Ira Aldridge

The African Roscius

Bernth Lindfors

Ira Aldridge

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EDITED BY BERNTH LINDFORS

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Lithograph of Ira Aldridge by Nicholas Barabás, 1853 (by permission of the Austrian Theater Museum, Vienna)

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I also acknowledge with pleasure a debt to all the institutions that provided illustrations for this book: the Austrian Theater Museum in Vienna; the British Library; the City of London, London Metropolitan Archives; the *Illustrated London News* Picture Library; the Manchester Art Gallery, UK; the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC; the McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University Library, Evanston, IL; the Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library,

The essays by Smith, Bell, Napier, and Winters were published in media sources that no longer exist. The essays by Sjögren and Marshall appeared in *Further Researches on Ira Aldridge*, published by the late Herbert Marshall at the now defunct Center for Soviet and East European Studies at Southern Illinois University; it has been impossible to trace a copyright holder for this monograph. Batušić, Groeneboer, and Sawala hold all the rights to their own essays, so it has not been necessary to obtain permission to reprint from the publications in which their contributions originally appeared in different form.

Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations; the Zagreb City Museum; the Theater Museum in Cologne; the Netherlands Theater Institute in Amsterdam; and the Meininger Theater in Meiningen. The cartoons from Warsaw's *Kurier Niedzielny* were supplied by Krzysztof Sawala, and the prints of Ira Aldridge as Othello, Aaron, and Mungo came from my own collection of black theatrical ephemera.

Last but not least, it is gratifying to report that a generous University Co-operative Society subvention grant awarded by The University of Texas at Austin has made it possible to add numerous illustrations and extra pages to this book. In particular, I wish to thank Mr. George H. Mitchell, president of the University Co-operative Society, for making such grants available to the scholarly community at The University of Texas at Austin.

BERNTH LINDFORS

Austin, Texas
December 10, 2006

Introduction

Ira Aldridge had a remarkable life and career. Born in lowly circumstances in New York City, educated for a few years at an African Free School, self-taught as an actor but prevented from appearing in plays at white theaters in America, he emigrated to England, began performing as a headliner at minor London theaters while still a teenager, then toured for more than a quarter of a century all over the British Isles, and finally, during the last fifteen years of his life, earned a reputation on the European Continent as one of the greatest tragedians of his day. Aldridge traveled farther, was seen by more people in more nations, and won a greater number of prestigious honors, decorations, and awards than any other actor in the nineteenth century.

Yet his extraordinary accomplishments are not very well known today. He is seldom discussed in histories of British or European theater, and because he had virtually all his professional experience abroad, he tends to be ignored in histories of American theater. Throughout his career he was an itinerant player, moving from place to place fulfilling short-term engagements on stages large and small. He was never under contract to a major metropolitan theater for more than a few weeks at a time, so he made no long-lasting impact on audiences in London, Dublin, Edinburgh, Berlin, Stockholm, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Constantinople, Warsaw, St. Petersburg, Moscow, or any of the other cities in which he was sporadically seen. As a luminary, he was more a comet than a fixed star—here today, gone tomorrow—and as a consequence he shines less brightly now, forgotten amidst more constant reminders of theatrical brilliance.

Nearly fifty years ago there was an attempt to bring him out of the shadows and place him before the world in a more conspicuous position so that his trailblazing achievements could be better appreciated. This was the fine documentary biography, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (1958), coauthored by Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock. With help from Aldridge's octogenarian daughter Amanda, Marshall and Stock were able to assemble an impressive record of Aldridge's activities by using materials supplied by Amanda and supplementing these with what they were able to find in libraries and archives throughout Europe and America. Most of what we know about Aldridge today is derived from the pioneering research of these two scholars. A more recent biography by Owen

Mortimer, *Speak of Me as I Am: The Story of Ira Aldridge*, published privately in Australia in 1995, does not go much beyond the facts presented by Marshall and Stock because Mortimer did the bulk of his research at the same time they did theirs. As a consequence, Mortimer added very little to the available narrative of Aldridge's accomplishments.

It was impossible for these early biographers to cover every facet of Aldridge's interesting life and career. The purpose of this book is to fill some of the lacunae by bringing together a number of essays that shed light on aspects of his existence that were not treated in sufficient depth by Marshall, Stock, Mortimer, and others or may have been omitted by them entirely. The section on Aldridge's life begins with three narratives by his contemporaries, the first of which is an anonymously authored biographical pamphlet published ca. 1848 and sold at his performances for much of the remainder of his career, sometimes in translated editions; this account is mostly factual but it includes fabrications about his birth and early upbringing in Senegal as well as false information about his first wife's origins. The other two early narratives were written by Aldridge's schoolmates at Manhattan's African Free School No. 2, both of whom had risen to positions of prominence in black communities in the United States. They record several little-known facts about Aldridge's early life.

The rest of the essays in the biographical section deal with matters left largely unexplored by earlier commentators, partly because none of them had access to documents of a personal nature that have surfaced in recent years. In addition to providing supplementary information on Aldridge's professional activities, most of these documents offer glimpses of his relationships with women, revealing the extent to which he was accepted, admired, and loved by those who came to know him offstage. Aldridge's first wife bore no children, but Aldridge fathered at least six by three other women, one of whom became his second wife. Four of his children were born out of wedlock, and there is evidence that he had numerous additional platonic and erotic love affairs both in the British Isles and on the Continent. Letters to and from the women involved help to flesh out details of these relationships. This aspect of Aldridge's private life can now be examined more fully than before.

The second section of this book deals with Aldridge's career on stage, noting in particular the impact he made as the first successful black performer to be seen in British and Continental theaters. Issues of race, reception, and repertoire are discussed in depth, first in essays that concentrate on his appearances in the British Isles, and then in reportage on his performances in the rest of Europe. Initially Aldridge enacted black roles—Othello, Oroonoko, and a host of slaves and servants in popular melodramas and farces—but to expand his repertoire he soon started experimenting with white roles and eventually mastered such classic Shakespearean characters as Shylock, Macbeth, Richard III, and Lear. He also revived and revised *Titus Andronicus* so that he could play Aaron the Moor as a hero rather than a villain. It was principally as a Shakespearean actor that he began touring the Continent in 1852.

Hazel Waters opens the section on Aldridge's career by examining his achievements in a variety of roles on the British stage, where he sometimes met with racist responses from critics and audiences caught up in ongoing debates about the abolition of slavery. Next, Ruth Cowhig focuses on his appearances in Manchester and neighboring antislavery cities where he was very favorably received. Then Joyce Green MacDonald and Nick Evans study Aldridge's means of countering the racial satire embedded in popular black minstrel shows and parodies of Shakespeare by successfully performing farcical black roles himself, thereby confronting audiences with the absurdity of their own prejudices. Aldridge's enactments of serious Shakespearean characters—Shylock, Macbeth, and Lear—are scrutinized in depth in the following essays, as is his interpretation of a mulatto role in a melodrama called *The Black Doctor*. The remainder of the contributions to this section deal with his performances on the Continent—specifically in Germany, Croatia, Holland, and Poland, where he was hailed as one of the greatest tragedians of his day. In two of the earlier essays by Marshall and Lindfors ("Whiteface") there is also substantial coverage of the very positive response to his acting in Russia.

Much of the information on Aldridge's activities on the Continent has not been widely available in English before. Sometimes, surprising details are revealed. For instance, Nikola Batušić reveals that when Aldridge performed in Zagreb, he was followed by the Austrian secret police who suspected him of being a spy. According to Krzysztof Sawala, when Aldridge acted for the first time "with Polish actors in a Polish theater in the Polish capital in a play directed by a Polish director and only recently retranslated into Polish," he was allowed to perform *Othello* but not *Macbeth* or *Merchant of Venice*. Ann Marie Koller discusses the artistic influence that Aldridge had on Prince Georg of Saxe-Meiningen, whose acting company subsequently had a powerful impact on modern European theater. And Joost Groeneboer records that Aldridge donated some his earnings in the Netherlands to the victims of a flood there. These little-known facts give us a fuller picture of Aldridge both as an actor and as a man.

The essays gathered here span his entire career, emphasizing the contributions he made during his forty-three years on the stage not only to the interpretation of black and white roles but also to ongoing debates about the intelligence, sensitivity, and sophistication of Africans and African Americans. As the most visible "African" in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century, Aldridge played perhaps his most significant role as an exemplary incarnation of the full humanity of all black people. Such an influential figure certainly merits more attention, and it is hoped that this book will stimulate further research on his extraordinary life and career.

Part One

The Life

1

Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius

London: Onwhyn (n.d., but ca. 1848)

To the philosopher, the philanthropist, the physiologist—to the man interested in the whole human family, and capable of drawing liberal conclusions from the various characteristics which, under different aspects, it exhibits, this brief memoir of one who stands forth a conspicuous specimen of a "distinct" and "marked" race, and a living illustration of their intellectual capabilities, will be peculiarly acceptable.[1]

It will tell of an Ethiopian—"a black"—who, notwithstanding the abject state in which most of his kind

> Live, and move, and have their being,

has obtained, and maintains among us Europeans—"whites"—who deem ourselves to be the most civilized and enlightened people upon God's earth, a reputation whose acquisition demands the highest qualities of the mind and the noblest endowments of the person.

The acquirements of a scholar, the conception of a poet, and the accomplishments of a gentleman, must be united in one individual before he can become eminent as an actor. These mental and physical advantages have been found to exist in an African; and to such a degree are they by him exhibited, that he, in his single person, and as a champion of his sable brethren, gives the lie direct to the most "refined" among us who, in his prejudice, his exclusiveness, and his igno-

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This *Memoir* is reprinted with the kind permission of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of the University of Pennsylvania. Internal evidence, particularly the many reviews of Aldridge s performances at the Surrey Theatre in March and April of 1848 as well as the reference to his engagement having just terminated there, suggests that it was written in April or May and published subsequently. The biographical information in it is summarized in *Tallis s Drawing Room Table Book of Theatrical Portraits, Memoirs and Anecdotes* (London and New York: John Tallis and Co., 1851), 15—16.

rance, shall harbour the remotest doubt of an African being, to all intents and purposes,

> A man and a brother.

It is not, however, the present endeavour of the writer to "point a moral and adorn a tale"; but to give, in the fewest possible words, a concise history of one whose career, describe it as you may, cannot fail to fill the reflective mind with thoughts of deepest interest. It is impossible to regard one man of colour as a being of extraordinary faculties, possessing a soul capable of appreciating, and endowments equal to the representation of immortal Shakespeare's great creations, and not sigh in serious contemplation of the wrongs of thousands of his countrymen, treated by their paler brethren as mindless, heartless, soulless, feelingless clay, bearing the corporeal impress of humanity, but cruelly or thoughtlessly denied its spiritual attributes. No: a moral lesson *will* present, and even intrude itself with the simple fact, that the swarthy native of Africa is as capable of cultivation as the fairest son of Albion: a fact in which the better portion of mankind rejoice, and one from which the advocate of slavery turns, but turns in vain, for Truth must in time prevail.

Mr. Ira Aldridge, the gentleman whose memoir is here given, has been long celebrated in the provinces, and not altogether unknown in London, as a performer of surpassing excellence. His fame as an actor has extended far and wide throughout Great Britain, but not until now has the Metropolis become perfectly acquainted with his singular merits. His recent appearance at the Surrey Theatre has created not only a sensation in the theatrical world, but a degree of curiosity throughout society in general; and the novelty of his performances, and his unequivocal success, are matters so striking and suggestive, that a brief account of his origin and professional progress, requires no apologetic preface; and we verily believe that the Anti-Slavery Society have not published a tract containing more incontrovertible evidence of the African's natural claims, than may be found in these pages.

Well-informed people need not be told that a great amount of the highest order of human intelligence is to be met with in people of colour. We have Africans who have attained eminence in the arts and sciences. In the Church, the Law, and in Medicine—in all our professions and trades, have they won honours and wealth; and the hue of the skin is known to be no natural impediment to the acquirement of learning, the cultivation of ingenuity, and the practice of virtue; but Mr. Aldridge is, we believe, the first born negro who has earned for himself a reputation in the highest walks of the Drama, and he deserves all the credit of having so signalized himself.

We cannot pay to the inky-visaged children of the Sun those personal compliments which are often lavished upon fairer faces. There is black marble as well as white; but those varied tints which captivate the eye—the beauties of colour—that

are not even "skin deep," and such as the rose, the lily, the violet, and other flowers display, are peculiar to European countenances. The "pure red and white," however, even in contrast to the blackness with which the Devil is painted, what are they in reality to the scientific and philosophic observer?—what are they in the eye of our common Creator? With such disadvantages as strongest prejudice can create, and generous natures cannot entirely overcome, it is no small triumph to Mr. Aldridge that the following lines have been addressed to him by one of our countrywomen who, in a spirit liberal and commendable, has availed herself of language which, we think, no impartial witness of the African's performances can say is misapplied:—

Thine is the spell o'er hearts
　Which only Acting lends;
The youngest of the Sister Arts,
　There all their beauty blends;
For ill can Poetry express
　Full many a tone of thought sublime,
And Painting, mute and motionless,
　Steals but a glance of time.
But by the mighty Actor brought,
　Illusion's perfect triumph's come:
Verse ceases to be airy thought
　And Sculpture to be dumb.

Ridicule, that powerful weapon even in the hands of fools, assails those who wear

The shadowed livery of the burnished Sun,

more than all the other sons of man upon the face of the globe. It is only in their vilest degradation and deepest misery—it is only in picturing Blacks torn from their homes and dying by dozens in the fetid hold of a ship, or suffering the cruelest tortures of slavery, that the generality of people cease to laugh at them. Their very virtues are turned against them in the shape of distorted or exaggerated facts, and from a long-established custom it has become almost a fashion to indulge in lampoons against the sable fraternity, to exult in caricatures of nigger peculiarities. But they are destined to outlive every prejudice. The author of the latest burlesque of the day says, in "The Golden Branch," and in reference to the once-popular, but foolishly-worded ballad of "Cherry Ripe,"

Must it yield the prize of song
To "Lucy Neal" and "Lucy Long"?

That it has done so is very certain, for "The Ethiopian Serenaders" have lately created among us quite a rage for such productions as the latter; and their performance of nigger melodies and pourtrayal of nigger character have delighted, day after day, and night after night, without intermission, crowded audiences, principally consisting of the nobility and gentry of this country.

"It takes a clever man to make a clown"; and the acuteness, humour, drollery, and downright absurdity of the negro are all evidences of his superior capabilities, the more striking when we compare them with the stolid natures of our own peasantry, and that "gentle dullness" to be found among others whose lack of brilliancy is not because no pains have been bestowed upon them in the way of polishing—people whose opaque qualities are eclipsed by the native lustre of the "black diamond."

As the foulest waters in time purify themselves, and, in their natural transparency show that which polluted them collected at the bottom, so shall we in time see the character of the man of colour divested of the ignorance, the absurdity, and the humiliation with which it is associated. His simplicity, his fidelity, shrewdness, conscientiousness, gratitude, and even his piety, have never been questioned. These "harmless qualities" of the head and heart have been allowed him, while higher attributes—if higher there be—have been denied, and his aspirations have been the constant theme of broad satire and vulgar personality. Man is the creature of imitation; but an African's emulation, according to the notions of many, must be limited to the prejudice, caprice, and fastidiousness of white men. Such barriers, however, give way, when Education, with indiscriminate hand, comes to the help of the most despised, and brings them to their proper level:—

> For 'tis the mind that makes the body rich.

And yet amid all our moral, social, and religious improvements, how many of us may be shamed by the untutored child of nature—the wildest savage of the uncultivated wilderness! More rude, however, than we have been no Hottentot can ever be; but in the most primitive specimens of the latter tribe are to be found attributes that adorn humanity, and few in comparison that disgrace it. Some of our sweetest and most plaintive melodies take their origin from the original compositions of the Blacks, especially those of the West India plantations, where no labour is performed without a vocal accompaniment. The writer of these lines has heard them join in choruses of rude, but perfect harmony, to verses, constructed for the occasion just as the leader's mind may be prompted by external objects, but never without some rhyme and reason, and a strong dash of poetic fancy.

No man can be more in earnest at one time and more in joke at another than the regular Coast of Guinea nigger: the very essentials of genius. The Red Indian has no fun in him; the like may be said of many a narrow-minded man of business, who has no soul for anything approaching the ridiculous—aye, or the sublime

either; and, consequently, but little soul at all. The Indian's character, however, wild as it is, is trained to seriousness and self-command. Not so the Negro. He is more a child of nature than the sojourner in the solitary woods; more so than the Hindoo or any of the East Indian tribe; and, unfortunately, less respected, because less dangerous; but he is more to be depended upon, and more tractable, than any other uncultivated being. Thus are his good and amiable qualities taken advantage of by his cruelest enemies, among whom we may reckon a considerable portion of a country—the United States—which boasts of its love of freedom, and bawls aloud its desire to cultivate universal fraternity, liberty, and equality!

Thus premising, in order that the reader may attach some importance to the subject before him, we commence the history of the AFRICAN ROSCIUS, as Mr. Aldridge has been styled from his early assumption of the sock and buskin. We must first, however, refer to his progenitors. His forefathers were princes of the Fulah tribe, whose dominions were Senegal, on the banks of the river of that name, on the west coast of Africa, to which shore one of our early missionaries found his way, taking charge of the father of Mr. Aldridge, in order to qualify him for the work of civilising his countrymen. From what we can gather, his grandfather was more enlightened than his subjects, probably through the instruction of the missionary, and proposed that his prisoners taken in battle should be exchanged, and not, as was the custom, sold for slaves. This wish interfered with the notions and perquisites of his tribe, especially his principal chiefs, and a civil war raged among the people. During these differences, the father of Mr. Aldridge, then a promising youth, was taken to America by the missionary, and sent to Schenectady College, near New York, to receive the advantages of a Christian education. Three days after his departure, the revolutionary storm which was brewing, broke out openly, and the advocate of humanity, the reforming Prince, was, together with his whole family, and personal attendants and connexions, savagely butchered; the missionary escaping with his young charge just in time to avoid a similar fate.

Mr. Aldridge's father remained in America until the death of the rebellious chief who had headed the conspiracy, and reigned instead of the murdered prince. During the interval he had become a minister of the gospel, and was regarded by all classes as a man of uncommon abilities. He was, however, desirous to establish himself at the head of his tribe, possess himself of his birthright, and advance the cause of Christianity among his countrymen. For this purpose he returned to his native country, taking with him a young wife, one of his own colour, whom he had but just married in America. To this step he was prompted by the advice of his white friends, who, doubtless, looked forward to his reign as one calculated to encourage the growth of those "Gospel seeds" which religious zeal had planted among the children of the Fulah tribe. Their pious hopes and intentions were frustrated. Mr. Aldridge, sen., no sooner appeared among the people of his slaughtered father, than old disagreements revived, and two opposition parties were formed. Civil war again broke out, and in the struggle of

contending chiefs, the enlightened African was defeated, barely escaping from the scene of strife with his life, and for some time unable to quit the country, which was watched by numerous enemies anxious for his capture.

During the first month of the arrival of Mr. Aldridge's parents, he, the subject of this memoir, was born; but nine years elapsed before the proscribed family escaped to America. All this time they were concealed in the neighbourhood of his foes, enduring vicissitudes and hardships that can well be imagined, but need not be described. As is always the case under such circumstances, for all men, more or less, depend upon one another, there was a faithful adherent, whose services mainly helped to save the lives of the rejected prince, and his wife and son. He accompanied those whom he so served to America, and there Mr. Aldridge, sen., returned to his ministerial duties, influencing aright the minds of people of his own complexion, in that country instead of his own.

The present Mr. Aldridge recollects that when a child, some eight years old, playing at the door of a hut where he resided, some warriors belonging to his father's enemies were passing that way, and noticed his resemblance to their fugitive chief who was then, unknown to them, in the neighbourhood. Upon their making inquiries about the boy, the woman of the hut, without betraying alarm, claimed him as her daughter's child, and he was unmolested. A narrow escape for the future African Roscius. Thus was he saved in his infancy to vindicate in his manhood the cause of his whole race; thus was he snatched from after participation in, or falling a victim to, the tragedies of real life practised by his countrymen, that he may among more civilised people, and before applauding numbers, revel in mimic strife! The Negro-boy of Senegal, whose life was so in jeopardy, had a strange career before him!

There may be something suggestive of ridicule in the thought of a black preacher, and Heaven knows there have been enough burlesques written and drawn to associate the idea with preposterously absurd notions of "nigger" eloquence and theology; be that as it may, it should be remembered that sterling merit ought to be measured by the means possessed for working good, rather than by the amount obtained, and Mr. Aldridge's father did not live in vain. Here is a notice of his death, as it appeared in the public papers so late as 1840:—

> At New York, on the 27th of September, the Rev. Daniel Aldridge, father of Mr. Ira F. Aldridge, the celebrated African Roscius. There are few individuals who have been more generally useful than the Rev. Mr. Aldridge, and whose loss will be more severely felt in New York among his coloured brethren, to whom he was endeared by his faithful discharge of the duties incumbent on him as a Christian minister.

We now come more immediately to the career of the African Roscius. His mother died in 1818, leaving but two surviving children, out of a numerous family. One of these, Mr. Aldridge's remaining brother, was murdered at New Orleans some few years ago. He incurred the anger of some Whites, in a gambling-

house, and, during a quarrel, one of the "free and enlightened citizens" gave him his *quietus* with a bowie-knife. Being a "nigger," of course no inquiries into the transaction were made, and no inquest was held upon the body.

Mr. Ira Aldridge was intended by his father for the Church. Many a white parent has "chalked out" in vain for his son a similar calling, and the best intentions have been thwarted by an early predilection quite in an opposite direction.

In sober seriousness we can well account for the father's choice, one so in keeping with his own aspirations; and we can easily imagine his disappointment upon abandoning all hope of seeing one of his blood and colour rivaling in reason and rhetoric the most favoured servants in the service of his great Master.

The son, however, began betimes to show his early preference and ultimate passion. At school he was awarded prizes for declamation, in which he excelled; and there his curiosity was excited by what he heard of theatrical representations—representations, he was told, which embodied all the fine ideas shadowed forth in the language he read and committed to memory. It became the wish of his heart to witness one of these performances, and that wish he soon contrived to gratify.

His first visit to a theatre fixed the great purpose of his life, and established the sole end and aim of his existence. He would be an actor. He says at this hour that he was bewildered, amazed, dazzled, fascinated, by what to him was splendour beyond all that his mind had imagined, and mimic life so captivating, that his own real existence would be worthless unless he in some way participated in such imitations as he witnessed. An actor lives to pourtray other's feelings, not his own; Hamlet describes him.

To those who have not visited the United States, the full extent of young Aldridge's presumption cannot be easily comprehended. In that "Land of Liberty" the coloured portion of the population are denied all opportunity of advancement in common with their more fortunate, because paler, brethren. To be of African origin, is to be a "nigger," a conventional term of reproach and contempt; and "niggers," in America, are excluded those places of public entertainment and public worship wherein "pale faces" assemble.

In one theatre only (the Park) an obscure portion of a highest gallery is set apart for people of colour, and there they may be seen, a dark mass of shining ebony faces, relieved by the ivory teeth shown upon every slight incitement to risibility. Here the most respectable are expected to herd with sweeps and pickpockets. No other places must they occupy. So young Aldridge was cut off from witnessing the best performances, and in common with many of his colour, felt severely the distinction which unjustly marked the difference which God's hand had made, and no mortal endeavour could remove.

The sons of "the star-spangled banner" which "Liberty upreared," designedly conspire to humiliate and keep in degradation the race over whom that banner waves in vain, as though they feel convinced that the only difference between the Yankees and their slaves, lies in their relative social positions, and to allow the

blacks the chance of improving their condition, would be the sure means of raising them in every respect to a level with the whites. It is, on the other hand, but natural in man to hate those whom they injure: hence we may account for the contumely invariably thrown upon a person of colour by a veritable Yankee. But there is nothing that the enthusiast will not attempt. Difficulties but "spur the sides of his intent," and despite his one personal disadvantage, and, among other numerous and serious impediments, and with a slight hesitation in his speech, Mr. Aldridge became a candidate for histrionic fame.

"Go-ahead" is the word in America, where people act more than they think. Our stage-struck hero was not singular as to progression. He fell to work, and studied the part of Rolla, in the play of "Pizarro," and in that character he made his "first appearance on any stage." This was at a private theatre, where he was singularly successful, and all his fellow-performers were of his own complexion; and, to use his own words, "the gentle Cora was *very* black, requiring no small quantity of whiting, yellow ochre, and vermilion to bring her cheek to the hues of roses and lilies,"—such a face as Sheridan describes in the text. There are many among us who would gladly witness the endeavours of such a company.

Shakespere decidedly never wrote for such a *troupe*, but he deigned to draw the Moor, Othello, one of his choicest creations, and in pourtraying the immortal part of man he described what was universal. But fancy a black Juliet! And why not? May there not be an Ethiopian Juliet to an Ethiopian Romeo? So reasoned and so *felt* the coloured members of the amateur corps, when Mr. Aldridge undertook to perform the love-sick swain in a sable countenance. Certain Yankees, with a degree of illiberality peculiar to *some* "Liberals," had no notion of such indulgences being allowed to "niggers," whose "tarnation conceit and *con*siderable effrontery licked natur slick outright." One Stephen Price, a manager of some repute, became actually *jealous* of the success of the "real Ethiopians," and emissaries were employed to put them down. They attracted considerable notice; and people who went to ridicule, remained to admire, albeit there must have been ample scope for the suggestion of the ridiculous. Riots ensued, and destruction fell upon the little theatre. Of course there was no protection or redress to be obtained from the magistracy (for, unhappily, they were whites), and the company dissolved, much to the chagrin of the Juliet elect, who declared that *nothing but* envy prevented the blacks from putting the whites completely out of countenance.

It was about this time that the celebrated and inimitable mimic and comedian, Mr. Mathews, was on a tour through the United States, from which he brought materials for making many a night "At Home," before an Adelphi audience. He chanced to see Mr. Aldridge on the stage, and made the most of what he saw. The African Roscius thus, at a public dinner in this country, gave his version of the story:—

> Mr. Mathews paid a visit to the theatre on one of the evenings of my performance, and this occurrence he has made the vehicle for one of the most amusing anecdotes in his well known "Trip to America." There is certainly a good deal more in the manner of his telling the story,

than in the matter, and he has embellished the whole circumstance with a great many fictitious variations, not the less amusing because untrue, but which are pardonable enough in such a work as Mr. Mathews's, the materials of which are acknowledged to have been made up as much of fiction as of truth. He says that on the occasion alluded to I played Hamlet, and in the celebrated soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," on my coming to the passage "and by opposing end them," the similarity of the sound of the words reminding the audience of the negro melody of "Opossum up a gum tree," they loudly called for it, and the polite request Mr. Mathews makes me accede to in the following elegant language:—"Well den, ladies and gemmen, you like Opossum up a gum tree better den you like Hamlet? me sing him to you"; which I, according to the anecdote, did three or four times, much to the exquisite edification of my black hearers, and then resumed my part of the pensive prince. The truth, however, is, that I never attempted the character of Hamlet in my life, and I need not say that the whole of the ludicrous scene so well and so humorously described by Mr. Mathews, never occurred at all.

Mr. Aldridge was bent upon witnessing the performances which took place in the country of his father's adoption, and opportunities for so doing presented themselves under the following, to him fortuitous, circumstances:—

He had a school-fellow who was in the habit of taking Mr. Henry Wallack's dresses to the Chatham Theatre, and the acquaintance of this boy he assiduously cultivated. With a little contrivance and the assistance of this privileged individual, young Aldridge obtained an introduction to the mysteries of the Stage. The boy soon after died of the yellow fever, and the coloured aspirant eagerly tendered his services, and obtained the wished-for *entree* to "behind the scenes," by becoming the bearer of the leading actor's dresses, and making himself generally useful in the way of running to and fro. This employment, if known to his father, was not that in which he wished to see his son engaged; but amply was that son repaid for his services, by being permitted to gaze upon the scenes which presented themselves.

It has been said by good-natured people who rejoice in distorting facts to the prejudice of those to whom they can be disadvantageously applied, that Mr. Aldridge, when a youth, was the errand-boy of Mr. H. Wallack, and in that capacity picked up whatever theatrical knowledge he acquired. There is no doubt but he availed himself as much as possible of whatever lessons fell in his way, and the greatest actor of any age must have done something of the kind; with this difference, that others had less difficulty in obtaining instruction. Young Aldridge derived no pecuniary profit from his services, but was too happy to render them in exchange for the delight he experienced in gaining admission to the precincts of what he most admired. There the young Roscius hung about the "wings," receiving intoxicating pleasure, listening with rapture to the wildest rant, and strengthening his hopes of emulating the most admired actors who presented themselves. But a sudden termination was put to his nightly enjoyment; through the interest of Bishops Brenton and Milner, he was entered at Schenectady

College, near New York, in order to prepare himself for the ministry; and here for awhile he entered into theological studies. Notwithstanding the progress he made in learning, he lacked advancement in his religious profession. No qualities of the mind could compensate in the eyes of Americans for the dark hue of his skin; the prevailing prejudice, so strong among all classes, was against him, and it was deemed advisable to send him to Great Britain. He was accordingly shipped for the Old Country, and entered at the Glasgow University, where, under Professor Sandford, he obtained several premiums and the medal for Latin composition.

Here he remained about eighteen months, when he broke entirely from the scholastic thralldom imposed upon him.

Even religious pursuits could not damp his ardour for the Stage. His early preference "grew with his growth and strengthened with his strength"; and while yet young he started for England, determined to make an attempt to appear in public before an audience who, whatever the severity of their criticism, he believed, would not condemn him on account of colour.

It was in the year 1825 the African Roscius came to England—the Old Mother Country whom he had so often heard reviled in the New World, but to which, in common with every American (whatever they may affect to the contrary), he looked with respect and deeply-rooted interest: feelings more or less disguised and suppressed among the free and enlightened Yankees, as men are wont to hide what does not agree with their vanity. He brought with him no transatlantic recommendations. An actor of colour was a novelty in this country not tolerated in that. Here we have distinctions without differences—there they have no distinctions but differences that are exceedingly great. "Without a friend," we are told, "the world is but a wilderness." There is much truth in the saying, for whatever our station, we are never wholly independent of one another in a social community. A man, nevertheless, may be his own friend to a very great extent, and Mr. Aldridge found that he had few others than himself to rely upon. He brought with him, however, a letter of introduction from Mr. Henry Wallack, whose knowledge of him and his character has been already alluded to. He had now to hammer his way into the theatrical world, and sought an opening for applying "the wedge." A very small aperture presented itself, but that was enough, for, as in rending timber, all depends upon the power and skill that are applied to the opening; and public opinion, however hard and stubborn, seldom fails to yield to the force of merit, provided it be properly and perseveringly brought into action.

