longer revolutionary to perform Shakespeare with an intent to convey a perception of fidelity to everyday "reality." This trend was certainly established by 1904 when Barton Baker lamented that the theatre had become "out of touch with the heroic, with enthusiasm, with passion, and the modern actor, to compromise with the Philistinism of his

audience, endeavors to render tragedy natural. . . ."

Such a rendering, according to Baker, does a disservice to tragedy; and he compares it with "a painter attempting to render Raphael or Michael Angelo in unison with Teniers."⁸

The nineteenth-century shift toward naturalism is significant in that it illustrates the beginning of a consensus which directly informed twentieth-century realism, arguably the most influential theatrical "ism" of our century. The difficulty in defining this general area in terms of a shift toward naturalistic acting lies in the slippery nature of the term "naturalism." Nineteenth-century theatre critics certainly used the term; but what meaning did it have for them? Fechter has been associated, both by his contemporaries and subsequent historians, with a type of naturalistic, as well as melodramatic, approach to his work in Shakespeare. No attempt will be made to assert that his particular brand of naturalism would in any way be recognized or perceived as naturalistic or realistic by today's standards; one fascinating aspect of acting history is, after all, the shifting perceptions and the ephemeral nature of what is considered to be a representation of "reality." All that can be determined with certitude is that some actors of the nineteenth century, Fechter included, were perceived to

⁸ H. Barton Baker, History of the London Stage (1904; New York: Blom, 1969) 152.

have attained a higher level of fidelity to everyday reality than others. This view of naturalism or realism is based on the idea of a continuum upon which meaning is determined only in relation to existing phenomena and is in no way fixed or rigidly set.⁹ The notion of such a continuum can be validated by viewing films made even twenty or thirty years ago; the elements which at one time appeared to be so gritty and realistic in these films often seem artificial, and sometimes even laughable, when viewed today. To understand Fechter's "naturalism," and how it undermined traditional conceptions of tragic acting, it is helpful to have some knowledge of the various tragic actors to whom Fechter would have been compared. A brief discussion of three of nineteenth-century Britain's trend-setting actors follows.

Of the great nineteenth-century British tragedians, perhaps the most famous of the old school traditionalists, unencumbered by any proclivity for the pedestrian, was John Philip Kemble. Kemble, whose career had been well

⁹ Erika Fischer-Lichte has written on the need for acting historians to understand the extent to which the craft of acting has been influenced by the social and cultural background of the actor. In her essay, "Theatre and the Civilizing Process: An Approach to the History of Acting," Interpreting the Theatrical Past, eds. Bruce A. McConachie and Thomas Postlewait (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), Fischer-Lichte makes a good argument against a fixed standard for evaluating "realistic" or "natural" acting, maintaining that the actor's craft is semiotic and that "any human body should be seen as the result of a reciprocal process of the organic and the cultural, an interaction between individual nature and cultural context" (21-22).

established in the eighteenth century, had set the standard for those actors adhering to the traditional school; his approach was formal, stiff, declamatory and, by Rowell's account, often boring.¹⁰ William Hazlitt compared Kemble's Hamlet to "a man in armour,"¹¹ so formal was his bearing.

As the century progressed, many other actors were far less inclined toward the Kemble school. Edmund Kean was considered by some to have originated a more natural approach to the acting of poetic drama, prompting Giles Playfair to call Kean "the new representative of Shakespeare. . . ." Kean, he said, "gave expression to the overwhelming desire for a break with artificiality."¹² Evidence suggests, however, that Kean's style, which completely lacked the Kemble decorum, was more rant and bombast than an honest attempt to be true to nature; consider Coleridge's famous declaration that seeing Kean act was "like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning."¹³ Similarly, Kean's volatile, emotional style

¹⁰ George Rowell, The Victorian Theatre (London: Oxford UP, 1956) 24.

¹¹ William Hazlitt, "Mr. Kemble's Retirement," Dramatic Essays, eds. William Archer and Robert W. Lowe (London, 1895): 139. This particular description of Kemble was originally published in the Times, June 25, 1817.

¹² Giles Playfair, Kean (New York: Dutton, 1939) 101.

¹³ As quoted in Rowell 24. Neither Watson, Rowell or Playfair, all of whom cite this famous observation, indicate its original source. There is some evidence to suggest that

prompted Hazlitt to say that his acting was "like an anarchy of the passions, in which each upstart humor, or frenzy of the moment is struggling to get violent possession of some bit or corner of his fiery soul. . . ." ¹⁴ When considered in relation to Kemble's acting style, it is not difficult to understand how Kean's approach would have seemed refreshingly natural and sincere. But as Watson suggests, ¹⁵ Kean's quality was naturalistic only in comparison to the formality of the old school. In any case, it is clear that Kean's naturalism bore little resemblance to Fechter's.

William Charles Macready could be considered a key transitional actor of the mid-nineteenth century, straddling the paradigmatic bridge between the ideal and natural school. Barton Baker, speaking rather disdainfully of the actor's perceived realism, called Macready "the founder of the modern school." ¹⁶ Macready

the comment was not intended to be complimentary. According to Tracy Davis, the phrase was not meant to describe Kean's brilliance, but instead indicated that watching Kean perform Shakespeare was like viewing tragedy in a drunken stupor (Tracy Davis, paper, "Galvanizing Edmund Kean: The Historiography Tradition," panel on theatre historiography, Association for Theatre in Higher Education annual conference, Atlanta, 3 Aug. 1992).

¹⁴ Earnest Bradlee Watson, Sheridan to Robertson: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century London Stage (1926; New York: Blom, 1963) 293. Watson is quoting Hazlitt from London Magazine, no. 11, Feb. 1820.

¹⁵ Watson 293.

¹⁶ Baker 150.

was known for portrayals in which he would inject certain selected colloquialisms or bits of realistic business, a practice which Watson suggests was borrowed from the great French actor, Talma.¹⁷ This embrace of certain bits of realism, including a high degree of historical detail in the mise-en-scène, did not mean that Macready had completely abandoned the idea of an ideal type elevated above nature. Denis Salter, in his essay on Macready's portrayal of Bulwer-Lytton's Richelieu, indicates the contrary:

Yet the actor's scrupulous attention to lifelike naturalness in every telling detail of the part should not lead us to overlook its idealized features. The critics also used words such as 'elevated' and 'sublime' to describe his predominant manner both here and in similar roles. Macready's art, as his contemporary George Vandenhoff has pointed out, 'was an amalgam of John Kemble and Edmund Kean [His work was overlaid] with an outer plating of his own, highly artificial and elaborately formal.' Macready certainly believed in the aesthetic principle of the beau idéal; although a certain degree of realism was desirable, it had to be kept 'within the limits of ideal truth.'¹⁸

Although Kean, Macready and many other tragic actors were known to have incorporated certain elements in their portrayals which were construed to have exhibited a kind

¹⁷ Watson 304.

¹⁸ Denis Salter, "A Picturesque Interpretation of History: William Charles Macready's Richelieu, 1839-1850," When They Weren't Doing Shakespeare: Essays on Nineteenth-Century British and American Theatre, eds. Judith L. Fisher and Stephen Watt (Athens: U. of Georgia Press, 1989) 47.

of naturalism or fidelity to everyday reality, evidence suggests that it was the acting of burlesque and melodrama which played the more crucial role in the shift toward realism. Tragedy was losing popularity and influence; burlesque and melodrama were on the ascendancy, an ascendancy to which a number of factors contributed. The nineteenth century saw the rise of the minor theatres, the patent houses having been in a state of decline for some time prior to the abolition of their exclusive privileges. This decline can be attributed partly to mismanagement, but also to the relative ineffectiveness of the law in preserving a true monopoly.¹⁹ By 1843 the patents had lost their special legal status, and the minor theatres were free to offer whatever fare they wished. But the legitimate drama could not compete with the popularity of the newer forms of theatrical entertainment which had been created, of necessity, during the reign of Drury Lane and Covent Garden. According to Rowell,

that which aimed highest suffered most. Tragedy, with its demands on the spectator's intelligence and imagination, and its sense of spiritual values, made little appeal to the new

¹⁹ Says Odell, "the management of the two great patent-houses fell into the hands either of actors who proved to be incompetent directors, or of mere theatrical speculators, exploiting the art for personal aggrandizement" (118). Oscar Brockett speaks to the futility of the patent laws in History of the Theatre, 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn, 1977), claiming that loopholes were broad enough to allow one minor theatre to offer performances of Othello during which musical chords were struck every five minutes, thus offering it legal protection as a burletta (390).

public. The inspiration of tragedy had already begun to run dry in the Georgian theatre. As the Victorian era approached it became virtually extinct.²⁰

And so the Victorian era saw the rise of domestic melodrama, burlesque and light comedy as the most popular forms of theatrical entertainment. Burlesque and melodrama are often ridiculed as theatrical and literary dross, unworthy of serious study; the importance of these forms, however, does not lie exclusively in their structure, literary merit or lack thereof. Watson speaks to the point:

Whatever creative energy was displayed in the English theatres during the first half of the century appeared, not in written drama, but in the spoken; not in conception, but in expression. . . . [F]or in . . . [acting technique] perhaps as much as in any literary influences of the day was to be found the current of a vital drama.²¹

As Watson goes on to note, the "realistic art advanced chiefly in comedy, melodrama, and burlesque."²² The trend toward bringing a more natural quality to the nineteenth-century English-speaking stage, away from the neoclassical idea of elevation above nature, appears to have been mainly confined to these newer forms, Shakespearean tragedy being considered too elevated for treatment in a manner which mirrors the everyday and

²⁰ Rowell 31.

²¹ Watson 281.

²² Watson 282.

celebrates the mundane. It could be argued that it is this trend toward a "realistic art" which gives these "minor" forms their historical importance, much more than for any intrinsic literary or social value they may contain.²³ The natural style of Charles Matthews, Jr., who, along with Madame Vestris, adopted a colloquial, understated line delivery in order to emphasize the outrageousness and absurdity of the burlesque, was later introduced to the legitimate stages of Covent Garden and Drury Lane.²⁴ Vestris' stage innovations included detailed interiors filled with realistic detail. No longer did the inclusion of two chairs on the set necessarily indicate the exact number of conversants.²⁵ The careful attention to everyday behavior reflected in the detailed stage directions of Thomas William Robertson, in particular the elaborate description of a tea party in Caste, caused his work to be named "cup and saucer comedy."²⁶ Vestris and Matthews, who perfected the drawing-room style during their management of the Olympic in the 1830s, and Robertson, whose work was to be staged thirty years later, are just three artists who exemplify a

²³ This statement is made with the awareness that "intrinsic" literary value is a highly questionable notion.

²⁴ Watson 339.

²⁵ Rowell 19.

²⁶ Rowell 79.

general trend toward a new conception of verisimilitude which was a forerunner to the Realistic movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In fairness, it must be noted that there are other views as to the nature of melodramatic acting which are not in agreement with the one expressed here: most notably that of Michael Booth, who emphasizes the histrionic qualities of the melodramatic actor and what he considers to be his indebtedness to tragic acting. He criticizes Watson for holding Fechter up as a practitioner of the melodramatic style, claiming that Fechter was actually an untypical example.²⁷ Says Booth, "Melodramatic acting was certainly 'energetic, daring, and impetuous to excess,' and the actual performing of the passions in melodrama indicates that the acting of melodrama was closer to theories of tragic acting than tragic acting itself."²⁸ Barton Baker points out that the melodramatic actor was

absurdly grandiose, so utterly unlike anything human that it would be very difficult to persuade the present generation that anything so innately ludicrous could ever have been taken seriously or witnessed without roars of laughter.²⁹

²⁷ Michael R. Booth, English Melodrama (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965) 190.

²⁸ Booth 206.

²⁹ Baker 354-355. Here Baker is specifically referring to a style he attributes to East End actors. Booth infers that Baker equates this style with melodramatic acting in

But, as even Booth is forced to admit (203), Baker concedes that these sorts of histrionics were obsolete by the time Fechter began his tenure.³⁰

In response to Booth, it can only be said that the histrionic quality of the nineteenth-century melodramatic actor cannot be denied. But it is also true that, histrionics notwithstanding, a type of naturalism was embodied by melodrama, engendered by a certain quality inherent in the genre: specifically, its domesticity. It was the domesticity of the new drama which made the shift away from the elevated ideal inevitable; drawing room comedies and domestic melodramas did not reflect the universal, if such a category can be said to exist, because their types were particular in time and space, limited to the confines of the domestic drawing room. In the new drama, universal types give way to social roles and issues. For example, the character of William in Jerrold's Black-Eyed Susan (1829) may still be a type-- indeed, it is more accurately the prototype of the English nautical hero-- but he is a nautical hero who embodies a social role in a particular culture; he is not the essence

general, but Baker makes it clear that the style he is describing was peculiar to the East Enders, and not universally employed by all actors. Of course, the historian must bear in mind certain of Baker's terms such as "innately ludicrous" resound with the baggage of Baker's own early twentieth century cultural perspective, and should be considered in that light.

³⁰ Baker 355.

of the universal sailor. Consider the titles of some of Robertson's plays: Society (1865), Caste (1867) and Progress (1869). Not only do these titles indicate, as Rowell notes, an attempt to go beyond mere story-telling,³¹ but they suggest the exploration of issues which draw their meaning from a particular social context. This particularization, this specificity of social context, made fertile ground for the seeds of a more socially specific portrayal of character; the more specific or familiar the social context of the dramatic vehicle, the more familiar and specific could the actor become in his work. In Robertson's School (1869), the women's emancipation movement is considered,³² an extremely topical and socially specific subject--hardly the sort of material traditionally thought of as "universal." The fixing of the melodrama firmly in the social framework of nineteenth-century Britain allowed the actor to work outside of notions of "timelessness" and "universality," or, perhaps more accurately, allowed the actor to dispense with, at least on one level, a pretense to "timelessness" and "universality." Michael Booth calls this dynamic "the replacement of a metaphysical with a domestic ideal," a dynamic operative even in Gothic melodramas such as Bulwer-Lytton's The Lady of Lyons

³¹ Rowell 77.

³² Rowell 77.

(1838), which, although replete with the trappings of historicity, have a decidedly domestic sensibility.³³

It is unlikely that theatre historians will ever be able to show any evidence of linear causality with regard to the replacement of the metaphysical by the domestic ideal, nor should they be bothered. The linear approach to theatre history (and history in general) has been widely discredited by such historians as Bruce McConachie, who rightly argues for a post-positivist theatre historiography.³⁴ Historians have been especially guilty of seeing performance style in terms of an evolutionary dynamic, marching ever onward to the perfection and enlightenment of the historian's own era. But the fact that history cannot be explained merely in terms of cause and effect does not mean that certain historical dynamics cannot be isolated and explicated by way of representative example. The transition from the metaphysical to the domestic cannot be explained in terms of linear progression, but it can be informed by the work of the individual practitioners who exemplified it. This is the purpose of my thesis: to position one particular actor as representative of a general trend.

³³ Michael Booth, introduction, English Plays of the Nineteenth Century, ed. Michael Booth (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969) 22.

³⁴ See McConachie's "Towards a Postpositivist Theatre History," Theatre Journal 37.4 (1985): 465-486.

A study of Charles Fechter's 1861 London production of Othello, insofar as it makes reference to notions of "naturalistic" stage behavior and a paradigm shift toward Naturalism and Realism, treads, to some extent, on shaky ground. No attempt will be made to explain Fechter as a causal factor in this paradigm shift, as though, without him, the course of theatre history would be significantly different. No claim is being made that Fechter's "naturalism" represented a point on a linear evolutionary progression toward ultimate stage verisimilitude. Fechter is worthy of study more as a reflection of a general trend taking place on the nineteenth-century stage. He is presented, not as the cause of a greater effect, but as an exemplary nineteenth-century performer who represented a particular nexus through which the general dynamic of a paradigm shift manifested itself; in this sense Fechter was typical. Fechter is also of interest to the historian because he brought the naturalism of domestic melodrama to Shakespearean tragedy; in this sense he was, in his time, unique. By studying Fechter's work, we can actually see a point of rupture within the old neoclassical paradigm; we can isolate one small moment in history which, while it may not have been decisive, was certainly representative of the paradigmatic shift.

Accomplished in melodrama and the romantic drama, Fechter brought to the English stage a popularized conception of Shakespeare which shook the London theatre community and challenged what Fechter called, in the preface to his acting edition of Othello, the "wormeaten and unwholesome prison where dramatic art languishes in fetters, and which is called: 'tradition!'"³⁵ To declare that Fechter's great contribution to the acting of Shakespeare and the shattering of tradition lay in his naturalistic approach is to run up against the innate slipperiness of that term. It is necessary, no matter how unattainable it may be in the final analysis, to come to some understanding of what Fechter's contemporaries understood to be "natural" stage behavior. Fechter's tendency to favor a more popular, domestic approach to tragedy is the key to that understanding; for Fechter's brand of naturalism had its origins, not in the tragic, but in the domestic, popular, melodramatic tradition. According to Watson:

The naturalness that Fechter substituted for the previous artificiality was neither perfect art nor perfect nature. It was merely the naturalism of melodrama in a high state of development, known familiarly in London as the 'gentlemanly melodrama.'³⁶

³⁵ Charles Fechter, preface, Othello by [William] Shakspeare, 2nd ed. (London, 1861): iv.

³⁶ Watson 374.

Perhaps Fechter's naturalism can best be informed by a passage in Henri Bergson's Laughter. Writes Bergson:

the tragic poet is so careful to avoid anything calculated to attract attention to the material side of his heroes. No sooner does anxiety about the body manifest itself than the intrusion of a comic element is to be feared. On this account, the hero in a tragedy does not eat or drink or warm himself. He does not even sit down any more than can be helped. To sit down in the middle of a fine speech would imply that you remembered you had a body. Napoleon, who was a psychologist when he wished to be so, had noticed that the transition from tragedy to comedy is effected simply by sitting down.³⁷

In 1861, appearing on the London stage both as Hamlet and Othello, Charles Fechter sat down.

The primary goal of my thesis is to examine those elements of Fechter's Othello which broke with the prevailing neo-classical paradigm. There is not nearly the amount of material on this production as can be found on Hamlet, but a thorough search has turned up a number of primary sources. A promptbook study of the production is impossible as Fechter's book is apparently lost; but Fechter's acting edition of Othello is available, replete with textual changes, staging and business. According to eyewitness accounts, not all of the business contained in the acting edition was employed in the actual production, but a study of those same accounts help determine which items of business or staging were used or discarded.

³⁷ Henri Bergson, Laughter, ed. Wylie Sypher, no trans. given (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986) 94.

Fechter published two editions of his version of Othello, and it is the second edition which this study uses in its examination.³⁸

The main point upon which almost every contemporaneous critic of Fechter's Othello agreed was the extent to which Fechter's effort broke with tradition. In article after article, often with tantalizingly little elaboration, critics made reference to some vaguely defined traditional Othello against which Fechter was to be measured. But what was this traditional standard? What conglomeration of textual arrangement, elocution, declamation and stage business constituted the "traditional" Othello? Indeed, the most hallowed tradition in the staging of Shakespeare seems to have been the casual attitude shown by actors toward the text. Actors often omitted scenes and changed the plots for convenience's sake. Garrick, for instance, cut the gravedigger's scene from Hamlet, omitted Ophelia's death, failed to poison the queen and added a duel between Hamlet and Claudius.³⁹ Colley Cibber was notorious for textual alterations. Thomas Bowdler's Family Edition of Shakespeare was so modified it lead to the coining of the

³⁸ The second edition was published very soon after the first, and reflects certain changes, principally in Act V, made by Fechter during the actual run. For more information about those changes, see Chapter Four of this study.

³⁹ William Winter, "Shakspere on the Stage: First Paper: Hamlet," Century Magazine Feb. 1911: 489.

pejorative term, "bowdlerize," and, according to Marvin Rosenberg, the Reverend James Plumptre made an aborted attempt to give Othello a happy ending.⁴⁰ Fechter himself was labeled untraditional partly because he restored the character of Bianca to Othello, a character found in the Shakespeare's original text, but often omitted in production.

The notion of a "traditional" Othello is intriguing because, clearly, no such "tradition" ever really existed. Nevertheless, Fechter's critics certainly perceived a concrete and quantifiable tradition, and, as far as this thesis is concerned, it is their perception--and not necessarily reality-- which is of historical importance. Indeed, one of my purposes in this study is to examine the Fechter Othello, not as a transcendent cultural artifact which can be judged by some universal set of criteria as having been either good or bad, but as a focal point of perception. My study is not so much concerned about evaluating Fechter as an actor (by what criteria would one make such an evaluation?), as it is with exploring why Fechter was perceived as he was by the arbiters of British theatrical taste. Fechter's foreignness, his association with the popular theatre and his melodramatic and domestic sensibility all contributed to the production of meaning

⁴⁰ Marvin Rosenberg, The Masks of Othello (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) 56.

at a time when the British public and theatre establishment were undergoing a fundamental change in the way they viewed all of those things. We can never measure the quality of Fechter's work, but we can study him in terms of his role as a producer of meaning. This approach, in my view, is what makes theatre history so fascinating.

Recent works on Fechter are hardly to be found. Besides Ehret's thesis, research has turned up only one other dissertation, Dennis Earl Noble's Charles Albert Fechter: The Artist and the Man as Seen Through His American Career (U of Colorado, 1973). As Noble's title suggests, Fechter's Othello does not figure prominently in the thesis. John A. Mills' 1974 article, "The Modesty of Nature: Charles Fechter's Hamlet," published in Theatre Survey, is another recently published work limited to Fechter's other Shakespearean endeavor.

Most secondary works on nineteenth-century British and American actors make only minor references to Fechter, and many books of the period which could be considered primary sources rehash much of the same material, derived heavily from Field. In addition to Lewes, Coleman and Field, Fechter's life is recounted in Edward Robins' Twelve Great Actors⁴¹ and Justin McCarthy includes a brief

⁴¹ Edward Robins, Twelve Great Actors (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1900) 315-349.

section on Fechter in Portraits of the Sixties.⁴² A number of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century periodical articles are also concerned with Fechter's career. Among them is an article in the Nation entitled "Realism in Dramatic Art--Or, Mr. Fechter's Realism" (1870), Charles Burnham's "Charles Fechter's Debut in America," from the Theatre (1917); an article by William Winter, written for the Century Magazine, entitled "Shakspeare on the Stage: First Paper: Hamlet" (1911), and George B. Woods' article, originally appearing in Old and New, "The New Tragedian" (1870). Two articles concern themselves directly with Othello. Henry Lewes published an article in Blackwood's Magazine, "Fechter in Hamlet and Othello" (1861), and Othello is discussed extensively in "Shakespeare and His Latest Stage Interpreters" (1861), which appeared in Fraser's.

Since only two of the above listed articles deal directly with Fechter's Othello, I have relied heavily on contemporary newspaper accounts of both the production and the controversy surrounding the published acting edition. A partial list of sources includes articles and reviews from the Times, Illustrated London News, the Sunday Times, Evening Star and Dial, the Athenaeum, Observer, the Examiner, the London Review, the Critic, Fun

⁴² Justin McCarthy, Portraits of the Sixties (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1903) 236-252.

and the Press. Henry Ottley's booklet, Fechter's Version of Othello Critically Analyzed (London, 1861), an expansion of commentary originally published in the Morning Chronicle, has proved to be invaluable. All of these accounts are, of course, supplemented by Fechter's acting edition of Othello with its copious notes on stage business.

This study will establish the specifics of Charles Fechter's approach to Othello and how those specifics separated his effort from what was perceived to be the "traditional" approach. While detractors heavily outnumbered those who supported Fechter's effort, the production will be seen to have been received favorably by at least some critics despite the contention of historians such as Odell. The study also explores the most intriguing aspect of the production--that of the critical snobbery which sought to maintain artificial distinctions between a perceived "high" and "low" culture. Fechter's acting was widely admired until he began to apply the sensibility of the more popular (and therefore less respectable) romantic and domestic melodrama to Shakespeare, an icon of British "high" culture. Perhaps most significantly, this thesis demonstrates Fechter's role as a transitional figure in the shift from an acting paradigm steeped in the remnants of neoclassicism to a paradigm which forms the basis for what is

now the dominant European and American approach to acting.

In addition to a discussion of Fecchter's basic acting style, Chapter Two will give biographical information with special emphasis on the French actor's career in England, including a brief discussion about his work prior to Othello and the critical responses it engendered. As Fecchter was viewed as an iconoclast in all three countries in which he appeared on the stage, his difficulties with the Comédie Francaise, his personality conflicts both in England and America and his failed attempt to repudiate the star system during his short-lived management of the Globe Theatre in Boston all shed light on Fecchter's reputation for spurning tradition. Chapter Two will also discuss Fecchter's reputation as a romantic actor in such plays as Ruy Blas, The Corsican Brothers and Don Caesar de Bazan. Given the view by many critics that Fecchter was an interloper from the popular theatre, an understanding of Fecchter's approach to romantic drama is of primary importance. Chapter Two will briefly discuss the only other Shakespearean role in Fecchter's repertoire: Hamlet.⁴³ Sources for this examination will include Ehret, Field, Mills, and a number of periodical articles

⁴³ Coleman claims that Fecchter personally told him that he performed the roles of Shylock and Macbeth in Paris. A subsequent search for any record of these performances turned up no evidence to support the claim (Coleman 303). Field makes no mention of any additional Shakespearean roles other than Othello and Hamlet.

dealing with several different productions of Fechter's Hamlet both in England and America.

Chapters Three and Four deal directly with Fechter's Othello and the critical reaction it engendered. Chapter Three is concerned with the general critical reaction to the production, focusing on those biases and prejudices which informed the critics' understanding of Fechter's popular, melodramatic and domestic style. Such terms as "passion," "melodrama" and "natural" were frequently used by Fechter's detractors in their criticism of the production. Chapter Three examines these culturally loaded terms and puts them in the context of nineteenth-century British theatre. Chapter Four examines the specific elements of the production, scenes of key interest to the critics. Such an examination enables an understanding of the ways in which the general elements of the production discussed in Chapter Three were specifically manifested.

Chapter Five will be a summary and conclusion of the study's findings.

CHAPTER II

GENERAL BACKGROUND AND EARLY LONDON CAREER

"[H]e who would stay at home and gather from the journals the character of Mr. Fechter's genius and the secret of his power, must be driven to despair."¹ So remarked George Woods as if delivering a warning against projects of the sort undertaken here. Woods' words of caution duly noted, Fechter's Othello should not be studied in a vacuum. Unfortunately, as Woods' one-hundred-and-twenty-year-old observation reminds us, period descriptions and eye-witness accounts of performance are fraught with peril; they are often merely laudatory or condemnatory without telling us anything remotely substantive. Even when a substantial description is given, the historian must interpret much of the information through his own twentieth-century consciousness, always in danger of being influenced by ideological assumptions based on a contemporary weltanschauung. The literary historian has her playtext; the scholar of the physical and technical theatre has his archaeological and iconographic evidence. The acting

¹ George B. Woods, "The New Tragedian," Old and New April 1870: 515.

historian, however, must be content with the frustratingly elusive evidence of eyewitness accounts-- the journals, the reviews, the diaries, and other super-subjective records of the moment of theatre-- which often seem to have all the solidity and substance of water.

The extant records dealing with Charles Fechter's career are no exception. Nevertheless, this chapter will attempt to clarify a number of things concerning Fechter's personality and career, all of which serve to deepen an understanding of his Othello. Commentaries on, and accounts of Fechter's life and career abound in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century books, newspaper articles and periodicals. This material affords great insight into Fechter's personality and experience, but it is with full awareness of the pitfalls mentioned above that both this chapter and the project as a whole undertakes to interpret them.²

² An explanation should be offered concerning sources. The critical accounts cited in this study are from various points during Fechter's career, many by Americans who are describing work done a decade or more after the London production of Othello. It could be argued that the citing of performances given in the United States is problematic, the purpose of the citations being to effect an understanding of Fechter's artistic sensibility at the time of the 1861 Othello. But there is no evidence to suggest that Fechter's approach to his repertoire varied significantly enough to deem the later work as invalid and off limits. The four plays which preceeded Othello on the London stage--Ruy Blas, The Corsican Brothers, Don Caesar de Bazan and Hamlet--all remained in Fechter's repertoire well after 1861. In the ensuing years cosmetic changes were certainly made, but apparently there was no reassessment of artistic sensibility. For that reason, the later accounts are included as evidence.

As discussed in the introduction, the historical consensus has been that Fechter's Othello was as great a failure as his Hamlet was a success. Edmund Yates called Fechter's impersonation of the Venetian Moor "a desperately poor performance, full of French tricks and nonsense. . . ." ³ Herman Vezin, while admiring Fechter's talents in general, confessed his feeling that Othello was beyond Fechter's grasp and that Shakespeare had been "dragged . . . down to his [Fechter's] own level. . . ." ⁴ Playwright Wilkie Collins, Fechter's sometime collaborator, had heard good things about his friend's Iago, a portrayal he admitted he had never seen. But Collins went on to remark that he had nothing to say about Fechter's impersonation of Othello except to express regret that he did see it. "The sooner that unfortunate performance is buried in oblivion," said Collins, "the better." ⁵

It was George Henry Lewes who articulated a key criticism of Fechter's performance. Lewes was of the opinion that Fechter was a personality actor whose own personal nature fit the role of Hamlet but was woefully inadequate to represent Othello. ⁶ Lewes did not think much

³ Quoted in Kate Field, C.A. Fechter (Boston, 1882): 148.

⁴ Quoted in Field 152.

⁵ Quoted in Field 158.

⁶ [George Henry Lewes], "Fechter in Hamlet and Othello," Blackwood's Magazine Dec. 1861: 744.

of Fechter's ability to convey passion; the character of Hamlet was weak, vacillating and intellectual, but Othello is pure feeling and Fechter was not up to the task. Said Lewes:

He is incapable of representing the groundswell of passion, which by him is broken up into numerous petty waves: we see the glancing foam, breaking along many lines, instead of one omnipotent and roaring surf. He is loud--and weak; irritable, not passionate. The wrath escapes in spirts [sic], instead of flowing in one mighty tide; and after each spirt [sic] he is calm, not shaken by the tremulous subsidence of passion. This lapse from the wildness of rage to the calmness of logical consideration or argumentative expostulation, this absence of gradation and after-glow of passion, is the error always committed by . . . bad tragedians, and arises from their not identifying themselves with the feeling of the part. I expected something better from Fechter.⁷

Roughly a century later, Marvin Rosenberg would classify Fechter's Othello, along with the Othellos of Macready and Irving, as "restrained."⁸ Rosenberg concurs with Lewes on Fechter's alleged lack of passion, suggesting that his intellectual approach led to an intelligent, but feeble portrayal.⁹

Fechter's supposed difficulty with conveying "passion" is difficult to understand in light of his popularity in such vehicles as Ruy Blas, The Corsican Brothers and Don

⁷ Blackwood's 751.

⁸ Marvin Rosenberg, The Masks of Othello (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971: 70.

⁹ Rosenberg 73-77.

Caesar de Bazan.¹⁰ Ruy Blas is consumed with love for his Queen and must convey the anguish, not only of a lover whose love must remain unrequited, but also that of the profoundly noble spirit who must endure the humiliation of obligatory servitude to a scoundrel. In The Corsican Brothers, Fabien dei Franchi must avenge his brother's death and save the honor of the beautiful Emilie de Lesparre. One critic described the scene in which dei Franchi duels with the evil Château-Renaud as being "represented with minute ferocity of detail, and with a truth on the part of the actors, which enhances the terror. . . ."¹¹ Don Caesar de Bazan is a comedy, but the title character is lusty, impetuous and full of good humor even in the face of his impending execution. His passion is of a different sort than that of dei Franchi or Ruy Blas, but it is passion all the same. Anyone familiar with these and other romantic dramas of the nineteenth century must recognize that these pieces do not call for intellectual, studied and, above all, passionless

¹⁰ Fechter's popularity did not, however, assure Augustus Harris a profit when he contracted with Fechter for an engagement at the Princess's. Coleman maintained that Fechter's Ruy Blas and Don Caesar de Bazan were financial disasters. It was not until Hamlet opened in March that Harris turned a profit. See John Coleman, Players and Playwrights I have Known, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Philadelphia, 1890): 298-302. Coleman makes no mention of The Corsican Brothers in this regard.

¹¹ From The Leader 28 Feb. 1852. Quoted in Michael Booth, English Nineteenth Century Plays (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969): 29. The Leader was describing the scene as played by Charles Kean and Alfred Wigan.

leading men. Fechter's success in these and other romantic melodramas leads to a suspicion that his critics mistook his melodramatic, domestic and relatively de-idealized approach to Shakespeare for passionlessness.

More to the point, they may not have considered "emotion" and "passion" to be quite the same commodity. Emotion implies highly personalized feelings: grief, romantic love, the thirst for vengeance, etc. Implicit in the commentary on Othello was the notion that "passion" belonged to the realm of the universal, a sort of idealized expression of emotion as opposed to those particular emotions expressed by private individuals in specific social situations.¹² At any rate, Fechter's Shakespearean sensibility did not materialize ex nihilo; as we shall see, he employed the same melodramatic and domestic sensibility in his portrayal of Othello that he did in more popular vehicles.¹³

¹² When Lewes discussed Fechter's lack of passion he was probably referring to an absence of the physiological effects of strong feeling. Lewes was unique in that, not only was he a theatre critic, but also an accomplished biologist and physiologist. Lewes believed that emotion and passion could be physiologically quantified, and when he refers to the "after-glow of passion" he is no doubt alluding to his belief that every nervous impulse left behind tremors which did not subside immediately. See Joseph R. Roach, The Player's Passion (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985): 186. There is no evidence to suggest that Lewes' clinical approach to passion and emotion was shared by other critics, however.

¹³ See Chapter Three and Four for more specific discussion of the perceived distinction between mere emotion and grand passion.

This chapter examines elements of Fecchter's background which shed light on his interpretation of Othello; his temperament, general acting style, previous romantic roles on the London stage and his unconventional approach to Hamlet will all be considered. Fecchter's temperament is of key interest because it can be linked with his iconoclasm. He was known for spurning the traditional, for remaking the icon of Hamlet in his own image. But this impulse toward iconoclasm had other outlets besides the stage; Fecchter's life and career were replete with examples of his contrary attitude and willingness to buck the system. His contrariness extended well beyond the purview of performance, manifesting itself in his business decisions and personal relationships. Fecchter's general acting style and English career prior to Othello are worthy of note because they illustrate Fecchter's particular brand of Bergsonian naturalism and give the lie to the accusation that he was a cerebral, intellectual actor, devoid of the emotional power necessary to sustain the role of Othello.

Fecchter the Man

Charles Albert Fecchter was born on October 23, 1824, the son of Jean Maria Guillame Fecchter and Marie Angelique Regis.¹⁴ Born in London, where his sculptor father had taken a position with a jeweller, Fecchter's ethnic and

¹⁴ Field 4

cultural background was mixed. Besides his nominal affiliation with England, his mother was from Flanders and his father, a native of Arçachon in France, was of German ancestry.¹⁵ If he suffered any identity problems as a result of this cultural ambiguity, Fechter never admitted it, but his lack of roots¹⁶ may have been a factor in his remarkable adaptability; Fechter, after all, had a successful career in France, England and the United States.

There are a number of anecdotes which illustrate his iconoclastic and contrary attitude, some, particularly those found in Field, seem suspiciously romanticized, and at times have the faint odor of legend about them. For instance, Field relates one incident in which the sixteen year-old Fechter, enchanted by a friend's romantic stories about military life, deliberately took offense at one of the friend's remarks and challenged him to a duel.¹⁷ Field has Fechter at odds with his teachers at the Conservatoire (where he enjoyed a mere three-week tenure), who expected their pupils to learn by rote imitation.¹⁸ Here Fechter is portrayed as a student whose insight and wisdom far exceed

¹⁵ Field 4-5

¹⁶ Field recounts that Fechter's family moved back to France, only to return to England at the onset of the revolution of 1830. Eventually the family again returned to France (7).

¹⁷ Field 7-8.

¹⁸ Field 17-18.

that of his instructors. Later, as a pensionnaire at the Comédie Française, Fechter becomes a champion of democracy who castigates the sociétaires for maintaining segregated green room seating vis à vis their lower-ranked colleagues.¹⁹ This was not the smartest career move; as Field remarked, "Wisdom and Fechter were never boon companions."²⁰ The incident over the seating makes for a charming story, but Fechter's alleged egalitarianism seems more like a folk-hero quality bestowed upon him by a biographer interested in selling her European hero to an American readership.

But in all fairness to Field, she is not the only source for anecdotes about Fechter's contrary personality. There are enough such anecdotes to allow the conclusion that he challenged the system frequently-- and with relish. Fechter's peculiarity of temper was legendary among his circle of friends. Burnham tells us that during Fechter's years as a London stage sensation he "continually and persistently quarrelled with his best friends, quarrelling and making up again with Charles Dickens, Palgrave Simpson, Edmund Yates and Wilkie Collins."²¹ Shortly before Fechter opened in Hamlet, the Sunday Times reported that the actor

¹⁹ Field 26-27.

²⁰ Field 29.

²¹ Charles Burnham, "Charles Fechter's Debut in America," The Theatre Jan. 1917: 7.

had become involved in a lease dispute with his landlord back in France. Evidently, Fechter returned to his lodgings after an extended absence to discover that his favorite tree had been cut down. He immediately broke his lease, citing the fact that the property was no longer as it was when he agreed to rent it. Fechter won the subsequent lawsuit.²²

Perhaps his most self-destructive moment of "in-your-face" diplomacy came during his disastrous management of the Globe Theatre in Boston. Although Clapp refers to Globe company members James Wallack and Carlotta LeClercq as leading man and lady, Field mentions the Globe venture as an attempt to jettison the star system.²³ If Fechter's intention was to manage the Globe with an ensemble company, he was invested with little sense of the impracticality of his goal. Fechter conceived of a theatre company which deferred to no one particular member--no one particular member, that is, except Fechter. In the nineteenth-century American theatre (or even today in the American commercial theatre) this would have been a daunting enough task for a master diplomat. But Fechter's heavy-handed style and easily bruised sensibilities led to calamity. One night, during the run of the critically acclaimed Count of Monte Christo,

²² Sunday Times [London] 27 Jan. 1861: 3.

²³ See Henry Austin Clapp, "Reminiscences of a Dramatic Critic," Atlantic Monthly Oct. 1901: 498 and Field 74-75. Field says that, in the Globe experiment, the "Drama was to be cared for irrespective of individual actors. The system of starring was to be abolished."

Fechter made a curtain speech castigating one of his actors, G.H. Griffiths, for arriving at the theatre drunk. The effect, according to Burnham, was to make Griffiths a sympathetic figure amongst the other company members.²⁴

When he assigned Mrs. F.S. Chanfrau a role she felt beneath her, Fechter's intransigence in the matter led to her abrupt resignation from the company. In a subsequent newspaper article, Fechter made a thinly disguised allusion to Mrs. Chanfrau when he denounced the tendency of actors to become prima donnas. "No theatre," he wrote, "ever did, or ever will, depend for its prosperity on the efforts of any one man, or so far as that goes on any one woman, no matter how high in the public estimation he or she may stand."²⁵ The culmination of the whole lamentable enterprise came when Wallack balked at playing Don Salluste in Ruy Blas and Fechter engaged him in a public row, Wallack sending his letters to the New York press and Fechter to the Boston papers. The only concession to Wallack was an offer to alternate with him the parts of Salluste and Ruy Blas, an offer Wallack categorically rejected. In a letter to his cousin (the actor Lester Wallack), Wallack accurately predicted the demise of the Globe experiment, pronouncing it "a decided fizzle. The houses are bad," wrote Wallack, "and [Globe proprietor Arthur] Cheney's pockets will be very much

²⁴ Burnham 8.

²⁵ Quoted in Burnham 8.

lighter before he is very much older."²⁶

Fechter's temperament was indeed legendary. It often seems to have been the result of nothing more than pig-headedness or an overextended ego. Although he most certainly suffered from both, it is also apparent that his problems were borne of an authentic sense of self-righteous certitude. It was this sense of certainty, so evident in his private life and business dealings, which explains the pure chutzpah required for a Frenchman to offer a radical new interpretation of Hamlet to a nineteenth-century English audience. Doubtless it was this sense of certainty which led him to write and produce his definitive and controversial acting edition of Othello, the preface of which alludes to the unfortunate British habit of "reciting" as opposed to that of "acting" Shakespeare.²⁷

Fechter's General Acting Style

The purpose of examining Fechter's acting style is to shed light on his naturalism, the naturalism labeled in Chapter One as Bergsonian. The word "naturalism" was bandied about by Fechter's critics as though its meaning were self-evident, and, for them, perhaps it was. There

²⁶ Burnham 62. Field also prints part of the correspondence between Fechter and Wallack (76).

²⁷ Charles Fechter, preface, Othello by [William] Shakspeare, 2nd ed. (London, 1861): iii. The preface actually reads, "Shakspeare's plays were certainly written to be acted--not recited."

are, however, some hints and clues as to what was meant, hints and clues which yield themselves up when these accounts are examined closely. But there is a second purpose to this exercise: to refute the accusation that he was merely an "intellectual" actor with no real ability to convey emotion. What Fechter employed, and what critics of Othello thought merely "restrained" or emotionless, was subtlety. Fechter must have realized early on that "less is more," but his critics were used to just the opposite from their favorite tragedians. His style may seem to have been histrionic by today's standards, but Fechter's disdain for making points, his willingness to share the stage with other powerful actors, and his own quiet acting choices were indicative of his appreciation for the power of subtlety. Fechter knew that a single tear trickling down a stoic face had an emotional impact way beyond that of a torrent of tears and a gnashing of teeth.

In 1862, Harper's New Monthly Magazine described Fechter's handling of Shakespeare, and the description was indicative of his innovative style. Fechter's secret was, wrote Harper's,

Not altogether the novelty of his rendition; but an attention to detail and accessories, with a stubborn, homely naturalness. . . . The strut and rant and mouthing of traditional Shakespearean actors are set aside. Heroes lounge as other men lounge; they twirl their fingers in a fit of thoughtfulness as other men do; they bite the quill-end of the pen as other

men do.²⁸

Harper's was hardly enamoured of this new style of tragedy. Besides a feeble physical appearance, a "strongly foreign" accent and a disregard for traditional textual conventions, Fechter had abandoned "all regard for the traditions of Kean and Garrick . . . and his treatment of the later conventionalisms of the English stage [was] quite contemptuous."²⁹ The unidentified critic compared the new style to "Dryden abjuring all rhythmic cadence for the mettle and homeliness of live speech!"³⁰

What is being described here is the de-idealization of English tragedy, an approach to poetic drama often referred to as "naturalistic," but which may as well have been called "domestic" or melodramatic. Melodramatic is not synonymous here with "campy" or histrionic, but with a domestic flavor, an attention to the minor details of everyday existence. For many critics, including Harper's anonymous contributor, the tragic hero who twirls a pen, lounges about, imitates domestic speech patterns or, in Bergsonian terms, sits down, can no longer be thought of as tragic.

²⁸ Harper's New Monthly Magazine Mar. 1862: 562.

²⁹ Harper's 562.

³⁰ Harper's 563.

In 1870, The Galaxy was quite taken with Fechter's stagecraft, waxing enthusiastically about his French "naturalistic" style:

The moment he steps upon the scene, however, he makes it evident that he is admirably qualified, if not to disarm criticism, at least to challenge it. A finished artist, a careful student, with an external which, if neither handsome nor graceful, is full of dignity and refinement, with that easy and unforced demeanor . . . which is, perhaps, more characteristic of the French stage than our own. . . .³¹

Of his restrained, subtle and relatively non-histrionic manner, the Galaxy remarked that "[h]e never strains either his voice or his capacity, and this . . . keeps our interest as unwearied as his nervous power."³² A laudatory appraisal to be sure, but such praise did not extend to Fechter's work in poetic tragedy. The Galaxy critic could not conceive of the new style befitting high tragedy in any way. In the Galaxy's view, Fechter belonged in melodrama, for "as a romantic or sentimental actor he is without a superior . . . but that for high tragedy . . . the peculiar bent of his genius, and his temperament, alike unfit him."³³

The Nation was also reserved in its assessment of Fechter's talents, and for many of the same reasons. The American magazine felt that his abilities were limited to simple realism, which, being an admirable talent, was not

³¹ "Mr. Charles Fechter," Galaxy Apr. 1870: 554.

³² Galaxy 557.

³³ Galaxy 561.

suitable to the really great works of the stage. Fechter's approach suited only lesser dramas like The Corsican Brothers; bastardized stage pieces of little consequence which did not belong to any particular genre.³⁴ Fechter's realism was inferior art, according to the Nation, because it did no more than represent real life, thereby rendering it inferior to be used in great poetic drama. His "art on the stage," wrote the Nation critic, "may be perfect but not high."³⁵

The final comment in the article sheds light on the acting sensibilities commonly employed in the poetic drama and the popular theatre of the time, as well as the divide which separated them:

We repeat the expression of our admiration of Mr. Fechter's vivid, picturesque, and impressive style of acting. . . . [It is] the result of the study and imitation of real life; yet we cannot yet accept him as an artist of the highest class, but only as first in the second rank of the realistic French school which now controls the stage.³⁶

It is quite clear that the French "realistic" school referred to by the Nation is the approach employed by the actor of domestic melodrama and romantic drama. Fechter may not have been the first actor on the British or American stage to employ the French school in the service

³⁴ "Realism in Dramatic Art--Or, Mr. Fechter's Realism," Nation 9 June 1870: 364.

³⁵ Nation 365.

³⁶ Nation 365.

of melodrama, but he was certainly the first to apply it within the sacred Shakespearean precinct.

Justin McCarthy lends credence to this view. Written in 1903, his retrospective of the stage stars of the 1860s bolsters the theory that Fecchter's style was unique among high tragedians. Says McCarthy:

He had no predecessor in his peculiar style of acting and he left no successor. . . . I should say that it [Fechter's dramatic principle] consisted in his endeavor always to reconcile the natural with the dramatic and to make the hero of tragedy seem, after all, but an ordinary human being like one of ourselves.³⁷

McCarthy seemed aware that notions of reality shifted from generation to generation, but he saw in Fecchter's style a quality which at least allowed the tragic hero a measure of human weakness, the weakness of a man who must twirl his pen, lounge or sit. This quality had not been seen in tragedy prior to Fecchter's debut, but afterward it effected a "happy change in . . . [British] theatric ways." The change was due, according to McCarthy, "to the genius and the courage of Fecchter."³⁸

But if Fecchter's "naturalism" was not the "naturalism" of previous generations, neither was it the Naturalism of Zola. Fecchter did not simply attempt to copy everyday behavior in all its formlessness and

³⁷ Justin McCarthy, Portraits of the Sixties (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1903): 250-251.

³⁸ McCarthy 252.

extraneousness. He always had the greater aesthetic in mind, was ever conscious of the need for artistic embellishment. Dickens called this artistic imperative "picturesque," referring to the small details of Fechter's performance and the use of meticulously conceived bits of stage business which were a hallmark of his work. Fechter, according to Dickens, always effected "a picture in its right place in the group, always in true composition with the background of the scene."³⁹ As an example of this "picturesqueness," Dickens cites the last scene of Ruy Blas. It was in this scene that Fechter, as Ruy Blas, about to triumph in his duel with the diabolical Don Salluste, assumes the stance of the headsman. The affectation of this metaphoric stance was, for Dickens, "one of the most ferociously picturesque things conceivable on the stage."⁴⁰ But lest this smack too much of the old idealism of the tragic stage, Dickens says that Fechter's picturesqueness was always "judiciously governed."⁴¹ His Iago, for instance, was

not in the least picturesque according to the conventional ways of frowning, sneering, diabolically grinning, and elaborately doing everything else that would induce Othello to run him through the body very early in the play. Mr. Fechter's is the Iago who could, and did,

³⁹ Charles Dickens, "On Mr. Fechter's Acting," Atlantic Monthly Aug. 1869: 243.

⁴⁰ Dickens 243.

⁴¹ Dickens 243.

make friends; who could dissect his master's soul, without flourishing his scalpel as if it were a walking stick; who could overpower Emilia by other arts than a sign-of-the-Saracen's-Head grimness; who could be a boon companion without ipso facto warning all beholders off by the portentous phenomenon; who could sing a song and clink a can naturally enough, and stab men really in the dark. . . .⁴²

And so we have a portrait of a song-singing, can-clinking Iago, a regular guy with a treacherous attitude. While the portrayal was, it would seem, of greater subtlety than most, there is certainly every indication, from Dickens' description, that it was replete with power and passion.⁴³

Lewes and the other detractors notwithstanding, Fechter certainly was not unable to convey or invoke powerful feelings. Rather, he employed a level of subtle sophistication which, when juxtaposed with the histrionic tragic style of the day, may have seemed passionless in contrast. Few accused Fechter of being passionless in his melodramatic work; how could he have been, given the emotional demands of such roles? Once again, it is

⁴² Dickens 243-244.