Mr. Aldridge commenced at the Royalty, at the East End, under the management of Mr. Dunn, where he first felt the British pulse, and found it favourable to his pretensions. This was in 1826, soon after his arrival from Glasgow.

He made his *debut* as Othello, in which he was highly successful. Thus encouraged and strengthened he procured an engagement at the Cobourg, where Messrs. Leclerc, Davidge, Hornblower, and Bengough, were the managers; here he played Oroonoko, Gambia, Zarambo, and [other] characters, and obtained great applause.

While there, he entered into an engagement—a solemn one, which, when once made, is peculiarly and particularly binding on both sides—he entered "the holy bonds of matrimony," and undertook to perform the part of a good husband for the rest of his life, to an English lady of respectability and superior accomplishments. The manner in which the match came about has a dash of romance in it, and may be thus briefly told.

Mr. Aldridge, after performing Gambia, in "The Slave," was invited by a friend to visit a private box, to receive the congratulations of a party who had witnessed his acting, and, from the interest he had excited in their minds, had expressed a desire to see the hero of the play in *propria persona.* The actor was formally introduced, and in that short interview commenced an intimacy which, six weeks after, ended in his marriage with a lady who was present, the natural daughter of a member of Parliament, and a man of high standing in the county of Berks. The lady played, to some extent, a modern Desdemona to Mr. Aldridge's Othello, for he unexpectedly had the power to say, in reply to relations—

> That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter,
> It is most true; true I have married her.

He was not accused of using "drugs, charms, conjuration, or mighty magic," in obtaining the lady whose affections came to him—

> By request, and such fair question
> As soul to soul affordeth.

But her father was much after Brabantio's way of thinking. His eyes mental and physical were not like those of the Duke, who said:—

> If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
> Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.

Mrs. Aldridge "saw her husband's visage in his mind," and that, we can venture to say, if it has changed at all, has improved by time and trial. Ever since her marriage she has accompanied her husband upon his professional journeys, and his theatrical campaign has been a long one, for there is no British town containing a respectable theatre which has not been crowded to witness his mimic art.

Thence Mr. Aldridge went to Sadlers' Wells, where he performed for a few nights in several leading parts; and next to the Olympic. Thus he modestly and hesitatingly, as it were, edged himself in, tremblingly alive to the prejudice with which he had previously had to contend—a prejudice to which, indeed, he had from infancy been taught to *submit,* however keenly he felt its influence and however plainly he saw its cruel injustice. But he was young; and a genial soil and atmosphere soon causes a sapling tree to take root and spread forth its

branches. He had found the true Land of Liberty, and he saw a fair prospect of prospering in it. Having, one may say, felt his way thus far in comparative obscurity, he withdrew into the provinces, the better to fit himself for a greater trial in the metropolis. He accordingly took a country tour, acting in succession at Brighton, Chichester, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Exeter, Belfast, and so on, returning to London after a lapse of seven years, an apprenticeship which he had turned to good account. During this time Mr. Aldridge had studied deeply and laboured hard at his profession. In every provincial town that he had visited his reception had been flattering in the extreme; and his fame as a country actor, as is generally the case in such instances, had reached the capital.

Notwithstanding the favourable impression "The African Kean," as he was then termed, made wherever he appeared, he repeatedly failed in procuring an engagement at Dublin. Mr. Calcraft, the spirited and accomplished manager of the Theatre Royal, could not be prevailed upon by letter to accept the services of the man of colour, at a venture: there was "something so absurd about it." Mr. Aldridge, therefore, went there at his own cost, and had an interview with the manager. The result was favourable to his ambition, and he was engaged "for a limited number of nights," as the saying goes, establishing a popularity which has never since abated.

Edmund Kean had been previously secured to appear at this theatre; and the management endeavoured to dissuade Mr. Aldridge from taking the part of Othello, as the celebrated tragedian was known to complain if his favourite characters were played just previously to his acting them himself. Mr. Aldridge was urged to come forward as Zanga, but he persisted in playing Othello, and had his way. He performed as Othello in December, 1831, and made a great hit. The Dublin people were surprised and delighted. His "sable suit" gave him additional interest in the eyes of the warm-hearted Hibernians, and the newspapers spoke in glowing terms of his rare abilities. This was the first hold that he took upon the British public, because his first appearance before an important tribunal belonging to it. He subsequently ran through his list of favourite characters, viz.: Zanga, Rolla, Gambia, Alhambra, Mungo, &c., in all of which he gained enthusiastic applause. From the many favourable critiques which appeared at the time, we will only quote the following, which by no means contains the greatest amount of praise:—

> Mr. Aldridge's first appearance was in a character in every respect suited to his genius, and most strongly calculated to draw forth those extraordinary powers, of which this actor is so distinguished a master. In all those parts where Desdemona calls into action on the part of the noble-minded Moor the softer and finer feelings of the heart, as, for instance, when she pleads for the restoration of Cassio, his responses were delivered in a manner so chaste, tender, and affectionate, that they were deeply felt by the whole audience. Many of those passages expressive of the finer feelings of our nature were most beautifully delivered in a

> softly subdued tone of voice, which was remarkable for its clearness and distinctness of tone. It was not, however, until Iago had roused his mind to jealousy that the actor became truly terrible and sublime. Beautifully and appropriately as were the softer feelings displayed and expressed, it was in the expression of the strong passions of jealousy and revenge that were raging in the bosom of the distracted Moor that Mr. Aldridge rose to a degree of excellence that we have never seen surpassed, albeit that we have seen the first of his contemporaries in the same character. When Iago began to pour his domestic poison into the ears of Othello, and he became alternately jealous of Desdemona's virtue and doubtful of Iago's honesty, his bursts of feeling, succeeded by fierce ebullitions of passion, were at once masterly, grand, and peculiar; and when in the agony of his soul, he gave vent to the passage,
>
> Who doats, yet doubts;
> Suspects, yet strongly loves,
>
> there was not one solitary individual amongst the audience whose heart did not feel, and whose hands did not applaud to the very echo, the soul-stirring eloquence with which the passage was delivered, whilst the dark and broad features of the actor presented to all who beheld them a faithful index of the contending passions which had placed his soul upon the rack. His seizure of Iago, when he seeks to extort from him some proof of Desdemona's dishonesty was also quite original, and well executed. Indeed, his entire representation of Othello is a masterly performance, as cleverly executed, as it is originally conceived, and one which will never fail to convince any intelligent audience that the actor possesses a genius not unworthy of the fame he has acquired.

Edmund Kean came to Dublin while the African was there and saw him act, upon which, with the good nature conspicuous in all he did, he gave him a letter of recommendation to the manager of the Bath Theatre, to the following effect:—

> Dublin, January 3, 1832.
>
> Dear Bellamy,—I beg to introduce to your notice Mr. Aldridge, the African Roscius, whose performances I have witnessed with great pleasure. He possesses wondrous versatility, and I am sure, under your judicious generalship, will prove a card in Bath. I have not yet recovered from the fatigues of my journey, but hope to be myself in a day or two.
>
> I remain, dear Bellamy, truly yours, E. Kean.

Upon referring to the playbills of the day, we find that which was issued for Mr. Aldridge's benefit, on Wednesday, December 21, 1831, contains this heading:—

> The African Roscius having been received by the Dublin Audience on each evening of his performance with enthusiastic applause, will ever feel most grateful for the honour conferred upon him, and considers the approbation of the Irish Public as one of the proudest and most distinguished testimonies which has ever been bestowed upon his professional exertions.

Upon this occasion he performed Gambia, in "The Slave," and Mungo, in "The Padlock"; and, in the latter character, he introduced, "by particular desire," the comic nigger song of "Oppossum up a Gum-tree."

At Bath Mr. Aldridge was, if possible, more successful than in Dublin. It is, however, unnecessary to follow his every footstep from town to town during his continued successes. At Belfast Charles Kean played Iago to his Othello, and he Aboan to Charles Kean's Oroonoko. Sheridan Knowles was among those who at that period complimented and encouraged the "only actor of colour upon the Stage." And the testimonials and letters of congratulation and approval which he then received would fill a book, while provincial criticism was uniformly in his favour. We may here extract from a paper a specimen of the general tone of reviews which his acting elicited:—

> Our theatrical campaign opened on Monday evening, with every promise of success, as it introduced to a Wexford audience the celebrated African Roscius, Mr. Aldridge, who appeared as Zanga, in Young's celebrated tragedy of "The Revenge." We cannot, indeed, find language sufficiently strong to do justice to this inimitable actor. His opening scene was powerful and affecting, and at once proved to his admiring auditory his just conception of the difficult character he had to sustain. In the third act, when he worked up Alonzo to the assassination of his friend, Don Carlos, by planting in his heart the seeds of jealousy, the manner in which he delivered the few lines, ending with "to tread upon the Greek and Roman names," was electrical; and in the last act, where he had completely wrought his victim to his fiendish and hellish purpose, in order to satiate his revenge; and saw Alonzo prostrate—his hellish joy—the self-satisfaction at the wish of destruction he caused—bespoke at once the genius of this mighty actor. During the whole of the last scene there was a breathless silence in the house—so anxious was everyone to hear every word he uttered, and pay that respect which transcendent merit deserves. This gentleman is tall in stature, stoutly built, with a strong caste of face of the African mould; his action is most graceful and becoming; his pronunciation clear and distinct, with a deep and mellow tone of voice; in short, Nature has stamped this man as an actor of the first order. The other characters of the play were most respectably sustained by the company. The evening's entertainments concluded with the farce of "The Padlock": the part of Mungo [played] by the African Roscius. Here again did we experience a new scene of delight upon his impersonation of this character. If the author of the piece were alive, and after seeing our hero in it, he would say—"that is the man for whom I wrote the piece." Suffice it to say, he is the first Mungo in the British dominions. The only way to appreciate the character of this man, and to estimate his towering genius, is to go to the theatre and see him. Our old and respected favourite, Mr. J. W. Potter, who is the manager, deserves well of the Wexford people for introducing to them this celebrated character—we trust he will be well repaid for his exertion by full attendance at the theatre during his stay.

The following season Mr. Aldridge returned to Dublin, and, after going through his limited round of characters, acted in a translation of Schiller's "Fiesco," by General D'Aguillar, which had a good run.

The following is a notice relating to him, which appeared in *Saunders' Dublin News Letter,* January 12, 1833:—

> Theatre-Royal.—Last night, Young's tragedy of "The Revenge" was performed, and the African Roscius played Zanga with a degree of native force and spirit-stirring fidelity that might have made
>
> Afric and her hundred thrones rejoice,
>
> could they have beheld their princely representative: his dark features are gifted with an expression that peculiarly fits him for the personation of characters like Zanga, with whose existence all the stronger and darker passions are so closely interwoven, and who are so well described as
>
> Souls touched with fires, and children of the sun,
> With whom revenge is virtue—
>
> an expression, savage, perhaps, in its origin, and its fiery development, yet conveying sentiments and sensations with a power that "Europe and her pallid sons" in vain attempt to equal.

At this time M. Laporte, the lessee of the Italian Opera House and Covent Garden, made the African Roscius an offer, which he accepted. His opening was fixed for Wednesday, April 10, 1833; and, after adding to his laurels at Edinburgh, where he played Shylock among other characters, on that night he made his bow for the first time upon the boards of the great "patent theatre," Covent Garden [see figure 1.1]. The *Standard* of April 14, 1833, thus alludes to the circumstance:—

> Theatre-Royal, Covent Garden.—We made a point of being present, for the last three evenings, to witness the performance of that singularly-gifted actor, the African Roscius, who is the first performer of colour that ever appeared on the boards of any theatre in Britain. He had chosen the part of Othello for his first appearance—an undertaking which at present was most hazardous; but notwithstanding the impression which the inimitable Kean has created in this character, and the genius by which he has made it peculiarly his own, the result showed that the African Roscius was fully justified in making the bold attempt. We at once gladly express our unqualified delight with his delineation of this masterpiece of the divine Shakspere. To attempt a minute description would be as superfluous as difficult; he succeeded in deeply affecting the feelings of his audience, and the representation all through was watched with an intense stillness, almost approaching to awe. At the conclusion, the African Roscius was called for by the unanimous acclamation of the whole house, who, upon his appearance, rose *en masse* to receive him with bursts of applause, waving of hats, handkerchiefs, &c., &c. The *debutant,* evidently deeply affected, expressed his grateful thanks in a very modest and feeling manner, and retired amidst enthusiastic cheering.

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Figure 1.1 Ira Aldridge of the Theatre Royal Covent Garden [commonly known as the African Roscius,] in the character of Othello, artist unknown (by permission of the British Library).

Nothing could have been more complete than his success. But there were circumstances against him, and he lost the immediate benefit to which that success entitled him, whilst others, with only half as much, have prospered. The fact of his having appeared as Othello two successive nights before a London audience is one evidence of his triumph, but it was not lasting. The tide of fortune was in his favour, but not "taken at its flood," and hostile and adverse breezes set in to keep him back. Theatres were not doing well, and the "legitimate" business was particularly low. He performed but four nights at Covent Garden; and then his name was withdrawn from the bills. This sudden and extraordinary termination to what was an unequivocal realization of all that could have been hoped of him, may be variously accounted for. M. Laporte was himself capricious, and a manager's motives, aims, plans, contrivances, impulses, decisions, and arrangements, are all his own. The public can seldom see or comprehend them; and managers are very often at a loss to account to themselves for what they do, while to the looker-on their conduct is, in nine cases out of ten, inexplicable. Certain of the public press—a few individuals—were inimical to the histrionic pretensions of the African. There was but little opportunity for assailing him directly and seriously, for in this country men must give something like a reason for what they say in earnest. Ridicule, however, is within the reach of the most unscrupulous and unthinking, and where it *can* be applied, nothing is more effective. Miss Ellen Tree was the Desdemona of Mr. Aldridge's Othello, and certain admirers of that lady, (who was then unmarried, and, as now, a special favourite), were envious of the Moor's familiarity with her fair face, and ridiculed his privilege. Burnt cork and grease, an imitative and dirty dye, upon a tallowy skin, were, in their fastidious and jaundiced eye, unobjectionable as compared with a veritable and natural hue of our Creator's own painting. Men, who have since grown older, and, if we may judge from their literary pursuits, wiser, took a pleasure in scoffing at "the idea" of "a nigger" filling an intellectual character, and surpassing themselves among others in his delineation of poetry, pathos, and passion. It was "the idea" alone which warped their better taste and judgment, for in reality there was nothing to mock. Had Laporte persisted in his undertaking, Mr. Aldridge would soon have been established as a generally known, popular, and extraordinary actor; but he did nothing of the kind. Prejudices, too, will come even across the great Atlantic.

> Coelum non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt.

And of this fact Mr. Aldridge has been repeatedly reminded upon coming in contact with actors from the United States. They have been ready to forget the immeasurable distance between themselves and the man of colour, physiologically considering one and the other, and, although engaged to perform minor parts to his more prominent ones, they have had the effrontery to assume the hectoring practised upon "Pompeys" in their own country (a kind of bearing at once contemptibly dictatorial and vulgarly familiar), as though they had luckily fallen

upon an object so void of self-respect and self-defence, that they may for once indulge in their nationality with impunity. Mr. Aldridge, however, has been too long admired and patronised in Great Britain, and too long absent from "the country of his early adoption," to submit to or tolerate the slightest Yankeeism of *that* kind. He is perfectly conscious of his own moral and physical powers as compared with those of men who would avail themselves of the mere force of prejudice to "put him down"; and the quiet dignity of manners, gentlemanly address, and deportment of the African, seldom fail to check conduct the very reverse—as is usually the case among men; for, let everybody use his own weapon, and the polished and best-tempered has the advantage, especially in a cool hand.

American actors, and some actors who have been in America, to this very day, scoff at the African

> Because that he is black,

while they themselves are but little admired for all their whiteness. We can very easily understand the latent animosity and open hostility that one performer feels for and shows to another, according to the circumstances which call forth such sentiments; but we have more difficulty in accounting for the unprovoked, uncharitable, unreasonable, and unjustifiable attacks made upon an individual by educated men whose interests can never clash with his, whose profession teaches liberality, and whose principal boast is strict impartiality. But there are many mysteries as to theatrical criticism that puzzle the uninitiated. Be that as it may, the respectable portion of the press, with one consent, extolled the African Roscius during his exceedingly brief engagement at Covent Garden.

Our hero went straight from Covent Garden to the Surrey Theatre, upon which occasion the following announcement in the playbills heralded his appearance there:—

> Mr. Aldridge, a native of Senegal, and known by the appellation of "The African Roscius!" is engaged at this theatre for two nights; and will have the honour of making his first appearance on Monday next, April 22, in Shakspeare's play of "Othello." N.B.—The circumstance of a man of colour performing Othello, on the British Stage, is, indeed, an epoch in the history of theatricals; and the honour conferred upon him, in being called for last week, at Covent Garden Theatre, after the performance, by the unanimous voice of the audience, to receive their tribute of applause, is as highly creditable to the native talent of the sunny climes of Africa, as to the universal liberality of a British Public.

There he likewise performed Oroonoko, Alambra, in "Paul and Virginia," Mungo, and other characters. His stay at the Surrey Theatre was not long.

Mr. Aldridge then again left London, and with an improved reputation. He had stood the test of a London audience, and had not failed; and his value was enhanced among country managers.

No performer has ever enjoyed more local celebrity than Mr. Aldridge has obtained from the period of his quitting the metropolis to this present period of his return to it. From time to time critiques of his performances, setting forth the excellence of his natural and acquired abilities, have reached London, and his name has become familiar to all who take any interest in theatrical matters. Again and again he visited all the principal towns in the United Kingdom, increasing in popularity wherever he appeared. A file of bills containing his performances, and newspapers containing criticisms upon them, is before us: these are so many repeated evidences of his continuous successes. The one announcing how

> The singular novelty of an actor of colour, personating the routine of Moorish and African characters, has rendered the performances of the African Roscius highly attractive in the theatres in which he has appeared; and the mighty plaudits with which he had uniformly been honoured by crowded audiences, evince the estimation in which his talents are held by the public;

and the other, eulogizing his various efforts in such terms as the following, which we take—as the landlady, in the song, took the nose of her guest—

> As a sample for all the rest.

> TIPPERARY THEATRICALS.
> THE AFRICAN ROSCIUS AND AMATEURS.
>
> This highly-gifted individual, Mr. Aldridge, the celebrated African Roscius has been sojourning in Tipperary for the last week, and has received from the inhabitants of the town generally, as well as of the surrounding country, a tribute of respect seldom tendered to any of the Thespian fraternity. But we do not evince any degree of surprise at Mr. Aldridge's warm reception in Tipperary—that town has always been celebrated for its love of the Drama, for its admiration and encouragement of the talents of any eminent performer, and the due appreciation of their merits. In the present instance we hesitate not in saying that, as a representative of the "Great Avon Bard," Mr. Aldridge in few characters has ever been excelled—nor in his just conception of the writings of that immortal poet have any of his predecessors shown so perfect an intimacy with, or so deep a knowledge of, the intentions of the great dramatist. On the boards, as the personator of the avaricious Shylock, the jealous Othello, or the vengeful Zanga, in Dr. Young's "Revenge," he has no competitor, and we may justly say, in Shakspeare's words,
>
> We ne'er shall look upon his like again.
>
> In private life, the pleasing and happy manners—the gentle and unassuming deportment—the suavity and grace with which Mr. Aldridge is endowed—have won for him many friends, whose esteem will, we trust, be as permanent as his theatrical fame will be pre-eminently lasting.

As the above is an Irish tribute, let us extract a few lines from the more cool, calculating, and matter-of-fact Scotch.

The *Caledonian Mercury,* of March 20, 1833, contains the following remarks:—

> We had the pleasure last night of being present at the representation of Othello by the celebrated African Roscius, and were at once surprised and delighted with the originality and beauty of his reading of the jealous Moor: whether in the passages which are distinguished by feeling or passion, he showed a command over the sympathies of his auditors, which none but an actor of the first order is possessed of. He reminded us of Kean in many of his best passages, and when time may have deprived us of that great master, the African Roscius will not be an unworthy successor. He was loudly applauded in all his points by a crowded and very fashionable audience, among whom we perceived many of the most eminent literary and professional characters in the city.

A score of other Scotch papers spoke of him in similar terms. Like the great Garrick, we find him equally happy in deepest tragedy and broadest farce. In the former, he is even Richard the Third and Bertram (we don't see a Romeo—a character, by the way, Edmund Kean could not personate); in the latter, he is, among other *suitable* characters—(this is not meant as a pun)—Jim Crow, Ginger Blue, the Virginian Mummy, singing nigger songs and dancing nigger dances, and now [and] then giving lectures in defence of the Drama, in such language as the following, which we copy from a report:—

> Bigotry and fanaticism have excited themselves in all possible shapes to annoy the professors of the dramatic art; but, fortunately for the honour of the Stage and dignity of human nature, it has found patrons and friends in the persons of the greatest and most learned men in the most enlightened periods of the world's history. Nothing can more strongly prove the importance of dramatic amusements than the diametrically opposite opinions that have been entertained upon the subject—opinions that have uniformly run like parallel lines for centuries—unbending, and without the smallest inclination to converge. From a reflecting mind, this view of it alone must claim the most serious investigation. Sculpture, painting, and music, are still cherished, and have also been appreciated and esteemed commendable by all, with the miserable exception of *the most ignorant*; and the Drama, when viewed in its proper light, will stand as high as the loftiest of the arts and sciences. Like every other art and science, however, profession or trade, it has its opponents and its enemies. Among these are many who argue for their opinions on fair, reasonable, and honourable terms. There is also another class, twenty times more numerous, more inimical, but less injurious, to the cause of the Drama than the first, and this last class, founded their animosity on a basis of folly, ignorance, and bigotry, combine in crying it down with the utmost avidity and bitterness. It has also, along with its truly great and eloquent supporters, many unthinking, ill-judging, and ill-advised friends, such as are common in every state, station, business, and degree of life, whose ill-digested arguments in its favour are more destructive to its success than otherwise, and, consequently, are of that description which, as Hamlet says, "would be much more honoured

in the breach than the observance." Luther, upon most subjects, would be attended to with respect, if not conviction, and one would imagine his view of the Stage alone would induce the serious part of the community to attend to the directions of the Stage, not to its destruction. He says, in comedies, particularly those of the Roman writers, the duties of the various situations of life are held out to view, and, as it were, reflected from a mirror. The office of parents and the proper conduct of children are faithfully delineated, and, what to young men may be advantageous, the vices and characters of profligate women are exhibited in their true colours; excellent lessons given to them how they should conduct themselves towards virtuous women in courtship; strong exhortations to matrimony are brought forward, without which no state, no government, can subsist.

We find him acting in plays written expressly for him, with gentlemen amateurs, and, at fashionable watering-places, among, and patronised by, select assemblies. Amidst a mass of testimonials to his public and private worth, are letters written by such distinguished individuals as the following:—

Sir D. Brewster, Principal of St. Andrew's College, to Professor Fleming, King's College, Aberdeen.
The Right Hon. the Earl of Chesterfield to the Marquis of Waterford.
The Hon. the Provost of Wick.
E. M'Ivor, Esq., Banker, to George Murray, Esq., Provost of Tain.
Miss O'Neill.
Madame Malibran.
Mrs. Hannyngton, of Dungannon Castle, to Captain Algeo.
President of Clongowes College.
President of Carlow College.
Mrs. Lyons, to Mrs. Bond, of Derricor Castle.
The Hon. the Provost of Dundalk.
The Rev. Michael Coghlan.
Alexander Gair, Esq., Banker, Tain, to P. M'Lachlan, Esq., Wick.
His Grace the Archbishop of Tuam.

All of whom commend and recommend him in the strongest possible terms. We extract a couple of the most important:—

Manchester, April 18, 1834.

MADAME MALIBRAN presents her grateful respects and compliments to the African Roscius, for the high treat afforded her last night, in his intellectual personation of Othello. Madam Malibran never witnessed, in the course of her professional career in both hemispheres, a more interesting and powerful performance, marked throughout by that strict adherence to nature which should be the characteristic of every dramatic portraiture. In returning the volume so kindly lent by Mr. Aldridge, she begs to tender her best thanks and sincere wishes for his continued success.

The *Clonmel Advertiser* says:—

> After the great concurrence of the United Kingdom having acknowledged him to be the greatest actor of the present age, we feel it perfectly unnecessary for us to offer a single recommendatory remark in his favour; it would be, in fine, as much a work of supererogation, as if we were "to gild refined gold." We feel extreme pleasure, notwithstanding, in placing upon public record the opinion given of him, on a very recent occasion, by Lady Wrixon Beecher [*sic*], late Miss O'Neill:—"I have seen him in Cheltenham and Cork, and, during my professional as well as private life, I never saw so correct a 'portraiture of Othello' amidst the principal luminaries of my day. It is true Kean reserved himself for particular passages, which were made to tell with startling effect; but, as a whole, his performance was not superior to the Roscius, whose acting, throughout, is transcendently uniform."

Among other high compliments that have been paid him, the House of Representatives of St. Domingo passed an unanimous vote in 1838, complimenting him on his successful progress in contradicting the assertion that his race is incapable of mental culture, and bestowing upon him a commission, with the rank of Captain, and Aide-de-Camp Extraordinary to his Excellency the (then) President Boyer. This honour was delivered to Mr. Aldridge through the consul in London. Many addresses have been written for him, and to him. From among the former we extract the following clever poetic effusion, from the pen of Mr. Stirling Coyne, a dramatic author of some metropolitan celebrity—one who has contributed largely to the best productions of the Adelphi, and the writer of its latest successful pieces:—

ADDRESS.

"Othello's occupation's gone!"—'tis o'er;
The mask has fall'n—I'm actor here no more.
But still your pupil—*protégé*—whate'er
Your kindness made me, and your fostering care,
"This mourning suit" perchance offends your sight;
But Nature triumphs, and asserts her right;
Expands my heart, and bids my tongue explain
The pride—the gratitude that swells each vein,
That floods unseen my dusky cheek—and dwells
Enshrin'd within my bosom's deepest cells;
Nurs'd in the land, where rolls the giant tide,
Of sluggish *Senegal*, through deserts wide,
Where every tainted breeze comes winged with death,
And Nature sickens in the poison breath;
Amid such scenes the Negro strays alone
In happy innocence—untaught—unknown:
Happy because that desert's faithless sand

He claims his own, his long-loved native land.
But soon the white man comes, allured by gain,
O'er his free limbs fling slavery's galling chain;
Robs him of heaven's best gift—and casts him then
Forth from his equal rank with fellow-men;
Transforms him to a brute—or worse—a slave:
Who loathes to bear the life that Nature gave.
Oh! justice heaven;—but list, the time is nigh:
Freedom approaches from the western sky—
Sheds her bright glory tow'rd the Indian Seas,
And shakes her banner o'er the Carribees.
The tortured black man hears her thrilling voice,
And checks his groans one moment to rejoice:
Forgive me, generous friends, nor rashly deem;
My tongue too long has lingered on this theme.
You, who have long loved liberty so well,
The strong emotions of my soul can tell.
But there's a warmer, deeper feeling here,
Which gushes like the desert waters, clear:
That fount is gratitude—it flows for you
To whom the tribute of my thanks is due;
You, who espousing injured Afric's cause
First cheered my efforts by your kind applause;
O'erlook'd my errors, taught my mind to soar,
And op'd my path to England's genial shore.
Though we must part, my best protectors, still
My heart will cherish till its pulse is still.
Its proudest record—the fresh memory,
That here the sable African was free
From every bond—save those which kindness threw
Around his heart—and bound it fast to you.

This was spoken upon his leaving Dublin to appear at Covent Garden.

In the midst of his provincial career, however, but while he was resting for awhile upon his well-earned laurels, the following paragraph went the round of the papers:—

DEATH OF THE AFRICAN ROSCIUS.

A melancholy and fatal accident occurred to Mr. Aldridge, the African Roscius, last week. Mr. Aldridge was returning in his carriage from the seat of Colonel Powell, when, within half a mile of Llandillo, one of the horses took fright at the blaze of light from the iron-works with which the county is studded; this occurred on the brink of a precipice, over which the carriage swerved with its inmate, dragging the horses and postilion. The footman had a most provi-

> dential escape. He was in the act of alighting to seize the horses' heads as the carriage was precipitated over the cliff. It is needless to add, that Mr. Aldridge, the postilion, and the horses were killed on the spot—the carriage being dashed to atoms. The place where this frightful accident occurred is 120 [feet] from the summit to the bottom.

The success of a hoax of the above kind depends more upon its apparent seriousness than evident probability, and the particulars of "the melancholy and fatal accident" were so gravely and minutely set forth, that nobody doubted them. The author knew well how to lie, but we do not envy him his merit, nor the satisfaction he derived from his vicious invention. In all probability, he was a Yankee who forged the falsehood, for such hoaxes have come from that country until the cry of "Wolf!" would not be believed in this, were it ever so well founded. Mr. Aldridge, however, was not injured by the groundless report in question. On the contrary, it made his name the more known, increased the interest which those who knew him took in his welfare, and served as a strong advertisement in widely circulating his fame. In time it became generally known that the African Roscius was alive and still prospering; and, coming to a later date, such notices as the following appeared, which we quote from The Era, a London weekly newspaper, which regularly reports all the theatrical business of the provinces:—

> The African Roscius, Mr. Aldridge, performs during the next week at Richmond. Those of the metropolis who have a wish to witness his acting, with a view to engaging him, have now an opportunity of so doing, as he will appear in Othello, and other characters which have gained him a great celebrity throughout the provinces. All the local papers, without one exception, describe him as an actor of extraordinary talent, both in tragic and comic business, and it is said, we believe with truth, that his appearance on a London stage would be very attractive.

Mr. Aldridge never abandoned the desire of making himself generally known and popular in London. To that end he has studied deeply and laboured long in his profession. The lapse of some years had wiped him from the memories of the comparative few who had seen him act in the metropolis, and curiosity concerning him was very often expressed. Not unconscious of his only natural disadvantage—that of his colour, he waited, with characteristic modesty, the invitation to appear again, to which his provincial reputation entitled him; but the legitimate Drama has been long at a discount. One or two managers lacked, to say the least of it, the moral courage to engage him, when opportunity occurred. The success of Mr. Brooke, however, at the Olympic, a gentleman with whom Mr. Aldridge had often acted in the country, drew him nearer London, and the management of the Surrey Theatre having offered him tempting terms, he accepted them, and his name again figured "on the Surrey side."

We believe that, notwithstanding the entire absence of all that bad taste and worse feeling which were displayed in certain comments, which, during his

previous visit, reflected more upon his race and their Creator than Mr. Aldridge himself, and, on the other hand, the high encomiums that the press bestowed upon him, his appearance at the Surrey this time has been attended with some disappointment. In the first place, the house is itself essentially a veritable "minor," whatever be the performers or performances introduced there. In the second place, the management evinced no spirit in bringing him forward. There were neither advertisements, placards, nor posters, to announce the fact, nor any stir made to circulate it, while those who "supported him" ranted so as to mar one moment the interest excited by Mr. Aldridge in another. Yet his usual share of commendation was given him.