⁴³ Earnest Bradlee Watson felt that it was this studied approach to the picturesque which grew tiresome to audiences and eventually caused Fechter's public support to erode. See Sheridan to Robertson: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century London Stage (1926; New York: Blom, 1963): 377. For Watson, Fechter was received with great enthusiasm primarily because he broke with tradition, not because of any intrinsic appeal inherent in the methods he employed toward that end (373). It is significant that Watson, too, associated the Fechter style with passionless intellectualism saying that, while Fechter was reminiscent of Macready in his colloquial speech, "[H]e wanted Macready's exaltation in passion" (372).

important to keep in mind the distinction which was clearly being made between "passion" and "emotion." Mere emotion was fine for the less elevated drama, but Shakespeare and high tragedy called for grand passion. Fechter's realism was much closer to the style of acting audiences were accustomed to seeing in melodrama. After all, as the Nation declared, Fechter was a member "of the realistic French school" which was sweeping the stage.⁴⁴ and in Watson's discussion of melodramatic acting, he allows that "long before the appearance of Fechter the stage had already become familiar with the general type of art for which that actor has usually been regarded as the sponsor."⁴⁵ Certainly "the stage" to which the Nation critic referred was not the tragic, but that of what he considered to be lesser works, the "bastardized stage pieces" of the popular theatre.

There are a large number of accounts which debunk the notion that Fechter was unemotional or lacked emotional power. Henry Austin Clapp remarked flatly that "when any common passion was to be shown in any usual way, Mr. Fechter's playing was eminently effective."⁴⁶ Woods also

⁴⁴ See above 44.

⁴⁵ Watson 371. Watson is not referring to the tragic stage, but to such productions as Charles Kean's Corsican Brothers and Alfred Wigan's The First Night, The Roused Lion and Still Waters Run Deep.

⁴⁶ Clapp 496.

felt Fecchter to be an emotionally powerful actor, giving him especially high marks in the evocation of "intense, passionate, self-forgetting love."⁴⁷ So powerful a performer was Fecchter, said Woods, that were he to be sans all accoutrements of the stage, he "could yet sway an audience to tears or laughter, and up and down the gamut of all the emotions."⁴⁸ Referring to his work in Ruy Blas, Woods even went so far as to say that Fecchter's emotional power surpassed that of his intellectual power!⁴⁹ For Woods, then, "restrained" was not synonymous with emotional flatness. It is also hard to believe, given Woods' testimony, that Lewes and other like-minded critics' notion of passion was synonymous with Woods' conception of emotion. Likewise Clapp, although he uses the word "passion," must not have meant it in the same sense as Lewes.

In summation, Fecchter's acting style may have been restrained; but it was restrained only in comparison to the tragic acting to which critics were accustomed, not to the point of cathartic vacuity. When Fecchter was performing in melodrama, his "restraint" did not appear to be a problem; in fact, he was highly touted for his performances in that genre. A sampling of the critical

⁴⁷ Woods 518.

⁴⁸ Woods 514.

⁴⁹ Woods 519.

reaction to Fechter's work in specific melodramas clearly illustrates his emotional appeal as well as the particular "naturalism" which was to carry over into his tragic roles. But when Fechter employed his acting style in the service of Shakespeare, his evocation of emotion lacked an ideal quality, the quality of grand passion.

Fechter preceded his London productions of Hamlet and Othello with several standard melodramas, pieces which remained in his repertoire throughout his career. The following summary is based on the critical response to those roles--in general, as they were received over the course of many years, and specifically, as they were received by the London critics just prior to Othello.

Ruy Blas

Fechter's English-speaking debut on the London stage was in the title role of Edmund Falconer's adaptation of Victor Hugo's Ruy Blas. Ruy Blas was the enormously popular story of a humble lackey who, due to a series of bizarre circumstances (plausible enough, evidently, to nineteenth-century audiences), becomes Prime Minister of Spain. Romance and intrigue abound as Ruy Blas is forced to become the tool of his master, the evil Don Salluste. It is Salluste who vengefully seeks to ruin the reputation of Ruy Blas' secret love, who happens to be betrothed to

the King.⁵⁰ His humble estate unknown to her, the queen-to-be soon falls in love with the new Prime Minister. Her reputation is ultimately saved, along with the honor of Spain, when the mortally wounded Ruy Blas kills Don Salluste in a duel. In the end, as Ruy Blas lays dying in his love's arms, he confesses the true nature of his social position. Through it all Ruy Blas suffers the anguish of humiliating servitude and of love which can never truly be requited or consummated; he seethes with anger over Don Salluste's villainy and, his final moments, when he reveals to the young queen his true social status, fairly drip with tenderness and pathos. Any actor who approached the role of Ruy Blas in a restrained, intellectual, emotionless way would surely fail. Fechter's production opened on October 27, 1860 at the Princess's Theatre, and the enthusiastic critical response suggested his effort was far from a disappointment.

With a few exceptions, most notably that of the Atlas, the critics agreed that Fechter's performance was fresh and powerful. McCarthy said that "the public realized in a moment that a new tragedian had come upon the English stage, well-qualified to defy competition in

⁵⁰ Falconer had changed Hugo's original story so that the Queen was merely betrothed and not married. The Times suggested this was out of respect for propriety. See Rev. of Ruy Blas by Victor Hugo, adapted by Edmund Falconer, Princess's Theatre, London, Times [London] 29 Oct. 1860: 10.

his own field of dramatic art."⁵¹ As the Times noted, even Fechter's heavily-accented English⁵² was no barrier to the enjoyment of his portrayal:

the manner in which M. Fechter would speak English, [soon put] the mind of the audience . . . at ease. His accent and his gesticulations are entirely of France, but his articulation is perfectly clear, and there is that music in his voice which would sound equally well through the medium of any language.⁵³

The Times felt Fechter's performance was good enough that it transcended the rather incendiary message that the lackey could be the social equal or better of his master. Fechter had the audience in the palm of his hand as they shouted for him to make an appearance before the curtain.⁵⁴

The Illustrated London News, which also thought Ruy Blas politicized the stage, paid tribute to Fechter's emotional and cathartic power, calling him "a melodramatic actor of great energy." They also confirmed the enthusiasm of the audience, saying that his performance sustained "repeated and prolonged plaudits."⁵⁵

⁵¹ McCarthy 247.

⁵² Field claims that Fechter studied to perfect his English sixteen to eighteen hours a day for four months before his debut (49).

⁵³ Times 29 Oct. 1860: 10.

⁵⁴ Times 29 Oct. 1860: 10.

⁵⁵ Rev. of Ruy Blas by Victor Hugo, adapted by Edmund Falconer, Princess's Theatre, London, Illustrated London News 3 Nov. 1860: 417.

A little later that month, Fechter was still drawing crowded houses, according to the Examiner. Fechter's subtlety prompted the Examiner's statement that he acted "effectively in melodrama without extravagance. He suits action to word with a nicety not usual upon the English stage. . . ." Like Dickens, the Examiner critic was especially taken with the stage business involving the executioner's stance at the end of the duel. The loud applause given this bit of business prompted the critic to remark that "Few melo-dramatic actors could venture upon such an effect, for the least hardness or clumsiness of manner would make it ridiculous."⁵⁶ Fechter's ability to carry off this bit of picturesque business was due undoubtedly to his meticulous planning and sense of the overall aesthetic picture.

In a preliminary review, the Sunday Times felt Fechter's performance to be endowed with "great natural power."⁵⁷ One week later, their critic claimed that he had never "witnessed a more thrilling sensation in any theatre than on Tuesday evening" when Fechter's Ruy Blas denounced and punished Don Salluste.⁵⁸ The review uses

⁵⁶ Rev. of Ruy Blas by Victor Hugo, adapted by Edmund Falconer, Princess's Theatre, London, Examiner [London] 10 Nov. 1860: 710.

⁵⁷ Rev. of Ruy Blas by Victor Hugo, adapted by Edmund Falconer, Princess's Theatre, London, Sunday Times [London] 4 Nov. 1860: 3.

⁵⁸ Sunday Times [London] 11 Nov. 1860: 3.

words like "melancholy" and "ferocity" in describing the performance. Fechter's emotional range had an awe-inspiring effect on the audience, who observed in a "breathless silence" which enveloped pit and gallery alike.

Of course, there was some dissent mixed in with the general chorus of approval. The Atlas was very distressed by Fechter's performance. Its criticism reflected more than a little bit of xenophobia, for the chief complaint seemed to be that Fechter was not an Englishman. If the Atlas is to be believed, Fechter was a disappointment to much of the audience largely because of exaggerated advance publicity and, more to the point, because the audience was supposedly expecting him to be more English than French and were disappointed in his foreign mannerisms. Although even the Atlas critic allowed that Fechter possessed "great and undoubted power," he felt that he was hampered by his French accent. Furthermore, his peculiar omission of pauses where English actors traditionally paused, along with his addition of pauses not traditionally made, was a cause for considerable distress.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Rev. of Ruy Blas by Victor Hugo, adapted by Edmund Falconer, Princess's Theatre, London, Atlas [London] 3 Nov. 1860: 888.

It is hard to believe that Fechter was much of a disappointment to the audience, given the enthusiastic response reported by so many other critics, and the temptation is to dismiss the Atlas critique as an example of nativist hysteria. As far as the accent was concerned, it is true that other critics had noticed it, but they, for the most part, had dismissed it as an imperfection of little consequence. Coleman, for instance, at first thought it "unendurable," but, he said, "after a few moments the voice made music, and I forgot all about the accent."⁶⁰ The Times certainly dismissed any notion of the bad effect of Fechter's speech patterns and pronunciation, as the quotation cited earlier makes perfectly clear. Ehret gives a summary of the criticism surrounding the accent, noting that Fechter's foreign pronunciation drew comments throughout his career. But, as he goes on to explain, much of the criticism was aimed as much at Fechter's non-traditional speech patterns (lack of points, de-emphasis of rhyme and meter etc.) as it was the accent itself.⁶¹

Indeed, Fechter's non-traditional speech patterns were intentional and nowhere did his novel way of speaking pay off better than in the role of Ruy Blas. The Galaxy

⁶⁰ Coleman 297.

⁶¹ Donald M. Ehret, "The Death Knell of Tradition: The Hamlet of Charles Albert Fechter," thesis, Ohio State, 1975, 18-22.

critic, referring to the American premiere, recognized that the power of Fechter's vocal work did not lie in flowery cadences, but in its subtlety and ordinary quality:

his voice is neither powerful, musical, nor flexible; and yet he produces some very rare and fine effects with it, as, for example, in Ruy Blas, the exquisitely simple, touching, and natural manner in which, after endeavoring to explain to Don Caesar his love for the Queen, which he does in an excited and enthusiastic tone, he suddenly pauses, drops his voice to its ordinary key, and says, 'I love her, that's all!' There is something indescribably intense and passionate in his utterance of these words, which echoes long in ear and heart alike, and tells the tale of Ruy Blas's deep and fatal passion.⁶²

This description seems to conflict with that of Coleman and the Times critic, both of whom wrote that Fechter's voice had musical qualities. Obviously, it is impossible to know precisely what anyone means by an adjective as subjective as "musical," but whatever Coleman and the unnamed critic meant, they most certainly did not mean the flowery, idealized poetic speech of the conventional tragic actor. Fechter's final words in Ruy Blas did not, according to the Galaxy, "like Henderson's 'What! the [sic] fair Ophelia!' 'linger like some exquisite strain of music in the memory;' but it . . . [had] an honest, manly ring about it, and an accent of intense pain too, which . . . [told] the tale of a mighty

⁶² Galaxy 555.

temptation wrestled with and overthrown."⁶³ It was that same Galaxy article which associated Fechter's believability with his melodramatic style, saying that his impersonation of Ruy Blas represented one of the "finest pieces of melodramatic acting."⁶⁴

The Corsican Brothers and Don Caesar de Bazan

The London papers said relatively little about Fechter's next two productions. The Corsican Brothers was a frequently produced melodrama about a man who avenges his brother's death and saves the honor of a young woman in the process. Don Caesar de Bazan was a comedy about a renegade and profligate Spanish nobleman who cunningly finagles his way out of his own execution. Although the press did not show much interest in either production, the little that was said was mostly favorable.

The reaction to The Corsican Brothers was the scantiest, because most papers did not cover the production. The Times mentioned it only in passing when reviewing Don Caesar de Bazan, and allowed only that Fechter had been alternating the production with Ruy Blas.⁶⁵ The Examiner did not devote much more attention

⁶³ Galaxy 556.

⁶⁴ Galaxy 555.

⁶⁵ Rev. of Don Caesar de Bazan [by Philippe Dumanoir and François Pinel], Princess's Theatre, London, Times [London] 13 Feb. 1861: 5.

to the piece, except to say that Fechter's performance showed how badly Charles Kean played the role.⁶⁶ Earlier that year, the Examiner had expressed the view that Fechter had, for the first time, demonstrated what a good actor could do with the part.⁶⁷

To glean any understanding of Fechter's performance in The Corsican Brothers, we must turn to the Nation and its appraisal of the production mounted in America nearly a decade after the London effort. The Nation, so critical of Fechter's work in tragedy, felt that he excelled in the piece because it lent itself to his melodramatic realism. This was something of a backhanded compliment, however, as the critic proceeded to badmouth the play as a shallow, one-dimensional fluff-piece of little lasting value.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Examiner [London] 16 Feb. 1861: 103.

⁶⁷ Rev. of The Corsican Brothers, Princess's Theatre, London, Examiner [London] 26 Jan. 1861: 55.

⁶⁸ Nation 364. It is important to remember that the popular dramas of the nineteenth century were not all accorded equal status, and that there were levels of respectability accorded to them which may be difficult for a twentieth-century mind to discern. The Corsican Brothers was apparently considered by many arbiters of taste to be a less respectable, more sensational piece than Ruy Blas, and therefore more of a fluff piece. There was more than one English version of The Corsican Brothers available, but my sources do not indicate which version Fechter used. Michael Booth says only that it was not Boucicault's (English Nineteenth Century Plays 28). It can be inferred from Boucicault's script that productions of The Corsican Brothers were reliant on special visual effects such as ghosts rising up through the floor and psychic visions fully realized before the eyes of the audience. Adding to the sensational scenic elements was the fact that the play is a revenge drama culminating in a dual between the transparently evil Château-Renaud and the noble and heroic

But, said the Nation, the play's lack of merit was compensated for by Fechter's performance:

this gross, tricky, sensational drama, which, compared with real dramatic work, is as the daubing of a savage compared with the significant composition, fine drawing, and life-like color of an accomplished and gifted painter, affords an actor of Mr. Fechter's well-deserved eminence an opportunity of displaying all his skill in that department, or rather that style, of his art of which he is so complete a master.⁶⁹

Again, the art which Fechter had mastered was the realism of domestic melodrama. His performance was replete with the details of everyday life, appearing natural, but always, of course, carefully calculated for the greatest effect possible:

[Fechter] shows, with even unusual impressiveness, the power he possesses of bearing himself simply, naturally, and with an apparent, absolute unconsciousness of self. He seems absolutely absorbed for the moment in his every act to do nothing for the effect it will produce; effect being all the while the object of his every movement. The very way in which, as he talks, he rolls his cigarettes and lights them one after the other, lingering now a moment before the ample fire-place, then putting his foot on a chair as he chats with his guest, being never afraid to turn his back to the audience, to whom he never plays, and whose very existence seems unknown to him, is charming, and is a part of this man's consummate art. . . .⁷⁰

The Nation went on to say that, as simple and domestically attuned as the portrayal was, its "everyday" quality did

Fabien dei Franchi.

⁶⁹ Nation 365.

⁷⁰ Nation 365.

not detract from any intended cathartic or emotional effect. "[W]hen he fights," said the Nation, "it is with a cool and pitiless bloodthirstiness which might be called savage. . . ." ⁷¹

As with Ruy Blas, it is difficult to imagine Fechter playing the roles of the two brothers in a dispassionate manner.⁷² Louis dei Franchi is a character who burns with anger and indignation when Château-Renaud compromises the honor of the virtuous Emilie de Lesparre. When Louis is killed, defending Emilie's virtue in a dual with Château-Renaud, his brother Fabien pursues the villain with a vengeance. These are not cool-tempered, emotionless characters.

Don Caesar de Bazan, being a light comedy, did not present as many opportunities for Fechter to run the gamut of heavy emotion or bring the ladies to tears. But Don Caesar is a comic nobleman with a joie de vivre approaching Falstaffian proportions. He is dissolute, drinks heavily and has squandered away his family fortune, but remains noble in spirit and has a strong sense of honor backed by courage. In the course of the play, Don Caesar defends an innocent young boy from the wrath of a tyrannical army captain. The ensuing combat is a

⁷¹ Nation 365.

⁷² The twin brothers were written to be played by one actor.

violation of the King's edict against dueling during carnival week, and Don Caesar is sentenced to be executed. In the course of the play he outwits his executioners and saves the honor of the King and Queen, foiling the wicked Don Jose's nefarious plot. Through it all Don Caesar never loses his self-deprecating sense of humor, his honor, nor his passion for life. Don Caesar's greatest asset is his charisma, and any actor who did not convey the raw power of the Don's forceful and life-affirming personality probably would not have remained in the role for long.⁷³

Fechter's portrayal of Don Caesar is worthy of mention, not only because it was his final offering before the debut of Hamlet and Othello, but also because his understanding of the role of Don Caesar was, characteristically, non-traditional. For example, the Times was impressed that Fechter disdained easy laughs, presumably those traditionally gone for by other actors. It felt that Fechter successfully obviated the problem of the character transformation by significantly toning down the Don's clownishness.⁷⁴ The Examiner agreed that

⁷³ As with The Corsican Brothers, it is not known which version of this play Fechter used. My analysis of the title character is based on the G.A. A'Beckett and Mark Lemon adaptation published in the United States (New York, n.d.). According to the cast list published with the text, this was the version which starred James Wallack at the Princess's in 1844 (6).

⁷⁴ Times [London] 13 Feb. 1861: 5.

Fechter had admirably resisted the temptation to play an "amusing vagabond;" Fechter portrayed the title character "even in his poverty and recklessness, [with] the air of a Spaniard and a nobleman."⁷⁵ Although the Sunday Times expressed preference for the old, caricatured Don Caesar, it gave Fechter credit for innovation: "Mr. Fechter refuses to adopt stage conventionalities and endeavours to portray real life as it is. His performance of Caesar de Bazan does him infinite credit."⁷⁶ . It can be inferred from these reviews that many actors who had played the role prior to Fechter had offered a boorish, certified libertine broadly delineated and acted. Fechter, however, sought to inject into the character a degree of plausibility; for the traditional Don Caesar was so much of a profligate and degenerate that his transformation into a hero was thoroughly unbelievable.

The production of Don Caesar de Bazan at the Princess's Theatre was the final offering of what was really a trio of curtain warmers to the theatrical bombshell that Fechter was about to drop. The next production was Hamlet, and with that foray into Shakespeare, Fechter made his indelible mark on the

⁷⁵ Rev. of Don Caesar de Bazan [by Philippe Dumanoir and François Pinel], Princess's Theatre, London, Examiner [London] 16 Feb. 1861: 103.

⁷⁶ Rev. of Don Caesar de Bazan [by Philippe Dumanoir and François Pinel], Princess's Theatre, London, Sunday Times [London] 17 Feb. 1861: 3.

nineteenth-century English-speaking stage.

Hamlet

It would be impossible to review all of what is known of Fechter's Hamlet without expanding this section to the size of a dissertation. But then, a dissertation on Hamlet is unnecessary given the fine composite portrait compiled by Ehret and, to a lesser extent, Mills. Even so, the production deserves brief mention here. What Fechter brought to the role of Hamlet can best be summarized by quoting Arthur & Beckett:

Until Fechter showed us Hamlet, the general impression anent the Prince of Denmark was that he was a creature of the imagination--utterly impossible as a living human being. In a moment this idea was abandoned, and, as we looked upon the polished gentleman in his becoming dress, walking the boards as if he were in the precincts of a court, we forgot the green-room and the close proximity of the stage door Instead of delivering his words as if they had been learned by heart, [he] spoke them like an ordinary individual.⁷⁷

McCarthy, too, recognized that this Hamlet was unique. He was "a living and natural creature, a man who, despite his tragic fate and the gloomy part he had to play, was yet a man like others, and was accustomed to speak and move after the manner of ordinary human beings."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ As quoted in John A. Mills, "The Modesty of Nature: Charles Fechter's Hamlet," Theatre Survey 15.1 (1974): 64-65.

⁷⁸ McCarthy 248.

As Mills has pointed out, the novelty of Fechter's Hamlet resided in "a thorough-going commitment to the particular, the familiar, the colloquial, the distinctive, the idiosyncratic in human behavior--a commitment to whatever would aid in the representation of Hamlet as a 'living human being.'"⁷⁹ Ehret, in summarizing Fechter's contribution to the role, said that "[h]e regarded acting as consisting of the creation onstage of an individual reality by imitating the manners of everyday life," and that "his portrayal of Hamlet 'domesticated' and 'contemporized' Shakespeare's Renaissance prince."⁸⁰

It was a bold move on Fechter's part to jeopardize his fledgling London career by presenting a thoroughly new take on one of the most tradition-bound plays of the most tradition-bound author in the British canon. McCarthy indicated that there was indeed some resentment brewing on

⁷⁹ Mills 65.

⁸⁰ Ehret 104. Ehret also characterizes the portrayal as an emotional one, a description which flatly contradicts that of Lewes. It is true that American critics tended to detect more emotional power from Fechter's performance than did the British. Mills offers an interesting explanation for this, holding that Fechter's American Hamlet was not all that different in temperament from the British version. The Americans, however, had just been fêted to Edwin Booth's Hamlet not five days before Fechter debuted in the role. According to Mills, Booth's portrayal was famous for being "brooding, sensitive, [and] intellectual," and, so being, would have made Fechter's character seem "robust, passionate, etc" (63-64). This is a shaky argument, but suffice it to say that the critical consensus on Fechter's 1861 Hamlet did not suggest an overly bombastic or passionately hotheaded character.

the part of the British public even before the curtain rose on the first night. He wrote, "the general opinion was that only sheer audacity and extravagant confidence in his own powers could have led a foreigner to venture on such an undertaking in London."⁸¹

Besides his overall Bergsonian approach to the role, Fechter's innovations fell into three basic categories: his colloquial speech patterns, physical appearance and his frequent connection of some material externality to the text. As Ehret has pointed out, Fechter's refusal to emphasize the rhymed couplets at the end of his soliloquies was due to his conviction that they not be delivered with any "more emphasis than . . . their literal meaning merited."⁸² The novelty of his physical appearance was due in part to the use of a blond wig (traditional Hamlets apparently favored dark hair) and a knee-length tunic instead of a the tight-fitting black velvet costume to which theatre-goers were accustomed.⁸³ As for the third category, Fechter was prone to use external objects to literally illustrate the text. For instance, when Hamlet upbraided Guildenstern for trying to

⁸¹ McCarthy 247.

⁸² Ehret 22.

⁸³ Ehret 22-23. William Winter claimed that the blond wig was no real innovation as E.L. Davenport had worn one as Hamlet some years before Fechter. See William Winter, "Shakspeare on the Stage," Century Magazine Feb. 1911: 496.

play him like a pipe (III,ii), Fechter produced a pipe, taken from one of the musicians, and hurled it away angrily.⁸⁴ During the closet scene, he made similar use of his father's and uncle's portraits, displaying them pointedly as he berated and cajoled his mother for keeping an incestuous bed.⁸⁵

B.W. Watkins, writing of the London production for the Theatrical Journal, summarized very nicely what he felt the major Fechter innovations to be. Fechter made no points; he had long, yellow hair; and Polonius' death scene was done without traditional declamation. Hamlet's speech upon the discovery of the body proceeded "from the inmost recesses of his heart. . . . This especially. . . ." continued Watkins, "all that Mr. Fechter does is natural."⁸⁶ Watkins did find fault, however, with certain readings which were "below mediocrity," and with the failure "almost entirely in elocution."⁸⁷ The suspicion here is that Watkins could not adjust to Fechter's literal and colloquial approach to the text, rhyme and meter. As he stated in his review, Fechter's characterization was a success "more on account of its exceeding novelty than with regard to its ideal

⁸⁴ Ehret 65.