The following are extracts from notices of Mr. Aldridge's acting, which have appeared in different newspapers upon this his latest appearance before a London audience:—

From the Morning Post, March 21, 1848:

> Mr. Ira Aldridge is a *bonâ fide* African, of mulatto tint, with woolly hair; his features are capable of much expression, his action is unrestrained and picturesque, and his voice clear, full, and resonant. It was interesting to witness the acting of Mr. Ira Aldridge, a native of Africa, giving utterance to the wrongs of his race in his assumed character, and standing in an attitude of triumph over the body of one of its oppressors. Mr. Ira Aldridge is an intelligent actor, and his elocutionary powers are admirable. Compared with the people by whom he was last night surrounded, he might with strict justice be considered a true Roscius.

From the Morning Herald, of March 22, 1848:

> A mulatto, of the name of Aldridge, appeared on Monday night at the Surrey Theatre, in the character of Zanga, meeting with all the success which cleverness and considerable experience would be likely to ensure. Mr. Aldridge is evidently a man of intelligence, and his personation of the revengeful hero of Young's disagreeable tragedy was discriminative, energetic, and disfigured by no clumsinesses or incongruities of elocution. He was loudly applauded; and upon being called before the curtain, propitiated the countenance of the audience in a neat and well-turned address. He afterwards appeared in "The Padlock"—playing the part of Mungo with much drollery.

From the Morning Advertiser, March 21, 1848:

> He achieved complete success, and it is nothing more than justice to his merits to say he deserved it. He has a clear and flexible voice, which he uses with great judgment and taste; he can infuse great expression and feeling into his intonation; his emphasis is judicious; and his transitions natural and appropriate. His acting was excellent throughout. Without attempting to institute a comparative criticism between the performance or merits of this gentleman and any of those who might be considered to be his competitors, we may venture

to say that he stands, without question, in the first class. In the farce of "The Padlock," his performance of the part of Mungo was equal to anything we ever witnessed, displaying great humour and histrionic art in setting forth the salient points of that very facetious specimen of sable servants. The greatest applause accompanied his efforts. If this gentleman has assigned to him characters equally well calculated to call forth his abilities, he cannot fail to be a great acquisition to the theatre, and to attract good houses, which, after all, is the great desideratum in these cases.

From the London Telegraph, March 29, 1848:

A native-born African appearing on our Stage is somewhat of a curiosity in histrionic annals; and it afforded us a pleasing proof of the wearing away of that prejudice against men of a colour different from our own, which has long lurked in the hearts of nearly all of us, that Mr. Aldridge, the "African Roscius," who on Monday night performed the part of Othello at this theatre, was, by a numerous and respectable audience, most favourably received. Mr. Aldridge's impersonation of the brave man who loved "not wisely but too well," is a treat of a high order. With the similitude of country and complexion, the illusion becomes exceedingly strong, whilst the critic has not to object to a defective knowledge of the language in which our great dramatist originally introduced this splendid conception. In the expression of love, rage, jealousy, and despair, this performance presented the skill of a consummate knowledge of the human passions, wrought, as it were, to a powerful and fearful reality. From the first moment in which the poison of jealousy taints his heart, till the "green-eyed monster" marked him for its own, in the progress of the passion, its deep workings, until he raged in the convulsions of agonising thoughts and convictions, the interest never flagged for a moment. Some passages merit the warmest praise, amongst which we may select the pathetic reference to his personal disadvantages. The scene in which Iago first attempts to excite his jealousy, when as yet "he doubts–yet doats–suspects, yet strongly loves," and the solemn impressiveness with which he declares, "I had rather be a toad and live upon the vapour of a dungeon, &c."

There was no clap-trap, no rant, even in the most vigorous and impassioned scenes; but truth to nature, and a just conception of character, were evidenced throughout.

From the Sunday times, March 26, 1848:

His delineation of the proud, revengeful Moor was finely conceived, and executed with great dramatic effect. In the soliloquies, and those passages in which the reflective powers of the mind are at work, while the material action is suspended, he possesses the rare faculty of completely abstracting and separating himself from all external objects, or of only receiving impressions from those that harmonise with the state of his mind. Zanga's opening soliloquy in the first act, during the storm, expresses this mental condition very forcibly. In scenes of emotion Mr. Aldridge is exceedingly natural; his grief and joy seem to spring directly from his heart, and have a contagious influence upon his audience. Nothing could have been more admirably pourtrayed than the exultation of Zanga when

he finds that his schemes for the destruction of Alonzo are ripening to success. There is a mad intoxication in his joy—an intensity in his savage delight that is scarcely less terrible than his rage. Of the better feelings of our nature we have but few indications in the character of the Moor brooding over his long-cherished vengeance; occasionally, however, we have touches of humanity gleaming athwart the dark picture, which were elicited with great effect by Mr. Aldridge. The remembrance of his father's death and his country's wrongs, and his own degradation, which had burned into his heart, is obliterated when he beholds his enemy lifeless at his feet, and the late remorse of a noble heart was expressed with deep feeling and pathos, when he exclaims—

> And art thou dead? So is my enmity—
> I war not with the dust.

As regards his general delineation of the Moor's character, it was marked by careful study and judicious conception. Mr. Aldridge played the part of the Negro servant with extraordinary humour and natural drollery. The child-like simplicity of the Negro character—easily excited to mirth or sorrow—with its love of fun and mischief, were admirably pourtrayed by him.

From the Dispatch, March 26, 1848:

Mr. Ira Aldridge, a gentleman of colour, appeared last week as Zanga, in "the Revenge," and deservedly met with warm encouragement. He is an actor of talent; and in such characters as Zanga can make a very deep impression. He has power to present, in strong, broad, effective bearing, the injuries, sufferings, and passions of the much-abused African. In a totally different character, that of Mungo, in "the Padlock," seldom, or ever, played by a native of the torrid zone, he displayed considerable *vis comica*.

Bell's Life in London, of March 26, 1848, writes, it will be seen, in *precisely the same words* as the Morning Advertiser of the 21st:

Mr. Ira Aldridge has a clear and flexible voice, which he uses with great judgment and taste; he can infuse great expression and feeling into his intonation; his emphasis is judicious; and his transitions natural and appropriate. His acting was excellent throughout. Without attempting to institute a comparative criticism between the performance or merits of this gentleman and any of those who might be considered to be his competitors, we may venture to say that he stands, without question, in the first class. In the farce of "The Padlock," his performance of the part of Mungo was equal to anything we ever witnessed, displaying great humour and histrionic art in setting forth the salient points of that very facetious specimen of sable servants. The greatest applause accompanied his efforts. If this gentleman has assigned to him characters equally well calculated to call forth his abilities, he cannot fail to be a great acquisition to the theatre, and to attract good houses, which, after all, is the great desideratum in these cases.

From the Weekly Times, March 26, 1848:

Mr. Ira Aldridge is a *bonâ fide* African, of mulatto tint, with woolly hair; his features are capable of much expression, his action is unrestrained and picturesque, and his voice clear, full, and resonant. His powers of energetic declamation are very marked, and the whole of his acting appears impulsed by a current of feeling of no inconsiderable weight and vigour, yet controlled and guided in a manner that clearly shows the actor to be a person of much study and great Stage experience.

From the Observer, March 26, 1848:

Mr. Aldridge has a clear and flexible voice, which he uses with great judgment and taste; he knows how to infuse considerable expression and feeling into his intonation; his emphasis is judicious; and his transitions were natural and appropriate. Without attempting to institute a comparative criticism between the performance or merits of this gentleman and any of those who might be considered to be his competitors, we may venture to say that he stands, without question, in a high class. In the farce of "The Padlock," his performance of the part of Mungo was excellent, displaying great humour and histrionic art in setting forth the salient points of that very facetious specimen of sable servants.

From The Era, March 26, 1848:

On Monday (March 20, 1848), Mr. Aldridge, "The African Roscius," who has gained a great celebrity in the provinces, appeared at this house in the opposite characters of Zanga, in Young's tragedy of "The Revenge," and Mungo, in the farce of "The Padlock." This was not Mr. Aldridge's first bow to a London audience. Some years ago, he performed two nights running as Othello, at Covent Garden, and afterwards went through several parts at the Surrey. He was at that time very young, and has since, by continual practice, improved himself in every respect as an actor. He was, however, highly successful when he last appeared in London. The papers spoke of his performance in terms of unequivocal commendation; but, notwithstanding the novelty of a man of colour representing Shakspere's intellectual heroes so as to meet the serious approval of critics, and the extraordinary circumstance of Mr. Aldridge (although a black) taking his stand in the profession of a gentleman and a scholar, capable of receiving the poet's creations, and pourtraying his thoughts in a display of histrionic art—notwithstanding the general approval he met with, and the encouragement he ought to have received, he made but little way as an actor of great pretensions, and soon disappeared from the London boards. Ridicule had something to do with this. The disadvantage of colour, which excluded him from all chance of success in America was not entirely overcome in England among a prejudiced, wanton, and unthinking few, who could not let an opportunity pass for sneering at and ridiculing the "presumptuous nigger." One publication in particular, now out of print, was particularly unmerciful, and its lampoons were sadly discouraging to the young "Roscius," for ridicule does not always blunt the feelings of those

against whom it is directed, but, on the contrary, often makes them more susceptible. Mr. Aldridge, however, is, in our opinion, likely to outlive such petty attacks as he was then subjected to. His appearance at the Surrey has been promising in the extreme, and we think his London engagements this time will be both gratifying and profitable to him. He is a very excellent actor. Like all of his race, and his country itself, he is one of extremes. The earnestness of seriousness is equal to the heartiness of his mirth. As Zanga he is exceedingly fine, looking the character of the Moor to perfection, and acting it with great power and correctness. For the tragedy itself we have little regard. It was written when mere declamation was admired, and the College critic sat in the pit to applaud stilted language, which is now looked upon as so much grammatical nonsense. Still there are some stirring passages in "The Revenge," and some melodramatic situations, and of these Mr. Aldridge avails himself very effectively. It was interesting to mark the subdued tone and superior acting of the African, as compared with the wild and unmeaning rant of those who "supported" him. In his passionate deliveries he received much applause, and upon those occasions his voice rises to ringing, clear, and distinct accents, while at others he speaks in a measured and grave style, almost too sober to be in keeping with the fiery nature of the Moor. We look upon him as an extraordinary personage, and quite a curiosity to those who take any interest in the physiology of man. In farce he is exceedingly funny. You see the veritable nigger, whose good-nature, humour, and even wit, are so commonly ridiculed. As Mungo he is very amusing, giving way to his absurdity with all the zest of one of his colour. Mr. Aldridge sings, too, and his "Possum up a Gum-tree" is one of the funniest things that can be imagined. No mock "Ethiopian Serenader" could come near it. It is novel to see one who has been obtaining much applause in pourtraying passion in its most poetic shape, descend to the broad farce of mock drunkenness, and cramming into his capacious mouth a lighted candle, which he mistakes for the neck of a bottle in the other hand; and it is only a man of natural genius who can do both so as to be commended for the faithfulness of his mimicry. On Monday next, Mr. Aldridge will appear as Othello, a character for which he is so peculiarly fitted. We are inclined to believe that he will be very attractive as the "darky husband" of the fair Desdemona. We advise the anti-slavery people, who visit Exeter Hall upon great occasions, to see Mr. Aldridge at the Surrey. His appearance there is a "great moral lesson" in favour of anti-slavery.

Again, on April 8, 1848 the Era says:

There is a repose, a dignity, and a natural gravity and earnestness about Mr. Aldridge's personification of the dusky Moor that are particularly impressive. He is very fine in the part, and the natural hue of his skin helps to make the illusion perfect. There is much originality, too, about the African's delineation of the character. His declamation has all the dignity, and his action all the grace, which belong to primitive races. Nor is he wanting in that refinement without which there is but little to admire in man, as he appears before the more civilized of his species. Mr. Aldridge is something more than an African: he is a scholar and a gentleman; at least, he acts like one. In Othello, he delivers the most difficult passages with a degree of correctness that surprises the beholder, and, at times, he ascends to a pourtrayal of the conflicting passions

> of the jealous husband in a manner both artistical and true. The workings of his mind, and sensations of his heart, were conspicuous in his swarthy visage, and depicted in every gesture. After the death of Desdemona, when he awoke to a consciousness of the deception that had been practised upon him, in the frenzy of his remorse he lifted the lifeless body of his murdered and wronged wife from the bed, as though she had been an infant. There was something terribly touching in this display of physical strength, wrought up by mental agony.

From the Illustrated London News (with an engraving of the African Roscius as Zanga, in "The Revenge"):

> Mr. Aldridge possesses an excellent voice, commanding figure, and expressive countenance; to which he adds the advantages of education and study. His dress, which is novel and picturesque, reminds one of the portraits of Abd-el-Kader. Throughout the play he more than realized the high encomiums that had previously been passed upon him; and many who ridiculed the idea of a native-born African successfully representing a dramatic character, retired with very different feelings. Nor is his talent confined to tragedy. His representation of Mungo, in "The Padlock," is a laughable performance, differing entirely from the Ethiopian absurdities we have been taught to look upon as correct portraitures; his total *abandon* is very amusing He re-appeared on the 27th as Othello, with great success.

From Douglas Jerrold's Newspaper, of March 25, 1848:

> On Monday, Mr. Aldridge, a Negro, performed the part of Zanga, and although the selection of such an individual looked like the parading [of] a piece of reality, by having a real black man to represent the ideal character, and therefore, seemed to be an insufferable piece of vulgarity, yet we thought it our duty to witness it. We were agreeably disappointed. Mr. Aldridge is an undoubted Negro, but is gifted with an intelligence of perception, dignity of action, and force of expression, that not only do honour to his particular race, but to humanity. He reads with much feeling and appreciation of the author; and there is a force and vigour in his passionate enunciation that is stirring, and perfectly free from imitation or rant. He especially possesses a freedom of gait and natural dignity of movement, derivable probably from the unconfined nature of his early life. He has nothing of the savage, but his freedom from the petty manners of conventional training. He made as much of Zanga as it is possible to do of so wordy, blustering, and clumsy an Iago. He has a slight foreign accent, and his voice, like most of his countrymen, is thin in the upper tones. He immediately afterwards performed Mungo, in "The Padlock," and with so much humour, and with such characteristic songs, that it gave universal satisfaction, and it is doubtful whether his *forte* be not rather comedy than tragedy. It is certain he is a man of no mean amount of talent, and its range is considerable, as is proved by his clever delineation alike of Zanga and Mungo. He was enthusiastically received by a very excellent house, and we are quite sure his complexion will be no impediment to his receiving the applause due to his merit.

The Satirist, of April 2, 1848, says:

> The African Roscius continues to draw good houses at the Surrey, from the novelty of seeing "a real black," and the more especially a tragic actor, which Mr. Aldridge is, beyond all doubt. His Othello is a very superior piece of acting, well considered, and well developed; the latter part, where, after the death of Desdemona, he becomes conscious of her innocence, his desperation, and the abandoning of himself to the furies of his mind, were touches of the highest excellence. As an actor he has fought his way through every opposition and prejudice, and as a foreigner and a stranger comes to England to delineate the poetic conceptions of England's bard.

Other London papers speak of Mr. Aldridge in similar terms. Upon the principle of "what everybody says must be true," Mr. Aldridge must be a man of no ordinary talent. As a whole his performances are, according to every testimony that has been given in reference to them, extraordinarily fine, whatever may be the occasional objections that spring up in the minds of those who endeavour to find faults in them. He is, however, before a public who will judge for themselves; that they admire his efforts is very evident in the encouragement he receives, and that his various and peculiar merits may be more generally known and tested, this brief history of his life and labours has been written.

The African, notwithstanding all that has been said of him, has yet to be brought fairly and completely before the London public, by whom he is, comparatively speaking, unknown. His engagement at the Surrey Theatre has just terminated with offers to renew it; but it is on the Middlesex side [of] the water he must take his stand and be thoroughly tested. Punch, seeing a joke and availing himself of it, said lately:—

> "Ira est furor brevis."—The theatrical critics are loud in praise of a real Ethiopian tragedian, a Mr. Aldridge, with the unusual Christian name of *Ira*, which is, no doubt, symbolical of its owner being "the rage," wherever he goes.

Mr. Aldridge will, no doubt, soon come forward more conspicuously than he has hitherto done, and justify the above remark. At Edinburgh, Mr. W. Murray, the spirited manager of the Theatre Royal, took great pleasure in helping to his successes, while the Scotch people have shown a marked appreciation of his merits. Such has been precisely the case with Mr. Calcraft and the Irish; facts to which Mr. Aldridge refers with lively and mingled sentiments of pride and gratitude.

We have witnessed the performances of Mr. Aldridge, and if testimony to his superior abilities and accomplishments as a tragic and comic actor were wanting, we would readily add our own humble opinion of them. But those qualities are beyond dispute. He possesses every mental and physical requisite for such parts as he fills, and is an ornament to his profession, and a credit, not only to his race in

particular, but to society at large, of which he is a bright, albeit a jetty member. In the character of Othello—his special favourite (for he has a decided preference for serious parts)—he seems to have precisely Dr. Johnson's conception of it. That great critic says:—"The fiery openness of Othello, magnanimous, artless, and credulous, boundless in confidence, ardent in his affection, inflexible in his resolution, and obdurate in his revenge, are proofs of Shakspeare's skill in human nature." Mr. Aldridge feels and acts all this.

In "The Slave," he is solemn in the intensity of his hatred, bursting out occasionally into a blaze of fierce invective and passionate declamation, and then hiding the fire of his feelings beneath the assumed servility necessary to his purpose and his station. There is no other actor who exhibits the same amount of gravity, save Mr. Macready, who carries his seriousness, to our humble thinking, to an unnatural extreme. Mr. Macready puts on the "intense earnestness" and "wrapped fixedness" which belong to greatness of soul, and wears the garments well; but they are evidently borrowed for the occasion, however much they become the wearer, and exhibit his skill in the adjustment of each particular fold. Mr. Aldridge, on the other hand, appears in such robes as though they fell upon him without an effort to possess them, and he wears, as it were, his own by right of inheritance. The dark shades of his face become doubly sombre in their thoughtful aspect; there is something true to nature in the nightlike gloom that is spread over them; an expression more terrible than paler lineaments can assume.

In farce, Mr. Aldridge is funny, as he is serious in tragedy. The ebony becomes polished—the coal emits sparks. His face is the faithful index of his mind, and as there is not a darker frown than his, so is there not a broader grin. The ecstacy of his long shrill note, in "Oppossum up a gum-tree," can only be equaled by the agony of his cry over the body of Desdemona. The sublime and the ridiculous defined, but not blended or confounded one with the other.

With these few general observations upon his acting, we conclude our task—one hastily performed, and shaped out of a handful of loose materials, such as a few old playbills, newspaper notices, and some memoranda that were indispensable. Mr. Aldridge, although aware that a string of such facts as are here set forth, would be calculated to advance his fame and increase public curiosity respecting him, has, with characteristic diffidence, left the entire construction of the narrative to the discretion of the writer, whose comments have been the gratuitous convictions consequent upon the simple facts submitted to him. Should the reader detect what he deems to be remarks too partial, and conclusions one-sided, some allowance, it is hoped, will be made for the bias which the mind naturally receives when engaged upon an undertaking in which its sympathies are excited, and when its approval is justified by the evidence it elicits. We lay down our pen thoroughly persuaded that, even with a set-off thus deducted from the gross amount of favourable construction contained in these pages, Mr. Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius, will, in no respect, be a loser by the interesting truths that remain, and others of his colour may see occasion to rejoice in their publicity.

2

Ira Aldridge (1860)

James McCune Smith

Nearly half a century ago—in 1816–17, to wit—there sailed from the port of New York, in one of the Liverpool packets, as steward thereof, a tall black man named Brown. He belonged to a class which, at that time and for years afterwards, even to this present day, occupied a respectable and responsible position. The steward was then, next to the captain, the most important personage in the ship. Dressed in his brilliant-colored morning-gown and red slippers, he was wont to receive passengers with a "stately courtesy," which was duly reciprocated by those who went down to the sea in ships. The stewards of the different lines of packets vied with each other in their style on board ship, and in their private houses. They were all colored, and sailed to every port, at home, or abroad—Liverpool, Canton, Bremen, Charleston, New Orleans, Savannah, &c. There are yet among us, in a flourishing old age, some of the stewards of that good old time: Henry Scott, the retired merchant, whose name is an analogue for probity, and George Lawrence, Senior, and of a somewhat later day, Benjamin Fisher, the "bluff salt" who reigns in the Vanderbilt "skimmer of the seas."—And of those that shipped on their last long voyage, Bowser, Mack, Burchell, Portee, Harry Brown, Moses Sheppard, George B. Williams, and a hundred others;

> *"Quae regio terris?"*
> What part of the earth does not bear witness to their presence?

In 1816–17, Mr. Brown, steward of a Liverpool liner, gave up following the sea, and hired a house on the north side of Thomas Street, (nearly opposite that since made famous by the Helen Jewett tragedy), and fitted up a tea-garden in the rear of the lot. In the evening he made the garden attractive by vocal and instrumental music. His brother stewards and their wives, and the colored population generally, gave him a full share of patronage. Among his *artistes* were Miss Ann Johnson,

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since Mrs. Allen, the mother of an excellent *cantatrice* of the present time, and James Hewlett. These evening entertainments were not dry affairs; brandy and gin-toddies, wine-negus, porter and strong ale, with cakes and meats, enabled the audience to gratify several senses and appetites at the same time. James Hewlett was quite a character in his line; a very fine singer for the times, he added by degrees, dramatic exhibitions to the entertainments. His off nights were invariably spent in the gallery of the old Park Theater, and spent not in vain, for he soon became celebrated for the talent and versatility which enabled him—anticipating Mathews, we believe—to perform several widely differing characters, very perfectly, at one exhibition. He followed the fashionable world to Saratoga, and in the height of the season, when rival singers would scatter their paper announcements through the hotels, there would appear, thickly scattered around, tastily printed on white satin:

JAMES HEWLETT,
Vocalist, and Shakespeare's proud
Representative
Will give an entertainment
IN SINGING AND ACTING
In the Large Room of the United States Hotel
&c. &c. &c.

Hewlett was a mulatto, of middle height, with sharp features, and a well-set, coal-black eye. He was a native of one of the West-India islands.

So great was Mr. Brown's success with his tea-garden, that in four or five years he built a theater in Mercer street, above Prince, then, of course, well up-town. The edifice was of wood, roughly built, and having capacity for an audience of three or four hundred. The enterprise was quite successful, the audience being composed largely of laughter-loving young clerks, who came to see the sport, but invariably paid their quarter for admission.

The father of Ira Aldridge was Daniel Aldridge, a straw vender in the city of New York. Mr. Aldridge was a strict member, in high standing, in "Old Zion." We well remember the old gentleman—short in stature, with a tall, broad-brimmed white hat, mounted on a high cart filled with his merchandise, and dolefully crying *straw, s-t-r-a-w!* through the streets, especially on Saturday nights. He was a native of Baltimore, and his wife (Ira's mother) of North Carolina; so that the great actor himself hails from the region which has produced so many distinguished colored Americans.

Ira Aldridge was born in Chapel street (now West Broadway) in the city of New York in 1808.[1] At the time of the existence of Brown's theater, he attended the African school in Mulberry street, on the site now occupied by colored Ward School, No. 1. He was among the "big boys" of our schoolmates, yet we do not recollect, nor do others of his schoolmates, that he especially distinguished

himself in any direction. We have a dim remembrance of a great fight in which he was engaged with one Joe Prince, on the spot until recently occupied by the New York Gas Light Co., at the corner of Collect and Hester street, when one—but which of them, we cannot say—got terribly whipped. His attainments were about the average of the scholars in attendance upon the school, then taught by the late Mr. Charles C. Andrews.

It was a peculiar talent, constantly exercised by that teacher, to find out what a boy was good for—in other words, the bent of the child; and having once ascertained this, he would spare no pains to cultivate such bent with untiring industry. Mr. Andrews felt, and often said, that the character of the race was in the keeping of his scholars, and that they must exert themselves to maintain it. "Ira," in the words of his elder brother, Mr. Joshua Aldridge, now resident in New York city, "being a somewhat intelligent lad, was held in considerable favor for his quickness and attention to his studies, both by his teacher and his schoolmates. He lost his mother while still yet a child, and being of a roving disposition only remained at home a few months after his father's second marriage; he shipped on a brig, and sailed south. While in a port in North Carolina, he attracted the attention of a slave-dealer, who offered the captain five hundred dollars for him; but the captain, who happened to be a Christian man, refused the offer, saying that 'the boy had trusted to his honor to carry him back to New York.'" Shortly after his return home, Brown's theater was opened, and Ira, with his brother Joshua, took to the stage; but their father, finding it out, took them away from the theater. Some time after this, Ira again shipped, this time as a steward in a vessel bound for Liverpool. It happened that Mr. James Wallack, the actor, was [a] passenger in the same vessel. Mr. Wallack engaged Ira as his personal attendant while on the passage, and on the arrival of the vessel in Liverpool, Aldridge left her with that view. He has not since (this was in 1826–27) returned to the United States. In 1828–29 he was engaged in a subordinate capacity in Astley's Amphitheatre, London.

In September, 1832, while in Liverpool, the writer of this sketch happened to put up at the same hotel with the wife of Mr. Aldridge. She was an English lady, the daughter of a late member of Parliament, and had made a run-away match with the African Roscius. She was a lady of fine accomplishments and great conversational talent. She showed me a bust, in plaster, of her husband, and very anxiously enquired whether he had the true negro features, seeming especially desirous that he should be perfect in this way. Mr. Aldridge himself was absent on a professional tour, and I did not have the pleasure of meeting him until nearly two years after in the city of Glasgow, where he fulfilled an engagement at the Royal Theater, then under the management of the late Mr. Alexander.

The engagement was a very successful one, the actor drawing large audiences and winning golden opinions from the press. The waters, however, did not run smoothly behind the scenes. Mr. Alexander, a tall, stalwart, coarse man, of great energy and perseverance, had won success in the management, by alternately cuddling and scolding his audience in the midst of his own performances, and by

bullying his actors behind the curtain. No small portion of the attraction to young gentlemen in the pit arose from his habit of suddenly breaking off in the midst of *Rob Roy*, with:—"Ye Gods in the gallery must na licht your pipes at the gas jets, and let your brent papers fall on the gentlemen below"—or as suddenly leaving the boiling cauldron and coming down to the foot-lights with:—"Madam, will you please stop that wean's crying!"

One night, between the acts, Mr. Alexander, in a towering passion at some mishap, turned to vent his rage on Mr. Aldridge; the latter firmly resented; Alexander uplifted sword in hand, sprang towards Aldridge, the latter with a similar weapon quietly disarmed the manager, without stirring a footstep; grasping his sword again he rushed on, shrieking "I'll kill him, don't hold me back"—the latter being addressed to two female supes [supernumeraries], who easily led him away.

The good people of Glasgow, at the time we write of, were especially "down upon" two institutions—Popery and the theater; and a man of repute—which meant a God-fearing, church-going individual—was certain of losing caste if he patronized, or even ventured within the precincts, of either. Anti-slavery men, who were for the most part rigid dissenters, entertained these prejudices in the highest degree. The secretary of the Glasgow Emancipation Society, the late John Murray, whose distinguished friendship I had the honor to enjoy, was so thorough in his anti-popery and anti-theater views, that it was with some reluctance, one Saturday morning, that I mentioned to him that my old school-mate, Ira Aldridge, would perform that night at the Royal Theater. To my surprise and delight, he at once proposed to go, which we did. It was his first and only visit to a theater. He was "carried away" by the acting of Mr. Aldridge, insisted on an introduction, and invited us to breakfast next morning. The *reunion* was a most pleasant one. When we left, and walked down Sauchiehall street to the coach, (Mr. A. was obliged to leave that morning to fulfill an engagement at Edinburgh) Aldridge grasped my arm, and his large, lamping eyes filling with tears as he exclaimed, "Oh God, what unexpected treatment to a poor outcast actor!"

Mr. Aldridge had not yet ventured on the London boards, although he had constant engagements in the provinces, and had received an offer from a Metropolitan manager. He was devoted to his profession, and determined to give several years of hard study and constant practice, before he risked his reputation, and that of his race, to the ordeal of City criticism. A few years after, feeling that he might make the venture, he accepted an engagement in London, which drew out the following:

(From the London *Spectator*, Oct. 13th, 1835.)[2]

The African Roscius (in 1834)

Mr. Aldridge, a native of Senegal, appeared as Othello, at Covent Garden Theater, on Wednesday. His person is tall and well-formed, and his action free-flowing and graceful; his

> face is not disagreeable, though we have seen better looking Africans, but it is not susceptible of much variety of expression. His voice is rich, melodious and sonorous withal, and in passages of tenderness its tones had great sweetness. It resembles Macready's, but has more volume. Indeed, the acting altogether—though with due intervals—reminds us of that great tragedian. His deportment is manly, and occasionally dignified; he moves and speaks with deliberation and self-possession. He evinced a great deal of feeling and nature in his performance; these, indeed, were its redeeming qualities; but they could not reconcile us to its numerous and glaring defects. Its beauties, however, surprised us more than its faults.
>
> An African is no more qualified, &c. In one particular alone, we might expect a native African to be qualified by nature to personate a character of his own clime and complexion, that is, in having the fiery temperament of these children of the sun. But herein Mr. Aldridge possesses no advantage; he is a remarkable exception to the general rule, being on the contrary tame and *larmoyant*. So that in fact he is without the natural qualifications which are essential to the verisimilitude of the character.
>
> The swarthy actor is not new to the stage; he has played at several provincial theaters, and in some of the minor houses of London. His declamation is not only ineffective, but faulty. Mr. Aldridge's grief is querulous and lachrimose, and his pathos whining. In the most violent bursts of passion he was deficient in energy and power; though in depicting the struggles of mental agony and suppressed emotion he was vigorous and natural. The range of characters in which Mr. Aldridge can appear must necessarily be very limited, we therefore expect his acting to be more perfect. "He has no genius, but is not without talent."

Such was Mr. Aldridge in 1834. *Per contra*, let us look at the same Ira Aldridge, the colored tragedian, in 1858.[3] Here is a splendid example, worthy the emulation of all our colored youth. See the contrast. In 1834, Mr. Aldridge is pronounced by a competent London critic to be one who "has no genius, but is not without talent" and in 1858 he is pronounced the first of living tragedians, producing effects only equaled by the wonderful Rachel, in her best *role*. Let young Anglo-Africans, when they feel the weight and manifest nature of the barrier in their way to eminence, remember that, in 1858, the first living tragedian in the world was Ira Aldridge, an American black man, who was once a pupil in Colored School No. 1, Mulberry street, New York City.