⁸⁵ Ehret 70.

⁸⁶ As quoted in Watson 375.

⁸⁷ As quoted in Watson 375.

qualities."⁸⁸ For Watkins, the ideal was still the standard of critical measure.

McCarthy details some of Fechter's other innovations, which included the way he walked (no "measured strides"), and talked (no measured pauses). He also abandoned what McCarthy called the usual "unbroken gloom" of previous Hamlets and added a measure of jocularly which deepened the character and made it fresher.⁸⁹ During the Gravedigger's scene it had been traditional to stand downstage center like "a popular preacher addressing a hushed and reverent congregation," but Fechter sat on a tombstone with his legs crossed and spoke with "easy levity."⁹⁰ McCarthy was a sophisticated enough critic to see that the obvious approach to Hamlet was not necessarily the most insightful. The fact that Hamlet was not universally gloomy made for a character "of varied mood; a man of genius and of fate, whose humor it was to clothe his profoundest thoughts sometimes in a disguise of careless indifference utterly impenetrable to such dull and commonplace observers as the homely grave-digger and his men."⁹¹

⁸⁸ As Quoted in Watson 376.

⁸⁹ McCarthy 248.

⁹⁰ McCarthy 248.

⁹¹ McCarthy 249.

Woods recalled another of Fechter's untraditional moments which came during his interview with the ghost. He claimed that Garrick, like Fechter, cowered in fear at the sight of the ghost, a bit of business for which he was roundly criticized. Garrick's interpretation notwithstanding, to cower and quake was considered to be out of step with the accepted way of playing the scene--that of approaching the ghost with solemnity and veneration. Woods indicated his preference for the old way.⁹²

Although Hamlet was panned by some critics in its later incarnations, particularly in America, the London debut was greeted by rave notices. Despite his foreign accent and demeanor, despite, or more appropriately, because of, his application of the French school to English tragedy, Fechter was hailed as a genius. His Hamlet ran one-hundred-and-fifteen nights, which was a considerable run in those days. The general critical consensus was accurately reflected by the Critic, which said:

M. Fechter's Hamlet is a performance it behoves every admirer of Shakespeare to see; and let him only go with an unbiased mind and a determination not to take offence at a few, and a very few, slight foreign mannerisms, and we do not fear but he will thank us for the recommendation, and ratify the judgement we have

⁹² Woods 515.

passed upon this admirable actor.⁹³

St. James' Magazine asserted that Fechter, "by his success in this great character, has inaugurated a CRISIS [sic] which tends to the advancement of our English stage."⁹⁴

Ironically, the St James' critic openly anticipated the application of Fechter's talents to Othello.⁹⁵ Fechter was about to do just that, but he would find the London press not quite so receptive, and Hamlet a tough act to follow. There were times, in Othello, when Fechter's subtle acting style earned him hoots of derision from the critics.⁹⁶ At other times, he was condemned for remaking Shakespeare into a sensational French drame. Part of the problem was that Othello, much more so than Hamlet, brought out Fechter's more sensational tendencies. The murder of a defenseless woman in her bed by a husband blinded by sexual jealousy has much more potential for sensation than a vacillating university student undergoing an inward struggle. Fechter's acting style may have been comparatively subtle, but he was still a product of the

⁹³ "Shakespeare and His Treatment," rev. of Hamlet by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Critic 6 Apr. 1861: 433.

⁹⁴ "Hamlet at the Princess's Theatre," rev. of Hamlet by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, St. James' Magazine Aug.-Nov. 1861: 376.

⁹⁵ St. James' Magazine 376.

⁹⁶ See discussion in Chapter Four regarding III.i.

popular theatre. To be sure, his vehicles had been respectable; Fechter never played in booth theatres or in any of the more notorious spectacle houses,⁹⁷ but his repertoire was still that of melodrama, albeit of the gentlemanly variety. As the next two chapters will demonstrate, there were a number of factors which contributed to the negative critical reaction to Othello. His choice of material, in conjunction with his naturalism, French sensibility and melodramatic style all played a part. But most significantly, Fechter was an actor of the popular theatre, and that did not sit well with the guardians of British high culture.

⁹⁷ Six years after Othello, Fechter did, however, appear in Wilkie Collins' No Thoroughfare at the Adelphi (Field 70), a house which, along with the Olympic, was characterized by Watson as one of "the most conspicuous in the development of the 'illegitimate' drama. . ." (Watson 73).

CHAPTER III

FECHTER'S "OTHELLO": A GENERAL EXAMINATION

The typical thesis concerning nineteenth-century actors tends to evaluate its subject by a fixed criteria, speaking in terms of "good" acting or "bad" acting, "natural" acting or "artificial" acting. Noble's dissertation on Fechter's American career, for example, seems largely dedicated to persuading us that Fechter was a good actor, and Ehret's thesis is equally convinced of Fechter's naturalness. The proof of these assertions lies in the evaluative comments of eyewitnesses. For Ehret and Noble, Fechter was a good, natural actor because people that saw him said so, and recorded their opinion for posterity. There is nothing wrong with this sort of project; the present project also relies on the assertions of eyewitnesses.

This study is not, however, concerned about using Fechter's production of Othello to make those same assertions about the quality and naturalness of Fechter's acting; such an exercise would be redundant. The purpose of examining Othello is to see the extent to which Fechter can be considered a transitional actor. Good, bad, natural or no, Fechter's work reflects the rupture of a paradigm, and

his work in Othello makes that rupture especially apparent.

That Fechter's Hamlet was widely praised and drew an enthusiastic critical and popular response is undeniable. But, for some reason[s], the critical honeymoon came to an abrupt end with Othello. Fechter's approach to his second Shakespearean role was just as picturesque, colloquial and "untraditional" as had been his Hamlet. He was still committed to the particular brand of naturalism which had so successfully informed his studied, contemplative reading of the Danish prince; and yet, his appearance as Othello caused a critical backlash. While this backlash might appear to have been the result of novelty turning stale, there was actually much more to the negative notices than the mere discard of fashion.

This chapter summarizes the critical response to Fechter's Othello. This is not a prompt-book study, and there is no intention to render a minute description of every scene or analyze every cut line or altered phrase. As the Sunday Times (obviously not writing for posterity) declared, "Those who want to know what M. Fechter's Othello is must see it for themselves, and they must see it more than once."¹ Since this is impossible, I offer instead an analysis of Fechter's performance sensibility. After all, it is not so much the reality of the piece which is of

¹ Rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Sunday Times [London] 27 Oct. 1861: 3.

concern here, as it is the perception it engendered in the critics and public. Words such as "passion," "tradition" and "melodrama," were the critical buzzwords used in almost every review of Othello. These are loaded terms which reflect certain biases held by the critics.

There was no dearth of friendly commentary regarding the production, despite what historians have said; the Times and Sunday Times were quite favorable in their opinions.² Henry Morley, after one small caveat about the wisdom of abandoning all stage tradition, proclaimed Othello to be "most interesting and most excellent, deserving even of a higher success than his Hamlet. . . ."³ The Evening Star and Dial admitted that the production was not, like Hamlet, "a gem without flaw," but also said that "those who love to see Shakspeare off stilts and out of buckram . . . may rest assured that the Othello of Mr. Fechter will afford them genuine and intense delight."⁴ Said the Atlas, Fechter "has re-cut and re-set the Shakspearean gems, and a more glittering and artistic presentment has not been witnessed

² See Sunday Times 27 Oct. 1861: 3 and rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Times [London] 24 Oct. 1861: 9.

³ [Henry Morley], "Mr. Fechter's Othello," rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Examiner [London] 26 Oct. 1861: 680.

⁴ Rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Evening Star and Dial 24 Oct. 1861: 1.

in this century."⁵ Not to be rhetorically outmatched by the Atlas, the Press called Fechter's portrayal "one of the most memorable events of the modern stage."⁶

These favorable notices were, however, not much more than merely laudatory in their descriptions. The preponderance of specific evidence concerning the production comes, not from these friendly reviews, but from the hostile ones. The hostile critics, the ones who felt that their traditions and sensibilities were being threatened gave more detailed descriptions. Most Victorian theatre reviews give little production detail, and are not usually ideal sources to use when compiling a substantive account of stage business and other minutiae of performance. But most Victorian productions were not as threatening as was Fechter's. At any rate, those who were enthusiastic about the Fechter innovations tended to stick with the standard, undetailed approach to criticism, while those who were most appalled described those passages which most offended.

A general critical overview of the production follows, as well as a general description of the Fechter portrayal and conception. This general overview is followed by more particular descriptions of key parts of the performance in

⁵ "M. Fechter as Othello," rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Atlas [London] 26 Oct. 1861: 691.

⁶ Rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Press [London] 26 Oct. 1861: 1034.

Chapter IV. In both this chapter and Chapter Four, Fechter's published acting edition is of key importance. Ordinarily, published scripts would not be considered directly relevant to a study of performance, but this case is different because Fechter published his libretto coincidentally with the opening night of the production. Most of the critics appear to have retained a copy of the script even as they watched the performance, and it was the rare review which did not take into consideration Fechter's explicit written conception of the play. In effect, the acting edition became part of the performance, influencing and informing the audience's understanding of the work. In the acting edition, with its copious stage directions (a novelty at the time), we have, in Fechter's own words, the manner in which he intended Othello to be apprehended by the audience. It is impossible to know the extent to which Fechter's published script actually served to manipulate the audience's interpretation of and reaction to the production, but there can be no doubt about its function as an informant in the construction of meaning.

Within the body of commentary regarding Fechter's Othello, there were a number of different themes and concerns which consistently resurfaced. It is difficult to describe these topics separately and distinctly because they overlap and inform each other. Fechter's colloquial, Bergsonian style was, not surprisingly, of major interest to

both admirer and detractor. The fact that Fechter was French appeared to irk many of the critics, and a pattern of resentment against the perceived French corruption of the English stage emerges within their critique. Furthermore, Fechter was accused of making Othello into a melodrama, a term which, for the critics, was synonymous with stage vulgarity. The association of the popular with the vulgar is, of course, hardly unknown in our own century.

All of these criticisms fit neatly into the general critique that Fechter was "untraditional." Despite the consensus that he was bucking tradition, the exact nature of that tradition is never clearly identified or defined. Indeed, there was not so much a monolithic Shakespearean tradition as there was a perception of such a tradition. Whatever Fechter was doing on stage, it was not seen as "traditional" by his friends or his enemies, so it is with this notion of "tradition" that this study will proceed.

Tradition

If his intention was to give offence, Fechter certainly knew how to make a proper start. In the preface to his acting edition, Fechter fired his first volley:

You will not find in it [the acting edition] a single annotation to swell the number of those myriad comments which already encumber the different texts of Shakspeare.

Here is simply An Acting Edition, entirely to the purport, and for the use of The Stage; free of all pretence to compete with the elaborate

publications intended only for the library.

Shakspeare's plays were certainly written to be acted--not recited.

I therefore ('most humbly bending to their state') offer to the Public, who have so kindly, and effectively, supported me in my bold attempt,--and to my Comrades in art, . . . the fruit of nearly twenty years' unceasing 'labour of love' for the Scenic Representation of the Great Master!
. . . .

It is now for others more qualified to press forward, to sap the foundations of that wormeaten and unwholesome prison where dramatic art languishes in fetters, and which is called:
'TRADITION!'⁷

Not surprisingly, this declaration struck much of the British critical establishment as arrogant. Fechter had trespassed in an area which the Sunday Times said was one "in which we have almost a religious pre-concern. . . ."⁸ Said Fraser's, as "modestly as we doubt not Mr. Fechter meant it [his preface], it had much better, we think, have been left unsaid."⁹ Lewes was incensed by Fechter's audacity. "We, who have seen Kean in Othello," he sniffed, "may surely be excused if we believe that we have seen Othello acted . . . we look upon Fechter's representation as acting, indeed, but as very bad acting."¹⁰ Ottley also made

⁷ Charles Albert Fechter, preface, Othello by [William] Shakspeare, 2nd. ed (London, 1861): iii-iv.

⁸ Sunday Times [London] 27 Oct. 1861: 3.

⁹ "Shakspeare and His Latest Stage Interpreters," Fraser's Dec. 1861: 778.

¹⁰ [George Henry Lewes], "Fechter in Hamlet and Othello," Blackwood's Magazine Dec. 1861: 749.

the Kean comparison, slamming the preface as presumptuous:

M. Fechter probably has not, as we have (and never to forget it), seen Kean 'act' and 'recite' in Othello, or, we give him credit to believe of him, that he would never have thought it necessary or becoming to take the initiative in putting upon the stage a version of this play so utterly at variance with all the conduct of the business which accompanied his (Kean's) performance. . . .¹¹

Fechter, said Ottley, had laid "violent and irreverent hands upon our great dramatic poet. . . ."¹² It was the public's duty, Ottley charged, to pause and reflect "before we accept him [Fechter] in his gigantic, self-assumed mission."¹³

Fraser's theorized that Fechter's success with Hamlet must have "encouraged him to believe that whatever is 'traditional' is wrong." This was foolishness, "for traditions are nothing more than the methods which genius has discovered, and experience approved."¹⁴ The defenders of "tradition" had been been aroused, and the battle was joined. The only problem was that no one really bothered to define the exact nature of what it was they were defending.

There are a number of general sources to which the student of theatre may refer if he or she wishes to construct some sort of composite of the "traditional"

¹¹ Henry Ottley, Fechter's Version of Othello Critically Analyzed (London, 1861): 9.

¹² Ottley 3.

¹³ Ottley 5.

¹⁴ Fraser's 779.

nineteenth-century Othello.¹⁵ What he or she will most likely discover in doing so, is that such a composite portrait is nearly impossible to construct. This is because there really was no monolithic performance tradition with regard to stage business. This is not to say that there were no stage practices particular to Othello which were practiced throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by more than one actor. James R. Sieman's research uncovers a number of re-occurring practices which actors consistently

¹⁵ In addition to Marvin Rosenberg's The Masks of Othello (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), see James R. Sieman, "'Nay, that's not next': Othello, V.ii in Performance, 1760-1900," Shakespeare Quarterly 37 (1986) 38-51; C. Douglas Abel, "'Alexander the Little': The Question of Stature in Edmund Kean's Othello," Theatre History Studies 9 (1989): 93-105; Daniel J. Watermeier ed., Edwin Booth's Performances: The Mary Isabella Stone Commentaries (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990): 149-211; Arthur Colby Sprague, Shakespearean Players and Performances (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1953):71-86 and Shakespeare and the Actors (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1944) 185-223; William Winter, Shakespeare on the Stage (New York: Moffat, 1911): 232-319; and Horace Howard Furness ed., Othello, New Variorum Edition, seventh ed. (Philadelphia, 1886). Sieman's project focuses on the last murder scene as performed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Sprague's Shakespeare and the Actors includes a section on Othello as performed from the Restoration through the late nineteenth century. Sprague's work includes discussion of Garrick, Edmund Kean, John Philip Kemble, the elder and younger Booth, Macready, Salvini, Fechter, among many others. Winter's is likewise a brief history of the role as performed by actors from Richard Burbage to Ermete Novelli. Furness' work is a compendium of literary commentary and stage business, including that of Fechter. Abel and Watermeier give us descriptions of the individual Othellos of Messrs. Kean (focusing primarily on the element of physical stature) and Booth (who was slightly after Fechter). George Odell's Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving 2 vols. (1920; New York, Blom, 1963) should also be mentioned here, but Odell's project is very broad and concerned more with chronicling names and dates than it is with the specifics of stage business in particular plays.

employed in the final scene of the play. For Sieman, these bits of business constituted evidence of "a culture trying to control a text that it desires to experience in the theatre but that it also strongly disapproves."¹⁶ He cites the practice of keeping the bed far upstage, presumably to preserve decorum,¹⁷ and the practice of having Othello enter the bedchamber carrying a light and a sword.¹⁸ However, the full body of evidence Sieman brings to his essay indicates that, far from being rigidly set, Othello was different every time anyone new assayed the part. Even the two examples mentioned above were hardly constant. For instance, Edwin Booth murdered Desdemona downstage and Macready strangled her behind curtains, after which he stabbed her "in full view of the audience. . . ." ¹⁹ But Sieman's project is to establish the ways in which the violence and eroticism of the play were made palatable to audience sensibilities, not to isolate a concrete, monolithic tradition. As Henry Morley said in his review of Othello, "No really great English actor, ever has fettered himself by traditions of the English stage. . . ." ²⁰

¹⁶ Sieman 39.

¹⁷ Sieman 40.

¹⁸ Sieman 40-41.

¹⁹ Sieman 47.

²⁰ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 680.

Various other sources will confirm the diversity of interpretation which characterized Othello in the nineteenth century. Rosenberg's study also recognizes the Victorian obsession with propriety,²¹ but makes clear that there were as many interpretations of Othello as there were actors who played the role. The work of Furness, Watermeier and Sprague bear this out as well; the stage business of Othello was not a constant factor in production. Even Fechter's textual alteration was not really the major cause of the critical uproar. His

text is even 'purer' than that of his predecessors. Thus the last 'whore' left by Lacy is eliminated; Iago's provocative 'man-talk' to Cassio about Desdemona and her wedding bed (II,ii) is out; and so are the erotic elements from Iago's description of Cassio's dream when he lay with the lieutenant. . . .²²

The Observer reported rumors that, in the Fechter production, "all old conventionalisms were to be swept away--that the purity of the text, wherever it had been infringed upon, was to be restored. . . ."²³ This was no small exaggeration; for Fechter's cuts largely agreed with cuts made by Kemble, Macready and others.²⁴ Kemble, Macready and

²¹ Rosenberg 55-60.

²² Rosenberg 74.

²³ Rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Observer [London] 27 Oct. 1861: 1.

²⁴ See J.P. Kemble, Shakspeare's Othello, the Moor of Venice (New York, 1807) and Macready's Covent Garden acting edition of Othello (London, 1838).

Fechter all omit the character of the clown, most or all of the scene in IV.iii where Emilia helps Desedemona prepare for bed, and most of the action after Othello's suicide. Fechter did, however, restore the character of Bianca the courtesan, a character which had long been excised in production.

Still, there was grumbling. Fraser's strongly lamented Fechter's cutting of Shakespeare's text, also mentioning Kean (presumably Charles) as one equally guilty of textual trespass.²⁵ "Strange proof of love," said Henry Ottley, "to cut out away numberless of the most beautiful passages of the author's text . . . and to pervert many other passages in such a way that neither the poet, nor his numerous disciples should recognize them as his!"²⁶ The Athenaeum came to Fechter's defense on this score, however, and took Ottley to task:

Mr. Ottley absurdly thinks that a foreign actor takes an unwarrantable liberty in availing himself of the privilege [of altering the text and sustaining a new reading]. This position manifestly involves a previous question, namely, should he be permitted to act Shakspeare at all on an English stage?²⁷

It should be noted that Ottley took issue with the textual alterations far more vehemently than did anyone else and his criticism can hardly be said to have reflected a

²⁵ Fraser's 779.

²⁶ Ottley 4.

²⁷ "The New Othello," Athenaeum 16 Nov. 1861: 654.

consensus among the critical community. Much the the same can be said of the Critic reviewer, who voiced opposition to any textual changes for purposes of performance. The Critic's contention that Shakespeare was meant to be read and not performed placed that periodical well outside the the mainstream of theatre criticism. It condemned what it called "the prosaic conception of the actor," apparently regarding itself as a guardian of high culture, ensuring that public exposure be reserved only for correct interpretations of Shakespeare. Shakespeare was such a privileged icon, it was better that his work never be subjected to the degradation of mimesis: "It is a general remark of cultivated persons that they prefer rather to read than see Shakespeare's plays performed;" said the Critic "and this is a just sentiment, for the imagination, however pure and genuine, is a delicate organ. . . ." The Critic evidently had been nursing a grudge against David Garrick since the previous century, deriding him for "cutting Shakespeare's text as suited his green-room mind."²⁸ Although the cuts were galling to certain critics (principally Ottley), textual alteration was not the principle cause of the Fechter-bashing; if it had been, then all of the Shakespearean actors of the nineteenth century would have been condemned along with him. J.P. Kemble and

²⁸ Rev. of Charles Fechter's acting edition of Othello by William Shakespeare, Critic 2 Nov. 1861: 446.

Macready, to name two prominent tragedians from earlier in the century, certainly did their share of textual pruning, and many of their cuts roughly agree with Fechter's.

And yet, the production quite clearly represented something new, something which was missing from the Othellos of G.V. Brooke or Samuel Phelps, to cite two of Fechter's contemporaries. That something lay in the realm of sensibility, of Gestalt. Much of Fechter's stage business was largely new; and yet it was the overall sensibility of his conception, the ambiance of the production, which caused the critical stir.

For one thing, Fechter's production had a uniquely ensemble quality. The star system, as most students of theatre history are aware, was a firmly entrenched institution in Fechter's day. Fechter's work represents one of the earliest attempts at subverting that system in favor of an ensemble. Given Fechter's ego and temperament, it may seem surprising that he had a reputation for giving the stage to others and for eschewing center stage when he felt that it was in the best interests of the production. His cultivation of an ensemble was one of the few areas in which, as far as Othello was concerned, he garnered more praise than blame. Some of his harshest critics allowed that, in this matter, Fechter's scorn for tradition was well-advised.

The Critic referred to Fechter's ensemble approach as his "principle." Acknowledging that he was helping to destroy the star system, it offered grudging praise. Fechter's staging was, it explained, "more self-denying than egotistical."²⁹ This unexpected bit of approbation is not all that surprising when it is remembered that the Critic was speaking from the purist's point of view. The star system had encouraged managers to prune Shakespeare and make numerous changes in the text whenever it was conducive to the star's ego. Anything which could be seen to undermine such a system would probably have been considered at least a small victory within the purist community.

Other admirers of Fechter's self-denying stage aesthetic included the London Review, the Athenaeum, the Atlas, the Times and the Press. Fechter was, said the London Review, "as the stage manager, . . . his own rival as the mere actor, and the manner in which he has changed the whole 'business' of the play, compels us to give the first place to the innovations he has introduced in contempt of all traditions. . . ." The Review felt that Fechter's staging downplayed the prominence of the title character even if it also tended to crush him "under the weight of his

²⁹ "The Representation of 'Othello' at the Princess's Theatre," rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Critic 26 Oct. 1861: 428.

own ornaments." ³⁰ The Press maintained that Fechter's direction ensured that there was "not one insignificant character. Everyone is remarkable for some individuality; and on the whole they form a complete gallery of human characters."³¹

It was not just that Fechter was generous in giving others the stage and allowing for character development in supporting roles; his sense of the picturesque, of total stage aesthetic, precluded the traditional staging with Othello standing in the center, the rest of the cast surrounding him in a semi-circle, deferring to the star. Fechter's staging foreshadowed that of the Meiningen Players in its carefully planned and picturesque choreography. "The walk down to the footlights and the old crossings in front during the dialogue, are abolished," explained the London Review. "The furniture on the stage is turned to use, and the characters sit easily while they converse; much awkwardness is thus got rid of."³²

It was apparent that the whole company had been drilled with the objective of presenting a unified and organically picturesque whole. Again, the London Review: "He has taken up the play as if he had received it in manuscript, and

³⁰ "M. Fechter's 'Othello,'" rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, London Review 26 Oct. 1861: 521.

³¹ Press 26 Oct. 1861: 1034.

³² London Review 26 Oct. 1861: 521.

asked himself what is the utmost that can be got out of every scene? The groupings are more picturesque, the whole action more easy and varied, the 'effects' more numerous. . . ."³³ The Review also commented that Mr. Ryder, Fechter's Iago, had "gained much by adopting what we presume are M. Fechter's improvements of the action."³⁴ The Athenaeum thought it obvious that the entire company was "working together on a general plan. The result was," it claimed, "that the performance had an air of naturalness and reality, sufficient of itself to command success."³⁵ John Ryder and Carlotta Leclercq, who played Desdemona, must have had to unlearn all of what they knew about staging, or so thought the Times:

People sit where they were wont to stand, are scattered about where they used to be huddled together, are formed into picturesque groups where they once were marshalled into the unvarying straight line. . . . Woe to the merely conventional actor, who, relying on his knowledge of routine, shall venture on the path now prescribed. He will find himself on the right hand when he ought to be on the left, he will knock against chairs and tables when he expects to find a clear pathway before him; he will stand in isolated wretchedness when he ought to form one of a well-devised group.³⁶

³³ London Review 26 Oct. 1861: 521.

³⁴ London Review 26 Oct. 1861: 521.

³⁵ Rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Athenaeum 26 Oct. 1861: 549.

³⁶ Times 24 Oct. 1861: 9.

The Atlas loved the new aesthetic. "Even the dumb actors are made to contribute to the general effect. They appear on the stage, not to show the resources of the management, but because their presence is necessary for the completion of the picture, and the graphic elucidation of the story."³⁷ Fechter's picturesque and ensemble staging brought a hitherto unknown dimension to high tragedy.

But just as it was not the stage business and arrangement of text which made Othello so controversial, neither was the ensemble and picturesque quality the sole or even the most profound non-traditional element of the production. Rather, it was the concept behind the business and staging which offended and thrilled Fechter's detractors and admirers. As the Times aptly put it, Fechter was "a thorough revolutionist of the drama. Some of his changes are made with a view to pictorial effect, but most of them may be traced to a fresh conception of the play and its purpose, and a desire to represent it in the strictest spirit of reality."³⁸ The real challenge to tradition, then, came from this "fresh conception." Exciting to some and distasteful to others, Fechter was doing the unthinkable; he was popularizing Shakespeare, employing the sensibility of "vulgar" melodrama in the service of the most sacred of British cultural icons.

³⁷ Atlas 26 Oct. 1861: 691.

³⁸ Times 24 Oct. 1861: 9.

Fechter's Melodramatic Approach

Never has there been a genre with a worse reputation than melodrama. Today the term is most often used pejoratively to describe anything considered to be dualistic, moralistic, formulaic and maudlin. It is easy, given the widespread popularity of the melodrama in the nineteenth century, to suppose that it enjoyed during that period a much higher level of respect than it does today. But even though great masses of people flocked to see it in all of its forms throughout the last century, there remained a significant portion of the intelligentsia to whom the melodrama was the epitome of vulgarity. One hundred and thirty years ago, melodrama was considered in much the same way as television is today: everybody seemed to patronize it; no respectable person admitted to holding it in high regard. Since theater critics were (presumably) "respectable," it is not surprising that when they spoke of Fechter's Othello as reminiscent of domestic melodrama or of the spectacle at the Porte St. Martin,³⁹ it was not meant to be a compliment.

There are certain scholars, notably Booth and Rowell, who have a tendency to describe the social dynamics of the Victorian theatre in rather general terms. Both regard the early nineteenth-century theatre as being a popular, working

³⁹ As late as 1944 Fechter's Othello was still being denounced as melodramatic "claptrap" by Arthur Colby Sprague in Shakespeare and the Actors: 221.

class, plebian institution which was somehow transformed into a middle-class, and therefore "respectable," institution later in the century. Says Booth:

In 1850 theatres were still suffering financially from the lack of aristocratic and fashionable patronage and the absence of a great proportion of the respectable middle class. Slowly, however, the theatre passed out of popular control and these classes returned.⁴⁰

Booth attributes this return to a number of factors, including Queen Victoria's patronage, her appointment of Charles Kean to the position of Master of Revels, Samuel Phelps' "taming the hitherto unruly audiences of Islington" in his great management of Sadler's Wells, and the Bancroft management of the Prince of Wales's.⁴¹ Late in the century, the new respectability of the theatre was reflected in the knighthoods received by both Irving and Bancroft.⁴² In a chapter aptly titled "The Return of Respectability," Rowell takes a similar view, crediting Bancroft and T.W. Robertson as primary catalysts in the shifting of audience demographics.⁴³

Granted, Booth and Rowell sometimes fail to see the theatre in all of its diversity, and their analysis does not take into consideration the glaring exceptions to their

⁴⁰ Booth, introduction, English Nineteenth Century Plays, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969): 3.

⁴¹ Booth, English Nineteenth Century Plays 3.

⁴² Booth, English Nineteenth Century Plays 3-4.

⁴³ Rowell 75-102.

general rules. Madame Vestris played to nothing, if not a middle-class, "respectable" audience during her tenure at the Olympic, and even Booth admits that well into the era of Robertson, Irving and Bancroft, theatres such as the Marylebone and the Adelphi were still attracting sizable working-class audiences.⁴⁴ These caveats aside, however, it can be said that by the end of the century, the mainstream theatres of the West End were controlled by the middle class. Booth and Rowell are not flatly wrong; there was a trend toward a more middle-class theatre throughout the century. After all, the audiences who began the century with the Old Price Riots were a far cry from the quiet, fashionably-dressed crowd who applauded Mrs. Dane's Defence from the comfort of the stalls. Due to a process of legislative reform, expanding empire and the economic benefits accrued through Colonialism, England was gradually becoming predominantly middle-class--and so were its theatres. Clive Barker has pointed out in his "A Theatre for the People," an essay which frames the decline of the patent theatres and the rise of the minors in terms of class struggle, that:

The class which produces the political and social reform leaders produces the cultural leaders, the playwrights and increasingly the actors and the managers. What patently needs examining is the extent to which the theatre of this class reflects their struggle for supremacy, and the form and content of their drama needs to be re-examined as

⁴⁴ Booth, English Nineteenth Century Plays 5.

a positive reflection of the class struggle.⁴⁵

Perhaps a better way to describe what was happening is to say that, as the century progressed, the middle class began to appropriate and make more palatable the domestic melodrama for its own consumption. Certainly the changes in audience demographics saw concomitant changes in the plays themselves. Fashionable audiences demanded fashionable settings, and the characters in the domestic melodrama became more affluent, polished and urbane.⁴⁶

It is significant, then, that the Fechter Othello takes place right about the time as do these social transitions. Such transitions never occur overnight, Fechter's Othello falling right in the middle of the twenty-to-thirty-year period of change. During this period, the term "melodrama" still retained something of a plebian, lower class connotation among the middle-class intelligentsia, even while many members of that same class were beginning to flock to see domestic melodramas, such as those Robertson would be churning out later in the 1860s. A reading of the criticism concerning Othello certainly suggests that the term "melodrama" still held such a negative connotation in

⁴⁵ Clive Barker, "A Theatre for the People," Essays on Nineteenth Century British Theatre, proc. of a symposium sponsored by the Manchester University Department of Drama, 10-12 Apr. 1970, eds. Kenneth Richards and Peter Thomson (London: Methuen, 1971): 15.

⁴⁶ Michael Booth, English Melodrama (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965): 145.

1861.

It is also important to remember that there were, and had been for some time, various gradations of respectability within the melodrama. Fechter's own status was an actor of the romantic melodrama; like Kean, Macready and many of the well-known actors who came before him, he never saw the inside of a penny-gaff or a booth theatre. Fechter, as far as we know, never performed in an East End working-class theatre or starred in one of those plays which were "hastily prepared versions of actual crimes. . . ." ⁴⁷ Plays like Ruy Blas, The Lady of Lyons and even The Corsican Brothers were much higher up on the ladder of respectability than was the fare at Astley's. But, as Chapter Two of this study has shown, even these more respectable melodramas were considered to be clearly inferior to high tragedy. ⁴⁸ "It is scarcely an exaggeration," Marvin Carlson points out, "to call the French romantic drama melodrama elevated to the status of literature." ⁴⁹ Compared to the grand tragedy of Hamlet or Othello, however, Fechter's repertoire would have been seen as a popular one; his French style, so widely admired when his character was named Claude Melnotte, seemed

⁴⁷ Booth, English Melodrama 51.

⁴⁸ See discussion in Chapter Two on the criticism regarding Fechter's suitability for melodramas such as The Corsican Brothers as opposed to his supposed unsuitability for high tragedy.

⁴⁹ Marvin Carlson, The French Stage in the Nineteenth Century (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1972): 4.

plebian and vulgar when his character's name was Othello.

Melodrama is French in origin; the term was coined to describe Rousseau's Pygmalion in the late eighteenth century. Rousseau, believing that French was not suitably lyrical, wrote Pygmalion so that the text and the music alternated with each other. Music was used to create an emotional mood, not as the simultaneous accompaniment to the libretto.⁵⁰ Although the term was coined to describe Pygmalion, it is Pixérécourt who is generally held to have been the chief facilitator of the genre. His plays combined the stock characters, music, moralistic themes, dualistic world view and spectacle which really defined the genre in the popular mind.

The new drama pioneered by Pixérécourt engendered a new style of acting. Marvin Carlson holds that melodrama was central to the general movement toward realism taking place throughout the century. He sees realism "as a variety of romanticism" and not necessarily a reaction to it:

It was the romantics who first became concerned with such questions as historical authenticity of settings and costumes, the effects of physical environment on human action, and the presentation on stage of realistic emotions. However exaggerated melodrama acting may have been, its audiences invariably described it as closer to life than the statuesque classicism of the traditional theatre. No dramatist before Pixérécourt was so careful of physical detail and so concerned with its accuracy, and after him Hugo and Dumas supervised every aspect of their productions as Pixérécourt had done, preparing the

⁵⁰ James L. Smith, Melodrama (London: Methuen, 1973): 1.

way for the modern director.⁵¹

This excerpt from Carlson demonstrates much of what was perceived to be peculiarly French about Fechter's approach. Fechter's brand of naturalism, his picturesque detail and strict supervision of his productions are all in the tradition of French melodrama.⁵²

There was also an overtly political aspect of melodrama which, at least on some level, must have informed the English middle-class critics in their perception of the genre. The relationship of melodrama to the French Revolution, to the terror and chaos of that period, may not be clearly definable, but the association exists nevertheless. The middle class, which was benefitting so greatly by the process of English legislative reform, could only have looked upon the French political experience of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with a mixture of fear and loathing. Britain's ruling class had avoided revolution through reform, but the prospect of bloody revolt extending across the channel must have seemed

⁵¹ Carlson 4-5.

⁵² English melodrama, of course, cannot be said to have evolved in a straight line of development from the French tradition. After all, the French melodrama owed much to the English gothic novel and the English melodrama undoubtedly was heavily influenced by the sentimental comedy of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the French influence was the most obvious, especially considering the huge number of adaptations of French plays which were produced in England during the nineteenth century.

very real. This apprehension would surely have disappeared by mid-century, but associations and resonances have a way of lingering and of sustaining irrational prejudices.

Frederick Brown has argued that melodrama was the natural cultural product of the Revolution. He notes that literary historians, when seeking to explain the origins of melodrama,

seldom look, however, . . . to life itself, or, rather, to the public Pixérécourt addressed. 'The entire people had just enacted in the streets and on the public squares the greatest drama of all time,' Nodier observed from the eminence of mid-nineteenth-century France. 'Everyone had been an actor in this bloody play, everyone had been either a soldier or a revolutionary or an outlaw. These spectators, who smelled gunpowder and blood, required emotions analogous to those from which they had been cut off by the re-establishment of order. They needed conspiracies, dark cells, scaffolds, fields of battle, gunpowder, and blood.'⁵³

Brown summarizes his thesis on the connection between melodrama and the Revolution:

Melodrama ritualized the terror. Its very core was a world view that allowed of no profane middle ground between virtue and evil, that pictured innocence hard put by enemies whose deviousness and implacability constituted a kind of brute nature transcending the merely human, a diabolical underground.⁵⁴

The melodramatic ambiance that Fechter brought to the role of Othello put the critics in a quandary: how to deal with an actor whose work resonated with the sensibility of

⁵³ Frederick Brown, Theater and Revolution: The Culture of the French Stage (New York: Viking, 1980): 88-89.

⁵⁴ Brown 89.

what was still perceived to be an inferior genre, but who continued to earn the favor of the very social and political class to which they, the critics, belonged.⁵⁵ Some of them justified this disparity by positing a public which needed cultural and critical supermen to help them understand and appreciate what constituted "high" art on the stage.

Ottley, Fraser's, and The London Review were particularly elitist in their attitudes. Ottley dismissed Fechter's popularity as immaterial; the public was a slave to fashion, to any new thing which captured its fancy. Oddly enough, he bought into the notion that "the people," presumably other people than those attending Othello, have an innate wisdom and common sense which would not tolerate such an abasement of the stage as was represented by Fechter's production: "the stalling off of the pit in many of our fashionable theatres . . . has no doubt, conduced in some degree to this result." Ottley alludes to the audience's function as that of an assistant, in the same manner as the Greek chorus. The audiences at the Princess's

⁵⁵ Field makes it clear that Fechter was having no difficulty drawing crowded houses. There was, apparently, a clear difference of opinion between the critical community and the largely middle-class, fashionable audiences who patronized the Princess's. According to Field, the production continued into the pantomime season and ended only when Fechter refused to appear "in conjunction with Columbine and Harlequin." Augustus Harris, the manager of the Princess's begged Fechter to reconsider, but Fechter did not return until the spring, playing the role of Iago. Fechter's Iago "attracted large audiences" for a number of weeks. See Kate Field, C.A. Fechter (Boston, 1882): 52-53.

had failed in their obligation; they were decadent. "It is not," he said, "'the thing' to clap with lemon-coloured kid-gloves, nor to hiss from behind a white cravat."⁵⁶ The implication was that the real, "common" people would have known better than to tolerate such impingements on good taste and authorial intention as had been carried out by Fechter. That the "common" people to which Ottley refers were in the habit of jamming into booth theatres and penny gaffs applauding all sorts of bastardized and popularized versions of Shakespeare does not seem to matter.⁵⁷ Ottley's strategy was to posit a phony folk culture propagated by "common" people, a curious position when seen in light of the charge that Fechter was imbuing Shakespeare with a "vulgar" aesthetic.

Fraser's maintained that the public is easily misled, and worried that "False impressions" such as those offered by the acting edition and, presumably, the production itself, "injure the taste of the public in the most vital point."⁵⁸ The London Review's final comments also betrayed its elitist attitude about both the public and the new middle-class drama. Taking into account Fechter's emphasis

⁵⁶ Ottley 5.

⁵⁷ Booth tells us in English Melodrama that Booth theatres were notorious for shortened versions of Shakespeare which sometimes lasted only half an hour, sans everything "but ghosts, murders, combats and thrills" (55).

⁵⁸ Fraser's 778.

on action and pictorial quality, the Review had this to say:

The additions being material, and the deficiencies intellectual, it is very likely the play will attract. The public taste runs in the direction of physical achievement; it has thronged for some three hundred nights to see Mr. Boucicault jump head first down a stage trap. Had he gone feet first, the piece would have had no such intense interest. And if expressive action makes the poetical drama, there is no reason why M. Fechter's grand, serious pantomime in 'Othello' should not be a success.⁵⁹

The elements of the production which drew the most fire were elements which took the character of Othello out of the realm of the ideal and into that of the domestic. Part of the domestic sensibility of Othello was due to the replacement of the public Othello with that of a domestic, more self-absorbed persona. In addition there was also a substitution of what was perceived to be merely emotionalism or sentimentality for grand passion. Both of these changes veer toward the personal realm and away from the quality of publicness or publicity which had, for centuries, been part of the tragic idiom.

Underlying much of the criticism was a distrust and resentment of Fechter's Frenchness. "Is not our stage already abased enough," asked Ottley, referring to Fechter's Othello, "but it must receive a new indignity, and from a foreign source?" It was too much to endure that the British drama had "had to borrow our stage intrigues, our

⁵⁹ London Review 26 Oct. 1861: 521.

stage incidents, and our stage morality, from the French."⁶⁰ Ottley's comments suggest a xenophobia of sorts, a sense of nationalist indignation over the perceived abasement of the national poet.

The "physical details" to which Carlson refers and Brown's "brute nature" were manifested both in French and English melodrama in a preoccupation with the symptoms of human existence. In a footnote to his chapter on melodramatic acting, Booth explains that:

Intensely realistic scenes were a feature of melodramatic acting, a curious accompaniment to the artificial elements. Realistic delirium tremens scenes in temperance melodrama had a horrifying effect on audiences. J.B. Booth remembers Charles Warner as Coupeau in Drink with 'the vacant, staring eyes, the lolling, protruding tongue, the hideous clutching at the imaginary snakes, and the ghastly caressing of the last bottle of brandy before the horrible death.'⁶¹

Ottley articulated disgust with this clinical approach to reality. For him, the French were to blame for the decline of the English drama. Pointing out that French had always recognized the English proclivity for "Gothic savageness," Ottley held that the English drama was now "as

⁶⁰ Ottley 3.

⁶¹ Booth, English Melodrama 208. It should be noted, in fairness to Booth, that he makes this assertion in support of his argument that melodramatic acting was closely akin to tragic acting. Booth maintains that the melodramatic acting style originated in imitation of a posited histrionic tragic style. Although Booth's theory about the interaction between the tragic and the melodramatic styles is arguable, his point about the melodramatic emphasis on human symptoms remains valid.

far behind the French stage in every ingenious device of atrocity, as we were in advance of it in 1741." He went on to say that, because of the French influence on the English stage,

the dagger . . . has no terrors now unless its stroke be followed by a splutter of real blood; and poison is administered in vain, unless in small doses, so as to enable the actor to exhibit all the horrible circumstances of months of protracted suffering from its effects. . . .⁶²

This is a good description of the Porte St. Martin style of acting. Such acting was eminently un-ideal, preoccupied as it was with the symptoms of everyday life.

The Critic complained that Fechter had degraded Othello to the point that his representation was nothing more than that of a particular individual in a particular cultural context. "If it is to be a murder in a back street at Paris by a wretch whose mind was corrupted by vicious logic," the Critic critic wrote, "Then it becomes at once an intense French melodrama."⁶³ A week earlier the Critic had declared that Fechter treated the play

as 'an intense domestic drama,' and realises it as if the scene were Paris and the time yesterday; and very probably yearns to play it in a round hat and evening dress. He cannot do this, so he transports himself to Venice and forthwith revives the dresses, furniture, and apartments; subduing them to splendid pictorial effects. The, to us, sacred name of Shakespeare, alone prevents him, as it would seem, from introducing all the politesse

⁶² Ottley 4.

⁶³ Critic 2 Nov. 1861: 447: . .

of the time. . . .⁶⁴

This description alludes to a great deal of the annoyingly French, melodramatic qualities of the production: the domesticity, the colloquialism which destroyed the ideality of a piece set comfortably in the past and the spectacle and stage effect. "Not only is familiarity the groundwork of the action," said the Critic in another part of its review,

but it is carried out beyond what we may imagine the actuality. The general is easy to vulgarity, we should say, with his officers. He lolls on their shoulders; he pulls them about and pats them on the bosom. These are French manners more than either Italian or English; and they are scarcely the manners of a Moor raised to command for his tremendous military prowess. . . . A light, slim, Arab officer in the service of the French scarcely fulfils our idea of the deep-loving, self-possessed, retiring, isolated Othello.⁶⁵

The Critic expressed its wish that Fechter had simply re-written the play rather than debase the original. It would have been better had he employed some "clever Parisian dramatists to re-write the barbaric story, with all that mixture of familiarity and fustian, and of actuality and absurdity, with which their drama abounds."⁶⁶

Others concurred. Morley, who had not found the production entirely without merit, wrote that the piece was "marred in the conception . . . by a French melodramatic spirit, and now and then by a somewhat puerile

⁶⁴ Critic 26 Oct. 1861: 428.

⁶⁵ Critic 26 Oct. 1861: 429.

⁶⁶ Critic 26 Oct. 1861: 429.

sentimentality. . . ."67 Ottley felt that the French melodramatic aesthetic resulted in a busy atmosphere which impeded apprehension of the play's intrinsic greatness.⁶⁸ Fraser's thought Fechter lacked dignity. "He does not keep sufficiently aloof, like a man accustomed to trust to himself. He leans now on Iago's arm, now on Cassio's shoulder. He allows himself to be easily chafed."⁶⁹ Lewes said that Fechter

attempted to make the character natural, and made it vulgar. . . . Fechter is unpleasantly familiar, paws Iago about like an over-demonstrative schoolboy, shakes hands on the slightest provocation, and bears himself like the hero of French drame, but not like a hero of tragedy.⁷⁰

Both Fraser's and Ottley were especially sensitive to the portrayal by tragic characters of any human or physical needs. Their critique of Fechter's propensity for sitting was vociferous. Ottley complained that:

Sitting is continually resorted to by all the characters, to the obvious weakening of the effect,--it being a principle well established (subject to few and special exceptions) that the erect posture is essential to the advantageous display of the symmetric proportion, and for the achievement of dignified action, in the human figure. It is, also, almost necessary to heroic or persuasive utterance. Imagine a counsel arguing, a legislator haranguing, or even a lover

⁶⁷ [Henry Morley], rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Examiner [London] 2 Nov. 1861: 697.

⁶⁸ Ottley 10.

⁶⁹ Fraser's 785.

⁷⁰ Blackwood's 748-749.

pleading his suit, in a sitting posture
 It may be said that sitting is ordinarily resorted to in common life. Be it so, but,--and here we take our stand,-- Tragedy is not the poetry of common life.⁷¹

Fraser's agreed. Kean or Garrick, Fraser's explained, could have done what

Fechter has done; to dispose chairs, and tables, and couches, on which to lean and sit about, and so to give an air of so-called reality to the scene. But they knew well that to use these accessories so freely would have been to violate an important principle of art. . . . For when men are under strong emotion, they do not loll or sit.

Fraser's concluded that Fechter's realism was not actually realism at all. "[S]uch realists as Mr. Fechter, like their counterparts of the modern pre-Raphaelite school, are continually doing what is most unnatural."⁷² Lewes echoed the sentiment, saying that Fechter confused realism with "vulgarism." Although some of the stage arrangement was admirable, much of it was so misguided as "to make Othello a drame such as would suit the Porte St. Martin."

It is not consistent with the nature of tragedy to obtrude the details of daily life. All that lounging on tables and lolling against chairs, &c., which help to convey a sense of reality in the drame, are as unnatural in tragedy as it would be to place the 'Sleeping Faun' of Phidias on a comfortable feather-bed.⁷³

⁷¹ Ottley 11.

⁷² Fraser's 780.

⁷³ Blackwood's 749.

Even with all the attention on scenic effect and human symptoms, Fechter managed to retain a certain subtlety. His style, as noted in Chapter Two, did not lend itself to bombast. As the Sunday Times put it:

He will not rant. He will not rely for effect upon climactic [sic] vehemences and oratorical devices. Nature is the law which he appears exclusively to consult; and hence, his most magnificent hits are those in which his simplicity becomes most lifelike He is inspired by the blood in his veins and the emotions in his soul, not by the lust of professional display.⁷⁴

Fechter's strength lay in the evocation of sentiment. This was yet another source of irritation for the hostile critics and even for some of the more friendly ones. Lewes' opinion of Fechter's ability to convey passion has been documented in Chapter Two, and so has the testimony of many eyewitnesses who made the seemingly oppositional claim that Fechter could convey and evoke all manner of emotion. Clearly a distinction was made between mere emotion and passion--sentiment and tenderness could be found in Kotzebue, but passion was the domain of ideal tragedy. The mere lover, absorbed in some private world of the self, could be emotional, but Othello, the tragic hero, could not afford such self-absorption. Even the Press, one of the strongest supporters of the production, acknowledged that Fechter succeeded "most in those scenes where emotion is to be expressed, being in the third act greater than in any

⁷⁴ Sunday Times 27 Oct. 1861: 3.

other, while in the last, where passion rises to its height, he . . . [was] the weakest."⁷⁵ The Observer thought Fechter's portrayal admirable in that it evoked "a most exquisite delineation of all that is tender and touching in the character; but . . . looked in vain for those grander phases where passion, engendered of the sense of irremediable wrong, rushes to a height that borders on the sublime."⁷⁶

Ottley and Fraser's were less kind in their assessment. In Ottley's opinion, Fechter did not know how to control his passions and, indeed, did not seem to have a proper notion of what constituted passion in a tragic context. Fechter's conception of passion was that of the French drame: "Under the guidance of modern French principles, he reduces a grand epic to an every-day love-passage and intrigue, the impelling motives being selfish, and the passions evolved superficial and common-place."⁷⁷ Fraser's thought that the love Othello showed toward Desdemona lacked ideality, saying that Fechter's conception was that of gallantry, "the thing which of all others Shakspeare's Othello was incapable of. . . ." Fechter showed Desdemona all "the small attentions of a carpet knight, but not the deep, watchful,

⁷⁵ Press 26 Oct. 1861: 1034.

⁷⁶ Observer 27 Oct. 1861: 1.