We say this is a splendid example, for the reason that the severe criticism of the London paper, in 1834, falling upon him when he had reckoned himself fit for the London stage, so far from discouraging, only acted as a stimulant to Mr. Aldridge, and drove him to a more severe course of dramatic study, which, after twenty years of persevering assiduity, placed him on that pinnacle of fame, to attain which he had started out. What greater difficulties can there be in the way of any of our young men?

In his up-hill struggle after eminence, Mr. Aldridge met the warmest encouragement from the Irish people. Some of his best friends are among the middle and higher classes in Dublin and Belfast, who urged him constantly to aim at the

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Figure 2.1. Ira Aldridge as Othello, lithograph by Ferdinand Zelinka, a reverse image of which appeared in *Anglo-African Magazine* 2, no. 1 (January 1860) (editor's collection of black theatrical ephemera).

highest excellence; and among the common people he has hosts of friends and supporters, who cheer him on, as only Irishmen can cheer. When we look to-day at the sentiments of Mitchel, Meagher, and O'Conor, on the one hand, and at the chronic hate with which the Irish masses in America act out such sentiments towards the colored man in America, we are led to alter the celebrated line and exclaim—"*Qui trans mare currunt cælum et animam mutant*."[4]

> At Belfast, in Ireland, Mr. Aldridge played Othello, for ten days, to the Iago of the younger Kean, and also Orozembo to the same artist's Alvan. On the Continent he appeared in Amsterdam, Brussels, Berlin, Breslau, Vienna, Pesth, Konigsberg, Dantrice, the Hague, Berne, Frankfort-on-the-Main, Dresden, Cracow, Gotha, and other cities, personating characters of every style and nationality. In most of these cities he received substantial tokens of approbation. The King of Prussia, at Berlin, wrote him an autograph letter, accompanying the first-class medal of Art and Science. The Emperor of Austria conferred on him the Grand Cross of Leopold; and at Berne he received the medal of merit in the shape of a Maltese cross. In Germany, Aldridge was looked on as performing his Shakespearian characters with marked ability; but in England he has not often appeared in any of Shakespeare's plays, except *Othello* and the *Merchant of Venice*. In Zanga, Orozembo, Zorambo, Rolla, Hugo (Gumbo?) [*sic*] in *The Padlock*, and other characters, the physiognomy of which suits his color, he is thought to display rare excellence. He is also a good comedian. After returning from his continental tour, Aldridge appeared in Covent Garden, in 1857; and, after an engagement at the Britannia, was about to visit Sweden, whither he had been invited by King Oscar.[5]

Mr. Aldridge is so nearly a pure negro, that there is probably not one thirty-second portion of white blood in his veins. His complexion is black, and yet of that shade through which the red blood may be seen glowing beneath. His hair is woolly. His features, of that negroe'd type which we see in the Egyptian Sphynges, are well represented in the plate accompanying this number. He is above the middle height, athletic, and of noble presence. Of the British actors, he may be classed with Garrick, in that it is hard to say whether he excels most in tragedy or comedy. His triumphs on the Continent are the greater from the fact that he used the English language in the various stages, whilst his audiences were French, German, Russian or Norse. He reached eye and ear and heart by something higher than pantomime, inasmuch as the tones of the voice swept the heart-strings with their resistless magic. It was the human appealing to the human, through the universal language of passion which accomplished these highest triumphs of art.

With Dumas, the father, first of living novelists, and Dumas, the son, first of living dramatists, and Ira Aldridge, the first of living actors, who will have the hardihood to deny that the negro, in the middle of the nineteenth century, is fully entitled to the first place in the Temple of Art?

Notes

1. The *New American Encyclopedia* [see "Aldridge, Ira," 1:305] states: "*Ira Aldridge* or *Roscius*, the real name of whom was said to be Hewlett, is a mulatto, ... born in a village called Bellaire, about 1810; was apprenticed to a ship carpenter, ... and from association with the German population, which is very large on the western shore of Maryland, learned the German language." Of these six statements, not one is true! The writer evidently confounds James Hewlett with Ira Aldridge. [The encyclopedia cited here, *The New American Cyclopaedia: A Popular Dictionary of General Knowledge* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1858), is the same as that cited under a different title by Philip A. Bell in chapter 3, the quotations being virtually identical but with differing errors in transcription. Ed.]

2. We may be mistaken in the year; the paragraph is copied from the files of the *N.Y. American* in the N.Y. Historical Society's library, and the year is left out of our copy. [The date of the review should have been April 13, 1833. Aldridge's first performance at Covent Garden had taken place on April 10 of that year, not 1834. Smith's transcription of this review is occasionally faulty, and he omits several passages. Ed.]

3. See *Anglo-African Magazine* 1 [1859]: 63–64. [This reads as follows:

> *Ira Aldridge, the Colored Tragedian*
>
> The St. Petersburg correspondent of *Le Nord* writes, Dec. 5: "The success of the negro actor, Ira Aldridge, has been wonderful. At his *debut*, people were curious to see an Othello who needed neither crape nor pomade to blacken his face. Many expected tears of laughter rather than tears of emotion, when they learned that Iago and Desdemona would reply to him in German. (The absence of an English troupe forced him to play with German actors.) Those who counted on this were strangely deceived. From his appearance on the stage the African artist completely captivated his audience by his harmonious and resonant voice, and by a style full of simplicity, nature, and dignity. For the first time we had seen a tragic hero talk and walk like common mortals, without declamations and without exaggerated gestures. We forgot that we were in a theater, and followed the drama as if it had been a real transaction.
>
> The scene in the Third Act, when the sentiment of jealousy is roused in the ferocious Moor, is the triumph of Aldridge. At the first word of the wily insinuation you see his eye kindle; you feel the tears in his voice when he questions Iago, then the deep sobs which stifle it; and finally, when he is persuaded that his wretchedness is complete, a cry of rage, or rather a roar like that of a wild beast starts from his abdomen. I still seem to hear that cry; it chilled us with fear and made every spectator shudder. Tears wet his cheeks; his mouth foamed and his eyes flashed fire. I have never seen an artist identify himself so perfectly with the character which he represents. An actor told me he saw him sob for some moments after his exit from the scene. Everybody, men and women, wept. Boileau was right in saying to actors: 'Weep yourselves, if you would make others weep.' Rachel, in the fourth act of *Les Horace*, is the only artist who ever produced so great an effect. At the first representation the poor Desdemona was so horror-stricken at the terrible expression of the Moor, that she sprang from the bed and fled, shrieking with fright.
>
> In spite of his stony nature, Aldridge can contain himself to those scenes which require calmness and subdued passion. In Shylock, to see him trembling with fear and indignation before the tribunal which is endeavoring to force Christianity upon him, makes one of those impressions which are never effaced. The severest critics find but one fault with him—that when speaking to characters at the back of the stage he has the bad habit of turning his back to the public. The director remonstrated with him about this but it was to no avail."

The correspondent of the *New York Herald* says: "An American negro, named Ira Aldridge, has been performing at the Imperial Theater in several of Shakespeare's pieces, and has met with great applause. His principal character, of course, is Othello, and he portrays the jealous African with such truth and energy that even those amateurs who recollect our great Russian tragedian, Karatugin, acknowledge the superiority of his sable successor. In Shylock, too, he shows unusual dramatic power; and, painted and tricked out for the stage, he passes very well by lamplight for 'the Jew that Shakespeare drew.' The worst is that Mr. Aldridge is accompanied by a German *troupe*, who perform the parts assigned to them in their vernacular, and the effect produced by their German answers to his English speeches is the most comical imaginable, and puts all illusion out of the question. Only think of Othello calling for his handkerchief, a Shylock claiming his pound of flesh, in English, and Desdemona excusing herself, or Portia expounding the law, in High Dutch! Fortunately, the majority of our Petersburg audiences, both English and German are 'heathen Greek,' so that the incongruity of the performance is not felt by them so strongly as the by the comparatively small portion of the spectators who were acquainted with the two languages." Ed.]

4. "They who cross the ocean change both their skies and their minds." Mr. Jeremiah Powers, at the O'Conor indignation meeting the other night, gave strong evidence to show that this change of mind will not be permanent: he said, the "blackest kind of men in New York are securing beautiful white Irish wives" &c.

5. *New American Encyclopedia* [see "Aldridge, Ira,"] 1:[306]. [The transcription here is more accurate, but there are still some modifications and a few corrections added by Smith. Ed.]

3

Men We Have Known

Ira Aldridge (1867)

Philip A. Bell

A few weeks ago the telegraph announced the death of this distinguished actor. About the same time, "Satanella," the vivacious and versatile, but not very veracious correspondent of the *Morning Call*, said he was in New York, under an engagement, but could get no white lady to perform with him. Since then our own correspondent, "L'Ouverture," informed us that Mr. Aldridge was expected in New York, and "will bring an accomplished lady from England to support him." Hence we inferred that "Satanella" was wrong, and Mr. Aldridge had not arrived. Recent intelligence confirmed that opinion, and we now learn that Mr. Aldridge died in Poland on the 10th of August, while fulfilling an engagement.[1]

The *Times* of this city [San Francisco] on the 16th inst. gives the following sketch of this eminent histrion, copied in part from *Appleton's Cyclopedia Americana*:

> Ira Aldridge was a mulatto, and was born at a village called Bellair, near Baltimore, Md., about 1810, and was apprenticed to a ship carpenter, learning his trade in the same yard with Molyneaux [*sic*], the notorious negro pugilist and prize fighter. From association with the German population—which is very large on the western shore of Maryland—he learned to speak the German language familiarly, and also picked up a degree of education rarely obtained by those of African descent where negro slavery exists. When Edmund Kean was in the United States, after the troubles which occurred in consequence of the Cox difficulties, Aldridge became his personal attendant, and accompanied him to England, where his natural talent for the stage was developed and cultivated. He returned to the United States after a short absence, and some time subsequent to the year 1830 appeared at Baltimore, at a theater then known as "The Mud Theater."

This obituary originally appeared in the *Elevator* (San Francisco), September 20, 1867, 2.

The above sketch of Mr. Aldridge is remarkably correct, considering the source from whence it came. It contains a few immaterial errors. Ira Aldridge was not a mulatto, he was a jet black man; he was not born in Maryland in 1810, but was born in New York about the year 1806; he was not apprenticed to a ship carpenter, neither was he acquainted with Molyneaux. We do not think he knew anything about the German language when he left New York. He did not leave New York with Edmund Kean in 1826, but with James W. Wallack, the elder, about 1824–25. He has never been in America since he left as above, consequently never appeared at the Mud Theater in Baltimore. With these slight corrections the sketch is perfectly reliable.

We were schoolmate with Ira Aldridge in the New York African Free School, under Charles C. Andrews. In 1822 we both left that institution—he to learn the shoemakers' trade, and we to attend the Classical Academy of John E. Thompkins, No. 187 Broadway. About 1823 a retired Liverpool steward named Brown opened a theater in Mercer street, near Houston, where Shakespeare seduced young Aldridge. While acting there he became acquainted with Mr. Wallack, who, seeing talent in the youthful aspirant for histrionic honors, induced him to accompany him to England, and try his fortunes in another hemisphere, where prejudice against color would be no barrier to his advancement. He began his career in the minor theaters of London, and afterwards visited the provinces, where he was very successful; he also performed in Dublin, Belfast, Edinburgh, Liverpool, and other places, drawing large audiences wherever he went. His principal characters were Othello, Shylock, Aaron, in *Titus Andronicus*, Orozembo, Zanga, in *The Revenge*, Gamba [*sic*], in *The Slave*, and Rolla; in all of which he was pronounced equal to any of the great actors of the age, and in some characters he was said to have no superior. He has appeared in all the principal cities of Europe, and has received more decorations of honor and orders of knighthood from the sovereigns of Europe, including the Czar of Russia, the Emperor of Austria, and the King of Prussia, than any actor who ever lived. He visited the continent a second time, and was received with increased honors.—At Berne the students, populace and dignitaries of the city turned out to welcome him, and he received the medal of merit in the shape of a magnificent Maltese Cross. He has likewise been made an honorary member of the principal scientific societies of Europe.

Ira Aldridge had received repeated invitations to perform in America, and liberal offers of engagement, all of which he had previously declined, believing that he would not be received with the éclat which attended him in Europe. It appears, however, that he had finally concluded to visit America, and had made an engagement to perform in New York, commencing this present month.

Before coming to California we corresponded occasionally with Mr. Aldridge, and in one of his letters he expressed his determination to visit New York after his retirement from the stage. He was anxious once again to see his old friends and relatives.

Note

1. [This date is incorrect. Aldridge died on August 7 in Łódź, Poland. Ed.]

4

"Nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice"

New Biographical Information on Ira Aldridge

Bernth Lindfors

The remarkable life of Ira Aldridge has been faithfully reconstructed in Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock's fine biography *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (1958). Using materials gathered from libraries and archives in Western and Eastern Europe and the United States, Marshall and Stock were able to put together a detailed documentary record of Aldridge's forty-three years on the stage, correcting many of the erroneous accounts that had been published during his lifetime and after his death in 1867. They also succeeded in uncovering new information about his personal life by interviewing his only surviving child, Amanda Ira Aldridge, then in her late eighties, who very generously gave them access to unpublished family papers. It is unlikely that such a full account of Aldridge's life and career ever would have seen print without the fortuitous collaboration of these three individuals half a century ago.

But though their research was thorough and painstaking, Marshall and Stock were well aware that they had not been able to tell the whole story. In a prologue to their biography, they admitted that "there still remained some missing links" and that the tale "was not complete in all its aspects" yet they were ready to place it before the public in the hope that, despite its "many limitations," their book would "stimulate others to pick up where they le[ft] off, until this great man is given his rightful place in theatrical history, and until the fascinating story of a unique representative of the Negro people becomes known to the world."[1] It is in this spirit of adding a few fresh discoveries to the archive of data they recovered and assembled that the following facts are put on record.

This essay originally appeared in a slightly different form in *African American Review* 28, no. 3 (1974): 457–72.

But first, for those who may be unacquainted with America's earliest important black actor, let us briefly review what is generally known of Ira Aldridge's life and career. Marshall and Stock succeeded in establishing that he was born in New York City on July, 24 1807, and that he attended the African Free School No. 2 at Mulberry Street in lower Manhattan some time between 1820 and 1824. His father—a straw vendor and lay preacher—had wanted him to enter the religious profession, but the young Aldridge, after taking part in a few amateur dramatic productions put on by small black theater companies, aspired to become a professional actor. Finding no adequate outlet for his ambition in New York, he left for England, where in May 1825 he made his debut with top billing in a succession of African and West Indian melodramas at London's Royalty Theatre. He was only seventeen years old at the time.

The first reviews of performances of this "Tragedian of Colour" were mixed. Some critics found his acting creditable; others reacted with undisguised hostility to the very notion of a black man playing a black role on the British stage. When he performed at London's Royal Coburg Theatre several months later, a caustic viewer for the *Times*, for instance, asserted that the shape of Aldridge's lips made it utterly impossible for him to pronounce English properly.[2] Such racist responses from critics did not, of course, prevent audiences from enjoying what they heard and saw. Indeed, it is quite clear, even from the negative reviews, that Aldridge usually had the audience on his side. He often won enthusiastic applause for his efforts.

But the critics may have carried more weight with metropolitan theater managers, for after his Royal Coburg engagement, Aldridge was not invited to perform in a major London theater again until eight years later. He spent the intervening period honing his skills by touring the English provinces, where he was well received both as a tragedian and as a comedian. He developed a repertoire consisting of Othello, abolitionist melodramas about noble, suffering, and defiant slaves, and musical farces that drew upon his ability to sing and dance. By the end of this period of apprenticeship he could perform as many as sixteen different roles in a week and a half—a range much broader than that of most of his more famous contemporaries. He also found it professionally advantageous to masquerade as an African, so he fabricated a colorful story about his ancestry, claiming that his father was an exiled Christian Fulah prince from Senegal; some of the publicity material he circulated stated that he himself had been born in Senegal and had lived the first eight years of his life as an outcast there. Soon he was billing himself as the "African Roscius," a name recalling Garrick, who had been hailed as the "English Roscius."[3] Africa thus became Aldridge's theatrical trademark.

Aldridge was a seasoned actor when he returned to London in April 1833 to play Othello at Covent Garden Theatre, one of the capital's most prestigious playhouses. He performed the role for only two nights, and again the critics savaged him. There were complaints about his appearance, his manner, his voice,

his accent, his textual interpolations, even his color. A reviewer for the *Athenaeum* wrote a diatribe protesting vigorously over his "pawing" of Desdemona.[4] Yet once again it is clear that Aldridge had made a favorable impression on the audiences that watched him. Although he couldn't please the critics, he still won praise from the paying customers.

For the next twenty years Aldridge played almost exclusively in the provinces, building up a loyal following and a considerable fortune. He was on the road most of the year, performing in cities, towns, and villages throughout the British Isles. Restless for new challenges, he extended his Shakespearean repertoire, experimenting with white roles such as Shylock, Richard III, Macbeth, and Lear. In July 1852 he set out on his first major European tour and earned enthusiastic ovations wherever he went. After his years abroad, he returned to England laden with medals, decorations, and honors but he still could not find regular engagements in London. He trouped through the provinces for a while, toured Europe again, then came back to England once more. By this time he was world-famous, but success on the London stage continued to elude him. He spent the last six years of his life performing principally in Russia and France, countries where he was acclaimed as one of the greatest tragedians of all time. He died on tour in Poland in 1867.

Aldridge's peculiar career raises a number of questions about racial attitudes in the Western world during the mid-nineteenth century, an era that saw the abolition of slavery, increased exploration of Africa, the emergence of ethnology as a professional discipline, the spread of Darwinian ideas, and the rise of scientific racism. Since Aldridge was a highly visible black in a white world at a time when the nature of the relationship between whites and blacks was being redefined, his life might be expected to yield insights into the big racial issues of his day. His years in the British Isles are especially interesting because the response to him was mixed. Why was he so popular in the provinces and so shunned in London? What assumptions, opinions, or biases did his audiences carry with them into the theater? Did their conception of him as an "African" condition their reactions to him as a performer? Did what they knew about his life offstage influence their reception of him onstage? It is not possible to address all of these questions here, but new bits of biographical information about Aldridge's personal and professional life may help to shed some light on the reasons for the ambivalent reaction to him in the British Isles.

But before we turn to such matters, perhaps we should clear up one small detail about Aldridge's youth—namely, the death of his mother Luranah. Marshall and Stock have little to say about this woman except that she was a native of North Carolina with numerous children, all but two of whom (Ira and his brother Joshua) had perished before she herself passed away in 1818.[5] However, the Manhattan *Death Libers* reveal that she died of consumption a full year earlier, on April 21, 1817, and was buried by Sexton Aaron Jacobs in the cemetery of "Old Zion," the church her husband Daniel had joined. Her age is listed as thirty-seven and her

"place of nativity" as the State of Delaware, not North Carolina. Though her name is recorded as Lavinia Aldridge, there can be no doubt that this was Ira's mother, for her address is given as Beach Street, which, according to various New York street directories, is where Daniel Aldridge lived between 1816 and 1819.

Not yet ten years old at the time of her death, Ira must have retained fond memories of his mother all his life, for more than forty years later he named his first daughter after her and also called the first house he owned Luranah Villa. One early biographical account of him, written by his schoolmate and lifelong friend Dr. James McCune Smith, quotes Ira's brother Joshua as having said that Ira "lost his mother while yet a child, and being of a roving disposition, only remained at home a few months after his father's second marriage."[6] We do not know exactly when this second marriage took place, but the rift with his father apparently grew wider after Ira and his brother Joshua started performing on stage, and "their father, finding it out, took them away from the theater."[7] Not long after this, Ira went off to England.

But he didn't lose contact with his family completely while he was abroad. For at least ten years he stayed in touch with a married sister in New York City named Susannah Peterson, a fact recorded in A. S. Abdy's seldom-cited *Journal of a Residence and Tour in the United States of North America, from April,* 1833, *to October,* 1834. Abdy, a British traveler interested in the condition of American blacks, included in his journal an account of the brave attempt by Susannah's teenage son William to rescue seven young white boys who had fallen through thin ice while skating. William had plunged in after them and saved two of the lads, but had become fatally trapped under the ice when seeking to reach the others. Several local newspapers carried this tragic story, with the *New York American* offering to take up a collection for the poor, distressed family of the heroic "colored boy Peterson."[8] Abdy promptly sought out the family and offered some work to Susannah, who supported her children and an ailing husband by taking in washing. Abdy was impressed by the dignity and fortitude of this woman, noting that "everything, in the furniture of the room, the decent behavior of the children, and the general deportment of the parent, bespoke full as much propriety and respectability as I ever met with in the same class of life, whatever might be the occupation or complexion."[9] Abdy went on to say that "Mrs. Peterson's brother, who is known in England as the African Roscius, had occasionally sent her remittances of money, and had expressed, in one of his letters from [Great Britain], an intention to provide for her unfortunate son's education."[10] So Ira Aldridge not only maintained contact with his sister but also offered her and her family material support, including a pledge to educate his nephew William, who would have been a small child when Aldridge had left the United States in 1824 or 1825. The aspiring actor evidently came from a good family and remained a caring, responsible brother while trying to establish a career for himself in the British Isles.

Aldridge himself had no children at this time. He had married an Englishwoman shortly after his opening run at the Royal Coburg Theatre in 1825, and

he stayed married to her until her death in 1864, but they never had any offspring. By assiduously tracking down widely scattered genealogical records, Marshall and Stock managed to identify this woman as Margaret Gill, the daughter of a stocking weaver in Northallerton, but they were not able to determine precisely when and where the marriage took place.[11] However, now that British marriage records from the early part of the nineteenth century can be searched by computer, it has been possible to trace and document the wedding. A page from a London marriage register shows that they were married on November 27, 1825, by Rev. L. H. Wynn in the presence of two witnesses, William Tanfield and Margaret Robinson (see figure 4.1). The ceremony took place at St. George's Church, Bloomsbury, a large church consecrated in 1730 that is still in use today.

It is perhaps significant that Aldridge signed the register not as Ira but as Fredrick [*sic*] William, presumably the names given him at birth or baptism. "Ira" may have been only a nickname. The middle initial K is also intriguing and appears to stand for Keene, the name by which he had been identified in the earliest playbills at the Royal Coburg. He did not begin performing as "Mr. Aldridge (a Native of Senegal)" until his appearance at Covent Garden in 1833. Could Keene have been his mother's maiden name? Since his father evidently disapproved of his son's theatrical inclinations, Aldridge in the early years of his

No. 1497
Frederick William Aldridge of this Parish
and Margaret Gill of this Parish
were married in this Church by Banns
this Twenty-seventh Day of
November in the Year One thousand eight hundred and twenty-five
By me L. H. Wynn. Minister
This Marriage was solemnized between us { Fredrick William K Aldridge / Margaret Gill
In the Presence of { William Tanfield / Margaret Robinson
No. 1498

Figure 4.1 Marriage certificate of Ira Aldridge and Margaret Gill (by permission of the City of London, London Metropolitan Archives, and Reverend Dr. Perry Butler, Rector of the Parish Church of St. George, Bloomsbury).

career may have decided to spare his father embarrassment by performing under another name. Or perhaps their relationship was so strained that the son deliberately chose not to use the family patronym, preferring instead to adopt his late mother's surname.

There is also a possibility that Keene was merely a stage name, chosen with a fine sense of irony because it conjured up a shadowy image of England's greatest living Shakespearean actor, Edmund Kean. It may be significant that Aldridge did not drop the name Keene until Edmund Kean collapsed while performing Othello at Covent Garden in March 1833, just a few weeks before the "African Roscius" was invited to London to play the same role in the same theater. Edmund Kean's death a month later may have sealed Aldridge's reincarnation as "a Native of Senegal," for at that pivotal point in his career England's only black Shakespearean actor may have needed to establish a distinctive identity of his own. Nothing further could be gained by presenting himself as a carbon copy of Kean, so he chose to become a professional African.

Another possibility is that Aldridge passed himself off as Keene upon his arrival in England because there was an Irish actor/singer of that name who had performed leading roles at theaters in New York and other American cities between 1823 and 1825. Since Aldridge sought engagements in major roles, it might have been to his advantage to exploit an ambiguity in nomenclature in order to impress British theater managers by exaggerating the extent of his experience on the stage. One of the earliest playbills announcing his performances speaks of him as "the celebrated American tragedian" and "Man of Colour," this "being the first instance in which one of that Complexion has displayed a striking degree of Histrionic Talent, and which has secured him the rapturous Approbation of an enlightened Public on the other side of the Atlantic."[12] The claim was made that he was an actor "known throughout America ... whose flattering reception at New York, and all the principal theatres in America, has induced him to visit England professionally."[13] This may have been normal media puffery calculated to arouse public interest in a new foreign player, but it certainly overstated Aldridge's reputation and experience. Who would not be keen to see such an actor? And who would not be Keene to appear as such an actor?

But let us assume that the name was an authentic family legacy deployed adroitly to further Aldridge's theatrical ambitions by playing upon a variety of wholly fortuitous thespian associations. It is unlikely that Aldridge would have signed the marriage register with an assumed name. He had dropped "Ira" for "Fredrick William," but he had retained the middle K, presumably standing for Keene. In the few letters and formal documents that survive from the first eight years he was on the British stage, we usually find him signing himself with some combination of these three names and initials, most often as "F. W. Keene." This was how early newspaper reports normally referred to him, too.

Following his opening run in London, Aldridge was invited to perform at several provincial theaters: first at Brighton in December 1825, then at a few other

cities and towns south and west of London—Chichester in January, Bristol in February, Devizes in February–March, Salisbury in March–April, Exeter in April, Devonport in June. Although he appears to have been well received wherever he went, he performed in each place for only a few nights. For weeks, even months, he may have been unemployed. This must have been a very precarious way to make a living. By the end of the summer of 1826, he and his wife were in a truly pitiable state, as a notice in *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post* of August 31 makes clear:

> It is with pain we hear that the talents of the African Roscius, Mr. Keene, have not secured him in this country, ever alive to merit, that patronage & support which his abilities claim, nevertheless his late effort in this city having totally failed, and both himself and his wife being in deep distress, the public are now most respectfully appealed to for that aid which may relieve their difficulties and assist them in their return to America; any donation will be gladly received at our office on his behalf.

This appeal evidently did not produce the desired result, for Aldridge remained a touring player in the British Isles for the next quarter of a century, moving slowly from rags to respectability before going on to great riches and renown on the Continent of Europe in his mature years. Never once in his professional career did he return to the United States, though he occasionally contemplated doing so and in 1867, just before his death, was negotiating a suitable contract with theatrical agents in New York City.[14]

Aldridge's married life has been discussed in some detail by Marshall and Stock, who were the first to establish that Margaret Gill came from a poor family and was not the daughter of a member of Parliament, as Aldridge often maintained. Since she usually traveled with him on his provincial tours, this gentrification of her ancestry may have been a ploy to enhance her social standing, for the white wife of a black actor might otherwise have been treated with some contempt and subjected to various indignities. The trick seems to have worked, particularly in Ireland, where it was elaborated with so many specific circumstantial details that Margaret was sometimes mentioned in press reports as "the only daughter of a former representative of a northern English county, who successfully opposed Mr. Lambton, the present Earl of Durham, in several contested elections."[15] If there were any truth at all in this legend, it may have been of the sort suggested by an anonymous reader of the Harvard University Library's copy of Aldridge's stage biography, *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius*, who amended the statement on page 13 that Margaret "was the natural daughter of a member of Parliament" by penciling out the word "natural."

Marshall and Stock uncovered solid evidence to prove that Aldridge himself fathered several illegitimate children, the first of whom—a son named Ira Daniel born in May 1847—was brought up by Margaret as if he were her own. Ira Daniel's true mother has never been identified, but Edward Scobie, who was a close friend of Aldridge's daughter Amanda, states that "an Irish lady gave birth to [this]

child."[16] The fact that Aldridge named the boy after himself and his own late father suggests that he was very proud to have an heir to continue the family line. Margaret, who was nearly ten years older than Aldridge, would have been forty-nine at this time, well past her prime childbearing age.

The mysterious "Irish lady" may not have been Aldridge's first partner in an extramarital affair. The 1841 census records for Worksop, a small town southeast of Sheffield, reveal that, when Aldridge performed there on the day the census was taken, he was staying at a boarding house on Market Place occupied by an elderly shoe mender and his family as well as by a young grocer. Aldridge, listed as a "Comedian," age thirty-five, is shown to have been accompanied by "Sarah Aldridge," age thirty. Since Aldridge's wife Margaret would have been a considerably older woman, it seems doubtful that the census taker would have misrepresented her twice, getting both her name and her age wrong. Who, then, was Sarah Aldridge? One has to rule out the possibility that she was another of Aldridge's sisters or that she was the missing "Irish lady," because she is listed as not having been "born in Scotland, Ireland, or Foreign Parts." Indeed, the only other scrap of information we are given about her is that she was not born in Nottinghamshire either, so all we may conclude about "Sarah" is that she hailed from some other part of England or possibly from Wales, provided, of course, that these small details in the Worksop tally sheets happen to be correct. The weight of the circumstantial evidence, such as it is, seems to support the inference that Sarah was neither kith nor kin. Through the census records we may have caught Aldridge in bed with another woman.

Another newly exhumed document reveals that he cheated on Margaret later in life, too. Just before leaving England to start his first tour of the Continent, he had an affair with the wife of a young man he had trained as an actor, and she bore Aldridge a son on March 15, 1853, while he was still away in Germany. The child died a few months later, but when Aldridge finally returned England in 1855, he was promptly sued by the young actor for adultery. In British legal parlance, this offense was termed "criminal conversation" ("crim. con." for short), and any man found guilty of it could be compelled to pay damages to the cuckolded husband of the seduced wife. Since this interesting lawsuit is not mentioned by Marshall and Stock, it would be useful to reproduce here the entire transcript of the court proceedings as published in the London press. The *Era*, the major trade paper serving the entertainment world, ran its version of the story on January 20, 1856, under the headline "Caution to Theatrical Husbands Who Neglect Their Wives":

> BAIL COURT, January 14. STOTHARD V. ALDRIDGE.—Mr. Edwin James and Mr. P. Thompson were counsel for the plaintiff, and Mr. Sergeant Wilkins for the defendant.
>
> Mr. James, in opening the plaintiff's case, said that the plaintiff sought to recover compensation in damages for the seduction of his wife by the defendant. The plaintiff was a very young man—he had been educated for the business of a surgeon at Hull. The defendant was a person who had acquired considerable reputation as an actor, performing under the name

of the “African Roscius,” and he was well calculated to play certain parts, being “coloured” by nature, and he had amassed a considerable sum of money. The plaintiff was now carrying on the business of a surgeon-dentist, but in 1849 he had taken a fancy to try his fortune on the stage, and having heard of the celebrity of the defendant, he went to Liverpool, where the defendant was then “starring” it as the African Roscius. He introduced himself to the defendant, and it ended in his offering to teach the plaintiff the profession for a sum of £50. The plaintiff sold a reversion to which he was entitled for a small sum of money, and he gave the defendant £50. The young man was sent to Hull, Liverpool, Wales, and other places. Soon after this, upon the introduction of the defendant, the plaintiff was induced, at the age of eighteen, to marry a young girl who resided where they lodged, at 22, Judd-place, New-road. They were married on the 15th of August, 1849. The defendant was present, and gave the young woman away. After the marriage the defendant sent the plaintiff upon a theatrical engagement to Wales. He took his wife, and she remained with him a short time, when, finding that he could not afford to take her [on] the different circuits with him, he sent her to her mother at Tonbridge-wells [*sic*], and during the separation the defendant had taken advantage of the opportunity and had seduced the wife. He had conducted himself with all the arts of a practiced seducer, and the consequence was, that in March, 1853, the wife gave birth to a child. At the time of her pregnancy the defendant, who was performing in Germany, wrote this letter to the wife:—

My dear Emma,—Your letter has just now reached me, and I am very much surprised at its contents. You may be mistaken. You say William [the husband] has been with you, and is it not likely that his visits have occasioned this mischief? However, write me particulars immediately—tell me everything—what you intend doing and where you mean to go, and I will make a remittance. Has Mrs. A. questioned you in connexion with me? and if so, what passed? How is your aunt? Where is William—what brought him to town?