⁷⁷ Ottley 15.

yearning tenderness of the large-hearted man of mature age."⁷⁸ What kept Shakespeare from sinking into "the region of melodrama"⁷⁹ was its elevated character. Along with the substitution of superficial emotion for grand passion came a tendency, also reminiscent of the drame, to act too much. By acting too much, Fraser's did not mean "overacting" in our colloquial sense, but rather the tendency to substitute action and stage effect for simplicity and grandeur.

Referring to Fechter's controversial preface, Fraser's said:

A tragic actor . . . who cannot 'recite,' or, more properly, 'declaim,' will never reach the summit of his art. Wanting this power, he will be likely, like Mr. Fechter himself in Othello, to act too much--that is, to fritter away his effects, and to distract his audience by too much action . . . too much dependence on the mere accessories of the scene.⁸⁰

Fraser's echoed the sentiment of Lewes, who maintained that "Othello has little to do, but much to be."⁸¹ Fechter's conception reversed that sentiment.

Closely related to this fracas over emotion and passion was the controversy surrounding the stage directions in the acting edition. The edition, unlike those of previous actors, purported to spell out for the actors the emotions and feelings they were to convey with each line. The Times

⁷⁸ Fraser's 785.

⁷⁹ Fraser's 779.

⁸⁰ Fraser's 779.

⁸¹ Blackwood's 750.

compared Fechter to August Von Kotzebue in this regard, with the exception that Fechter's text, unlike Kotzebue's, could not be impugned.⁸² The comparison to Kotzebue was apt, given that dramatist's propensity for directions in which emotions were to be worn on the sleeve. Not only did Kotzebue pioneer these kinds of directions in the early nineteenth century, he was also known for his domestic sensibility and sentimentality. Kotzebue, like Fechter after him, was not so much concerned with the ideal, but the particularized emotions of individual people living in the private domain. David Grimsted has said of Kotzebue that:

While the table was being set and the socks knitted, his heroines were also in the midst of some heartrending experience, such as yearning for the young officer in the picture frame. Kotzebue's plots were set up to give ample opportunity for this kind of sentiment.⁸³

Consider Fechter's directions at the beginning of Act

III. The script dictates that:

As the curtain rises, DESDEMONA, seated, winds off the silk, which EMILIA (sitting on the stool) holds to her; CASSIO stands respectfully before DESDEMONA, who continues her work as she speaks.⁸⁴

⁸² Times 24 Oct. 1861: 9.

⁸³ David Grimsted, Melodrama Unveiled (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968): 10.

⁸⁴ [William] Shakspeare, Othello, Charles Fechter's acting edition, 2nd ed. (London, 1861): 46. This publication will hereafter be referred to as "Fechter."

At various points in the text, the directions instruct Othello to speak while "playing with her curls,"⁸⁵ that Desdemona turn from Othello "with a childish pout" and return to him "with a tone of reproach." When she exits, Othello watches her, "following her with his eyes, and sending her a last kiss."⁸⁶ Throughout the play, the directions indicate, not only on what to stand or lean or where to exit, but the manner in which the actors were to do so.

For Ottley, the directions indicated that Fechter completely misunderstood "the nature, and quality of the love subsisting between Othello and his youthful bride. . . ." He especially disdained the kissing, the playing with the curls,

and then more kissing usque ad nauseam. . . .
[A]ll this shocks us as unworthy of both of the personages, and of the poet. No doubt this sort of thing consists very well with French notions of sentiment, and accordingly we are not surprised to find it running persistently through the play, breaking in, every now and then, even in the most tragic scene.⁸⁷

Fraser's, the London Review, Ottley, Lewes (in Blackwood's) and the Athenaeum were the most vocal in the debate over the directions, and, of those four, only the Athenaeum supported the concept. The London Review was

⁸⁵ Fechter 48.

⁸⁶ Fechter 49.

⁸⁷ Ottley 21.

scathing: "Of the stage directions that prescribe certain mental feelings and their expression, we would hint that to an actor with the smallest gifts of his art, they are unnecessary." The Review mentioned several specific instances in which it thought the directions ludicrous, citing instances in which Iago speaks "with comic mystery," Roderigo listens with "timorous attention," and in which Iago is instructed to let his face "gradually brighten with a diabolical smile." Such a school of acting, said the Review, would "produce a very mechanical, soulless school of artists." The directions were "so childish in their absurdity, yet so pompous in diction, we should rather ascribe them to the clerical amateur, who is reported to have had some share in this deliverance of the drama from tradition."⁸⁸

Fraser's was of the opinion that Fechter had given "more than most editors in the way of commentary as to what Shakespeare intended to be understood from the action. . . ." As for the efficacy of the directions, Fraser's was as disdainful as the Review, saying that "The man who cannot learn from his own soul how to express [the passages in Othello] . . . will never learn it from such schoolboy tutorings as these."⁸⁹ Lewes thought that the

⁸⁸ "The Libretto of Othello," rev. of Charles Fechter's acting edition of Othello by William Shakespeare, London Review 2 Nov. 1861: 550.

⁸⁹ Fraser's 777.

Waiter. Sir, here is a person who desires to speak with you.

Beefington. [Goes to the door, and returns with a letter which he opens. On perusing it his countenance becomes illuminated, and expands prodigiously.] Hah, my friend, what joy! [turning to Puddingfield.]

Puddingfield. What? tell me--let your Puddingfield partake it.

Beef. See here! [Producing a printed paper.]

Pudd. What? [With impatience.]

Beef. [In a significant tone.] A newspaper!

Pudd. Hah! what say'st thou? a newspaper!

Beef. Yes, Puddingfield, and see here [shows it partially], from England.

Pudd. [With extreme earnestness.] Its name!

Beef. The Daily Advertiser.

Pudd. Oh, ecstasy!

Beef. [With a dignified severity.] Puddingfield, calm yourself--repress these transports--remember that you are a man.

Pudd. [After a pause, with suppressed emotion.] Well, I will be--I am calm.⁹²

The Athenaeum decided to forgo the fun and come to Fechter's defense. The Athenaeum critic said Othello was "well cast and well acted; and the directions of his book have conduced to the end of a better representation than

⁹² Fraser's 777-778. The quotation from Fechter's edition also appears in Fraser's, but, due to certain inaccuracies in the Fraser's quotation, I have quoted it as it appears in the acting edition.

could have been accomplished without them."⁹³ The following week, he further defended Fechter, claiming that the directions only represented the kind of new business that all "eminent English performers" have taken the liberty to include in their productions.⁹⁴ The difference was, of course, that Fechter had set them down for posterity.

The overall effect of these elements--the privileging of emotion over grand passion, the symptomological approach to the acting, the particularization of the individual characters as opposed to their universal idealization, the domestic ambiance--all of them conduced to create an Othello who existed as a private individual, caught up in private concerns. The Othello of the ideal stage does not murder Desdemona because she has hurt him or injured his pride or driven him to incontinent rage. The ideal Othello must transcend the petty concerns of the lover, the private individual, and, instead, seek justice. Desdemona must die because she has allegedly committed a heinous crime against nature; justice demands no less. Justice is public, revenge is private. We are not, supposedly, to be interested in Othello and Desdemona as individuals, the way we are to empathize with the hero and heroine of melodrama. Our interest should stem, or so the idealist critics implied in their criticism of Fechter, from the universal essences and

⁹³ Athenaeum 2 Nov. 1861: 587.

⁹⁴ Athenaeum 16 Nov. 1861: 654.

truths, the ideality, which the tragic hero is supposed to represent.

My analysis so far has concentrated on general criticism. In Chapter IV, the examination of several scenes of key interest to the critics will enable an understanding of the ways in which the general elements of the production discussed in this chapter were manifested specifically.

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CHAPTER IV

FECHTER'S "OTHELLO": A SPECIFIC EXAMINATION

Having developed a framework through which the criticism of Fechter's Othello may be understood, my study now directs its attention toward more specific elements of the production. As my principal concern is with perception, I found those parts of the performance which were subject to the most critical scrutiny to be of the most interest. The reader who wishes to construct a more complete record of the performance may look to the acting edition; there, he or she will have access to Fechter's own stated intentions, if not the exact record of execution, for each and every scene.

The lion's share of specific criticism focused only on certain scenes: Othello's first appearance in I.ii, his defence of his actions before the Venetian Senate (I.iii), his landing on Cyprus (II.i), the scene in which Iago engineers the fight between Cassio and Roderigo (II.i), the scene in which Iago falsely implicates Desdemona and Cassio (III.i), Othello's epileptic seizure and subsequent confrontation with Desdemona (IV.i), and the climactic

murder/suicide scene (V.i).¹ It was in these key sections that Fechter's characterization most provoked, excited or offended his critics, and it is in these scenes that the general characteristics of the production discussed in Chapter III were manifested most clearly.

There is not much to discuss concerning Fechter's Act I, Scene ii appearance, except to note that the impression it made set the tone for the remainder of the performance. Fechter introduced his particular brand of naturalism the moment he set foot on the stage.

The scene was a set scene,² with a house placed in the middle of the stage, containing "a practicable door."³ Othello enters, wearing "the dress of a Venetian general in time of peace," which for Fechter constituted "[a] long red robe, [and] the Lion of Saint Mark embroidered on the chest."⁴ He then does a curious thing--he opens his own door with "a golden key."⁵ In performance, the key could

¹ These scene breakdowns correspond to the Fechter acting edition and not necessarily to the folio version.

² A set scene was one including three-dimensional set pieces and providing much greater stage depth than carpenter's scenes, or those scenes played in front of painted drops.

³ [William] Shakspeare, Othello, Charles Fechter's acting edition, 2nd ed. (London, 1861): 6. All subsequent citations of this publication will be referred to as "Fechter."

⁴ Fechter 6.

⁵ Fechter 6.

not be seen,⁶ but the effect of the commander of the Venetian armed forces unlocking his own door was derided as preposterous. The London Review hated it:

It raises the ludicrous idea that the house of the Venetian Commander-in-chief had been left without servants, or that the Moor had commenced his married life on the truly oriental principle of locking up his spouse. The flourish of the key is purposeless--explains nothing--has nothing in the text to warrant it, and has no effect except a moment's puzzle for the audience.⁷

Lewes remarked that the key business was undoubtedly meant to lend "an air of reality; the effect is to make us forget the 'noble Moor,' and to think of a sepoy."⁸ Clearly, Fechter's stage business in his initial appearance was designed to establish a domestic Moor, a more specifically human character, more specifically human, that is, than would perhaps have suited the arbiters of artistic truth and beauty.

In the following scene the novelty of Fechter's conception made itself apparent in earnest. Here, Othello addresses himself to the Venetian Senate and justifies his marriage to Desdemona. The scenic arrangement, Fechter's colloquial style and familiar mannerisms inspired the first

⁶ See "The Representation of 'Othello' at the Princess's Theatre," rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Critic 26 Oct. 1861: 428-429.

⁷ "The Libretto of Othello," rev. of Charles Fechter's acting edition of Othello, by William Shakespeare, London Review 2 Nov. 1861: 550.

⁸ [George Henry Lewes], "Fechter in Hamlet and Othello," Blackwood's Magazine Dec. 1861: 749.

really extensive critical commentary.

The design for I.iii was evidently a novel one. Ottley noted that "old precedents" dictated that the Duke and other councilors were to be set up at the back, facing the audience. This arrangement gave the actor playing Othello "the full extent of the stage to occupy with his voice," while keeping him nearest to the audience in order to address the assembly from downstage center.⁹ Fechter, however, placed the ducal throne stage left on raised steps. At stage right were desks for secretaries; there were doors in the back and stage right. A large table occupied the floor at some point between the ducal throne and the secretarial desks. Lit chandeliers hung from the ceiling.¹⁰

Lewes, who, for the most part, took a dim view of Fechter's innovations, actually had a somewhat favorable opinion of the set. Fechter, said Lewes, had a knack for "stage arrangement," and the design for the Senate scene gave it "a really natural air."¹¹ Ottley, however, thought the design to be faulty, especially Fechter's use of space in his address to the Senate. Fechter spoke

from midway up the stage, across a table, at which sits Brabantio within arm's length. The effect is bad. It is inconsistent with the relative position of the personages:--it cramps the action

⁹ Henry Ottley, Fechter's Version of Othello Critically Analyzed (London, 1861): 10.

¹⁰ Fechter 10.

¹¹ Blackwood's 749.

of all, and prevents that appearance of 'breadth' as necessary to the proper 'filling' of the stage as to that of a picture.¹²

The scenic arrangement aside, it was Othello's address to the Senate,¹³ his justification for marrying Desdemona, which really began to raise critical eyebrows. Fechter delivered the speech colloquially, eschewing points and drawing mixed reactions. Ottley, of course, found Fechter's interpretation to be vastly inferior to that of Edmund Kean's. According to Ottley, Kean had been

calm, impressive, dignified, modest all at once--his voice flowing in musical cadence from end to end. M. Fechter, standing at the foot of the table, commences by throwing his arms wide apart, as with an air of deprecation, ejaculating . . . in an alto key.¹⁴

Fechter's arm gestures may seem to have been histrionic, but his delivery was thought by the critics to be underplayed. The London Review called it a "calm narration, only slightly tinged with sarcasm" which fell "lamely on the ear."¹⁵ Fraser's thought Othello's "Rude am

¹² Ottley 10.

¹³ Fechter 13. Roughly equivalent to 1.3.127-170 of the standard text edited by George Lyman Kittredge (Boston: Ginn, 1941). Subsequent citations will be referred to as "Kittredge."

¹⁴ Ottley 16.

¹⁵ "M. Fechter's 'Othello.'," rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, London Review 26 Oct. 1861: 521.

I in Speech"¹⁶ line was delivered as though Othello was "so plain-spoken as to give offence." This was a faulty interpretation, said the Fraser's critic, who held that the line actually referred to Othello's relative lack of rhetorical training.¹⁷ The Observer maintained that the speech was delivered in such a way that the listener "would never know . . . [it] was written in any other form than the plainest prose."¹⁸

The descriptions of Fechter's colloquial interpretation were not all condemnatory. Morley, for instance, was pleased with the overall effect of the speech, especially with one particular bit of business. The breakdown of the speech entails that Othello turn "to BRABANTIO with tender courtesy" on the line "The very head and front of my offending/ Hath this--(to the Senate) this extent!"¹⁹ Sensing "the mute denial of BRABANTIO," Othello then answers passionately, "no more!"²⁰ At this point, Brabantio rises to his feet in anger and the two men "regard each other with menace," causing a number of senators to rise out of their

¹⁶ Fechter 13. Kittredge 1.3.81. Kittredge's text reads "Rude am I in my speech;" Fechter's edition alters it slightly.

¹⁷ "Shakspeare and His Latest Stage Interpreters," Fraser's Dec. 1861: 785.

¹⁸ Rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Observer [London] 27 Oct. 1861: 1.

¹⁹ Fechter 13. Kittredge 1.3.80-81.

²⁰ Fechter 13. Kittredge 1.3.81.

seats in alarm. "OTHELLO is at once calm, and submits to the COUNCIL."²¹ It is after this altercation that Othello proceeds with the "Rude am I in speech" line. Morley saw Fechter's delivery "as a special apology called for by that show of violence" which came earlier. He also claimed that, in performance, Fechter's tone suggested a "French politeness." Morley liked the effect because "it . . . [gave] a lively break to the speech, and . . . [carried] it to the end in true colloquial fashion." He was, however, forced to admit that Fechter had violated authorial intention; in Morley's opinion, Shakespeare had intended Othello's words to mean "dignity of expression" and not an inability to speak properly. Certainly, Shakespeare had not envisioned a "French apology for . . . excitement." Morley also held that Fechter's "no more!" was not sufficiently forceful to cause the Senate to rise up in alarm.²² He enjoyed Fechter's novelty, but could not reconcile it with his iconic view of Shakespeare.

Laudatory comments concerning Fechter's declamatory style came from other quarters. The Athenaeum's fears were at first excited by the strength of his foreign accent in the previous scene, but the speech to the Senate set their fears at rest. The Athenaeum had no problem with the

²¹ Fechter 13.

²² [Henry Morley], "Mr. Fechter's Othello," rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Examiner [London] 26 Oct. 1861: 681.

treatment of verse as prose. "Here was nothing of the set oration," said their critic, "but, long as the speech is, all was familiar discoursing; the emphatic phrases being selected with unexceptional judgement."²³ Fechter's next big speech, the one in which Fechter recounted his wooing of Desdemona,²⁴ drew similar praise from Morley, who described it as being delivered with a "colloquial ease that is most clever and agreeable, though not at all 'unvarnished.'"²⁵

Fechter used this scene to firmly establish the love relationship between Othello and Desdemona; his approach was demonstrative, replete with kissing, hugging and other physical manifestations of affection. According to the acting edition, Othello physically conducts Desdemona to the spot on which she is to testify.²⁶ On her line, "And, so much duty as my mother show'd/ To you, preferring you before her father,/ So much I challenge that I may profess/ Due to the Moor, my lord,"²⁷ Othello approaches and kisses her on the hand.²⁸ Later, Desdemona kneels while "OTHELLO supports

²³ Rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Athenaeum 26 Oct. 1861: 549.

²⁴ Fechter 14-15. Kittredge 1.3.128-170.

²⁵ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681.

²⁶ Fechter 16.

²⁷ Fechter 16. Kittredge 1.3.186-189.

²⁸ Fechter 16.

her."²⁹ When she rises, she places "herself close to OTHELLO."³⁰ Still later, after Brabantio has physically repelled Desdemona when she attempts to kiss his hand,³¹ Othello holds Desdemona "in his arms like a child" and, finally retires, keeping Desdemona fast within his embrace.³²

This demonstrative behavior was that of a character who was more a private lover than a public, ideal and tragic hero. Morley observed that Fechter's reception of Desdemona, after her speech swearing fealty to him,³³ was that of the "proud and happy lover."³⁴ In Ottley's opinion, Fechter's familiar attitude and the physical liberties it engendered were scandalous. "[G]ood sense and common delicacy of feeling would prompt Othello to hold aloof from her. . . ." he declared. Upon Desdemona's entrance, Fechter greeted her "with the impetuosity of a boy and the gallantry of a Frenchman. . . ."³⁵

²⁹ Fechter 17.

³⁰ Fechter 18.

³¹ Fechter 18.

³² Fechter 19. Morley reported, in the Examiner 26 Oct. 1861, that Fechter exited "with his arm about her, covering her with a part of his own robe" (681).

³³ Fechter 16. Kittredge 1.3.180-188.

³⁴ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681.

³⁵ Ottley 17.

John Ryder's performance as Iago in this scene, illustrates the problem with eyewitness accounts. The acting edition instructs Iago, at the end of the scene, to sit on the table, lean "his forehead on his hands, thoughtfully; and . . . [mutter] between his teeth." He then was to raise his head slowly, showing his face, "which gradually brightens with a diabolical smile."³⁶ On the line, "It is engendered:--Hell and night/ Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light,"³⁷ the directions entail that he break "into a savage, ringing laugh . . . [stop] suddenly . . . [turn] quickly round, and . . . [look] on all sides, in fear that he has been overheard.--Curtain falls."

This is melodramatic stuff, but the critics did not perceive Ryder's performance uniformly. Ottley and Morley thought he was overacting. Iago's laugh, said Ottley, "must have alarmed the whole neighbourhood, and risked provoking particular and jealous notice of his conduct. . . ." ³⁸ Morley was pleased with Ryder's efforts in the last three acts, but felt that his work in acts one and two was ill-conceived. Ryder wore his evilness on his sleeve instead of adopting an outward manner which would not be "at odds with

³⁶ Fechter 21. Ottley thought that sitting on a table was extremely "inelegant," especially as it was coupled with "one leg swinging in the air" (10).

³⁷ Fechter 22. Kittredge 1.3.408-409.

³⁸ Ottley 18.

his lieutenant's view of him." In the first two acts, Ryder performed "as if he were overacting a Mephistopheles." His work in the last three acts was, Morley allowed, much more in accordance with the more subtle Fechter style.³⁹ Compare these descriptions to that of the Evening Star and Dial, whose critic commended Ryder for being "a diligent disciple of Mr. Fechter's school," and commented that "There was not a trace in the performance of the transparent villain whose arts could scarcely have deceived a fool. . . ."⁴⁰ The touches of melodramatic villainy were evidently much more acceptable to the liberal Evening Star than to Shakespearean purists, Ottley and Morley.

Act II, scene i, the triumphal entry into Cyprus, was set at the harbor. Fechter's set is specified in his text as consisting of a large arcade at the back with a gate on stage right. A capstan stands at stage left, and bales of merchandise are scattered about.⁴¹ Ottley described the set as "a very cleverly painted set scene, . . . with storm raging and tempest-tossed wrecks floating in, painted by Telbin in his best style."⁴² But Ottley also held that the

³⁹ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681.

⁴⁰ Rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Evening Star and Dial [London] 24 Oct. 1861: 1.

⁴¹ Fechter 22.

⁴² Ottley 13. Ottley refers to William Telbin the Elder, the same Telbin who was chief scene painter for Charles Kean during his management of the Princess's.

drop was an affront to verisimilitude; "The idea of that hapless storm-driven wreck remaining prominent in the centre of the picture, for a full half-hour or so," he said, "with nobody going to its rescue" was ridiculous.⁴³

According to the acting edition, Desdemona enters and Cassio "conducts her to a seat"⁴⁴ which is one of the bales of merchandise on either side of the capstan.⁴⁵ Fraser's strenuously objected to the business of sitting. Traditionally, claimed Fraser's, Desdemona stood throughout the scene; standing was essential in order for the actress to impress the audience "with that attractiveness and dignified simplicity of character which had subdued the stern soldier in Othello." Not only did sitting violate Fraser's ideal conception of Desdemona, but the whole notion that she and Emilia would, in all their finery, sit on dirty bales, violated all standards of plausability.⁴⁶ In addition, Fechter's use of a set scene necessitated that the actresses be placed too far upstage, making it difficult for the audience to see.⁴⁷

⁴³ Ottley 13.

⁴⁴ Fechter 25.

⁴⁵ Fechter 26.

⁴⁶ Fraser's 780.

⁴⁷ Fraser's 780-781.

Meanwhile, Iago leans upon the capstan and discourses in a very familiar manner with Desdemona.⁴⁸ Ottley was again scandalized, this time at the "indignity" which Desdemona must suffer when Iago "leans cross-armed on the top of the capstan, and with familiar smirk, stares first at the wife of his general, and then at her attendant, his own wife." He also thought it contradictory that Iago would see impropriety in Cassio's behavior toward Desdemona and yet engage in innappropriate behavior himself.⁴⁹ Fraser's described Iago as speaking "with an air of coarse impertinence which must have made Shakespeare's Desdemona recoil from him in disgust."⁵⁰

Lewes was most concerned with Othello's behavior. Here "was an opportunity for being natural which Fechter wholly missed," he said.

Never was there a tamer meeting. Kean's tones, 'O my fair warrior!' are still ringing in my ears, though a quarter of a century must have elapsed since I heard them; but I cannot recall Fechter's tones, heard only the other night. I only recall a vision of him holding his wife at most 'proper' distance, kissing her hand, his tone free from all tremulous emotion. . . .⁵¹

⁴⁸ Fechter 26. Fraser's noted that he leant on his elbows.

⁴⁹ Ottley 11. This is a curious criticism given the fact that, to the audience, Iago is known to be a hypocrite.

⁵⁰ Fraser's 781.

⁵¹ Blackwood's 750.

Fraser's concurred: Othello's love for Desdemona was more gallant than passionate, this being one of the great shortcomings of the first two acts. The meeting was "hurried through, as if it were of no moment. . . . That we may appreciate the fall, we must be made to see the paradise." After all, said Fraser's, Othello has every reason to fear that Desdemona's ship has been lost in the storm, yet he is very subdued when he sees her.⁵²

Fechter's handling of the crowd scene was also a problem for Fraser's. When Desdemona enters, says the acting edition, she "passes along the Arcade, surrounded by people, to whom she distributes alms."⁵³ Likewise, Othello enters "surrounded by his followers, and attended by the people--who shout!"⁵⁴ As he and Desdemona exit, Othello "passes . . . through the midst of the crowd, as they make way for them;"⁵⁵ he then addresses Montano from there. Fechter, said Fraser's, had obscured the principals. "They [Desdemona and Othello] are thus confounded with the multitude, and the dialogue is scrambled through as though Othello and his bride had been parted only for an hour."⁵⁶

⁵² Fraser's 785.

⁵³ Fechter 24.

⁵⁴ Fechter 27.

⁵⁵ Fechter 29.

⁵⁶ Fraser's 786.

Morley summed up the general feeling about the scene, saying that Othello appeared, not so much a soldier returning triumphantly from battle, but as a "newly-married husband who rejoins the bride from whom he was parted on the wedding-day."⁵⁷ Even though this is exactly what Othello is, the novelty was in Fechter's concern with the private, personal Othello, not Othello, the public person.

Tragic idealism took another beating in II, iii. Ottley reported that Othello's "Good-night"⁵⁸ to Cassio and Iago was uttered "looking back, after arriving at the portal, in a familiar tone, as one would on going away from the smoking-room of a club."⁵⁹ It is also interesting to note that Fechter had Cassio play his drunkenness in a slightly more realistic manner than Ottley would have preferred. When Cassio prepares to depart, after drinking with Iago, he drops his handkerchief, falls on his knee, "and clasps his hands, as if praying, to hide his condition."⁶⁰ Was it proper, asked Ottley, for Cassio to sit "with his face buried in his hands, just after the drunken scene . . . in the presence of, and whilst under rebuke from his own general?" Certainly not; the whole scene "was defaced by

⁵⁷ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681.

⁵⁸ Fechter 32. Kittredge 2.3.11.

⁵⁹ Ottley 19.

⁶⁰ Fechter 35.

unjustifiable incidents of coarse vulgarity. . . ." ⁶¹

Fechter's performance during this confrontation further reinforced his un-ideal interpretation of the role. When he spoke the line, "Silence that dreadful bell!--it frights the isle/ From her propriety," ⁶² he did so with what Ottley conceded was "passion," but it was of the petty, irritable, panicky variety. Othello, he said, "almost screams in passion, rushing up the stage the while. Kean gave it calmly and authoritatively, as a thing of course, and 'more in sorrow than in anger.'" ⁶³ The petty quality of the moment can be seen in Lewes' description of the same scene:

Fechter was loud, but he was not fierce. It is characteristic of his whole performance in the passionate parts, that he goes up the stage and bids them . . . [to silence the bell] with an accent of impatient irritability, as if he were angry at the bell's preventing his hearing what was to be said. ⁶⁴

Although Morley thought the scene to be "well sustained," he also admitted that Fechter, while beginning the scene with a "dignity of manner," reverted to a kind of petulance on the bell line. It almost seemed to Morley that "its noise had worried him. . . ." ⁶⁵ He seemed "tetchy and irritable" when he interrupted the brawl between Cassio and

⁶¹ Ottley 12.

⁶² Fechter 38. Kittredge 2.3.175-176.

⁶³ Ottley 19.

⁶⁴ Blackwood's 750.

⁶⁵ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681.

Roderigo,⁶⁶ observed Fraser's.⁶⁷

The indoor setting of Act III, which Fechter condensed into a single scene, struck both Ottley and Fraser's as inappropriate for a number of reasons. Fechter set the scene in "A Room in the Castle," a combination of Desdemona's boudoir and Othello's office. A divan and table "covered with papers, maps, instruments of navigation, &c." were placed stage left. The right side of the room, belonging to Desdemona, contained a chair and stool with "embroideries, music, musical instruments, &c." surrounding them.⁶⁸ It was in this double-purpose room that Cassio was to petition Desdemona for Othello's favor and Iago kindle Othello's latent jealousies.

Not surprisingly, Ottley complained the most about the physical arrangement of the scene. It was inconceivable, he maintained, that, in such a large castle, Othello would be forced to conduct the business of governance in Desdemona's private chambers. The lack of privacy suffered by Desdemona, when barged in upon by advisers and lieutenants, was also of no small import.⁶⁹ In addition to this, Ottley pointed out that Shakespeare had placed most of the act in

⁶⁶ Fechter 37. Kittredge 2.3.150-157.

⁶⁷ Fraser's 785.

⁶⁸ Fechter 46.

⁶⁹ Ottley, 24.

the open air.⁷⁰ This, however, posed a problem. Other recent acting editions had divided the act into two scenes in two separate apartments;⁷¹ which, then, was the "traditional" way: the way of the folio or of accepted nineteenth-century practice? Ottley concluded that the "tradition" of the nineteenth century was in error; Shakespeare was wise in placing the action in the open air because Cassio would never have dared enter the castle after his humiliation and certainly would never have been allowed in Desdemona's private chambers. Fechter's decision to so place the action was "an indiscretion almost amounting to an act of indelicacy. . . ." ⁷²

Ottley was especially sensitive to indelicacy, vociferously objecting to Bianca's presence inside the castle.⁷³ An outdoor setting would have posed no problem. That Bianca would meet Cassio outside the palace was plausible; that she would be cavorting about the governor's private chambers was absurd. "For a woman of the class of Bianca to force herself into the Governor's castle," said

⁷⁰ Ottley 25. The exception would be 3.2, which takes place, according to the Kittredge edition, in the castle.

⁷¹ Ottley 25. This is certainly true of J.P. Kemble's edition (New York, 1807) and Macready's Covent Garden version (London, 1838).

⁷² Ottley 25.

⁷³ Fechter restored the character of Bianca, mistress to Cassio, a character who had been excised in productions throughout the century.

Ottley, "and, above all, into his wife's apartment, is repugnant to every dictate of reason and propriety. . . ." ⁷⁴ Another violation of propriety occurred when Emilia ushers Cassio out through the same stage left door ⁷⁵ through which Desdemona later departs. ⁷⁶ This was, said Ottley, an incident "marked with a questionable character." ⁷⁷

Fraser's agreed with Ottley about the wisdom of an indoor setting, and for many of the same reasons. Fraser's also maintained, given Iago's stated intent, to "draw the Moor apart;/ And bring him--jump--when he may Cassio find/ Soliciting his wife!" ⁷⁸ that the outdoors was the only logical placement for the scene. Shakespeare knew his business; the law of probability held that it was outside the castle "where Cassio might naturally hope to come across Desdemona's path, and where Othello might easily be led by Iago. . . ." ⁷⁹ Perhaps Fechter hoped to cover the improbable nature of the situation by having Othello undergo what Morley called "a spasm of emotion" when he saw his wife

⁷⁴ Ottley 27.

⁷⁵ Fechter 47.

⁷⁶ Fechter 49.

⁷⁷ Ottley 26.

⁷⁸ Fechter 45. Kittredge 2.3.391-393.

⁷⁹ Fraser's 781.

with Cassio.⁸⁰

Not only was Cassio's presence in Desdemona's private chamber, a day after his disgrace, thought to be inappropriate and wildly improbable, but both Fraser's and Ottley also took umbrage at what they saw as the forced domesticity of the scene's beginning, in which Desdemona is discovered winding off silk as she speaks with Cassio.⁸¹ That she would continue to engage in her work while receiving Cassio was a violation of "common courtesy," said Fraser's. Their implication was that Fechter placed the scene indoors, a clear violation of authorial intention, in order to add the domestic trappings. "Is not this pitiful aiming at reality an insult to our understandings," asked Fraser's, "and a great wrong to the intentions of Shakspeare?"⁸² Ottley added that Desdemona spoke her lines to Cassio "with something more of smiling sympathy than the occasion would seem to warrant. In fact," he continued, "already the sentiment is altogether à la française."⁸³

⁸⁰ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681. Morley wondered why Othello would be bothered by seeing the two together, as, at this point, Othello has no cause to be suspicious. On a purely speculative note, perhaps Fechter thought the impropriety of the situation would serve as an additional catalyst to Othello's jealous rage.

⁸¹ Fechter 46.

⁸² Fraser's 781.

⁸³ Ottley 12.

The unseemly French sentiment and domesticity was compounded by the behavior of Othello and Desdemona toward each other. During the scene in which Desdemona pleads Cassio's suit to Othello, the acting edition instructs that he kiss her on the forehead and play with her curls and that she kneel before him on the footstool.⁸⁴ She gives him a playful, "childish pout," and he sends her "a last kiss" from across the room when she departs.⁸⁵ Desdemona, said Ottley, "coaxes him like a child, kissing his black beard, whilst he dallies with her. . . ." ⁸⁶ Lewes thought the early scene with Desdemona was played in too cavalier a fashion, as though Othello was "free from all misgiving." Othello, said Lewes, "treats her as a father might treat a child who was asking some favour which could not be granted, yet which called for no specific refusal."⁸⁷ Lewes also wondered why Othello was so cavalier; surely, he thought, this scene, coming as it does between two attempts by Iago

⁸⁴ Fechter 48.

⁸⁵ Fechter 49.

⁸⁶ Ottley 12. Ottley found even more distasteful the demonstration of affection between Cassio and Bianca. Cassio puts his arm around Bianca and kisses her hand several times (Fechter 72-73). What Shakespeare intended as a "pretty discourse," said Ottley, Fechter reinstated "after the coarsest possible fashion. . . ." (Ottley 28). Even the Times, which called the restoration of Bianca "judicious," thought the part of the courtesan to be "repulsive." See rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Times [London] 24 Oct. 1861: 9.

⁸⁷ Blackwood's 752.

to cast aspersions on Desdemona's honor, should entail some sort of strained and uneasy discourse between the two.⁸⁸

But Fechter's Othello showed no such uneasiness. In fact, after Desdemona exited, he carried on much of the following scene while busy at his desk, shuffling papers, reading despatches and signing documents. For most of the scene in which Iago poisons Othello against Desdemona and Cassio, Othello occupies himself with numerous little activities, seemingly unaffected, not comprehending Iago's insinuations until very late.⁸⁹

Fechter's choice of business was the subject of much hostile discourse. Lewes' first reaction was that Fechter's paper-signing and other activities were good choices, but added that "the manner in which Fechter executes it [his stage business] is one of those lamentable examples in which the dramatic art is subordinated to serve theatrical effect. It may be natural to sign papers and busy oneself at one's desk, but it was not natural for Othello "to be dead to the dreadful import of Iago's artful suggestions."⁹⁰ The whole business was "very showy," said Fraser's. "It affords room for a great deal of movement, and picturesque arrangement. But how dearly is all this purchased!"⁹¹ Fechter's

⁸⁸ Blackwood's 752-753.

⁸⁹ Fechter 50-54.

⁹⁰ Blackwood's 752.

⁹¹ Fraser's 782.

naturalism and picturesque approach were clearly thought to be showy theatricalism substituting for simplicity and tragic grandeur.

It was Fecchter's perceived slowness to appreciate Iago's meaning which drew the most commentary. Fecchter played most of the scene as though he was preoccupied with his work, exhibiting an almost cavalier attitude toward Iago's insinuations. Not until Iago said "She did deceive her father, marrying you;/ And, when she seem'd to shake, and fear your looks,/She lov'd them most!"⁹² did Fecchter's Othello suddenly comprehend the full import of Iago's suggestion. He "stops at once," reads the acting edition, "as struck by a thunderbolt! His face changes by degrees, his eyes open as if a veil had been taken away!"⁹³ Fecchter delivered the subsequent line, "And so she did!",⁹⁴ "in a tone, and with a display of facial agitation, which drew down the first round of applause."⁹⁵

Ottley, Fraser's and Lewes were all critical of Fecchter's slowness in this scene. Ottley spoke disdainfully of Othello's "nonchalant manner" and of Fecchter's decision

⁹² Fecchter 54. Kittredge 3.3.206-208.

⁹³ Fecchter 54.

⁹⁴ Fecchter 54. Kittredge 3.3.208.

⁹⁵ Ottley 21.

to play with his pen as he spoke.⁹⁶ His slowness was especially strange, said Ottley, given the line "By heaven, he echoes me, / As if there were some monster in his thought/ Too hideous to be shown."⁹⁷ Lewes also was of the opinion that authorial intention was being violated: "Fechter deliberately disregards all the plain meaning of the text, and makes the conviction sudden and preposterous."⁹⁸ He was at a loss to understand how "any one [sic] should fail to interpret this dialogue, every word of which is an increase of the slowly growing suspicion." Lewes believed that Fechter thought of his dialogue as "not to be understood seriously, but as the banter of Othello at seeing Iago purse his brow and look mysterious about trifles."⁹⁹ Fraser's concurred, holding that the dialogue clearly indicated "that his [Othello's] attention is not only fully roused, but that he is already seriously uneasy, and has a vague divination of Iago's drift. . . ."¹⁰⁰ Lewes scoffed at the notion that the reminder of Desdemona's deception would be the catalyst for Othello's sudden comprehension. After all, he pointed out, Othello was not swayed by that argument when Brabantio himself used it in

⁹⁶ See Fechter 50.

⁹⁷ Ottley 21. Fechter 50. Kittredge 3.3.106-108.

⁹⁸ Blackwood's 752.

⁹⁹ Blackwood's 753.

¹⁰⁰ Fraser's 782.

Act I.¹⁰¹ For Lewes, this sudden conversion was pure melodrama. It was, said Lewes, "the art of the Porte St. Martin, or the Variétés; it . . . [was] not the art of Shakespeare."¹⁰²

All of this was, for the Critic, evidence of Fechter's annoyingly French interpretation of the role. Othello should be played as a savage, quick to anger and suspicion; Fechter was much, much too civilized. The Critic commented that Fechter's Othello "was, we learn, a remarkably familiar, easy commander; and very slow of comprehension." In the Critic's opinion, the only true interpretation of the text could be one which recognized "the impetuous barbarism of Othello, and if he [Fechter] lessens that, he weakens the whole play, and it all tumbles into indefensible nonsense."¹⁰³

As it was, Fechter had created a character more at home in nineteenth-century France than in sixteenth-century Venice. Said the Critic:

If he is to be made a cool, polite, modern Frenchman; very slow to suspect, and all but indifferent when he does; then he is a mere social monster. . . . If there is to be an attempt to make his conduct perfectly reasonable, and to cram the erring barbarian into the narrowest conventions of social life, then we must abandon the play altogether as a tissue of ferocious

¹⁰¹ Fechter 18. Kittredge 1.3.293-294.

¹⁰² Blackwood's 754.

¹⁰³ Rev. of Charles Fechter's acting edition of Othello by William Shakespeare, Critic 2 Nov. 1861: 447.

impossibilities."¹⁰⁴

Not everyone hated what Fechter was doing. There was even a small critical faction that heartily approved Fechter's less impetuous Moor. The Times, for instance, was very enthusiastic about the scene. The late and instantaneous realization was effective, they said, because in that way

Othello's jealousy thus becomes, not a brutal and barbaric folly, but a reluctant and pitiful mistake, from which the man has no escape, but in which all the beautiful and chivalric instincts of his nature are outraged and subdued.¹⁰⁵

For the Sunday Times, Othello's hamartia represented, not a character flaw, but an error in judgement, a conception more true to the Aristotelian meaning of the term.¹⁰⁶

The Times saw the scene as a success, the key to which was Fechter's subtlety. They even hinted that his realization was not quite as sudden as his detractors indicated, that perhaps Fechter's hostile critics simply

¹⁰⁴ Critic 2 Nov. 1861: 447.

¹⁰⁵ Rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Sunday Times [London] 27 Oct. 1861: 3.

¹⁰⁶ It is interesting to note that the first night audience's reaction to this scene (assuming that the critics all attended the opening) was either electrifying or very subdued, depending on whose description is to be believed. The Evening Star and Dial maintained that Fechter's performance during the realization scene "produced a sensation" (Rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Evening Star and Dial [London] 24 Oct. 1861: 1.). Compare that to Lewes' contention that Fechter failed "even to move the applause of an audience very ready to applaud" (Blackwood's 751).

were not attuned to the nuances of his performance.

"Preceding Othellos have spoken in a whirlwind of fury. Nothing can exceed the subtlety with which he [Fechter] indicates the progress of jealous uneasiness . . . ," said the Times.¹⁰⁷ Morley, who was no critical lap dog to Fechter, certainly saw something more than Ottley, Fraser's, or Lewes. Fechter arrived at his moment of truth, said Morley, as though representing "a deep nervous thoughtfulness. He stands aside with his eye fixed on vacancy, as one reasoning out in contemplation the path shown him to the hell whither it leads."¹⁰⁸

Once again, the key to understanding Fechter's performance lies in his rejection of the ideal for the particular, and grand passion for emotion and sentiment. Lewes described Edmund Kean's Othello as being imbued with "a grand ideal propriety," but Fechter's "sympathetic temperament" was no match for Kean's "tragic grandeur."¹⁰⁹ Morley compared Fechter's characterization with that of Samuel Phelps who had recently assayed the role at another London theatre. Phelps, according to Morley, had done everything he could to suppress his emotions while in the presence of Iago.¹¹⁰ Fechter, however, had become "absorbed

¹⁰⁷ Times 24 Oct. 1861: 9.

¹⁰⁸ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681.

¹⁰⁹ Blackwood's 751.

¹¹⁰ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 680.

with a painful intentness in the thoughts presented by his ancient, and . . . [gave] the half inattentive and half stifled answer of a man with his heart wrung and his thoughts far away. . . ."¹¹¹ Fechter's anguish was "only the anguish of the lover," and through the course of the performance "Mr. Fechter's Othello becomes more and more simply emotional."¹¹²

Fechter's more individualized Othello was also much less concerned with meting out justice in defence of principle than he was for exacting revenge on a supposedly wayward wife. Late in the third act, Othello instructs Iago to see that Cassio is killed.¹¹³ It was Lewes' opinion that Fechter's interpretation of this scene made Othello culpable in a murder, instead of the facilitator of an unquestionably just punishment. Fechter's approach was that of a conspirator who proposes a dirty little murder, not that of a legitimate governor acting in the interests of universal justice.¹¹⁴ The implication is that a truly tragic figure is never so self-absorbed as to be personally vengeful, but always directs his actions in the interest of justice and propriety. Besides, said Lewes, Fechter's scheming made it

¹¹¹ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 680-681.

¹¹² Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681.

¹¹³ Fechter 66. Kittredge 3.3.472-473.

¹¹⁴ Blackwood's 751-752.

appear that he would rather leave the difficult task of murdering Cassio to Iago, while carrying out the job of killing a defenseless woman himself.¹¹⁵ Later, in Act IV, scene i, Othello was again seen to be culpable in an offence. Iago has Othello hide behind a tapestry in order to eavesdrop on his potentially incriminating conversation with Cassio.¹¹⁶ Since Bianca eventually joins the two men, it makes Othello a "participator in the offence," thought Ottley, to hide and eavesdrop "whilst Cassio and Bianca desecrate the sanctity of his home . . . with their unseemly discussions." If the scene had been placed outside, as it should have been, Ottley maintained, and Othello had been hiding behind a tree or a wall, he would not have been guilty of any low behavior.¹¹⁷

The Evening Star and Dial gives us one of the rare specific descriptions of the visual style of Fechter's acting. When Othello instructs Iago to set his wife to spy on Desdemona,¹¹⁸ the stage directions indicate that Othello "stops, suffused with shame, and crosses before IAGO, without looking at him."¹¹⁹ According to the Evening Star, what Fechter did at this point was to turn his head aside as

¹¹⁵ Blackwood's 752.

¹¹⁶ Fechter 75.

¹¹⁷ Ottley 28.

¹¹⁸ Fechter 56. Kittredge 3.3.240.

¹¹⁹ Fechter 56.

though "abashed,"¹²⁰ a melodramatic gesture reminiscent of Delsarte. In fact, Lewes accused Fechter of a "redundancy of gesture and the desire to make a number of points, instead of concentrating attention on the general effect."¹²¹ For Lewes, Fechter's picturesque approach was as cluttery as a Victorian trophy room. When it came time to grab Iago by the throat,¹²² Fechter jerked "out a succession of various threats, looking away from Iago every now and then, and . . . [varied] his gestures, so as to destroy all sense of climax."¹²³ Fechter's frequent head turning evokes more Delsartian imagery.

As Act III came to its climax, Fechter's performance became more violent and symptomological. When Othello hears Desdemona say that the handkerchief is not really lost,¹²⁴ he lapses into momentary euphoria. Morley reported that Fechter turned "suddenly with all his love and trust flowing back on him, to take her [Desdemona] to his arms"¹²⁵ until she repelled him again, with the words, "But what an' if it [the handkerchief] were [lost]?"¹²⁶ Later, the acting

¹²⁰ Evening Star and Dial 1.

¹²¹ Blackwood's 751.

¹²² Fechter 62.

¹²³ Blackwood's 751.

¹²⁴ Fechter 69. Kittredge 3.4.83.

¹²⁵ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681.

¹²⁶ Fechter 69. Kittredge 3.4.84.

edition instructs that Othello seize Desdemona "violently, and . . . [raise] his hand as if to strike her. . . ." ¹²⁷

In Act IV, scene i, Fechter vacillates again between tenderness and violence. His resolve weakening, Othello is "checked by the aspect of DESDEMONA, [he] opens his arms to her in spite of himself; and bursts into tears." ¹²⁸ This was executed, said Morley, "as a cry of irrepressible tenderness, at which the lovers wind insensibly into each other's arms. . . ." ¹²⁹ But it is only a momentary concession to his more tender feelings; he soon is "holding her head between his hands as if to crush it" and ends up throwing her violently into a chair. ¹³⁰ All of this crushing and throwing was, said Ottley, an example

of the coarse personal violence displayed towards her; conduct which we read of too frequently in low life, but of which no gentleman, or man with the commonest feelings of generosity or manhood, would be guilty of to any woman, even his wife. ¹³¹

As for symptomology, Fechter had begun, in Act III, to exhibit "the physical effect of mental suffering in convulsive twitchings, and involuntary drawings of the

¹²⁷ Fechter 70.

¹²⁸ Fechter 85.

¹²⁹ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681. This is another indication of Fechter's ability to convey the sweet, sentimental emotions of the lover.

¹³⁰ Fechter 86.

¹³¹ Ottley 11.

corners of the mouth till all the teeth . . . [were] bare."¹³² These physical symptoms forshadowed the epileptic fit from which Othello was to recover in Act IV, the opening of which calls for the discovery of Othello, "stretched, unconscious, on the divan."¹³³

On opening night, and perhaps during a number of early performances, Fechter had lain face downward. This was subsequently changed; Ottley claimed that "Othello now lies on his back on a narrow settee, which is much too short for him, his head dangling over at one end, his legs at the other." Ottley's opinion was that this was a ridiculous position for anyone to fall into, and although it suggested a person completely oblivious to any external stimulation, Othello recovered "very suddenly, on hearing the name of Cassio."¹³⁴ Lewes thought that, since Fechter omitted the scene where Othello actually falls into the epileptic fit,¹³⁵ the audience merely thought him to be sleeping. Indeed, he said, when Othello "rises from the couch and begins to speak, he is indeed as calm and unaffected by the fit as if he had only been asleep."¹³⁶

¹³² Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681.

¹³³ Fechter 74.

¹³⁴ Ottley 11.

¹³⁵ Kittredge 4.1.1-42.

¹³⁶ Blackwood's 751.

Fechter's calmness must not have lasted very long given his violent and emotional swings later in the act. But the violence of Fechter's emotions was not very satisfying to many of his critics. Fraser's noted that, in Act IV, Othello's "passion is that of a fiery, splenetic, tiger-like nature, rather than the successive convulsions of a noble heart goaded to madness. . . ." ¹³⁷ Once again, Fechter's passion was purely personal. The Critic thought that Fechter's scene with Lodovico and Desdemona ¹³⁸ was excellent because the "little bursts of emotion . . . [were] thoroughly within his powers," unlike grander displays of passion. ¹³⁹

All of the controversy surrounding the first four acts was nothing more than a prelude to the explosion of criticism over Fechter's Act V. The most sensational part of the play, it was Act V which lent itself best to Fechter's melodramatic, symptomological and picturesque style. It is in the commentary on Act V that the general prejudice against Fechter's popular approach is most apparent. As he did in Act III, Fechter altered Shakespeare's scene breakdown, with the single resulting scene more than living up to its lurid potential.

¹³⁷ Fraser's 785.

¹³⁸ Fechter 78-82. Kittredge 4.1.227-293.

¹³⁹ Critic 26 Oct. 1861: 429.

Once again, the physical setting came under fire. It was "a very elaborate set scene," said Ottley, "the fruit of Mr. Fechter's fertile invention. . . ." ¹⁴⁰ The scene was, of course, set in Desdemona's bedchamber. The acting edition called for a large window at the back, with a "balcony overlooking the sea," and Stage left of the window was an arch and an oratory. There was also a prie-dieu and Madonna lit by a red lamp. The bed sat on raised steps and was placed conspicuously downstage. A small hand-mirror lay next to the sleeping Desdemona and pieces of her clothing were scattered around the room. ¹⁴¹

For many, the setting was an affront to good taste. The London Review thought the design and placement of the bed ostentatious, calling it "a flagrantly-gilded four-poster." ¹⁴² Morley referred to the bed as "a pompous structure" which, being set on a dais, looked "as portentous as a scaffold on the Place de Gréve or a catafalque prepared for a great funeral pomp." ¹⁴³ Fraser's was especially taken aback by the hand-mirror. Desdemona would never have been thinking of anything so trivial as her vanity and the suggestion that she had fallen asleep while primping before a mirror was preposterous. Fraser's reminded its readership

¹⁴⁰ Ottley 13.