Yours sincerely, Ira

After Mrs. Stothard was confined his tone became altered and he wrote to her this letter.—

Dear Madam,—You would not have been neglected but I had some communications made to me of most imprudent conduct on your part which very much annoyed me and caused me not to address you again. I do so now, however, and if you give me the assurance that the child is “of colour” and that the father is the person you name [himself]—you understand me—both you and your child shall not be neglected. Is it a boy or a girl? Write by return, enclosing the same in the envelope I send you. Seal mine up and direct it to me. Do not pay the postage. Tell me, does your mother know whose child it is, and is she unkind to you? Did your aunt leave you anything?

Yours faithfully, Ira

‘

He would prove that the child was “of colour.” The child was now dead. He would produce the evidence before them, and would ask them to give such damages as would mark their sense of the defendant’s conduct.

The formal proofs of the marriage on the 15th of August, 1849, were put in.

It was proved that the defendant acted under the name of the African Roscius. He was a black star, but rather a desirable one. He played both tragedy and comedy well.

Mrs. Ingledew: I am the mother of Mrs. Stothard. She is now thirty years of age. I saw the plaintiff just before they were married. She was then with me at Tonbridge-wells. The plaintiff came down to take her to be married. I was unfavourable to the marriage. In seven or eight months after the marriage she returned to me. I objected to the match on account of the plaintiff being a performer. She had previously been residing with her aunt in London. The defendant lodged with her aunt, and it was there the plaintiff first saw my daughter. Her aunt died, and I then went to London, and my daughter I then found had been confined on the 15th of March, 1853. I saw the child; it was a coloured boy. My daughter lived with me after her marriage, because her husband could not support her, he earned so little. She took in needlework. She still remains with me.

Cross-examined: I opposed the marriage very strongly. My daughter had resided for some years with her aunt. Mr. and Mrs. Aldridge lodged in the same house. A Mrs. Groom kept the house. My daughter has only had two children; the first was by her husband, and was born ten months after the marriage; the other child was the one of colour. My daughter never complained of the treatment of her husband. I have not seen the plaintiff since the summer. My daughter is not living with him; nor has she done so for the last six years. She works at her needle for a living. She upbraided him for neglecting her, but he said he had written letters to her which she had not received. I am in indigent circumstances. She was confined of her first child in the Lying-in Hospital. I don't know where her husband was at the time. He wrote to her in the hospital saying that his aunt wished to know whether he was married, and if inquiries were made he requested his wife to say they were not married.

Re-examined: When she wrote to him complaining of neglect, he answered that he earned so little he really could not send her money.

Susannah Burgess: Mrs. Stothard came and lodged with me in 1853, and during the time she was confined of a coloured child. I know the defendant. I saw him and said to him, "Do you remember Emma Stothard?" He said, "Perfectly well." I said, she had a child, of which he was the father. He seemed confused, and asked me why I said he was the father. I said, "Because it is so much like you." He said, "She is married." I said, "I know that but white men don't beget black children." He said, "Are you a mother?" I said I had had nine children, but I had never had a black one. She was confined at my house, and told me that Aldridge would remunerate me. He said he could not give me anything just then, but if I would leave my address he would send to me. Shortly after that I wrote to him, and he sent word that I was to go to his house. I went there on the 19th of May, and he gave me five shillings. He said "I don't give you that on Emma's account, but for your family." I had not applied to him before because he was not in England. The child was born on the 15th of March, 1853. I was godmother to it.

Mrs. Matthews: I had the child to nurse when it was five months old. It was a coloured child. It died with me. Mr. Stothard went to the funeral.

Mr. Smelley: I am a surgeon living in Judd-place, New-road. The child was brought to my house. It died of dysentery, and I certified the cause of death. It was coloured, and had woolly hair.

Mr. Dillon: I am a theatrical agent. I know the defendant, and have done so for thirty years. He is about fifty. I have repeatedly made engagements for him. He is now in Cork.

Richard Norman: I am an actor at the Surrey Theatre. I know the plaintiff. He went by the name of Stewart. He was acting with me at the minor theatre in Liverpool for nearly twelve months. I should say he earned about a guinea a week. He played "utility" parts in anything. He was a little fair man about twenty-two.

Mr. Sergeant Wilkins then addressed the judge for the defendant, contending that there was no proof that these parties were the persons who were married.

The learned judge thought the evidence sufficient to go to the jury. Mr. James then summed up the evidence he had called. He thought the plaintiff was entitled to their sympathy and consideration. The defendant had pleaded that the act he had done was with leave and license, which, as no evidence was offered to support it, was adding insult to injury. It had been shown that the plaintiff had not the means of supporting his wife. His career was a most precarious one—it was notoriously so. The defendant had taken advantage of this, and had seduced the wife. It was to be urged on behalf of the plaintiff that he had not dragged his wife about with him to share his miserable poverty, but had sent her where he thought she would be safe—to her mother; and there she would have been secure had it not been for the arts of the defendant. The plaintiff had written to his wife, and addressed the letters to her at Judd-place, and, no doubt, the defendant had intercepted those letters. Was it not, then, a case for damages? The defendant had given the girl to the plaintiff at the altar, and he had every reason to place confidence in the defendant; but the defendant had caused the separation by intercepting the letters, and had then poured the poison of jealousy into her ear and seduced her.

Mr. Sergeant Wilkins then addressed the jury for the defendant. Mr. Justice Williams, when at the bar, had addressed a Welsh jury, and then said he would call witnesses in support of his speech, but was interrupted by the jury, who said he need not trouble himself, as they believed every word he had said. If, therefore, they believed Mr. James, this was a very bad case. But how was that speech supported by the evidence? Many things had been stated, but little had been proved. There was no proof of the defendant having introduced [the] plaintiff to his wife, or that he had given her away. There was no proof of the plaintiff having paid the defendant £50. There was no evidence of his having sold a reversion. It was clear his friend was wrong in his facts, for what was there to show that the plaintiff had written any letters to his wife at Judd-place? What right had he to infer that Mr. Aldridge had intercepted the letters? What evidence was there of any seduction? Let them look at this heart-broken husband. Why, he had never lived with his wife for six years. According to the evidence of her mother, he had left her to the mercy of the world. Had he not sworn to take her for better or worse? and yet he had sent her from him, and there was no proof of his having sent her a farthing. Was it true that he had written to his wife, telling her to deny the marriage, and hold herself out as a woman of shame? Was that true? Her mother said it was. How could it be said that Aldridge had kept the husband from his wife, when he was in Germany and the plaintiff in Liverpool? He regretted that the plaintiff could not be called, as he might have told them in what way and in whose society he had passed his time. The wife was left delivered of a child, and where? in a lying-in hospital; left, deserted by her husband, and without a farthing given

> her by him. Where was the proof of their having lived on terms of affection? What loss had the plaintiff sustained? The proof of adultery was very slight. Aldridge was not the only man of colour. Othello was a Moor—a handsome man; but Aldridge was an African. What would they say of a lady who would fall to the arts and devices of a "nigger?" The moment a woman yielded to those desires, which were a curse of her nature, then the word "seduction" was introduced. When the treasure was in the plaintiff's hands he had thrown it away and trampled upon it. Where, then, was the claim for damages?
>
> The learned judge summed up. The child had strong indications of its paternity, and he thought that it must be considered to be the offspring of a Negro. They were not to award a punishment, but to compensate the plaintiff for the loss which he had sustained, and he would caution them to beware how they were led away by the statements of a powerful advocate, when they were not borne out by the evidence in the case. A great deal that had been stated was certainly unfounded. The moral conduct might be heavy, but he saw nothing of artifice or an endeavour to pour poison into her mind. The letter of the defendant seemed to infer that he would bear his share of the burden. The defendant was not to be classed among persons of artful guilt, but he said she might expect assistance from him. What, then, was the loss the plaintiff had sustained? He did not see any indications of the plaintiff intending to pass the noon and evening of life in happiness with his wife. From the first separation the wife was left in solitude, without money, in the lying-in hospital. She complained of all this, and no support was rendered her. There was no proof of any letters to show that the plaintiff had attached any value to the situation in which he had stood. They must say what comfort of married life had been invaded, and what was the amount of loss the plaintiff had sustained. The jury returned a verdict for the plaintiff, damages 40s.

The verdict obviously went in Aldridge's favor. Though found guilty of "criminal conversation" with Emma Stothard, he was required by the court to pay only a nominal penalty. Had William Stothard been a better husband, Aldridge could have suffered sterner consequences, but he had an able attorney who knew how to exploit to good effect the plaintiff's glaring faults of character and conduct.

Aldridge's letters to Emma are quite interesting, for they show that he was prepared to face up to his responsibilities as father of the child, yet he evidently did not want Margaret to be hurt by hearing about the matter from Emma. Again he comes across as a caring, compassionate man, one who wants neither his wife nor his mistress to suffer on his account. Some might not regard such behavior as evidence of kindness, but perhaps the worst that could be said of Aldridge as a husband and a paramour is that he had a tendency to love not wisely but too well—and too many.

Several press reports of the court case mention that Aldridge had authorized that his son be christened John William Aldridge, but Emma may have received this message too late, for the name she recorded when registering his birth was Frederick Charles Aldridge; when he died three months later (on June 18, 1853),

she identified him as Frederick Charles Aldridge Stothard. As far as we know, this was "Ira" Fredrick William Keene Aldridge's second illegitimate child.

He was to have at least two more: Irene Luranah Pauline, born on March 29, 1860, and Ira Frederick ("Fritz") Olaf, born some time in 1862, both of them born to a young Swedish woman named Amanda Paulina von Brandt, who was to become Aldridge's second wife thirteen months after Margaret's death on March 25, 1864. Margaret had been in poor health in her later years and after 1855 had not accompanied Aldridge on his tours abroad. Where he first met Miss von Brandt is still unknown, but her legitimate daughter and namesake Amanda told Marshall and Stock that it definitely was neither in England nor in Sweden but somewhere on the Continent, "probably in Germany."[17] For several years Aldridge evidently kept two households, supporting Margaret and his first illegitimate son in one and Amanda Paulina and her two illegitimate children in the other. Whether Margaret was aware of these arrangements we do not know for sure, but Aldridge seems to have managed to maintain cordial relationships with both "wives" simultaneously, and one small piece of evidence suggests that the women themselves also got along well with one another. After marrying Aldridge in 1865, Amanda Paulina gave birth not only to Amanda Christina Elizabeth (who later in life adopted her father's name and became known as Amanda Ira) in March 1866, but also, four and a half months after Aldridge's death the following year, to another daughter, whom she named Rachel Margaret Frederika. The second name of this second legitimate daughter may signal the respect—perhaps even affection—that the younger wife held for her predecessor.

Not much was known about Amanda Paulina von Brandt at the time Marshall and Stock wrote their biography of Aldridge. Relying on information Amanda Paulina had supplied when applying for a marriage certificate, they could report her date of birth as March 2, 1834, and since she lived on until 1915, they could depend on the details her surviving daughter Amanda Ira provided about her later years in England, but her early life remained an unsolved riddle. Aldridge had been in the habit of introducing her as a baroness, but research in Stockholm archives failed to turn up her name in any of the published genealogies of the nobility in Sweden.[18]

However, after the biography was published, a Swedish scholar, Dr. Gunner Sjögren, uncovered some interesting new facts about her, which he communicated to Marshall and Stock.[19] These details about Amanda's past are too equivocal to allow us to form a firm opinion about her character as a young woman, but certain indisputable facts stand out. She was of humble birth and upbringing, not of noble blood. She was a singer, an aspiring chorus girl who left her homeland after becoming involved in a well-publicized scandal. She may have been innocent of any wrongdoing, but like Aldridge himself, at a young age, she had to make her own way, depending on her own talents, in a foreign land. She bore Aldridge two illegitimate children, accepting whatever risks to career and reputation such dependents might entail. From what we know of her subsequent domestic life, she

appears to have been a good mother to these and to her later children, and a good wife to Aldridge in the closing years of his life.

Aldridge, for his part, remained steadfast in his commitment to his incapacitated first wife, not divorcing or discarding her in favor of the much younger woman who had won his affection. When he purchased his first house, Luranah Villa, he moved Margaret and Ira Daniel into it and found other accommodations for Amanda and her small children. In other words, he discharged his responsibilities as a spouse and father to two households, dividing his loyalties between them. He was not the kind of man who could sever forever his ties with his earliest loved ones, simply leaving them in the lurch. Just as he had never forgotten his sister and her children in New York, he never totally abandoned his wife, mistresses, or children in England. Though not a faithful husband, he was a dependable family man.

Yet it is conceivable that in Georgian and Victorian England his associations with white women would have raised more than a few eyebrows and attracted comment. Consider what his defending attorney had asked jurors to contemplate with regard to Emma Stothard: "Othello was a Moor—a handsome man; but Aldridge was an African. What would they say of a lady who would fall to the arts and devices of a 'nigger'?" Aldridge's legitimate wives must have had to face the same racist scrutiny and the same doubts about their morals and judgment. Is it any wonder, then, that Aldridge introduced Margaret as the daughter of a member of Parliament and Amanda as a baroness? He had employed the same tactic when presenting himself to the British public, pretending to be the son of a Christian Fulah prince from Senegal. Had it been widely known that he and his wives were of lowly birth, they might not have been accepted in polite circles or even in the scruffier world of the theater.

Indeed, it is entirely possible that Aldridge found it difficult to secure regular engagements in London because his humble origins were known there and his intimacies with white women were greatly resented. We have already seen how the *Athenaeum* complained of his "pawing" of Desdemona at Covent Garden Theatre in 1833. Ellen Tree, the actress who played Desdemona that evening, later married Edmund Kean's son Charles, who became a famous actor himself and in middle age took over the management of London's Princess's Theatre, where he and his wife starred together between 1850 and 1859. Not once during his term as manager did Charles Kean invite Aldridge to perform at his theater. Never again was the "African Roscius" given the opportunity to play opposite the former Ellen Tree.

Others besides Charles Kean were unwilling to allow their wives to share the same stage with Aldridge. Marshall and Stock recorded an interesting exchange between the manager of the Theatre Royal Dublin and the irate husband of Mme. Celeste, another famous actress of the day. The husband, "a Yankee of the genuine type," stormed into the manager's office to protest the arrangements that had been made:

> "I see you have announced the African."
> "Yes."
> "My wife shan't play with him."
> "Why not?"
> "Because he's a nigger."
> "I am not alive to the objection. I am no negrophilist, neither do I denounce a man because he happens to be black"
> "You are odd people in this country. In America we don't associate with blacks."
> "Neither do we, as a national habit. But he's a good actor and the public like him. His colour is nothing to me, though it were green, blue, or red."
> "That's all very well for a joke; but my wife shan't play with a nigger."
> "I don't think she will be called upon to do so. They are not in the same pieces."
> "But she shan't be in the same bill, or come into the theatre while he is here."
> "That's another view of the case. Am I to understand that you mean to break the engagement?"
> "Well, I guess I've not exactly made up my mind to do that; but you oughtn't to have engaged this fellow.... You can't go near the fellow. He is abominably offensive. All niggers are."
> "Perhaps so. We must keep on the windward side, and give him as wide a berth as possible."
> The indignant Republican, finding the questions resolving itself [*sic*] into an absurdity, subsided. But the difficulty passed away. The African's visit was postponed by some accident, and the impending contamination never took place.[20]

Though this is passed off as a humorous anecdote, with a liberal Dublin theater manager getting the last laugh on a xenophobic Yankee, the virulence of such naked racial and sexual hostility must have had a decidedly negative impact on Aldridge's career. Again, it was his contact with white women, not his competence as an actor, that was the primary point at issue here.

This kind of biological animosity was seldom stated so bluntly in newspaper views of his performances, but one occasionally finds evidence of it elsewhere. In the memoirs of an actor who performed with him for a season in Croydon in 1850, one comes across the following remarks:

> We did a splendid business for six weeks, the "African" winning laurels of histrionic growth, and multitudes of admirers among the various Desdemonas who constituted the majority of the assembled audiences in this usually straight-laced town or village of Croydon. I can remember the feeling of repugnance I experienced at the adulatory congratulations bestowed upon him by the fair members of the company (who for decency sake shall be nameless).... it shocks a sensitive nature to see a pure blonde with almost angelic features and form, putting on a most bewitching smile and using every art of feminine blandishment to win the notice and deserve the esteem of the true bred "African Nigger."[21]

We also have the testimony of Madge Robertson, the last woman ever to play Desdemona to Aldridge's Othello in London:

> Mr. Ira Aldridge was a man who, being black, always picked out the fairest woman he could to play Desdemona with him, not because she was capable of acting the part, but because she had a fair head.... Although a genuine black, he was quite *preux chevalier* in his manners to women. The fairer you were, the more obsequious he was to you.[22]

But on the stage, especially when enacting the jealous Moor, he behaved very differently. In the last act of *Othello*, she recalled,

> he used to take Desdemona out of bed by her hair, and drag her round the stage before he smothered her. You had to wear sandals and toed stockings to produce the effect of being undressed. I remember very distinctly this dragging of Desdemona about by the hair was considered so brutal that it was loudly hissed.[23]

London audiences evidently did not relish watching an undressed white woman being rudely manhandled by a black man. In playing the scene this way, Aldridge may have been violating much more than an ordinary taboo against undue violence on the stage. His brutality appears to have been construed as unbridled bestiality, a racial tragic flaw. This sort of Othello was less sinned against than sinning.

Offstage Aldridge looked and behaved like a perfect gentleman, but in some quarters his elegant appearance and demeanor were enough to provoke ill will. There were negative reactions to his public display of respectability, even gentility. At the Folger Library a letter scribbled on the back of a Scottish playbill advertising Aldridge's performance at a theater in Dingwall on May 1, 1840, carries the following account of his entry into that town:

> he arrived here (would you believe it—) in his own Carriage, a smart Chariot & pair (Horses his own) mounted Postilion flashy Livery, Black Velvet Hunting Cap trimm'd with Gold Lace &. Two Ladies (White inside) Imperials on the Top—and his Butler in the Rumble—Is that not going it—

The author of this note also objected to Aldridge's interpretation of Zanga in *The Revenge*, noting that "with the exception that he *dress'd* & *look'd* the Moor it was otherwise contemptible." One wonders if this assessment was based solely on his acting or if it was prompted to some degree by the sight of Aldridge's splendid carriage, horses, livery, servants, and white women. Was the actor being judged strictly on his merits or on his violation of social norms? What seems to have impressed this Dingwall correspondent most is that Aldridge appeared altogether out of normal character for a black man: he dressed and behaved in too princely

a manner to know his proper place in life or art. This may have been too much for some spectators to take. They were inclined to condemn what they saw, because Aldridge too openly challenged conventional racial and class expectations.

But what may have bothered this public most about Aldridge was his evident sex appeal. His wives and mistresses were white women. So were his casual conquests, who included Hungarian and Czech ladies he met on his tours of eastern Europe.[24] At least three of these consorts—the unidentified Irish lady, Emma Stothard, and Amanda Paulina von Brandt—bore children by him out of wedlock, and when the birth of the Stothard child led to a suit being brought against him for criminal conversation, the case received wide publicity throughout the British Isles. Aldridge clearly must have been known as a womanizer—and a miscegenating womanizer at that. Could this have been the primary reason that he was kept off the London stage for most of his career? Was he blackballed for his sexuality?

This is the kind of question it may never be possible to answer definitively. The full story of Aldridge's years on and off the British stage may never be available to us, for there are too many lacunae in the documentary record to allow us to reconstruct his career completely. His performances in London and other major metropolitan centers can be investigated in depth by consulting local newspapers, journals, and magazines, and one can trace with some success his movements through other parts of the British Isles by tracking down whatever playbills, theatrical ephemera, business records, and unpublished letters or diaries may still exist. But as he made his rounds, Aldridge performed in many towns, villages, and hamlets that had neither printed media nor any other means of keeping records of notable local events. The chapters in his life story that ought to be devoted to such small-scale theatrical ventures cannot now be written, and some areas of his private life may be closed off to us forever. Yet the hunt for more data should nonetheless continue, for his was an unusual life worth rendering in the fullest detail possible. The smallest fragment of documentation, whether it be a death or marriage certificate, a passing remark, a census entry, a court transcript, an eyewitness report, a racial joke, a professional recollection, or a handwritten personal critique, should be preserved and put on record so that we can arrive at a clearer conception of the man through a more comprehensive account of his experiences and achievements. As Marshall and Stock put it nearly fifty years ago, we need to persist in this biographical quest "until this great man is given his rightful place in theatrical history, and until the fascinating story of a unique representative of the Negro people becomes better known to the world."[25]

Notes

1. Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (London: Rockliff, 1958), 6, 13.

2. "The Coburg Theatre," *Times* (London), October 11, 1825.

3. The name alludes to Quintus Roscius Gallus, an eminent Roman actor of tragedy and comedy.

4. "Coburg Theatre," *Athenaeum*, April 13, 1833.
5. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 18–19.
6. James McCune Smith, "Ira Aldridge," *Anglo-African Magazine* 2, no. 1 (January 1860): 29. This article is reprinted as chapter 2 in the present volume.
7. Ibid.
8. *New York American*, December 24, 1833.
9. A. S. Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour of the United States of North America from April, 1833, to October, 1834* (London: John Murray, 1835), 2:45.
10. Ibid., 46.
11. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 66, 308.
12. Playbill of the Royal Court Theatre, October 10, 1825.
13. Advertisement in the *Bristol Mercury*, January 30, 1826.
14. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 327–28.
15. *Kerry Evening Post*, May 29, 1839.
16. Edward Scobie, *Black Britannia: A History of Blacks in Britain* (Chicago: Johnson, 1972), 132.
17. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 293.
18. Ibid., 294.
19. See chapter 5 in this volume.
20. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 105–66; originally published in *Dublin University Magazine*, November 1868, 560.
21. J. B. Howe, *A Cosmopolitan Actor* (London: Bedford, 1888), 58.
22. Mrs. Kendal [Madge Robertson]. *Dramatic Opinions* (London: John Murray, 1890), 10–11.
23. Ibid., 11.
24. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 185–87. See also chapters 6 and 7 in this volume.
25. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 13.

5

Ira Aldridge's Swedish Wife

Gunner Sjögren

In their biography of the eminent negro actor, Ira Aldridge, Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock have collected a wealth of information about the life and career of a unique personality. Their research has unearthed a multitude of documents and facts, which makes this biography a most thorough study. As is natural in such a work, however, certain problems remained unsolved. For example, while details of the place and date of birth and of the parents of Ira Aldridge's first wife were eventually established beyond doubt, Marshall and Stock could not trace the origin of his second wife. I am happy to be able to supply the missing information.

According to the marriage certificate her name was Amanda Paulina von Brandt; she was the daughter of Oloff von Brandt, a baron of Sweden, and was born on March 2, 1834. Her daughter, Amanda Christina Elisabeth Aldridge, who was interviewed by the authors of the biography, apparently knew little about her mother's origins. She believed that Amanda Paulina had been left motherless at an early age, and that after her father's remarriage she had left home and joined an operatic group. She had studied with the same teacher as Jenny Lind, a Herr Berg, at the Royal Theater School in Stockholm. The daughter further believed that her parents had met somewhere on the Continent, probably in Germany—at any rate neither in Sweden nor in England.

Finding no trace of a Swedish aristocratic family called von Brandt, the biographers had to call off the search for any trace of her Swedish background.

Baron Oloff von Brandt was in fact a falsification; Amanda Paulina's father was plain Olof Brandt, a farrier-blacksmith of Västerås, a country town in Sweden. His only child, Amanda Paulina, was born on March 7, 1833. Amanda Paulina Aldridge's first daughter born in wedlock was christened Christina Elisabeth—the names of Amanda Brandt's mother—a most unusual combination of names in Sweden. This fact establishes the women's identity, despite the small discrepancy in Amanda Paulina's date of birth as stated in the marriage certificate.

This essay was originally published in Herbert Marshall, *Further Researches on Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius*, Center for Soviet and East European Studies Monograph no. 2 (Carbondale: Center for Soviet and East European Studies, Southern Illinois University, n.d.), 51–55. A few stylistic changes have been made in the author's English.

A few years after the birth of Amanda Paulina, her mother died and her father died a few years later when she was eleven years old. In 1848 the orphan moved to Stockholm, and three years later she became involved in the greatest scandal that had ever hit the Swedish literary world.

In June 1851 it was rumored in Stockholm that an army chaplain, Carl Jonas Love Almqvist, had absconded after attempting to poison an aged ex-captain, Johan Jacob von Scheven, from whom he had stolen a number of promissory notes. Almqvist had casually mentioned that he was going to Uppsala for a day or two, but it was soon learned that he had left the country, traveling post-haste to Bremen, where he took a ship to New York.

It is difficult to overestimate the shock that this revelation caused among the Swedish public. For three decades Almqvist had been the leading literary figure in Sweden. His works have an astonishing range. He created some of the purest lyrics in the Swedish language; at the same time his extraordinary powers of imagination led him into the wildest fantasies and yet he was the most realistic narrator of his day. As headmaster of an experimental school he proved to be a farsighted and creative pedagogue. He was deeply religious, but his conception of society was far in advance of his time. The problem of crime fascinated him. In an early novel he made a violent attack on the doctrine of free will, calling his attack "a sharp sword-point pressed against mankind's most sensitive nerve."[1] Later, in a small, admirably written novel called *It Can Be Done,* he advocated the complete emancipation of women, legally, politically, and socially, as well as the superiority of free association over legal marriage. A storm of protest greeted this bold book. Not only did Almqvist lose his position as headmaster, but the book also cost him a professorship for which he had applied. Eventually he took orders and became an army chaplain.

All his life he labored under the burden of poverty and debt. At that time nobody could live by his pen in Sweden and, having lost his headmastership, his situation became desperate. In 1850 the fifty-seven-year-old Almqvist struck up a friendship with the erstwhile Captain von Scheven, an old usurer, who was a well-known character in Stockholm. Living alone after having quarreled with his wife and only son, von Scheven was now seventy-seven and somewhat senile—a cheerful and naive soul, fond of discussing religion and philosophy. Almqvist became an almost daily visitor to his home and soon gained his complete confidence. Gradually he took over the management of von Scheven's business, helping him with the renewal of loans and the collection of debts. Eventually Almqvist induced von Scheven to let him borrow considerable sums against his own promissory notes.

One day von Scheven found to his dismay that all Almqvist's promissory notes, to the amount of 18,000 daler, had disappeared. His suspicions at first turned on a young girl who lived in his flat—Amanda Brandt. Von Scheven questioned her in Almqvist's presence, but she emphatically denied having taken the notes and immediately left von Scheven's house. A day or two later an anonymous letter was handed to her in which she was advised to leave town, as the old man was very

angry and would get her into trouble with the police. Money was also sent to her. Wisely, she did not follow this advice but took the letter to von Scheven, telling him that she believed that it was written by Almqvist (which it certainly was).

In the meantime Almqvist had promised to make good von Scheven's loss and made out a new set of promissory notes. Taking advantage of the old man's failing eyesight he signed them, not with his own name, but with a completely invented one—O. Almgren. This ruse was discovered by von Scheven's housekeeper, who distrusted Almqvist. When questioned by von Scheven, Almqvist hedged, saying that he often wrote his name in that way, but he promised to make out a new set of notes and to get some reliable friends as security. Meanwhile some grains of a white substance, which the housekeeper had found in bowls of oatmeal gruel and in a decanter of brandy, had been analyzed and proved to be arsenic.

When this discovery of arsenic was rumored, Almqvist left Stockholm—in the nick of time. A police investigation led to the discovery of a chain of circumstantial evidence against him, and his case was tried by court-martial. The court was not fully satisfied but found that the evidence constituted "at least more than half proof"[2] that Almqvist had committed the alleged theft, fraud, and attempted poisoning. The court decreed that the case should be "left to the future, when it might be made clear"[3]—that is, until Almqvist himself could be heard. The finding was confirmed by the Military Court of Appeal.

Almqvist never returned to Sweden. In the United States he made a precarious living as a language teacher and later married again, without even having tried to get a divorce from his Swedish wife.

A whole literature has sprung up around this criminal case. Was Almqvist guilty or not? Many have tried to clear him—with varying degrees of success. In 1929, however, a lawyer, A. Hemming-Sjöberg, showed that the trial was quite fair and expressed the opinion that the evidence against Almqvist was overwhelming.[4] An English edition of his book was published in 1932.

And what of Amanda Brandt? Some five or six weeks before the scandal broke, a gold worker, Theodor Lilja, who lived on the attic floor above, had approached von Scheven and persuaded him to let this orphan girl, who (Theodor said) was destitute and lodged with him and his wife, move into von Scheven's flat in exchange for helping his housekeeper, who was ailing. Lilja's story was not strictly true—the girl had lodged with him earlier, but during the previous five months she had been working as a servant at a country inn some ten or fifteen miles from Stockholm.

Amanda Brandt apparently came to Stockholm to try to enter the Royal Theater's choral school. Places here were much coveted; not only was tuition free, but pupils also got a small salary. While waiting for admittance, she took private lessons, and in all probability her teacher was the opera singer Isak Albert Berg, who had numerous pupils, and who had once taught Jenny Lind—a story that tallies with the Aldridge family tradition.