¹⁴¹ Fechter 98.

¹⁴² London Review 26 Oct. 1861: 521.

¹⁴³ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681.

that Fechter had omitted the scene in which Desdemona gets ready for bed,¹⁴⁴ a scene in which Shakespeare reveals the serious state of her mind. This omission was unfortunate and the addition of the toilette glass was absurd.¹⁴⁵

Fraser's implication was that Shakespeare's true intention was sacrificed for picturesque stage effect.

As the curtain rose, Fechter stood on the balcony, dressed in a white burnoose and looking at the stars.¹⁴⁶ At this point the Song of Willow, which Shakespeare gave to Desdemona in Act IV,¹⁴⁷ was heard sung by unseen boatmen on the water below.¹⁴⁸ This evidently constituted a daring innovation, one which was seen as sensationalizing and popularizing the scene. When Desdemona had the song, said the Critic, it was a "simple, touching ditty." Now that it was given to "three lusty boatmen," it was merely a device to enable Othello the "opportunity of moving to music--a thing greatly coveted in the intense Domestic Drama."¹⁴⁹ "[T]o make the 'Song of Willow' a chorussed barcarole deprives it of all meaning;" complained the London Review, "as fitly could Ophelia's snatches of song be given to a

¹⁴⁴ Kittredge 4.3.

¹⁴⁵ Fraser's 782.

¹⁴⁶ Fechter 99.

¹⁴⁷ Kittredge 4.3.41-57.

¹⁴⁸ Fechter 99.

¹⁴⁹ Critic 2 Nov. 1861: 447.

chorus of ladies of the court."¹⁵⁰ The effect of the song, according to Morley, was "small . . . unworthy of Shakespeare, and we suspect also that the showy effects now got with a great bed are rather more melodramatic than Shakespearean."¹⁵¹

The Observer was also critical of the choice, but for different reasons. Being one of the critics generally in the Fechter camp, the Observer held that the whole effect of the song was beautiful and "picturesque." It was, however, felt that the audience's expectations were so high, so riddled with anticipation of the murder were they, that the real effect of the song was to interfere with the momentum of the action, to place a drag on the fever pitch which had been building throughout the evening.¹⁵²

During the last couplet of the song, say the stage directions, Othello slowly approaches the bed and, upon accidentally catching a glimpse of his black face in the mirror, utters the line, "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!"¹⁵³ With the clear implication that his race is the ultimate cause of his misfortune, Othello returns to the window and "violently throws the glass into the

¹⁵⁰ London Review 2 Nov. 1861: 550.

¹⁵¹ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681.

¹⁵² Observer [London] 27 Oct. 1861: 1.

¹⁵³ Fechter 99. Kittredge 5.2.1.

sea. . . ."¹⁵⁴ This had not been the first time during the performance that Fechter had attempted to emphasize race, or use a mirror in doing so. In Act III, Fechter's Othello "paces the stage, and starts on seeing his face in a glass." "Haply: For I am black!" he cries.¹⁵⁵ This was "as novel as it was extravagant," said Ottley. The business was "'created' in truly French spirit. . . ."¹⁵⁶

When Fechter's directions regarding the mirror were carried out in performance, the critics howled. It was, thought Ottley, "a rather startling Shakespearian reading." He scoffed at the notion that Othello's blackness was in any way a motivation for the line, holding that "the cause" was "the great fell purpose or mission in hand." Could anything, Ottley asked, "be conceived more absurd, except his puerile vengeance upon the passively offending mirror, by throwing it out of window into the sea?"¹⁵⁷ The Critic also thought the mirror business stupid, a "substitution of a petty incident for a great inward emotion. . . ." The French were responsible for this outrage, and the public as well for tolerating it. It was

a true Parisian idea, and meets here, as it would at Paris, with many approvers, but it totally alters Othello's character, and transforms him

¹⁵⁴ Fechter 99.

¹⁵⁵ Fechter 57. Kittredge 3.3.263.

¹⁵⁶ Ottley 22.

¹⁵⁷ Ottley 29.

from a great sacrificer into a petulant vain murderer, who kills a woman because she has taken a dislike to his complexion.¹⁵⁸

A host of other critics joined in the attack. The London Review called the mirror business "trivial and ludicrous,"¹⁵⁹ and said it was "exactly as if he had sat down on a hair brush, and finding it uncomfortable, had flung it away with a very husbandlike interjection! . . . [W]e should advise its suppression."¹⁶⁰ Fraser's labeled the incident "pitiful."¹⁶¹ Othello was, at this time, contemplating the enormity of Desdemona's alleged sin, trying to persuade himself that that alone was "the cause." "Had there been fifty mirrors in the room at such a moment, he would have had no eyes to see his visage in them."¹⁶²

Morley did not immediately understand Fechter's point about race, much less approve of it. When he saw the production, he thought Othello was alluding to Desdemona's vanity as the cause of misfortune, and only realized that Fechter was referring to his skin when he consulted the acting edition.¹⁶³ Even the friendly Observer critic held

¹⁵⁸ Critic 2 Nov. 1861: 447.

¹⁵⁹ London Review 2 Nov. 1861: 550.

¹⁶⁰ London Review 26 Oct. 1861: 521.

¹⁶¹ Fraser's 782.

¹⁶² Fraser's 783.

¹⁶³ Rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Examiner [London] 2 Nov. 1861: 697.

that it was obviously Desdemona's infidelity which was "the cause," and that Fechter's long, slow march to the window to throw the mirror was not appropriate for Shakespeare.

"[E]ffective as such incidents might be in ordinary melodrama," said the Observer, "they are by no means in keeping with the grand and earnest straightforwardness of Shakespeare's mighty scene."¹⁶⁴ Only the faithful Atlas had anything good to say, as hackneyed as that praise may have been. Fechter, they said, was holding "the mirror up to Nature."¹⁶⁵

It was now time for the murder. This scene was the most sensational part of the most sensational act in the play, and it lent itself very well to Fechter's melodramatic vision. According to the second edition of Fechter's published text, on Desdemona's "banish me, my lord, but kill me not!"¹⁶⁶ she seizes "his hands, as if to kiss them in the agony of her despair."¹⁶⁷ On Othello's "It is too late,"¹⁶⁸ he flies into a "mad fury," and "throws her on the bed; then stifles her cries with the pillow, which he presses with both hands. A great silence [follows]. . . ." A moment

¹⁶⁴ Observer 27 Oct. 1861: 1.

¹⁶⁵ "M. Fechter as Othello," rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Atlas [London] 26 Oct. 1861: 691.

¹⁶⁶ Fechter 103. Kittredge 5.2.78.

¹⁶⁷ Fechter 103.

¹⁶⁸ Fechter 104. Kittredge 5.2.83.

later, when Desdemona stirs, Othello passes "his poignard under the pillow," and averts his eyes.¹⁶⁹

It is interesting to note that the first edition of Fechter's published script contained a much more more lurid and sensational version. Since this early edition would have been the one the critics would have had at their disposal, most of them make reference to this, more gruesome, description. Othello,

in mad fury whirls round his sword over the head of DESDEMONA, who falls to the ground as struck by the lightning of his blade. He turns to throw away his weapon, and DESDEMONA seizes the opportunity of rushing again to the door; but he stops her passage, carries her to the bed on which he throws her; then stifles her cries with the pillow, which he presses with both hands. . . .¹⁷⁰

Fraser's tells us that Fechter omitted this "outrageous extravagance" in actual performance,¹⁷¹ but there is some evidence that, while Fechter may have modified his conception and made it a bit tamer, at least the early performances included more sensation than the second edition of the script would indicate. Ottley, for instance, described Fechter as actually kneeling on Desdemona's body when stifling her. That bit of business is not mentioned in either written description and Ottley indicates that he is indeed referring to the actual performance when he says that

¹⁶⁹ Fechter 104.

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Ottley 30.

¹⁷¹ Fraser's 783.

the whole business constituted "a scene of such extravagant atrocity that it actually called forth an irreverent titter from the gallery."¹⁷² The Athenaeum, on the other hand, congratulated Fechter for not carrying out the full extent of his conception on opening night.¹⁷³ The degree to which Fechter carried out his conception that first night remains a matter for conjecture.

Whatever Fechter did, it was seen as overly violent, and sensational. The violence, said the London Review, degraded "the whole scene to the poorest melo-dramatic level."¹⁷⁴ Referring to Dickens' popular and melodramatic Oliver Twist, Fraser's said that the scene made "one think rather of the murder of Nancy by Bill Sikes, than of Othello and Desdemona."¹⁷⁵ The Athenaeum declared that such things were "certainly done in the opera of 'Otello'; but such melo-dramatic action would certainly not be acceptable in a poetical tragedy. . . ."¹⁷⁶

The disdain for the unseemly "reality" represented by the murder was overwhelming. Why, asked Fraser's,

should Desdemona spring out of bed, to be brutally thrust back into it? Why drag into prominence the physical parts of the tragedy? Why divest it of

¹⁷² Ottley 30.

¹⁷³ Athenaeum 2 Nov. 1861: 587.

¹⁷⁴ London Review 2 Nov. 1861: 550.

¹⁷⁵ Fraser's 783.

¹⁷⁶ Athenaeum 2 Nov. 1861: 587.

the vague horror which always attends a deed of death, suggested rather than seen? This is not tragedy. It is melodrama, and melodrama of the coarsest kind. 'Tradition' was right in placing Desdemona's couch at a remote part of the stage: Mr. Fechter is wrong in bringing it so far forward that every detail is thrust painfully on our senses. 'Tradition' was right in confining Desdemona to her couch: Mr. Fechter is wrong in hazarding the ludicrous effects of the opposite course.¹⁷⁷

The Observer, too, was very critical of the prominence

given to the bed upon which the fated Desdemona lies, and which has the effect of bringing painfully into view the process of her suffocation, a scene always so full of horror as to be scarcely supportable, and of which undoubtedly the less that is forced upon the sight the better.¹⁷⁸

Morley's comments returned to the notion that Fechter's Othello was too individual and particularized, and that the murder scene made this defect more than obvious. Phelps' portrayal had given the impression that his Othello was concerned with the execution of justice; Fechter's disturbingly violent Othello seemed to be carrying out a personal vendetta. "The act is full of passion and emotion," explained Morley, "and the audience is deeply stirred, but the effects in some respects belong rather to French melodrama than to English tragedy. . . ." ¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Fraser's 783.

¹⁷⁸ Observer 27 Oct. 1861: 1.

¹⁷⁹ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681.

As the act proceeded to its conclusion, it remained for Fechter to throw one last bomb at the theatrical establishment. Instead of having Iago removed from the stage before his suicide, Fechter kept him on the stage and, when it came time for the suicide, he seized Iago, "still bound, [and forced him] to kneel before DESDEMONA." Appearing as if he was going to stab Iago, Fechter, on the line, "I took by the throat the circumcised dog,/ And smote him--thus!"¹⁸⁰ stabbed himself instead. The stage directions indicate that he

throws the dagger at the feet of IAGO; then, tottering, walks to the bed; but--unable to reach DESDEMONA--falls in despair and dies. CASSIO kneels before him. By order of LODOVICO the GUARDS advance towards IAGO; and, as they place their hands on his shoulder, the curtain falls.¹⁸¹

The stabbing was carried out with the an eye to pictorial and symptomological effect. According to Ottley, Iago contracted his features and winced as though sprayed in the face by Othello's blood. The audience was taken by surprise with the business, said Ottley, who nevertheless questioned its "historic truth and . . . taste."¹⁸²

Fechter's finish was the perfect way to end a whole evening of sensation, melodrama and picturesque stage effect, and it was fitting that the production's final

¹⁸⁰ Fechter 114. Kittredge 5.2.355-356.

¹⁸¹ Fechter 114.

¹⁸² Ottley 14. Ottley does not make clear what "historic truth" is in the context of fiction.

moments left the critics in such a tizzy. Only the Atlas and the Press liked the scene, the Atlas calling it "most effectual," and noting that "the house 'rose at him [Fechter].'"¹⁸³ The Press thought that the business with Iago was "striking" and commendable.¹⁸⁴

The others fumed. The Critic referred to the business of keeping Iago on stage in order to feign killing him as "utterly un-Shakespearian and thoroughly French."¹⁸⁵ A week later, the Critic said that

the melodramatic situation which closes the tragedy--Iago being forced to kneel as in homage to Desdemona, is of a piece with all the other superficial effects which arise from a desire to express a small outward movement instead of an inward and spiritual emotion.¹⁸⁶

It was "a weak invention--a poor bit of stage-trick," said the London Review.¹⁸⁷ Othello would never "defile his touch with the fingering of the 'pernicious caitiff,'" said Fraser's.¹⁸⁸ Morley thought the business a "melodramatic, but false reading,"¹⁸⁹ and the Observer objected to the ending's lack of "calm, majestic grandeur." Fechter's

¹⁸³ Atlas 26 Oct. 1861: 691.

¹⁸⁴ Rev. of Othello by William Shakespeare, Princess's Theatre, London, Press [London] 26 Oct. 1861: 1034.

¹⁸⁵ Critic 26 Oct. 1861: 429.

¹⁸⁶ Critic 2 Nov. 1861: 448.

¹⁸⁷ London Review 2 Nov. 1861: 550.

¹⁸⁸ Fraser's 784.

¹⁸⁹ Examiner 26 Oct. 1861: 681.

staging reminded the Observer "of a scuffle and shuffle," leaving the audience temporarily in doubt as to who had been killed.¹⁹⁰ And, of course, asserted Ottley, Kean had been much better. "How different was the grand simplicity of the death scene with Kean--the stealthy stab, the sudden fall backwards flat on the stage!"¹⁹¹

It is refreshing to observe that not everyone took all of this so deadly seriously. Fun, a publication reminiscent of Punch, ran several items taking great delight in lampooning both Fechter and the press. One item, obviously alluding to Fechter, extolled the great "Affghanistan [sic] tragedian," Chowcudder Bobajee Loll, who, it was rumored, had changed the entire business of the last scene of Othello, "Othello stabbing Desdemona, and eventually smothering himself with her pillow."¹⁹²

Earlier that year, Fun had published a travesty of Fechter's acting edition; here are some excerpts:

Enter OTHELLO, very pale; he looks in the pier-glass, reflects for a minute, then throws the glass out of window. It is heard to break, particles fly in at the window, and OTHELLO treads on a bit of broken glass; he starts, then takes off his shoe and finds a hole in it.

Othello. It (alluding to the aperture) is the cause, my sole!

¹⁹⁰ Observer 27 Oct. 1861: 1.

¹⁹¹ Ottley 32.

¹⁹² "Country Theatricals from Provincial Correspondents," Fun 7 Dec. 1861: 120.

Later, Othello sits at the table and writes despatches until the pen splutters, waking up Desdemona.

Desdemona (waking suddenly, and asking a very natural question) Who's there?

Othello (with lively badinage) OTHELLO.

[Rolls his eyes violently for five minutes.

Desdemona. And yet I fear you when your eyes roll so.

[Pause. OTHELLO does nothing.

Alas! Why gnaw you so your nether lip.

[OTHELLO gnaws his nether lip, and seems to like it.

Desdemona (seeing that he is not inclined for further conversation, tries to come to some arrangement for getting a good night's rest). Kill me to-morrow.

Othello (who is a Quaker). Nay. It is Two--late!

[Looks at his watch, touches the spring of the repeater, it strikes two: he winds it up, lays it down on the dressing-table, and then proceeds to put the pillow on DESDEMONA'S mouth: finding this insufficient for his purpose and her end, he piles several pieces of furniture and a valuable wardrobe on the bed, waits a few minutes: ticking of mattress and watch is distinctly seen and heard.

The murder discovered, Othello brings the scene to a dramatic close:

Othello (seeing at once by CASSIO'S manner that he (OTHELLO) has been deceived). Fool! fool! fool! (Politely bows an apology to CASSIO, who thought the epithet intended for him.) Set you down this. (IAGO places a chair for him, which is indignantly kicked over by OTHELLO.) That in Aleppo once (points on a map to Aleppo; MONTANO appears satisfied) I took by the throat--(drags IAGO to French bedstead, and knocks his head against the post)--a turbann'd Turk (puts the handkerchief round his head, in imitation), and smote him thus. (Stabs himself in such a manner as to show his accurate knowledge of

anatomy. Then falls on IAGO, who falls on CASSIO, who falls on MONTANO, who falls on GRATIANO, who falls on whoever [sic] happens to be next, who utters a cry which falls upon the ears of the audience, as the curtain falls on the scene. TABLEAU.¹⁹³

The Fun parody made light of it all: the voluminous stage directions, the race-conscious mirror business, the idiosyncratic line readings, Fechter's picturesque style, the sensationalism of the murder, and the surprise ending with Iago. I close this study with an excerpt from a humor magazine because so often it seems that Victorian society regarded itself with such unrelenting seriousness; certainly Fechter's critics took themselves seriously enough. It is refreshing to read Fun's parody because it is proof that at least some of the participants in the Othello imbroglio knew how to put the theatre in perspective.

¹⁹³ "A Moor Propre," Fun 16 Nov. 1861: 90.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Charles Fechter's Othello has been remembered much less favorably than his Hamlet, but it is by far the more interesting of the two productions--controversy is almost always more compelling than widespread approbation. Fechter's second Shakespearean role was not the abject failure history would have us believe. There were those critics who thought that Fechter's brand of naturalism was the wave of the future, the vanguard of the new theatre--and in many respects they were correct. His abandonment of neoclassical notions of verisimilitude, his meticulous staging and sense of ensemble all prefigured major trends of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The impulse in his acting toward the depiction of the everyday and the mundane would find vindication years later in the movements of Naturalism and Realism; his attempts at creating an ensemble predated the Meiningen Players; his disregard for the old conception of the universal tragic ideal forshadowed the general collapse of that paradigm which was to occur by the century's end. In Fechter's Othello we can see the rupture of that paradigm; we can,

via the benefit of historical distance, isolate some of the social dynamics which were at work during a period of transition for the theatre. We can never know if Charles Fechter was a good actor, but we can rest assured of his significance as a transitional figure.

This transitional status is, for the most part, due to what his contemporaries saw as his naturalistic style: a particular brand of naturalism which emphasized and celebrated the small detail of everyday life. Considered by such critics as G.H. Lewes and Henry Ottley to be innappropriately prosaic, Fechter's work in Othello presented the Moor as a human being much like any other human being--bound by the same pedestrian constraints which bind us all. Unlike the statuesque classicism of Kemble or even the idealistic realism of Macready, Fechter's style framed its characters as individuals with all of the quirks and peculiarities individuals exhibit in the most ordinary of circumstances. Fechter's Othello opened his own doors, twirled pens, opened mail and lounged about. His emotions were just that--merely emotions, lacking what was perceived to be the grand passion of the ideal tragic hero. Fechter's Othello kissed and coddled Desdemona as any lovestruck young groom might fawn over his new bride. His jealous rage and the punishment he meted out lacked the quality of publicness or publicity seen by many critics as integral to the

tragic sensibility of Othello. Fechter's jealousy was the intensely personal rage of the private lover, his retribution more a murder than an execution made necessary by a public sense of justice.

Fechter's emphasis on emotion and sentiment were directly related to his emphasis on the symptomology of human existence. His stage business consistently served to remind the spectator of Othello's basic bodily needs and limitations. To lounge and sit, said Bergson, is to break the illusion of the superhuman tragic hero. A tragic hero embodies human traits, but he does not embody them in an ordinary way; his embodiment is extra-human, existing on an ideal plane. Fechter's portrayal brought Othello down to earth, demystified him. For the Atlas, the Press the Sunday Times and the Evening Star and Dial, all of which had more good things to say about the production than bad, the demystification of Othello was welcomed as a refreshingly new approach.

Fechter's disregard for the conventions of the star system and his commitment to ensemble playing have been underemphasized by historians. Fechter's willingness to give the stage to others, to let each member of his company shine as a well-developed character, was unheard of in 1861. As far as the box office was concerned Fechter was, to be sure, Othello's star attraction, but his stage aesthetic remained a self-denying one. Gone was

the traditional staging in which the star commanded center stage with his supporting cast standing deferentially in a semi-circle. The company had obviously been drilled with the objective of presenting a unified and picturesque whole, the stage business carefully choreographed to serve the interests of the overall effect. In Othello, Fechter carefully blocked his crowd scenes nearly fifteen years before the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen would become famous for doing exactly the same thing. It is interesting to note that even a good many of Fechter's detractors found much to praise in this startlingly new approach to stage business.

Nevertheless, the bad commentaries heavily outnumbered the good and, even though there is evidence that the box office for Othello remained healthy throughout the run, so many critics went gunning for Fechter that it was no wonder he did not reprise the role in later years. Most of the favorable criticism was general and relatively unconcerned with the details of performance. It was left to the hostile critics, the ones who felt most threatened by Fechter's approach, to provide those details, which they did with a vengeance.

And that is precisely what makes his effort such a fascinating study: the sheer vitriol with which those big critical guns came after him. Reading the attacks on Fechter, one could almost forget that the subject of this

bitter controversy was only a play--and a pretty safe play at that. But a moment of reflection should make us realize that the last thing in the world Fechter's production could be called was "safe." Here was a Frenchman, a foreigner, invading the sacred precinct of the British national poet. He was arrogant enough to declare that no British actor had ever properly "acted" Shakespeare and when he demonstrated for the public the quality that had been missing in their theatre for all those years, it turned out to be French too.

What Fechter brought to Othello and what, apparently, Othello brought out in Fechter, was a distinctly melodramatic sensibility. The trend away from the old notions of verisimilitude and neoclassical ideality had its roots in the more popular theatre. Melodramas were much more concerned with social specificity and individuality than they were with universal types or neoclassical conceptions of stage truth. Fechter's prosaic style was that of the gentlemanly melodrama. The spirit of Romanticism which spawned the drama of Pixérécourt, and later of Hugo and Dumas, was one which emphasized individuality over universality, the private over the public. As Marvin Carlson reminds us, realism and naturalism in the theatre "developed more as a variety

of romanticism than as a reaction to it."¹ Fechter's representational sensibility was that of the individual operating in the private sphere of a particularized social setting. It was the sensibility of the drame brought to high tragedy.

Fechter's melodramatic and popular style was a threat to the "high" culture establishment. Establishments always resist change, and the London theatre world was no exception: Shakespeare was a privileged icon and could not be allowed to be defiled by being popularized. Othello, with its eroticism and its preoccupation with the dark forces unleashed by sexual jealousy, was especially accommodating to Fechter's melodramatic sensibilities--much more so, arguably, than was Hamlet. Othello, as melodrama, was a threat to the power of the social guardians, the power to define and reserve for themselves a privileged area of culture.

Fechter's nationality compounded his problems with the critics. No direct connection can be made between the critics' disdain for Fechter's French style and melodramatic aesthetic and the chaotic political situation which had consumed France since the late eighteenth century. But the relationship of melodrama to the terror and chaos of the French Revolution, the association of

¹ Marvin Carlson, The French Stage in the Nineteenth Century (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1972): 4.

that genre with the Boulevard theatres and their attendant mobs, must have remained strong. After all, the series of revolutions and upheavals which had constituted the French political experience since 1789 was the stuff of British middle-class nightmares. It was no wonder that melodrama was seen as vulgar, and Fechter as an agent of vulgarity. The irony was, of course, that Fechter was as middle-class in his sensibilities as were the critics; for even as Fechter's Shakespearean style was being condemned as a "low" culture intrusion into the realm of high tragedy, the English Bourgeoisie was in the process of co-opting melodrama and appropriating it for their own ends. The era of T.W. Robertson and other such middle-class melodramatic playwrights was at hand.

Had Charles Albert Fechter never existed, the history of the theatre would not have been irrevocably altered. Fechter's significance does not derive from his role as a catalyst; it derives from his status as a figure of transition. Through his work in Othello we can see the rupture of a longstanding paradigm and isolate the social and political elements which contributed to the production of meaning at a time when the theatre stood on the verge of total transformation.

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