It is possible that von Scheven paid for these lessons, wittingly or unwittingly. Amanda Brandt's position in his house was somewhat ambiguous. Von Scheven lived in an apartment of only four rooms. Questioned by the police, von Scheven said that the girl slept on a couch in the drawing room, a story that she confirmed. But in two letters, written during his flight, Almqvist insinuated that Amanda spent the nights in von Scheven's bedroom. In view of the fact that this was not the first time that von Scheven had housed a destitute girl, and that he had confessed to a friend that lechery was his worst fault, it seems at least possible that Almqvist was right.

There are slight indications that Almqvist may not have been the only one who tried to get money out of the old man. Some of those who have studied the case believe that Lilja and von Scheven's housekeeper conspired to this end, and that they had their own reasons for planting Amanda Brandt in his drawing room. On the other hand it must be stressed that Amanda Brandt made a very good impression on the members of the court. The minutes show that whereas, for example, the housekeeper was a voluble and somewhat erratic witness, Amanda Brandt's deposition was clear, sober and matter-of-fact. The court did not question her morals and was entirely satisfied that she had nothing whatever to do with the theft of the missing notes.

Nevertheless, Amanda Brandt left Sweden, never to return, even before the sentence against Almqvist was pronounced. She applied for a passport to go to Copenhagen in September 1852.

I have failed to trace Amanda Brandt's her further movements. Unfortunately, no registers were kept in Denmark of foreigners entering or leaving the country. Her name is not to be found on the payrolls of the Royal Theater in Copenhagen, and it is possible that she soon left for Germany. At this time some 170 German-speaking theater companies were active on the Continent. Many of them staged both drama and opera and had a permanent chorus. I have found no records of a Miss Brandt among the solo singers in the *Deutscher Bühnen-Almanach*. Unfortunately, the members of the choruses are not always included in the registers. A Miss Brandt was engaged for a short period at the Detmold Theater in 1857, but neither her Christian name nor her initials are known.

The first child of Ira Aldridge and Amanda Brandt, their daughter Luranah, was born in London on March 29, 1860. The Marshall-Stock biography states that Aldridge was in England for the entire year of 1859 and places him in 1858 in only four Continental cities: Saxe-Meiningen in January, and Prague, Reval, and St. Petersburg in the autumn.[5] From the *Deutscher Bühnen-Almanach* (1859 and 1860 editions) I gather that he also acted in Posen (Poznan) in January 1858, in Budapest in February–March, in Graz and Salzburg probably in March, and in Altenburg and Gera in April. On returning from St. Petersburg he gave performances in Königsberg (Kaliningrad) probably in January 1858 and in Rostock on February 9, 10, and 11, 1959. This brings us to a date very near the conception

of the first child of Ira and Amanda. Rostock, situated on the Baltic and not far from Denmark and Sweden, is a likely place for the encounter between the negro actor and the Swedish chorus girl, but unfortunately no registers or payrolls seem to exist covering the personnel of the Rostock theater at this time.

It must be borne in mind, however, that the information contained in the *Bühnen-Almanach* is not exhaustive, and Aldridge may have performed in many other places as well as those that are listed in it.

It is doubtful whether Amanda Brandt would have posed as the daughter of a baron von Brandt when she lived in Germany. There are several German noble families of this name, and such a deception would easily have been detected. Ira Aldridge, who in building up his image as a negro actor called himself an African prince and let people believe that his first wife was the natural daughter of a member of Parliament, might well have found it expedient to give his second wife a more fitting social status. This harmless ruse evidently gave him much satisfaction. From the evidence of Hans Christian Andersen, who encountered them in Paris, Amanda Brandt was quite ladylike and could evidently be accepted as a baroness.[6]

Notes

1. A. Hemming-Sjöberg, *A Poet's Tragedy: The Trial of C. J. L. Almqvist* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932), 36.
2. Ibid., 94.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 229.
5. Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (London: Rockliff, 1958), 293.
6. Cited in ibid., 324.

6

"African Tragedian" in Golden Prague

Some Unpublished Correspondence

James J. Napier and Stanley B. Winters

The name of Ira Frederick Aldridge (1807–67), self-styled "African Tragedian," has enjoyed respectful but scanty treatment in the history of the theater and of the American Negro.[1] Aldridge, born a United States citizen, was widely acclaimed in Europe as one of the leading Shakespearean actors of the nineteenth century. Racial bias led him to leave his native land and adopt British citizenship, so he is relatively unknown in the United States. The limited references to his life and career reflect neither his true stature nor the measure of his acceptance into the more aristocratic but less racially conscious milieu in Europe.

Aldridge's achievements indicate the range of his talents, while his stalwart defense of human dignity makes him relevant today. His background combined violence, humanitarianism, and Christian fervor. His grandfather, a Senegalese chieftain, was slain with members of his family while defending his decree that prisoners of war should be exchanged rather than sold. Only Ira's father, through the help of an American missionary, escaped murder.[2] Making his way to the United States he converted to Christianity, married, and became pastor to a black congregation in New York, where Ira was born on July 24, 1807.

The boy's father steered him toward the ministry, but Ira dreamed of the stage. His early efforts were thwarted by the angry reactions of New York audiences to a black man in the theater. Not until Ira got the courage to introduce himself to Edmund Kean did his fortunes change. Kean, in New York on tour, liked the youth immediately, hired him as a servant, and took him to England for further education.[3] In 1825 the seventeen-year-old Aldridge made his debut in *Othello* at the Royalty Theatre in London. Maturing rapidly, he was soon performing in leading English theaters. Kean described him as an actor of "wondrous versatility."[4]

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The years of Aldridge's rise to fame apparently had bright as well as unhappy moments. His stay in England was scarred by professional wrangling, broken contracts, and insults by critics to his acting skill. In Ireland and Scotland, however, he was complimented for his dignity and grace both on and off the stage. When Aldridge toured Europe, he proved a powerful audience attraction. Admiring crowds greeted him in Berlin, Vienna, and St. Petersburg. Students at Moscow University, hailing his Othello, unhitched the horse from his carriage and pulled him triumphantly through the streets. The king of Prussia bestowed upon him the Gold Medal of the First Class for Arts and Sciences, a distinction shared by only three others (Alexander von Humboldt, Gasparo Luigi Spontini, and Franz Liszt).

The roles that won Aldridge popular and critical acclaim were those of Macbeth, Lear, and Othello. In contrast, his portrayal of Shylock, whom he interpreted as a genuinely tragic figure, was highly controversial in England. Some critics accused him of being in league with the Jews, whose petitions for civil rights were then being considered by Parliament. The fact that Aldridge was willing to alter Shakespeare by eliminating the last act of *Merchant of Venice*, leaving Shylock at the end as a broken old man, perhaps reveals his aversion to a one-sided distortion.

Aldridge married twice, first an Englishwoman, then after her death a Swedish baroness.[5] Rather little is known about this aspect of his life. His first wife accompanied him on tour, tending to [his] young son Ira and occasionally defending her husband's business affairs against scheming or incompetent theatrical agents. She was not a robust woman, but that did not appreciably dampen Aldridge's social life. There are suggestions in his diary that he had a perceptive eye for some of the young ladies he encountered. One interesting episode, with minor literary consequences apparently not yet published, occurred in mid-century when Aldridge performed Shakespeare in ancient Prague.

Prague, capital of the Kingdom of Bohemia, was then just beginning its era of great economic and population growth. Still basically German dominated in culture and administration, it was witnessing rising Czech contributions in art literature, business, and public life. Its 157,000 inhabitants (1850) hardly made it a challenger to cosmopolitan Vienna, capital of the Austrian Empire of which Bohemia was a part. Yet it was a beautiful city architecturally, particularly rich in Baroque, and boasted Charles University, oldest in Central Europe.

Theater in Prague had deep roots among both Czechs and Germans. In the absence of a permanent royal court to serve as patron (the Austrian archdukes who were crowned as kings of Bohemia stayed mainly in Vienna), Prague's Jesuit colleges and great aristocratic families had sponsored Italian and German opera and drama for over a century. In 1771 the first play in the Czech language to be performed since the Counter Reformation was presented in the city, and a few years later the independent Czech theater (as distinguished from theater in

German) had modest beginnings in its own building.[6] Shakespeare seems first to have come to Prague during the late Enlightenment through a translation of *Macbeth* into Czech (1786) from Schiller's German. In 1846 *Romeo and Juliet* was rendered into Czech, and from 1855 onward there began to appear in Czech the initial volumes in a complete edition of Shakespeare's plays. Aldridge usually performed Shakespeare in English with supporting actors assisting in the local language or in German. His initial visit to Prague, the concern of the balance of this essay, occurred in 1853. The time was opportune not only because some of the translators were already at work on Shakespeare but also because a campaign was underway to raise funds to construct an adequate and truly national Czech theater without any government subsidy or imprimatur. Though this initial effort failed, it proved an important rallying point for Czech nationalism and established the basis for a later campaign that succeeded.[7]

Prague at the time of Aldridge's visit was astir with growing Czech patriotism and national consciousness. These currents, in hostile interaction with their German counterparts, were destined to end the "good old days" when both nationalities lived and worked together without exaggerated awareness of their ethnic and cultural differences. The division of Prague, and of Bohemia, into German and Czech factions was an inevitable outgrowth of the Czech "national revival" dating from the late eighteenth century, of the German Romantic movement, and of the failure of the Austrian Revolution of 1848 to create a constitutional arrangement satisfactory to both peoples.

Prague's social structure had many layers. The uppermost included the high clergy and government officials and the aristocratic landowners whose palaces adorned the city's fashionable "Small Side" across the Vltava River. Next came various notables among the lesser nobility and upper middle classes. The latter included the mercantile patricians, members of the higher status professions and university faculties, and other bourgeois with sufficient wealth and leisure to patronize theater and the arts. Beneath them were the broad masses of people in petty trades, handicrafts, and menial occupations. The revolutionary events of 1848 were too short-lived to alter this hierarchical structure. Over the long run it was to succumb to more powerful forces of industrial and demographic transformation already at work.

Into this still traditional milieu stepped the "African Tragedian" in February of 1853.

To trace Aldridge's precise steps during his brief stay in Prague is difficult, but apparently he was a success. A contemporary cartoon shows the Prague *Stavovské divadlo* (Estates Theater), the only Czech theater in Prague, before his arrival boasting long lines waiting for tickets.[8] Aldridge himself has helped posterity by leaving behind several pieces of correspondence and poetry addressed to Madam Johanna Zimmer Engel (1818–74), a Czech member of the upper-middle-class social layer described above. Madame Engel at thirty-five was the widow of the late

Joseph Engel (1796–1845), doctor of medicine and surgery, master of obstetrics and ophthalmology, professor of theoretical medicine, and active member of the Museum of the Bohemian Kingdom, the nucleus of the Czech "national revival." Dr. Engel died when his wife was twenty-seven and their only son Emanuel was one year old. (Emanuel in later life was to gain distinction as a sometime poet, a physician, and above all as a politician, member of the Bohemian Diet and the Imperial Parliament and president of the club of Czech deputies in Parliament.) Madame Engel never remarried. From her letters and other papers in the Literary Archives of the National Museum in Prague one concludes that she was a woman of excellent taste and good education.

When Aldridge played in Prague, Madame Engel provided hospitality for him and his family. The true nature of the relationship between her and Aldridge may never be unraveled. His correspondence with her, reprinted below, intrigues us although it warrants no firm conclusions. It is offered as a contribution to the understanding of the feelings of a black actor, thousands of miles from his birthplace, opening his heart to a woman whose memory he evidently cherished.[9]

To Madame Engel

"Dislike me not for my complexion
The shadow'd livery of the burnished Sun."
(Shakespeare)

A Place in thy memory Dearest
Is all I claim,
To pause and look back when thou hearest,
The sound of my name;
Another may woo thee nearer,
Another may win and wear,
I care not though he be dearer,
If I am remembered there.

Remember me not as a Lover
Whose hopes were cros'st;
Whose bosom can never recover
The light it hath lost.
As the young Bride remembers the Mother
She loves, though she may never see,
As a Sister remembers a Brother
So Dearest, remember me.

Ira Aldridge

Prague, 5th May 1853

Dresden, 20th May/53

My Dearest Madam

I cannot tell you with what regret I had to deny myself the pleasure of spending the last evening of my sojourn in Prag under your hospitable roof, nothing but circumstances, the particulars of which, coupled with my indisposition I will not trouble you with the recital. I appreciate your extreme kindness and hope to have the gratification of endeavoring to make a return for the same in London where I hope to see you and your dear Son at no distant period. I hope that you, your dear Mother and Son are in the enjoyment of that inestimable blessing health. Kiss them both for me. Ira sends kisses ad infinitum. I have been very successful here, the König and Königin and Hof have patronised me to an unusual extent. Mrs. Aldridge has been very ill since her departure from Prag and is still unwell. I hope to be favoured with a line from you at your leisure. Remember me kindly to all friends, particularly to Dr. Sehebeku and Mr. Nprt'átko whose politeness and kindness I can never forget, like my country man Herr Seyd; the Professor and his obliging Son; Dr. Rieger your brother in-law and the ladies who I had the pleasure of meeting at your house, the names of which I cannot immediately call to mind. In conclusion My Dear Madam, I beg to subscribe myself

Now and always,

Your Obliged & Obd. Svt.
IRA ALDRIDGE

P.S. Kiss your Son and Mother for me.
IA.

Unsigned Poem in Aldridge's Handwriting

THE ANGEL GUARDIAN

(1)

Dear angel ever at my side./ How loving Thou must be.
To leave Thy home in heaven to guide/ A guilty child like me.

(2)

Thy beautiful and shining face,/ I see not though so near.
The sweetness of Thy soft low voice/ I am deaf to hear.

(3)

But I have felt Thee in my thoughts/ Tilting with sin for me,
And when my heart loves God, I know/ the sweetness comes from Thee.

(4)

And when dear spirit I kneel down/ Morning and night to prayer,
Something there is within my heart/ Which tells me Thou art there.

(5)

Yes, when I pray, Thou prayest too/ Thy prayer is all for me.
But when I sleep, Thou Sleepest not,/ But watchest patiently.

(6)

And most of all I feel Thee near,/ When from the good Priest's feet,

I go. Absolved in fearless love/ Fresh toils and cares to meet.

(7)

Ah, me. How lovely they must be,/ Whom God has glorified.
Yet one of them, O sweetest thought/ Is ever at my side.

(8)

Then for Thy sake, dear angel now/ More humble will I be,
But I am weak, and when I fall/ O weary not of me.

(9)

O weary not, but love me still/ For Mary's sake, Thy queen,
She is never tired of me,/ Thou I, Her worst of sons have been.

(10)

Then love me, love me angel dear,/ And I will love Thee more.
And help me, when my soul is cast/ Upon the eternal shore.

Amen. [n.d.]

Notes

1. See Marie Trommer, *Ira Aldridge, American Negro Tragedian and Taras Shevchenko, Poet of the Ukraine: Story of a Friendship* (Brooklyn: Marie Trommer, 1939); Owen Mortimer, "Ira Aldridge, Shakespearean Actor," *Crisis* 62, no. 4 (April 1955): 203–14; Margaret Just Butcher, *The Negro in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1956), 189; Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (London: Rockliff, 1958).

2. [This account of Aldridge's father and grandfather is based on misinformation in the *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius* (London: Onwhyn, n.d.), 8. Ed.]

3. [This information is incorrect. Aldridge did not meet Edmund Kean in New York, and he never worked as his servant. Ed.]

4. *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius*, 15.

5. [As noted by Gunner Sjögren in chapter 5 of this volume, Aldridge's second wife was not a member of the Swedish nobility. Ed.]

6. Oskar Teuber, "Die Theater Prags," *Die österreichische-ungarische Monarchie in Wort und Bild* (Vienna, 1886–1902); *Böhmen* 2 (1894–96): 185.

7. Stanley B. Kimball, "Czech Nationalism: A Study of the National Theatre Movement: 1845–83," *Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences* 54 (1964): 43–60.

8. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 184. The Czech boycott had been in effect to protest against the use of German in the theater's productions.

9. Acknowledgment for access to material on the Engel family and to the writings of Aldridge herein reprinted is made to the Literary Archives of the National Museum in Prague and especially to Dr. Jaromír Louzil, director, and Dr. Pavel Krivsky, assistant, in the Památník národního písemnictví na Strahove. Aldridge's writings are located in Emanuel Engel, literary estate, File 6R 78, items 77–79.

7

A Garland of Love Letters

Cyril Bruyn Andrews

(I)

There were, of course, the inevitable crowd of admiring ladies. What actor of great repute escapes them? They ranged as usual from the very young—like the sender of the photograph "To a great artist from a little actress"—to the very elderly, from nursery-governesses to Grand Duchesses. And that was the atmosphere in which he [Aldridge] lived. To those who look at love letters in the spirit of a Peeping Tom, with a foolish snigger or perhaps still worse with a slight disgust, there will be little that is delightful in old love letters. They will seem foolish and old-fashioned, their charms will seem to have long since faded. Yet in love letters that are simple and sincere there is always something fresh and arresting, in spite of, or perhaps because of, their being remarkably the same in all ages; each seems so essentially personal and yet savoring of something so eternal; perhaps that is their fascination.

Of the flood of letters that Ira Aldridge received from his many admirers we must pick out a little garland. There is Matilda of Pest who will take a post with a family or even marry anyone in order to live near him. There is the very domestic Sophia Zybum who insists in incorporating her whole family in a united adoration. There is Elise of Odessa of the flowered notepaper with the pansies and forget-me-nots; there is another friend in Pest, this time heavily coroneted who would like some little poesies to translate into Hungarian; and Alexandra Menenskiansky, also with a large crest, who has an eye on her brother's purse as well as her own gratification. Another member of the aristocracy writes in French of a wonderful dream in which they are eating cheese together, but most of the foreigners [Continental Europeans] are struggling with the English language. Yet that is a small matter compared with the almost hopeless struggle to express their

This essay, a chapter in Andrews's unpublished biography, "Victorian Ebony: The Story of Ira Aldridge (Known as The African Roscius)," was written in 1934–35 when Aldridge's daughter, Amanda Ira Aldridge, gave Andrews access to family letters and documents, most of which have since disappeared. Andrews's typescript is held in the Ira Aldridge collection at the McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University Library, Evanston, IL.

feelings adequately even in their native tongue. After a letter beginning "As little as badly I English can," the rather stilted affectionate writing of Eliza Buckland or of the lady, Keajensky, sounds almost flowing.

Of all the many love letters, possibly the most charming are those of Ellen Garpinchenko; she is such a child at one moment and then develops so quickly into a delightful mixture of childishness and maturity. On September 21st, 1863 she is writing on a tiny piece of child's notepaper with a white embossed border.

Dear Mister Aldridge,

Forgive me that I wrote you last time on a little piece of paper, but, it is Mama's fault because she did not tell me she was writing to you; and it was after the letter was closed, that I put it in.

Your letter from Karkoff traveled very long for we received it, on the 14th of this month, and it was with great difficulty that Mama could find it when she was at the wedding of my cousin at Isume.

The country is very dull, we go very seldom to walk, because there is a very disagreeable wind but in two weeks we go to Karkoff and I think it will be pleasanter.

Now dear Mister Aldridge I have a prayer to ask you. In Poltava I dare not ask you for your portrait because there was many who asked you for the same if you will give me at preasant one I will be very glad.

I hope we will hear soon that you are in good health.

Yours sincerely
ELLEN GARPINCHENKO

We had a great deal of crying when Pacho wrote his letter because he sade there were too many faults.

ELLEN.

Was that other little piece of paper that she mentions inserted in a previous letter at the last minute on purpose? It almost looks like it, for in a later letter an extra little note is obviously slipped in. In the next letter the portrait has already arrived, that was so earnestly requested, and there is a full and intimate account of her life.

24th September.
6th October.

I suppose that you must be arrived at London the 10 September—in imagination I have followed you all the time of your voyage; and now, when you are at home, I will repose of my inquietudes because I know you in good hands. Excepting the anxiety on account of your voyage, I am tired and disposed very ill, I dont know myself why—I hope it will be nothing.

Tell me, my dear, are you contented to find yourself at home? All yours must be very happy to see you, after a so long absence, how much I regret to be so far from you. I think often of that—but there is no way to change the thing, the only pleasure that I have now is to hear speak

of you. I hope you found your affairs in good order? You were so anxious for them. I wish that all should be well for you.

The last week I have been invited for a wedding dinner—I know anything the most tiresome than such a dinner—and particularly for me. God knows as I do not like this Ceremony!

Allow me to thank you, my good friend, for your amiable attention, it seems that we sympathize greatly, for I also at the wedding dinner, I proposed a toast *for those not present*.

After the depart of my brother, I have received no news from my father nor Nathalie till now, I think Miss Buckland wrote you that my brother has passed here a few days, he brought us the news of marriage of Mr. Victor. I think that this poor man has lost his mind, they say, it is a marriage for a miserable Sum of money. Greatest folly! Nothing more.

I remember dear Monsieur Aldridge you said me, that you have in your house a Orangery, will you tell me, if you have there any Gesnerians?—It is a charming flower, that smells delightfully and pleases me very much; farewell the flowers! the Country is dull, the leaves begin to fall, the evenings are long! All attributes to Winter.

If you could see, how I learn the English! At such a point, that the night even I dream of words, phrases, verbs, pronouns. It is dreadful!

I hope you are satisfied because I write to you, every week, but this letter will be the last, for I will wait the answers.

Adieu my dearest, loved friend, do not forget me my soul; Your portrait ornaments my drawing room but I avoid to look it too often.

YourS

NELL.

Mr. Garpinchenko charges me to thank you again for your packet, he recommends himself to your kind remembrance, and I Sir I beseech you to be indulgent for my English letters, I only begin.

A few days later there are two letters enclosed in the same envelope—a formal one for the family to see and another in pencil and folded very small and obviously private. The first reads:

Dear Mister Aldridge—I and Mama play in perfection the walses Il Bacio and Turisten I hope you will be satisfied to hear us play when you return. Pacha kisses you a 1000,000,000 times.

Your little friend ELLEN G.

The second and more intimate has no beginning and no end.

presently I am at Isoum where I have received your letter and gloves from Karkoff. Thank you, thank you my good my dear friend of your remembrance. Mr. Garpinchenko pray that I thank you also of his part; he is very satisfied of your attention. How happy I am that you have been sorrow after my depart. I kiss your hands for this words. Do not want to know the French because I have learned enough the English, to understand all that you will speak, or write. All night I have had your gloves under my pillow, and I could not sleep—Why?—You know.

In the first of Ellen's letters the envelope is plain and addressed in another hand. In the next the envelope bears an embossed monogram but not hers. In the third, which contains the two letters, we have her own seal and in the fourth written in the following year the envelope has her own monogram. This last is rather a grown-up effort and Ellen has become Helene but it is still full of the old naivety.

Dearest Mister Aldridge

We were extremely greaved when we heard that you have been in Kalonga but should not come in Karkoff. We lived in the hope of seeing you this winter when we parted in July. I heard also that you were coming in autumn here. Is it true? It is so long to wait but I hope we shall see you before.

After we received your letter from London we were so inquiet about you for we thought that you were dead or very ill. I think Mama wrote to you about all the inquiries we made about you in town we were whole days in town running from one end to the other, but we knew nothing about you.

The 12th of January which is the day you came to us for the first time last year was a very dull one for us for we all expected to see you here. We drank your health.

My aunt wrote to us several time to enquire if we did not here any thing from you and a few days ago my uncle Costentin was here he salutes you and my grandfather and aunt also.

Now dearest Mister Aldridge I must finish my letter for as always I began too late and Mama waites for me.

In the hope of hearing of you soon I

remain your affectionate

HELENE GARPINCHENKO.

N.B. Dear Mister Aldridge I began to make something for you but I had no courage to finish it when I heard you were not coming to Karkoff.

Helene.

Yet in the following November the signature is Ellen again and the notepaper is childishly bordered with delightful garlands of colored flowers, foxgloves, roses, passion flowers and forget-me-nots. Yet the phrases are grown-up, it is impossible to return to what is past.

Dear Mister Aldridge,

You cannot immagine what pleasure it gave me to receive your letter. Why did you not write so long? It made us very inquite about you, we thought you were ill or something had happened with you. You must not do so another time. But I forget, you do not care to anything one tells you; how Mama tried you should write regularly, but no, you will not.

Now I will make you a reprimand. In your letter to me (Mama tells me in hers also) you write; "Your obedient servant." Dear Mister Aldridge if you will not pain us, you will never write so again, for you are not our servant but our dear, our best friend.

You ask me if we passed a pleasant summer, if you think we can pass a pleasant summer in waiting then I can say we had one of the pleasantest I remember, for not a day passed when we did not wait for you or for your letters, your room was continually ready to receive you. We put everyday fresh nosegay on your dressing table and the last one was the day we left the country.

Miss Buckland is no more with us, because Pacha wants a tuter, but she stayed in the country with one of our very near neighbours, Mister Weber, who has two sons with which she is to learn English. We received a letter from her.

We are very obliged to you for the little dogs, I should like very much to have one. Do tell they should send one from England in a box.

Mama has received your letter a month after it has been written, in spite of all the pains she takes to receive them regularly.

I hope Dear Mister Aldridge that you are quite well, for us, we are never ill, thank God.

Yours affectionately

ELLEN.

N.B. I send you a blotting book that you should not forget to write to us.

I KISS YOU WITH ALL MY STRENGTH.

PAUL GARPINCHENKO.

(II)

Of the children's letters the most charming is perhaps Fanny's:

Sir;

You receive this letter from a little girl that you never saw and who never saw you, however she knows you pretty well through her mother's recitals. My little heart is full of admiration for you. I should so much like to have a talent approaching to the one that was devolved upon you, but it should not be for acquiring people's renown because one seldom appreciates true talent.

If I could, I should cover you with riches and glory, and should liberate all the negroes for your sake. After Russians I always prefered the negro nation to all others, and when I shall be a grown-up person I shall absolutely write a work in which I shall invite all the Europeans to become real Christians in arming themselves and liberating all their black brothers. I so much wish to see you and hear your beautiful talent!

Mamma promised me that pleasure in Petersbourg where I shall be in winter.

Wishing you, Sir, good health and happiness, I have the honour to be yours respectfully,

Fanny.

As a contrast we have Emily's much longer and crested epistle; Emily is obviously no longer very young and from the way she writes one suspects her of enjoying bad health:

My dear Friend,

You tell me that my letters are most welcome, so I shall trespass on your patience perhaps I may not send this immediately, for I shall not be able as yet to go to the Post Office myself and I cannot trust it with anyone, but I cannot put off the wish of communicating with you to tell you how necessary your letters are to my happiness.

I had been ill suffering from irritation of the nerves which had occasioned me many sleepless nights, and entire loss of appetite. I had become quite weak and so changed that my sister was quite alarmed, but I only wanted rest! (Last spring I suffered terribly of a low fever and my cough which never leaves me, and the doctor was afraid I should have another attack) You who have never lived for long in Russia cannot tell how trying Spring is to those of weak health. I generally feel its effects, and so, ill, wearied, sad, I was thirsting for news of you. But, dear Ira, I thank you. I did not expect a reply so soon to come. (a clerk belonging to the office and whose wife is indebted to me sends on your letters) And the next day I was well, I could walk, I could eat. I laughed to myself when the doctor could not find out what had produced such a rapid change when I told him that a good night's sleep had effected it; so you see, dear Ira, that your letter came just in time to sooth me and to rouse me.

I was moved on hearing of your illness also of the distress you had undergone. Believe me, dear Ira, that all that is dear to you will be so to me on your account; I am not selfish in my affection. I would only ask to be your friend, to know all that encircles your home and your heart, so when you write next time do not refuse me that pleasure.

Do you go to the seaside for your health or will you act there; so let me know where it is, and how long you will remain; do you think I shall not go there, do you think I shall hesitate? nothing ever deters me, when once I have formed a wish my will is strong enough to perform it, the only obstacle which may occur is my health, and now we have rumours of war. Should that happen I cannot leave Mama. It is Easter Day. You have very likely heard of the custom existing in Russia, that of meeting with the exclamation of "Christ is risen!" and embracing three times without any distinction of sex or class. All our tenants come early in the morning and then the bell never ceases ringing, visitor after visitor arrives and as everybody fasts seven weeks the table is laid out with loads of eatables and which almost sinks beneath its weight, each one must partake of something. I lay in my chair and enjoyed the sight, about the room all the relations and nearest friends assembled and they all sat down to enjoy the repast. I had mine in a window before me and others joined me with their plates in hand. I never lack entertainers; three young men tried their utmost to dispell all gloomy thoughts; there was a continual hubbub in the room for there were groups everywhere disputing and conversing and after a while others joined our circle for it was becoming very animated. My spirits rose, I proceeded into the drawing room; I strolled about until the doctor told me I should tire myself too much. I was gay, happy, animated, and it was your letter which occasioned it; your letter which I had only received yesterday morning, besides there was a charm even in this very mystery. No one even troubles the cause of my high spirits; the doctor might well wonder. At eleven they dispersed, I could not sleep, I must write all this to you—You ask to see me when I come to England. It is for you to decide. Can we meet as friends? If so, I will promise to see you; if not I will be greatly grieved, and instead of the four months of entire rest and liberty being a time of happiness, it will only be a time of sad reflection. I will await

your answer before I entirely decide, and yet half the pleasure will be lost if I do not see you act on the English stage, so do not fail to answer me all these questions, Besides, you promised to send me the "Inquiry." I thought it would have come in this letter so do not forget to send it next time. I count all your promises.

The opera has experienced a great loss, that of Bosin, she was greatly lamended and was buried with all the honour due to her, I went to see her remains and as I stood there the question suggested itself whether she was happy in death for it was rumoured she was not in life "that is in her home," but I am meandering, I shall never weary of writing to you, it seems as if I were communing with a kindred spirit. I almost imagine sometimes that you are besides me, but I awake to the sad reality that it has only been one of my dreams, so goodbye, dear friend; I shall not say write soon I know you will do so whenever you have a single hour to bestow upon your absent and ever faithful admirer

Emily.

I enclose the verses though there was a jealous inclination to keep them back. They have no measure but I tried to keep strictly to the sounds and therefore the harmony is disturbed. They were signed "Olga" but I could not find out who had written them.

Martinoff had a farewell dinner given him. He has gone to the continent for his health. Do not be too long in writing for should I go to England it will be in the latter end of May and I must have a letter before then.

Goodbye.

In a later letter she is better but still languishing:

Dearest Friend;

Instead of having written I thought I should have come myself. I thought I should have been beside you should have spoken to you, should have listened to you, and I am disappointed. Did you really impatiently long to see me? not so impatiently as I have longed. I am sure you have not counted the hours and days as I have counted them; and after all this longing and waiting and counting I must put up with disappointment, I must wait another year, a year, a whole year of expectation! Thank you and a thousand times thank you for your speedy reply to my last letter, it made me happy for many days and will console me until your next comes— I write this on the point of leaving Petersbourg to go up the country about 800 versts to a very pretty place. In August I shall go to Nijni-Novgorod to the famous fair there, I shall only stay a few days, though there will be many curious things to be seen and many foreign nations to study; I like caracteristics and it will therefore grant me great pleasure, besides Nijni-Novgorod is an old prussian town and will remind me of former times. I promise myself strict investigation of it but I shall not annoy you by describing it.

For a long time I would not decide upon going but the doctor insisted for he told me I must absolutely bathe and drink warm milk so I followed his advice and shall leave town the 7th of June. It is rather late but my lessons keep me in town until then. During the time I am in the country I dare not write as the post office is not near us, and I shall not be able to carry the letters myself. I dare not trust them with anyone else. I shall also not be able to receive any from you, but dearest Ira, if you have the least affection for me let me at least find two

letters waiting for me when I return to town in the middle of August; I shall then write immediately. Do not disappoint me. Dear Ira, I shall be still further from you and yet it seems to me that there is no distance between us; for every moment of my life is filled up with the thoughts of you, what would I not give to be but just for an hour beside you, to tell you again and again how dear you have been to me and how dear you will ever be to me; shall we ever meet again? I know not! I often wish that Death would claim me and that I might pass out of the world full of the thoughts of you, whilst happy in thinking I am dear to you, whilst happy in believing that you care for me, whilst feeling that my heart was not growing old but then the grave would not give me rest, so I must cease to wish for it; I am happy and yet I am sad, is it a wonder? My expectation of seeing you has been in vain. I must even be deprived of your letters. Have I not cause for being sad? Dear Ira should I annoy you with my letters, should I weary you with my complaints. Tell it me at once, my heart is proved and knows how to bear its own sorrows, it would scorn to murmur were it certain of being only tolerated and not appreciated. I would scorn such a sentiment, and would revenge myself by marrying the first-comer and become the torment of his life; now I wander to no purpose, I have become agitated by a rumour that has excited my jealousy. Ira you will bear with me for I am sad for I shall not see you! I will not tell you that time will pass on very slowly, I have my books, my writing, my painting, my day-dreams (dreams that are full of you) I shall be in a beautiful place where Nature has richly lavished her gifts around; I shall be free to roam in the thick woods, I shall be alone in the beautiful fields (no not alone—you will be with me) I shall loiter by the river side, I shall glide over the beautiful waters far from the whirl of the world, far from the noise of busy tongues, and can I be so sad? No! Two months will pass quickly and when that is over I shall have news of you; what a pity you do not understand French; there is a beautiful piece of poetry by Victor Hugo, my favourite French poet where he says "Child, if I were King"—but I will say ". . . if I were Queen" I would give my sceptre, crown and homage for one deep look from you.

You ask me about the German theatres. I think it was to have been finished, but in Russia everything is so delayed that one can never be certain of anything. The French the [*sic*] Emperor expressed his wish that it was prepared without fail, but as far as the German I know nothing decisive. How muchsoever I would wish to see you I would fear another winter for you the public is really so ungrateful and so fond of change, I would rather not see you for a year, than seeing, perceive the slightest change upon your countenance occasioned by an ungrateful crowd; it may be that it will be quite the contrary, who can tell. A mass of people is moved like a volcano, which is thrown up sometimes with sudden fury and brightness, exploding as it bursts; at others, rolling quietly and igniting for a moment and then quieting. You may be certain that all that crowd would not welcome you with greater warmth than I would, I shall not say another word, you must judge for yourself. I want now to bid you goodbye, I have others letters to write and it is very late, and yet I linger to say farewell for two long months,—should I die whilst I am away you will know it by my not writing any more.

Yours for ever faithful

Emily.

I bid you a long, long goodbye, and yet it may be that I will see you in November. I dare not think of it.

(III)

One of the most amusing is from Matilda of Pest written a few years earlier:

> . . . My dear Aldridge,
>
> I will write you now not only for that pleasure to pass with you at least in imagination the few minutes occupied in writing to you, but also for an important affair:
>
> I have written to the "Times" and in consequence of this letter my annonce appeared already the 14 of Februar, but as I hope little profit will derive from that step, and I have nobody in England who could be interessed by me excepted you, so I will applye myself to your kindnesse. You have many aquantance in England, it will be easy to procure me a situation as gowernesse or companion lady—
>
> My knowledge of Hongarien, German, French and little Englich can be very usefull in my present situation, and when I will be older when I can add to my reach imagination, fantaisie the cold experience; *I will write*. You will be surprised at this request, I will relaite you in few words the causes which induce me to take that carière—I can not very well agree with my family and I am too proud after leaving my mother's house to receive from her any money and yet whatt is the most desagreable; one will mary me.
>
> I will not say with that that any love affaire is under leaving my mother's House not at all; I love nobody. I passed my time in studies and pianoforte and life always occupied prevented me of such useless folies; but my whole antipathy derive from that; I will not mary an Hongarian never:—
>
> A propos mariage! If now you would send me an E. Gentleman *by post* whom out of pity would marry me I had two agriable thing of it; first, I would leave my mother on friendly terms and I could see you my grand Aldridge—.
>
> With my Englich master I am angry. He never will introduce Englich gentlemen to our house; thought he knows a great many—
>
> Now farewell, I know I made many faults but be indulgent with me—
>
> My bests compliments for your Lady,
>
> Your Matilda.

(IV)

It is a contrast to skip a few years to look at the large and complicated coat-of-arms on the seal of Alexandra Menenskiansky, who wrote at the beginning of the same year that produced Ellen Garpinchenko's letters, and to compare it with the pretty little letter of Elise of Odessa of the year before. Elise of Odessa writes on notepaper adorned with wreaths of small flowers and round the words "Dear Sir" twine rose-buds, pansies and forget-me-nots:

> . . . I never complained of my not knowing of English language so much as at present time to express my gratitude to you for your Locket which remains with me; and also for your remem-

bering, expressed in your letter to Mrs. Orbinsky. At least to thank you for the highest pleasure and for those sentiments which produce your genial play. I impassiantly awaited your arrival here to see you once more, poor scene, but alas! you past far from here and leave us in a lost hope. I envied Mrs. O. because she has been so fortunate as to be able to see you every day in your short stay in Odessa. To my lot there fell the very smallest part of dumb conversation with you, but if there could be no more then I am satisfied even with this little. At any rate I have seen you, I have heard you off the stage which I so wanted, sought and at length attained. This time will be the last episode in my life.

Now it remains only for us to wish you with all my heart a happy voyage and every best things in the world.

With my respect to you,

I am yours,

Elise.

P.S. I begin now to learn Englich language.

Alexandra writes in a larger bolder hand. She is evidently rather a mercenary lady:

. . . My dear, dear Sir,

I do not know if you have received my last letter which I directed to Moscow, but I am sure of one thing that you have quite forgotten me, whom you so shortly called your friend. How have you finished your long tiresome journey? Are you well? Those are the questions I beg of you to answer me as soon as possible. How have you found your son, your dear boy? I heard that he was ill and that his illness has made you stay at Moscow shorter than you thought; God bless all of you, and keep you for ever, may He keep away all sorrow from such a good man as you are, these are my heart's wishes, and you know that I speak the truth. Do write me a word in answer to this letter of mine and tell me if I can write to you once more before you leave London—then I heard from Mr. Deacon that you made an engagement with the direction [theater management] in Moscow from 15 April so that I am afraid that another letter will no more find you in England. I need not tell you, my dear Sir, how impatiently I look forward to our meeting again, but your long silence does not prove the same from your side, then Mr. Deacon wrote to me 5 letters and you only 2 and this is my 4 missive. I am living now in a great family, then my sister has arrived with her husband and although we very seldom go out, we pass our time very pleasantly indeed. Often do we speak of you, and my sister who speaks very well English asks me sometimes to read to her some of your monologs from Othello. My parents, brother, sister-in-law, and some of your acquaintances asked me to remember them kindly to you; Mistress Walkhovsky and her daughter too. My little nephew is growing up in good health and by the time you return he will be quite a fine boy. My brother is very occupied now, in gathering a new troop, you will find many new faces and three beautiful young women; Miss Voroinno is engaged too for 30 rbs. monthly, the dear little Jessica has remained; Mr. Berg has gone away. In general the Theatre affairs do not go on too well but let us hope that your return will bring us all much pleasure and add to my brother's purse a good deal of money.—

Write to me how you are passing your time; where Mr. Deacon is—then he is really a strange man; he wrote to my brother on business and asked him to answer adding that he is going to

Paris but he never sent his address so that my brother could not write, not knowing where to direct his letter to—

I think that the project of having an opera this year must be abandoned. When people seldom visit the theatre and money seems to be a rare gift now, and certainly it will cost a great deal dearer than a Russian troop—as for the circus they cannot decide till this very moment if they are giving the place up or not—strange people!

Now goodbye, my own dear Sir, goodbye, and may God bless you; and now let me notwithstanding the great distance between clasp and squize heartily your hand and wish you once more all happiness.

Write very soon and do never forget

Your affectionate, Alexandra

There were many instances all over Europe in which whole families fell victims to the charm of Ira Aldridge's personality and the genius of his acting. It was in almost every case the whole family rather than an individual member that holds him in the highest esteem; it was an age of family feelings, family likes and dislikes; and very domestic letters like Sophia Zybinn['s] no doubt formed a large portion of his correspondence.

"Dearest Sir," she writes on January 29th, 1865,

I rejoice heartily in receiving your kind letter but as the Russian post is constantly inexact, my answer could no more find you in Nijny so I adress direct to London, where I hope you are happily arrived. I rejoice for your great success, can it be otherwise, everybody who feels and understands art must be quite in rapture seeing your performance. The letters I receive from Vagan are full of admiration for your talent! I hope your dear son is in good health? We are already in our new abode which is quite comfortable and elegant. I remain all this winter in the country. Perhaps I shall go for several days to Nijny to Catherine Ostafieff's. My daughter thanks you very much for your portrait; I am so thankful that you do not forget us and that now and then we have a letter from you.

I shall never forget the deep impression you made upon me! My husband sends his regards to you, and I thank you once more for your dear letter.

Adieu, dearest Sir, I send you a most affectionate and cordial shake hands, and remain yours,

Sophie

(V)

The most broken English is in Ida's letter of June 6th, 1866, from Sympheropol:

. . . Sir!
As little, as badly, I English can will I yet in this language say you for your kindness all my thanks that he straightly to your heart going, you warmer sound may. This thanks then Sir, this consideration, wich all the world has for the artist Aldridge express I with imperfect terms

to the noble man who his word insomuch truly to hold known. Neither I now [nor] my sister have had a occasion to prowe you that we not as unworthy stood before you your great art not blindly homage rendered. I dare say this, Sir—with pride and conviction.
Remember graciously, respected Sir, by you great triumphs of the two far persons in who memory and hearts your high art for ever, for ever you traced has!
With complete constant respects,

Yours,

Ida

P.S. I think, I mistake not, if I in your image the Othello from the 3rd Act (scene 3) see, where he, after all the proceedings to the Dark Powers insomuch desperately, his heart opened! An energetic scene!

You must excuse this post-scriptum, Sir!

Among the many coroneted communications, the next three are typical:

My dear Sir,

Having a most sincere and hearty desire to see you once more I permit myself to solicit you with my humble prayer, to honour me tomorrow Friday at 8 o'clock to take a cup of tea with me, where you will find the same company among which you were tonight. If you cannot come at 8 o'clock we will wait you till 12.

I hope you will not refuse the humble prayer of your

Most humble servant,

The following is translated from the French:

My very dear Mr. Aldridge!

Last night in a dream I saw myself in a garden full of the most lovely flowers—and we were sitting side by side eating cheese—Then I saw that you had your makeup on and that was why I was prepared to see you in the disguise of your visiting card.

I had with me this morning a literary gentleman and we talked a lot of you—I don't know what will be the result. His Highness Prince Mentchikoff spent last evening with us and he said that he intended to go tonight to the theatre to see and hear you.

Affectionate Greetings,

S Carron TI—

"Friend A" writes from Pest:

My dearest friend!

The newspaper which you send me caused me very great pleasures. I would have written you already a very long time ago, but I did not know where you are, I thought that you do not remember me any more. I shall never forget of the happy and pleasant days, which you have spent in our house.

I am convinced that my English letter will also cause you a little pleasure and to surprise you?

I learn only since five months and I must say that I have not been always dilligend. I never doubted of your Gentle inclination to me and it is my sacred and greatest wish.

And I make a request of you, as to my true friend, if you can send me any useful English books, only be so kind, little poesies. I wish to translate them into the Hungarian language; please you will send them as soon as possible. I remaine with respect your faithful and truely,

friend A . . .

Friday in the afternoon at four o'clock.

The following is also translated from the French:

O dear beloved one, where are you at this moment and are you thinking only of me? To think that hundreds of miles separate us and that my letters may find you ill and miserable before I have any idea of it. Oh God, is it possible that you, a stranger, a man who I only know at a distance, and that I shall perhaps never see again, can be so dear to me, that I should have just chosen you, you whose language I do not know, whose country is far from mine and whose words of tenderness and love I can hardly understand, or apply them as I ought. Is it not sad and strange?

Tell me, tell me frankly, if you will ever come back, if the day will ever come when I can see you again, and I can hold your dear hand which has so often held mine. But where, where on earth are you that you do not answer! Oh God, however much I cry or suffer or complain, you will not see it or hear it. So, all is over! I can hope to see you again as I hope to die. Both are equally probable. What is the use to go and seek in a land I hardly know and many miles away a love that has perhaps been replaced in your country, in your family, in the midst of your people in your "*Home Sweet Home!*."

[with the words "Home Sweet Home" she abandons her native French language and continues in English]

Adieu dearest and beloved friend, every day I love you more, it is all i know to tell you in your language. Adieu—

(VI)

Of the German letters one is typical even though translated:

My dearest Ira,

The news of your severe illness makes me wretched. I am beside myself with pain and heartrending. My foreboding has not vanished, you are ill my dear Ira, and must suffer so much and I cannot be with you. While here I am twiddling my thumbs day and night and not able to do anything for you except to pray for you with my whole soul. When I read your last lines to me, my heart almost breaks with sorrow and anguish, because I cannot be by your side to help you; it makes one most unhappy. Who will take care of you since your wife is also ill. God alone can help you, my true friend, he will not forsake you, he will hear my prayers and restore your health. We will count upon his aid. Do not worry on my account, my Ira, though I am far away, my heart and thoughts are ever with you, my love grows daily deeper and more

tender, the longer I do not see you the more clearly I see that you are everything to me, and that my love will only end with my death. I have never believed what those who despised you have said. I do not ask what the world says; if you love me nothing else matters, and you are my world. Your son's letter gave me great pleasure when I know that you are better. I will write to him as well, but not yet, for I am too sad. Greet him and kiss him for me many times. My mother also sends you her kindest regards and hopes for your speedy recovery. I send you my best heart's desire, my well-beloved Ira, could I only be with you, my true care would soon bring you back to health. When you are better write to me if you have the time to spare if only a couple of words. I do not ask any more. My dearest friend, I am so miserable and sad that I could die with crying, I shall not be happy until I have news of you. May God bless you, heal your pains, strengthen you, soothe your sufferings and send you support. He can uphold you. Nothing else can. Farewell, my dearest Ira. My love will always await you.

Your true

Anna.

P.S. I received your letter yesterday 6th April.

The Russian letters are among the most interesting, and literal translation is perhaps best; one concludes:

I am convinced, my dear and never to be forgotten friend, that you will not be angry at finding that I myself, and I alone, answer your letter, although to my great regret, it was addressed to all of us. I was not much rejoiced when I found you were still in Kischineff. Why could I not see you again, as I so much wished? Indeed I no longer know what I do wish and will. I only know that your departure has left me quite unhappy. I cannot say I am uncomforted I could have no hope, but it seems to me that my cheerfulness will never return, if it does not return with you.

According to all appearance I am still the same. I read, work, give instructions to my children and in fact I am busy the whole day, but I am changed into a kind of machine and I do everything unconsciously. Forgive me my dear friend, that I now speak so much about myself but never before was I so troubled. I cannot as yet settle down quietly, and when I do anything not strictly necessary I do so unconsciously. I *was* always, if not quite happy, at least tranquil.

At present your attachment to me, and your friendly words, if they be not words only, will be the best consolation for me. *May we meet again!* dear friend, I have placed confidence in you here. If you wish me to have some repose, which is so necessary for me, let me expect the happy day. Write to me soon and write a long letter. Tell me how you are after the journey, and how all are at home. What are you doing now? What are you thinking about? I wish to know all—all. But do not be frightened at so many questions and do not laugh at my letter.

Kiss for me your dear son as I myself would wish to kiss him. Madame Elise my sister, and my Daider [?] send many kind regards.

Farewell once more, my dear friend. I will endeavor to write my next letter in English, although that will be difficult but I have begun to learn English so that I may be able to understand you and to correspond with you. Do not forget your Russian friend

Vortinsky

In Eliza's letter we have news again of the Garpinchenko family and of Ellen, who so often writes to her hero, and so in the arrangement of our little garland of letters we come back to where we started.

My dear Mr. Aldridge,

What an age it is that we have not heard from you, have we perchance offended you?

Or is the cause this that Mrs. Aldridge is ill or otherwise your son? But my sincere hopes is this that their's no foundation for either.

We heard that you were in Moscow by one of my friends who said he traveled in the same carriage as you. It is not just I know or otherwise you would of wrote is it not so my good friend.

But now that I know you will write a few lines to us in answer to these.

The winter has not been so favourable on account of their beeing so mutch rain and dampness.

Now I will endeavour to change the scene by telling you a very laughfable thing witch is this.

I made a little coat for the winter for Beautingka with the hopes of sending it by the same parcel of Mrs. Garpinchinco. But what do you imagine Mrs. G—will not permit it to come this time on account of my not finishing something that I have in hand for you as a little punishment for my negligence, she says what a horror to make for them and not to finish what you have in hand for Mr. Aldridge.

Ellen does not read every day as she promised you. It is a great pity. Please ask her when you write to read one hour each day. It is not mutch I ask. It is for her good that I ask it. Pasha makes a little progress with a little fuss each day.

Mr. Victor is not married on account of some trifling embarasments. I am sory to say I have been ill nearly all the winter with a violent cold witch has made me very feeble and very thin. I were so ill this morning that I feared I should not be able to write these few lines.

Now you will excuse all bad writing and bad spelling for I have not time to recopy it. In hopes that these few lines will find you in good health

Beleive me yours sincerely,

Eliza

It has been said that a man's character can be estimated as much by the letters he receives as by those which he sends, and in preparing our garland no weeds have been discarded, nothing objectionable left out, because there was nothing objectionable to leave out. It is just a small selection, typical of the period and typical of the kind of simple frank devotion that Ira Aldridge called forth. Possibly the Victorian age was franker than we suppose. It is possible that we cover up more by a false frankness than they concealed by a frank moderation. In any case it is obvious that these little love letters concealed nothing for, if they did, would they be real love letters?

Part Two

The Career

8

Ira Aldridge's Fight For Equality

Hazel Waters

In the mid-1820s, the campaign against slavery in England was coming to its height, even as, at the behest of wealthy proslavery interests, black inferiority was widely propagandized. The debate was carried on in Parliament, in the press, in public meetings, in local newsletters, and in the expressions of popular culture—including the theater. In America, ongoing resistance to slavery erupted most notably in the south in 1822 in a planned wide-scale revolt under Denmark Vesey. In the north, it would be another five years before a state like New York passed the last in a series of manumission acts, though a raft of discriminatory measures aimed at black subordination kept such liberation in check.[1] It is no coincidence that such measures came to be known collectively as "Jim Crow," for that eye-rolling, shoe-shuffling, fast-talking, singing and dancing white parody of black mores, introduced by the actor "Daddy" Rice, began its cultural takeover of American audiences at around the same time, the late 1820s. Rice/Crow soon became a hit in the large popular Park Theatre of New York, with its rumbustious—and segregated—working-class audience (blacks were confined to the galleries).

Yet some years earlier, New York had been the site of a much braver cultural venture, the African Theatre. Created by free blacks around 1820, it was closed down a few years later following a white riot. It emerged again, but its existence was fragile and uncertain and it did not long survive the climate of racist hostility that surrounded it.[2] One of those who may have appeared there and whose imagination was certainly fired by it—and perhaps also by having witnessed the great English actor Edmund Kean in New York—was the young Ira Aldridge, the son of a black minister. Although destined for the ministry, Ira rejected this path, choosing to pursue a vocation as an actor. But only in England was this even remotely possible. Hence, at the age of seventeen, in 1824 or 1825, he came to England, never returning to his native land, though he went on to perform exten-

This essay is a slightly revised version of an article the author published previously in *Race & Class* 45, no. 1 (2003): 1–30, under the title "Ira Aldridge and the Battlefield of Race."

sively across Continental Europe. Aldridge's career in Britain and Europe spanned some forty or so years, from his first performance at the Royalty Theatre to his last performance in England at the Theatre Royal Haymarket, 1865. He died while on tour in Lodz, Poland, in 1867.

Aldridge's career was coterminous not only with the ferment over slavery and abolition but also with the further entrenchment of a racism that penetrated deep into British society. This is evidenced in the types of roles that he played and that formed his basic repertoire, many of them being derived from the vision of the noble, wronged, and often vengeful black; other parts of his repertoire demonstrate an intention to push against the limitations of those familiar (and increasingly dated) black roles and included playing in whiteface. The racism that he encountered can be seen not only in the treatment meted out to him when he attempted Othello at the prestigious Covent Garden Theatre, but also in his long struggle for acceptance on the London stage, despite evidence of his great ability.[3] Aldridge's career is important not only as a symbol of black capacity in a society in which many would deny such capability, but also for its effect on black representation.

Aldridge's first appearance on the British stage took place against the backdrop of intense agitation over slavery. After the trade had been abolished in 1807, the movement to outlaw slavery entirely had begun to gather pace when it became clear that abolition of the trade had not led slavery itself to wither away. The forerunner of the Anti-Slavery Society had been formed in 1823; in 1825 it began publishing the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*. A network of local branches publicized the issue and organized petitions to Parliament; it was one of the earliest mass propagandizing movements and inaugurated a new approach to effecting political change. At the same time, the proslavery interests also began to muster their propaganda, for the sugar industry was already showing signs of a decline in profitability, which induced greater exploitation of slave labor, not less.[4] Hence, it was timely that, in October 1825, Aldridge should appear at the Coburg (now called the Old Vic, then a popular working-class theater) as the lead in "a grand West Indian Melodrama, called *The Revolt of Surinam, or A Slave's Revenge*."[5] The playbill itself made much of the topical nature of its slavery theme:

> This Piece exhibiting a most faithful Portrait of the horrors that arise out of that dreadful traffic, which it is the proudest boast of Britain to use her best efforts towards suppressing, must receive an immense portion of additional interest from being supported in its principal Character by a *Man of Colour*, and one of the very race whose wrongs it professes to record.[6]

The play was, in fact, an adaptation of *Oroonoko* (1695), in which the eponymous hero is an African prince tricked into slavery. Despite the changes from the original, enough would have remained to make the play still controversial. The "bombast and affectation" detected in it by the *Times*[7] would have been countered by the physical reality of a powerful young black actor, from a slave

society, portraying an all-encompassing passion for his white wife and making a doomed bid for freedom and revenge. The subsequent reviews, all struck with the "novelty" of Aldridge's debut appearance, attest to this, either by their ferocious lambasting of Aldridge's audacity in daring to appear at all, or by their praise for his performance.

The *Times*, with heavy-handed humor, was unqualifiedly racist in its assessment. Aldridge's appearance is first bracketed with that "at the Surrey Theatre [of] a man who plays a monkey in the most natural manner possible." He is then further put in his place by being described as "what Mr. *Doubikins* calls 'a *genuine nigger*.'" Doubikins was the name Charles Mathews had appropriated for the comic Yankee character of his American "At Home" performances (first given at the English Opera House in 1824).

The reviewer, having thus firmly located Aldridge in the racial hierarchy (his features "although . . . of the African character, are considerably humanized"), then goes on to discuss the performance:

> His figure is unlucky for the stage; he is baker-knee'd and narrow chested; and owing to the shape of his lips, it is utterly impossible for him to pronounce English in such a manner as to satisfy even the unfastidious ears of the gallery. . . . The audience wondered and laughed at him all through the play until he stabbed his wife, and then they applauded him loudly; but it was not until he killed himself that their delight grew outrageous.[8]

After such a buildup, however, the worst that the *Times*'s reviewer can actually say of Aldridge's acting is that he is "not . . . worse than the ordinary run of such actors as are to be seen at the Coburg Theatre." As if regretting even such a grudging acknowledgement, however, the reviewer once again turns the attack on to Aldridge's skin color. Aldridge is not black enough to fit the preconception. Perhaps he should be replaced by the "blackamoor" who "sweeps the crossings at the end of Fleet-market," for the "gentlemen in the gallery . . . looked for nothing lighter than a chimney-sweeper on May-Day." Moreover, sneered the reviewer, the "black worsted stockings" of Aboan (Oroonoko's loyal friend and lieutenant) did not match Aldridge's own color, which was "but little darker than the dun cow." The whole is finally nailed down with a reference to Day and Martin boot polish, ever the cliché, particularly for the black *slave*.

This review is paradigmatic of the way in which, increasingly, blackness comes to be dealt with in English commentary. There is the opening frame of reference to a theatrical novelty and, apposite to the black stereotype, the monkey; the opposition of what is African to what is recognizably human; the outright mendacity of the physical description (needless to say, none of the many prints, drawings, portraits, and later photographs of Aldridge point to the physical deformity alleged by the *Times*); the black crossing sweeper (who haunts theatrical criticism wherever black characters or storyline are involved, and who deserves his own footnote in history),[9] and the perennial, endlessly repeated Day and Martin joke.

Not all the reviews were so hostile. The popular liberal paper the *Globe*, for example, declared the "importation of Mr. Keene [Aldridge's original stage name] from the African Theatre . . . a lucky hit." On the whole, felt the reviewer:

> his conception of the character was very judicious. . . . Several of his touches in the last scene were impressive and . . . brought down spontaneous plaudits. His enunciation is distinct and sonorous, though his voice is deficient in modulation and flexibility; his features appear too hard and firm to admit of outwardly exhibiting the darker passions and most embittered sufferings of the heart. But he looks his character.[10]

Aldridge continued to play at the Coburg for the next few months, before taking up an engagement at the Theatre Royal, Brighton, in December. It was after a performance at the Coburg that he met his first wife, Margaret Gill, "who appeared to have entertained something more than an admiration for the dark actor, who stood alone in a land of strangers. She saw his 'visage in his mind,' and within a brief period from that accidental introduction entered into a matrimonial alliance with him."[11]

It was, according to the black historian Edward Scobie, marriage with a white woman that engendered even greater hostility toward Aldridge within the powerful West India and slavery interest and led to his disappearance from the stage for about a year after his career had been fairly successfully launched.[12] The West India interest in the unreformed Commons ensured that, despite the comprehensive nature of the agitation against slavery, its repeal could not be passed without electoral reform.[13] The Society of West India Merchants and Planters, based in the heartland of political power, London, was a highly active body that, through its literary committee, propagandized the proslavery case, funding publications and buying up and distributing favorable material gratis to booksellers.[14] Moreover, as its minutes show, "*The Times*, *The Chronicle*, *The British Press*, *The Herald*, *The Representative*, *The Courier*, *The Globe and Traveler*, *John Bull*, and *The English Gentleman* opened their columns to the committee in return for monetary consideration."[15]

The existence of such an underlying current of opinion, stronger in London where the West India interest was most powerful and active, may perhaps explain the fact that, although Aldridge had undoubted and continuing success in the provinces, including Bath and Dublin, engagements on the London stage were few and far between—and then almost invariably at the minor theaters.

Aldridge's Roles

It is significant that many of Aldridge's major roles were in plays that predated the nineteenth century and so still carried some reflection of Enlightenment values—values before which the black protagonist could hold up some sort of mirror,

however distorted. They included not only *Oroonoko* and its adaptations but also *The Revenge*, *The Castle Spectre*, and *The Slave*. The characters of Oroonoko, Gambia, Zanga, and Hassan were all played by Aldridge throughout his career, and it could be argued that he did much to keep these plays in the repertoire. That these, along with Othello, were Aldridge's staple performances for over thirty years indicates the corresponding failure of contemporary plays to take black characters seriously, except in one or two instances. Aldridge did have an effect on the nature of black representation in that, if these plays did not extend the boundaries of the black stereotype, they at least retained some connection with the broader vision of the past.

Aldridge's portrayal of Zanga (see figure 8.1), the central character in *The Revenge*, a prince turned by the experience of enslavement into a towering figure of vengeful cunning and cruelty, was frequently praised, even though the shortcomings of the drama itself were acknowledged. "He made as much of *Zanga* as it is possible to do of so wordy, blustering and clumsy an Iago" stated the review in the radically inclined *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper*, after a largely favorable assessment of Aldridge's qualities generally.[16] Or, as the *Era* put it: "As Zanga he is exceedingly fine, looking the character of the Moor to perfection, and acting it with great power and correctness. For the tragedy itself we have little regard."[17]

And the *Morning Post* found it

> interesting to witness the acting of Mr. Ira Aldridge, a native of Africa, giving utterance to the wrongs of his race in his assumed character, and standing in an attitude of triumph over the body of one of its oppressors. England has, however, done its duty. . . . witness the millions paid for the manumission of the blacks.[18]

Even the comic character of Mungo, in which Aldridge was judged to excel,[19] has a quality of independence of spirit that was denied to later comic blacks. Much, too, was made in the reviews of his versatility in turning from the tragedy of *Othello* to the broad comedy of *The Padlock*. Although such versatility was expected of the nineteenth-century actor, the frequency of comments on Aldridge's skill in this respect lead one to believe that it was exceptional.[20]

From the outset, Aldridge seems to have been concerned to push at the boundaries of the roles available to him. Thus, quite early in his career, he undertook white roles—an exceptionally bold approach that would excite comment even now. He played Rolla in *Pizarro* (a part that stressed the value of freedom); the Dutch sea captain Hatteraick in *Guy Mannering*, and the title role in *Bertram*.[21] He added Shylock to his repertoire, for the sympathetic nature of which portrayal he was many years later congratulated by the Jewish community of Zhitomir in Russia.[22] A hitherto unpublished translation by Marshall and Stock of a lengthy Russian critique by Durylin of Aldridge's playing of Shylock evokes the depth and qualities he brought to the part:

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Figure 8.1 Ira Aldridge as Zanga in *The Revenge* (by permission of the *Illustrated London News* Picture Library).

> Aldridge deeply understood the character and so he played it as an exploited, despised Jew whose daughter was kidnapped or spirited away after she was taught to rob her own father and to borrow money from him, and was deprived of the right to revenge for these things. He gave us a character of a Jew who was forced, under threat of death, to renounce the religion of his forefathers. . . . Shylock has much money but he has more insults and abuse. He is the bearer of the sorrow and tragedy of his hunted people. . . . he desires revenge for what he considers violated pride as a Jew. . . . he belongs to the oppressed, powerless people who are never forgiven anything.[23]

Shylock was the Shakespearean role that, apart from Othello, Aldridge played most frequently. (Macbeth, Richard III, and even Lear were also in his repertoire.)[24] Yet there is virtually no contemporary comment on these performances, and nothing anywhere that demonstrates, as Durylin's commentary does, the way in which Aldridge's consciousness and experience of racial oppression must have informed his art. Only his Othello and sometimes his Zanga ever seem to have been reviewed in depth by the English press. Was the black actor playing the white role simply invisible when he stepped outside the allotted boundaries?

Much of the material developed for Aldridge appears now to be lost, such as *The Negro's Curse*, by H. M. Milner, performed with success at the Coburg, but of which no trace can be found.[25] Lost, too, are *The Libertine Defeated, or African Integrity!* and *Savage of the Desert* by W. Roberds, though presumably these would have capitalized on the themes of slavery and vengeance still deemed appropriate for a black actor. Nor do we have many details of the composite entertainment Aldridge put together while performing in Ireland in the late 1830s. Similar in format to Mathews's *A Trip to America*, but apparently more serious in intent, it included a "brief introductory LECTURE on the DRAMA . . . a Memoir of the African . . . His Scene in ROLLA . . . and amusing Anecdotes of Mathews's well-known Trip to America,"[26] as well as extracts from *Othello*, *The Revenge*, *The Castle Spectre*, *Oroonoko*, *The Padlock*, and others. Unlike Mathews's, Aldridge's scenes from America went on to cover such topics as "Liberty and Equality, or the American Slave Market" and "England, or the Negro Emancipation. The Slave's Gratitude."[27] It is not fanciful, I think, to see in this Aldridge's oppositional approach. He took a hugely popular format, with a funny and extremely racist content, and turned it, if not on its head, into something that contradicted Mathews's formulations of the black character and yet remained entertaining.

It is true that he performed some of the minstrel songs such as "Jim Crow" or "Miss Lucy Long" that were becoming so inordinately popular as performed by entertainers such as Rice. After all, he had a living to make and also had to give an audience what it wanted, but whereas Mathews, Rice, and their subsequent imitators were guying the black performer, this approach would seem inimical to a black American who had left his own country where "[n]o qualities of the mind could compensate in the eyes of the Americans for the dark hue of his skin" and who, presumably, was impelled by a desire to extend his capacities and the range

of activity open to him.[28] At the time he left for England, slavery was still legal in some northern states, and not even all of New York's slaves had become free under its Emancipation Law.

Obi; or, Three-Fingered Jack

There is, however, one extremely interesting survival of material supposedly written for Aldridge, a dialogue version of Fawcett's proslavery pantomime, *Obi; or, Three-Fingered Jack* (first performed in 1800), in which he played the role of Karfa (three-fingered Jack).[29] It demonstrates both the potential for and the limitations of re-rendering and re-ordering a pressing issue of race and power through rewriting a popular dramatic entertainment. It also demonstrates the lengths that Aldridge could go to, within the constraints of the melodramatic format, to make the black villain not only the most dynamic but also the most imaginatively involving character in the play. Of necessity, given the subject matter of the whole, Karfa/Jack is forced into the mold of full-blown villainy, but what is impressive is the way that he threatens to explode that mold.

In *Obi*, the happy, hierarchical world of the plantation is threatened by the lawless outsider Karfa (Jack is his slave name). The plot hinges on Karfa's capture of Rosa, the planter's daughter, and of her beloved fiancé, Captain Orford. Aldridge first played Karfa in Bristol in 1830, not long before one of the largest and most serious of slave rebellions in the Caribbean broke out, in Jamaica, in 1831–32, a rebellion that immediately preceded abolition. Karfa, who dwells in a cave with a bunch of brigands, is presented by Ormond the planter as evil incarnate for having first attempted the virtue of Ormond's wife and then murdered her. He is a "monster," of "giant strength" who has "burst his bonds" (2) and escaped. But for Karfa, it is the African's tale of betrayal, capture, and loss that motivates his quest for vengeance. For him, the murder of Ormond's wife was a "sacrifice" to the memory of his own wife, Olinda, murdered by the slave traders who captured him: "can I forget? can I forgive? Never" (5).

While Orford, Rosa's husband-to-be, is out hunting, he is seized by Karfa and taken captive. Rosa, determined to find Orford, disguises herself as a boy and is, in turn, captured. Karfa, dynamic and articulate, explodes the stereotype embodied in the plantation slaves. Not for him his mother's traditional Obeah magic (though Obeah was, in fact, a potent organizing factor in slave rebellions and correspondingly feared by the planter class). He is the future:

> *Jack* [Karfa]: Your white man, I am told, can soar into the air, fathom the deep, ransack the mine, and enslave in every clime where his accursed arts find access. Here, here alone, no white man finds an entrance, but as Karfa's slave. . . . obey me! the times have changed, and the white man must now labour for the black. (8)

The latter speech is all the more shocking in that it is spoken to the captured Rosa, for the audience is aware that she is a vulnerable woman, even if Karfa is unaware

of this. That a black actor, from a slave society, was playing this role must surely have added to its charge. But Karfa's vision of a potential future is one that has to be utterly eradicated if the racial status quo is to be maintained. And the maintenance of that status quo falls to the Christianized plantation slaves Quashee and Sam who, fearful of Karfa's black magic, know their place and will do anything they are ordered to do in order to retain it. Karfa taunts Quashee about his slave status; the very manner of Quashee's denial validates Karfa's taunt: "Me *no* slave! me free!," cries Quashee, "me *gentleman*, me Mr. Quashee now" (9). Finally, Karfa is defeated in a desperate struggle by Sam and Quashee and despatched on stage with a blunderbuss and two swords. Assurance of his death is made doubly sure.

The play remained long in Aldridge's repertoire, despite the by now rather anachronistic setting from which Karfa's indictment was hurled. Perhaps it allowed Aldridge to express, through Karfa's rebellion, something of his own struggle. As late as 1857, the play was listed in the *Theatrical Journal* as due to be performed during Aldridge's last week at the Britannia.[30]

Othello and After

The role with which Aldridge came to be most closely associated and which dominated his acting life was that of Othello. Though his provincial performances as Othello were generally acclaimed, it was not until almost the end of his career and after a long and bitter struggle that he received, on the London stage, anything like acceptance in the role. It was a struggle that had much to do not only with the proprietorial reverence that the English felt for much of Shakespeare's work, including *Othello*, but also with the way in which that play was viewed and the challenge that Aldridge, as a black actor tackling a role that was weighted with cultural, social, and political significance, posed to the dominant racial hierarchy. Indeed, the history of the staging of *Othello* is, in itself, a reflection of changing racial attitudes and mores.

From Shakespeare's time until the early nineteenth century, Othello had traditionally been played in the blackest of makeup and black gloves. Leman Rede, a contemporary commentator versed in all aspects of stagecraft, described the transition:

> Othello used not in former days to sport a coloured countenance, but wore the same sables as Mungo, in the "Padlock"; but this, as being destructive of the effect of the face, and preventing the possibility of the expression being noted, has become an obsolete custom. A tawny tinge is now the colour used for the gallant Moor, for Bajazet, and Zanga; Spanish brown is the best preparation.[31]

It was, in fact, the great tragedian Edmund Kean, whose Othello was termed by Hazlitt as "beyond all praise,"[32] who first played the role as a "tawny" Moor. While for Kean (a class outsider, as Othello was a race outsider), the lighter makeup allowed greater play to his finely expressive face and eyes, its use also chimed in

with a growing distaste for physical blackness. That was now indelibly associated with slave status and all the ingrained, systemic inferiority structured into that status. The fact that Othello explicitly declares himself to have been sold into slavery and redeemed was passed over.[33]

In the words of Paul Robeson (himself one of the great twentieth-century Othellos):

> Shakespeare meant Othello to be a "black moor" from Africa, an African of the highest nobility of heritage. From Kean on, he was made a light-skinned Moor because Western Europe had made Africa a slave center, and the African was seen as a slave. English critics seeing a black Othello—like my Othello—were likely to take a colonial point of view and regard him offhand as low and ignoble. . . . Othello's personal racial dignity is involved in his love. . . . The honor of his whole culture is involved.[34]

Moreover, the play itself, like other Shakespearean works, was in some ways too much for the sensibilities of its early-nineteenth-century audiences. *Lear* had had its ending rewritten; *Titus Andronicus* had been adapted in the seventeenth century by Ravenscroft and was rarely staged (Aldridge's drastic revision in which Aaron was made the hero is the only one that I have been able to trace as having been performed in this period);[35] and *Othello*'s explosive mixture of profound sexual passion, jealousy, and barbarous (in the original sense) nobility had already been "refined" by excision to meet the taste of its eighteenth-century audiences.[36] Add to this the racial theme of the whole, in an increasingly race-conscious age, and one can see not only how deeply disturbing audiences would find the play but how provocative any portrayal might be that would shake the frame within which it was experienced. Yet, and this is the apparent contradiction, *Othello* was not for those reasons rarely performed; highly venerated as one of Shakespeare's greatest works, it was, rather, one of the most frequently performed of his plays during this period.

Thus, by the time Aldridge came to play Othello on the London stage in 1833, there was a whole complex of motivations—political and psychological—ready to be mobilized to belittle and attack him. He had had several successful years in the provinces and the reviews had been highly favorable. John Cole of Scarborough was moved to publish a small pamphlet on Aldridge's Othello, "a performance enriched with the brilliancy of genius," after witnessing him,[37] and Aldridge had a letter of commendation from Edmund Kean, who had seen him performing Othello in Dublin.[38] This time, the invitation was not for one of the minor, local theaters, but for one of the patent theaters, authorized to stage the legitimate drama, Covent Garden. Battle was swiftly joined. For here was not one of the sable brethren who could be safely patronized and pitied overseas and who, in that capacity, did so much to bolster English national pride in its benevolence, but one who was attempting to engage, on equal terms, with two national shibboleths at once—Shakespeare and the home of legitimate drama, a center of national prestige. The reaction was furious, swift, and devastating.

Even before Aldridge's appearance at Covent Garden in April 1833, there appear to have been rumors that he was to perform at Drury Lane, the other patent theater in London. In September 1832, *Figaro in London*, G. A. à Beckett's trenchant magazine critiquing contemporary politics and contemporary theater, reported as follows:

> [I]n the way of novelty there has been a stupid looking, thick lipped, ill formed African calling himself the African Roscius, and posting placards about Lancaster saying that he appears there previous to the fulfilment of *his engagement at Drury Lane Theatre*. Now we suspect this to be a hoax, but if this vain glorious [*sic*] *Niger* is positively engaged at Drury Lane, we have little hopes that Captain Polhill [then lessee of Drury Lane] will ever be instrumental to the regeneration of the Drama. Is it because the man has a black skin that he is a ready made Othello? . . . If a sooty face, we mean, of a naturally black complexion of necessity implies an aptitude for parts such as Othello, Zanga, etc. why has not the old Commodore been long ago dragged from his crossing in Tottenham Court Road, and thrust upon the boards of Drury Lane Theatre as Oronoko [*sic*] or some other of the numerous Moorish parts in the Drama.[39]

When Aldridge did finally appear, at Covent Garden (April 10, 1833), not Drury Lane, *Figaro*'s vituperation reached even more hysterical levels:

> a further act of insolence is to be perpetrated, by the introduction to the boards of Covent Garden theatre, of that miserable nigger, whom we found in the provinces imposing on the public by the name of the *African Roscius*. This wretched upstart is about to defile the stage, by a foul butchery of Shakspeare, and Othello is actually the part chosen for the sacrilege. Is it because nature has supplied the man with a skin that renders soot and butter superfluous, is it on the strength of his blackness that he considers himself competent to enact the part of the Moor of Venice.[*sic*] We have before jammed this man into atoms by the relentless power of our critical battering ram, but unless this notice causes the immediate withdrawal of his name from the bills, we must again inflict on him such a chastisement as must drive him from the stage he has dishonoured, and force him to find in the capacity of footman or street-sweeper, that level for which his colour appears to have rendered him peculiarly qualified.[40]

So it goes on, in issue after issue. *Figaro*, after having been accused in placards of attempting to drive Aldridge from the stage without fair trial (Aldridge received support from the Garrick Club),[41] assumes a pious air of critical impartiality, citing once again the poorly attended performance in Lancaster.[42] The magazine, claiming credit for having "hunted the Nigger from the boards of Covent Garden," went on to excoriate Aldridge's performance as Mungo at the Surrey.[43] He is accused of being a former slave, of using foul language outside the theater,[44] of slurping beer off the stage floor as Mungo (*Figaro* faints at this), and derided for attempting a white part.[45]

That Aldridge should attempt to continue in London, despite the barrage of hostility, suggests strength of character of the most steadfast kind. *Figaro*'s

(untrue) accusation of Aldridge's former slave status is, perhaps, the nub of the matter. The abolition of slavery in Britain's overseas possessions was imminent (to be effected in 1834), and the proslavery interest, propagandizing the inability of blacks to exist without white tutelage, together with the necessity for immense reparations for the planters, was still powerful in London. After Aldridge's appearance as Othello, the proslavery, ultraconservative *John Bull* (funded by the West India merchants) had a few snide words to say:

> The City Theatre produced a black man as Tom Tug in the *Waterman*. An example which Covent-garden followed on Thursday by exhibiting another *Whango Iang* in *Othello*, as if, because a man's face is black, he could act that particular part.... The City Blackamore got unmercifully hissed—the Covent-garden nigger considerably clapped. This is all a matter of taste.[46]

The presence on the London stage of a black actor, performing one of the most revered and highly charged roles in the Shakespeare canon, gave the direct lie to the argument of innate black inferiority that the proponents of slavery so assiduously peddled. Nowhere outside London—heart of the West India interest—did Aldridge ever meet such dedicated hostility.

But what were the qualities of Aldridge's performance itself, following, as it so closely did, the last of Edmund Kean as Othello? The *Times* was, of course, disparaging. The house was thinly attended and the reviewer found Aldridge's accent "vulgarly foreign" and his performance "weak." It conceded, though, that "Mr. Aldridge was extremely well received" by the audience.[47] (Throughout Aldridge's career, reports of audience enthusiasm were often at variance with critical opinion.) The *Athenaeum*, a liberal literary journal, was outraged, for reasons of class, race, national pride, and sexual propriety:

> Mr. Henry Wallack's black servant in the character of *Othello—Othello*, forsooth!!! *Othello*, almost the master-work of the master-mind—a part, the study of which occupied, perhaps, years of the life of the elegant and classical Kemble; a part, which the fire and genius of Kean have, of late years, made his exclusive property: a part, which it has been considered a sort of theatrical treason for anyone less distinguished than these two ... to attempt; and this is to be personated in an English national theatre, by one whose pretensions rest upon the two grounds of his face being of a natural instead of an acquired tint, and of his having lived as servant to a low-comedy actor. It is truly monstrous.... It is impossible that Mr. Aldridge should fully comprehend the meaning and force of even the words he utters.... In the name of propriety and decency, we protest against an interesting actress and lady-like girl, like Miss Ellen Tree, being subjected ... to the indignity of being pawed about by Mr. Henry Wallack's black servant.[48]

None of this suggests much about Aldridge's performance, after which "Mr Sheridan Knowles, the great dramatist," is said to have "rushed into his arms,

exclaiming, 'For the honour of human nature let me embrace you.'"[49] The conservative *Spectator* seesawed wildly between praise and blame, concluding that

> He evinced a great deal of feeling and nature in his performance; these, indeed, were its redeeming qualities; but they could not reconcile us to its numerous and glaring defects. Its beauties, however, surprised us more than its faults. . . . In the most violent bursts of passion, he was deficient in energy and power; though in depicting the struggles of mental agony and suppressed emotion, he was vigorous and natural. . . . It was upon the whole a failure. . . . the applause bestowed on his . . . Othello induced the Manager to announce its repetition.[50]

The *Morning Post* was cool in its assessment, claiming to be "[p]rejudiced neither in his favour nor against him," following the campaign of "several publications . . . tending to condemn, or rather to annihilate, him unheard."

> His . . . face . . . is not capable of very varied expression. His figure is tall and noble, and his manner of walking the stage is dignified. . . . ALDRIDGE's enunciation is far from correct or pleasing . . . but he possesses a fine, full, melodious voice, which might with practice be turned to more advantage. . . . To sum up . . . it was not an *Othello* for Covent-garden Theatre, where we do not . . . go to witness mere curiosities. . . . there was not any audible expression of disapprobation throughout the whole of his performance.[51]

More enthusiastic were the *Standard*, which expressed "unqualified delight with his delineation of this masterpiece of the divine Shakespeare" and the liberal *Globe*. For the *Globe*'s reviewer, there were "beauties throughout his performance" that more than compensated for the occasional lapse into "rant" and "some vulgarisms of pronunciation."[52]

Aldridge's engagement at Covent Garden was, however, curtailed and he gave only two performances (a flu epidemic shut the theater for some nights). He never gave the planned performances as Zanga and Mungo, but moved for a period to the Surrey, across the river and one of the more adventurous of the non-patent theaters. Here he continued to be hounded by *Figaro*, though apparently ignored by the rest of the press. His own version of events was given in his *Memoir*:

> Certain of the public press—and a few individuals—were inimical to the histrionic pretensions of the African. . . . Miss Ellen Tree was the Desdemona of Mr. Aldridge's Othello, and certain admirers of that lady . . . were envious of the Moor's familiarity with her fair face, and ridiculed his privilege. . . . Men, who have since grown older, and, if we may judge from their literary pursuits, wiser, took a pleasure in scoffing at "the idea" of "a nigger" filling an intellectual character, and surpassing themselves among others in his delineation of poetry, pathos, and passion. . . . Had Laporte [lessee of Covent Garden] persisted in his undertaking, Mr. Aldridge would soon have been established as a generally known, popular, and extraordinary actor. . . .[53]

Aldridge returned to provincial touring; his next major London engagement was some fifteen years later, in 1848, again at the Surrey;[54] in 1852 he appeared at the Britannia, a large popular East End minor theater with a working-class audience, which had less success than the Surrey in broadening its appeal and remained the home of old-fashioned melodrama. Shortly thereafter, Aldridge left for his first tour of Continental Europe, where most of his subsequent successes were to take place and where he would be loaded with honors for his brilliant performances—despite the difficulties inherent in his acting in English with supporting casts that acted in the vernacular. His other documented appearances in London were at the Britannia in 1857 and the more fashionable West End theater, the Lyceum, in 1858, for which he was praised by the *Athenaeum* and lengthily dismissed by the *Times*;[55] his last London appearance was at the Theatre Royal Haymarket in 1865.

Across Europe, he attracted huge interest and dazzled audiences. Theophile Gautier was one who praised his ability, as Lear even more than as Othello. "In the former he acted; in Othello he was just himself. . . . his outbursts of indignation and anger were superb, but at the same time there was a feebleness, and senile trembling . . . such as one would expect from an old man on the verge of his eighties who is being changed from an idiot to a madman by the weight of intolerable misfortunes."[56]

The Black Doctor

If playing the great roles of the Shakespearean canon across Europe—and receiving widespread acknowledgment of his abilities—was one way in which Aldridge transcended the barriers erected against the black artist, back in England the situation was different. Here, though he played many of these roles, he was limited to short runs in provincial theaters and his performances, except as Othello, were little commented on. There is not sufficient space here to trace Aldridge's career in detail. However, certain developments stand out, characterized by their opposition to the prevailing trends of the time, through which one can interpret Aldridge's career as a counter to the growing virulence of racial stereotyping. One was the addition to his repertoire, in the late 1840s, of what was probably the first contemporary melodrama to deal seriously with issues of race—"a play in which colour prejudice was the motivating factor and not simply a comic ploy"[57]—*The Black Doctor*. Jack Gratus, in his analysis of cultural racism, sees the play as a white response to the notion of black equality "by making the latter the victim of humiliation." He continues, "On the stage where [the white man] can play out his fantasies he punishes the black man for presuming to be his equal." But, in the context of its time, *The Black Doctor* is more progressive than this implies.[58] In the 1840s, much contemporary popular theater and entertainment was dominated by images of stupid, happy slaves, singing the songs of "nigger minstrelsy." In 1846, when *The Black Doctor* was first performed, the

Ethiopian Serenaders were also in Britain, following on and giving further impetus to the "Jim Crow" vogue initiated by Rice in 1836.

The Black Doctor, however, is an intense, highly melodramatic, interracial love story. An adaptation from the French, it survives in two versions, one by J. V. Bridgeman and one attributed to Aldridge.[59] The French setting has been retained, perhaps to palliate any discomfort if *The Black Doctor*'s theme of interracial love between (former) slave and white mistress were to be brought nearer home. Set in the prerevolutionary period in a French colony, the Isle of Bourbon, Aldridge's role in the play was that of the black doctor Fabian, a "mulatto" who has saved the life of his erstwhile master's wife, Madame de la Reynerie, and fallen deeply in love with her daughter, Pauline. It should be noted that, although Fabian is described as a "mulatto," he is not endowed with the evil characteristics of the mulatto, derived from a mixed parentage, as portrayed in a number of other mid-century dramas. In Bridgeman's version, Fabian is described as "a very dark brown, with glossy straight black hair," but in the version attributed to Aldridge, there is some attempt to distance him from such a dark skin color; he is "not a black man, but . . . yellow and brown."[60]

Pauline de la Reynerie brings her servant, Lia, who is suffering from some unknown complaint, to Fabian for diagnosis. Fabian recognizes the syndrome:

> *Fab*: The sickness that oppresses her is of the heart.
>
> *Lia*: (*Rising in terror.*) Fabian, Fabian! Oh, be silent. . . .
>
> *Fab*: And this love, pure and chaste, you would hide from all, as if it were a shame for you to love one whom you have no right to love, and who despises you. . . . Because he is not of your accursed race; because he is a European . . . he is a good and worthy young man; but his skin is white (*To Lia.*), and yours is dark as mine; therefore you have not the right to love him. Suffer, poor sister, suffer, and despair, for yours is a malady for which there is no remedy. (5)

Pauline is appalled and pledges to make it possible for Lia and her beloved to marry: "You say he is not of her race; what is that to me, since she loves him—would die for him?" (5).

Transported with joy that Pauline should utter such sentiments, Fabian is cast into the depths of despair when he encounters St. Luce, the husband intended for Pauline—a man whom he has just rescued from a poisonous snake. Struggling between his desire to kill St. Luce and his desire to kill himself, he goes to meet Pauline at a prearranged spot, to further Pauline's plans for Lia. Walking along a wild and rocky cliff path with Pauline, Fabian determines that he and she will die together, rather than surrendering her to St. Luce:

> *Fab*: Listen, then. There lived in St. Louis, a poor mulatto—a slave, who . . . received his freedom! the generous gift should have made him happy, but

it was otherwise; for once free he was compelled to leave his master's dwelling, and under that roof dwelt his better angel. At length he went forth, more wretched in his freedom than in his slavery! for he loved—yes, madly loved—adored that master's daughter. (*Wind heard.*)

Paul: (*Alarmed.*) How dreadfully the wind howls.

Fab: (*Not heeding her.*) He would have buried his love in his heart, though it had crushed it. . . . He thought himself beloved—and though respect to the pride of her race forbade her to be *his*, he thought at least she would never be another's. The fool was dreaming; one word awoke him, she was about to marry—to marry! she had deceived him, had sported with his agony; she should not have done so—it was imprudent, for then the wretched man took an oath to unite himself to her by the solemn, dreadful, awful tie of death. (7)

It is interesting that Fabian is allowed to go to the very brink of murder, while Pauline is pleading to be let go, and yet still retain his heroic status. Unusually, Pauline returns his love and, in peril of imminent death, pledges herself to him, even as he repents of his plan. The two contract a secret marriage that has to be kept from Pauline's mother, in whom the pride of race and class runs strong. The household, with Fabian now in attendance as a servant, returns to France, where Pauline's mother insists that Fabian be sent back to the Isle of Bourbon and Pauline marry St. Luce. St. Luce suspects Pauline and Fabian and is insolent to Fabian, ridiculing his status:

St. L: No doubt, in Bourbon 'twill be necessary to doff these trappings of the gentleman, which appear rather strange; here 'tis only laughed at, but in Bourbon 'twould be otherwise; there this insolence would be chastised, particularly the sword, which sits but ill on a mulatto, who could not dare to raise it even to ward off the planter's whip! (11)

At this baiting of her husband, Pauline reveals the truth and threatens to take her life with poison. Fabian, while insisting on the validity of their marriage, renounces Pauline: "you would have died for me, you shall live for your mother!" (12). Fabian is incarcerated in the Bastille due to the machinations of the marchioness; St. Luce is also incarcerated (more comfortably) for getting in a fight. The Bastille is stormed, St. Luce escapes, and Fabian is liberated. Fabian, by now driven mad with grief, is brought together with Pauline but fails to recognize her; yet it is important that she be acknowledged as his wife, rather than St. Luce's, for, as an aristocrat, her life is forfeit to the mob. Only as she is about to be shot does Fabian's reason return, and he sacrifices his life, taking the bullet that was meant for her.

The whole is highly charged, with Fabian as the center of interest throughout. In its sustained melodramatic tone, swiftness of pace, dramatic incident (the rising waters on the rocky shore, the storming of the Bastille, and the shooting of Fabian), and clarity of opposition between the haughty aristocrats and their humbler fellows

(the scene in the Bastille, of comfort versus rags, is explicit), it must have been highly effective. Fabian is a serious character, with an emotional range—albeit expressed within the conventions of melodrama—that the black character of this period is not often endowed with. Nowhere does he lapse into minstrel-type speech—an achievement in itself for the black character at this time. With his commanding presence, Aldridge no doubt made an excellent Fabian and was sufficiently associated with the play for its publishers, Dicks, perhaps for publicity reasons, to attribute it to him. Though there are frequent (and, from the context, favorable) mentions in the *Era* of his performances of *The Black Doctor* during 1847 and 1848 in, among other places, Bath, Dumfries, Norwich, and Dover and, in London, at the Surrey, I have discovered no substantive reviews of them.[61]

It is indeed frustrating that this is so, for there are several notices of Aldridge's 1848 engagement at the Surrey, which, of all the non-patent theaters, did attract regular press attention. Reading one such notice, it is impossible not to feel for Aldridge. Did he believe himself to have finally broken through the metropolitan barrier to acceptance after years of short-term, strenuous engagements across the country? Perhaps a climate of opinion in which the Chartist movement, with its emphasis on popular rights, was mobilizing for a mass rally on Kennington Common, close to the Surrey, only a week or two hence, might have emboldened Aldridge to speak out. After an excellent performance as Zanga, reported one of the radical magazines of the time,

> Mr. Aldridge was called for, when he came forward and made a pathetic and eloquent address, and stated that "the twenty years' struggle he had made, was amply repaid by the reception he had that night received, and hoped the prejudice was fast dying away, when one man should be deprived of a hearing on the stage, because his face was of another colour, seeing the black man and the white were both the work of the same Creator," and which brought down the most deafening applause.[62]

The Chartist breakthrough failed to materialize, however, and so did Aldridge's. His engagement at the Surrey did not cause any fundamental change in his status. His next metropolitan engagement was not till March 1852, at the Britannia. Here, as well as his other roles, he played Fabian, of which the *Theatrical Journal* said simply: "Mr. Ira Aldridge . . . has given us further proofs of his histrionic abilities by his powerful delineation of the Black Doctor, it was an artistic performance, nor did it escape the reward it merited."[63] This, brief as it is, is the only assessment of his performance as Fabian that I have traced. *The Black Doctor* appears not to have stayed long in the repertoire; its mode and style, already somewhat dated, would soon have seemed terminally old-fashioned. The class polarities, clearly evidenced in the Bastille scenes, which might have seemed so pertinent in 1848, presumably no longer had the same rallying power in the 1850s. Not long after his Britannia engagement, Aldridge left England for the first of his lengthy and successful continental tours.

Titus Andronicus

The Black Doctor, however, was not the only vehicle that Aldridge used to extend his repertoire and promote an alternative view of black potential and capacities. In Edinburgh, in July 1850, on the last night of his engagement at the Adelphi, there was "performed for the first time it is believed that it has ever been acted in this city, Shakespeare's Tragedy of *Titus Andronicus*, Carefully revised and altered from the original text."[64] Its first London performance was at the Britannia in 1852.[65] Of this groundbreaking adaptation, the *Theatrical Journal* has only this to say:

> *Titus Andronicus*, has been produced here for the purpose of giving Mr. Ira Aldridge an opportunity to show his versatility of talent. The tragedy was well acted, and mounted with care and propriety. Mr. Aldridge's personation of the Moor [Aaron] was exceedingly clever and effective; his performance was remarkable for energy, tempered by dignity and discretion.[66]

To present *Titus* at all was a bold undertaking, given the horrors of the original, though the seventeenth-century adaptation by Ravenscroft that was usually followed caused many of these to be performed offstage rather than on.[67] Ravenscroft also emphasised the role of Aaron, with his dramatic death on the rack, in flames, as he refuses to confess. Aldridge's revision must have been of the most drastic kind, for he made Aaron the hero. J. M., writing in *Notes and Queries*, recalled that

> In the present century an attempt was made to bring *Titus Andronicus* on the stage. The revolting scenes of necessity were omitted, and the catastrophe changed, so that, excepting the title, Tamora the Queen of the Goths, and some other characters, it had a very small resemblance to the original. . . . The representation of Aaron was good but the adaptation was ineffectual.[68]

Another correspondent to *Notes and Queries*, J. J. Sheahan, remembered that "at least one great scene from a play called *Zaraffa, the Slave King* (written in Dublin for Mr. A—) was imported into it."[69] The play was "prepared for the stage by Mr. C. A. Somerset,"[70] and a letter transcribed in "Victorian Ebony" indicates some of the changes:

> I . . . think you will alter your intentions in not having the child revive at end of Act 3rd when you come to read Act 4. . . . In Act 5th you will see to what an unparalleled powerful situation for Aaron the abduction of the child by the spies of Saturninus will lead—I will venture to say that there is not a play on the stage with a more powerful climax: besides with terrific action, incidents which form its ground action, we preserve in a mitigated form one of the greatest

> features of the original play, and give Shakespeare only divested of the Horrors of the scene.... Aaron will grapple the Emperor by the throat and strangle him, but not before he has himself been poisoned at the banquet table—
>
> Can anything be more interesting than the scene between Lavinia and Titus (who is evidently deranged in the original), or more noble than the conduct of Aaron in my 4th Act—? and in crowning him King of the Goths we add dignity and importance to his character.[71]

What this shows is Aldridge's continuing desire to extend the range that was open to him, not only as he had done so radically by taking on roles that were not racially determined, like Lear and Shylock or, at a lesser level, parts in *Rob Roy*, *Valentine and Orson*, *Bertram*, or *The Brigand*, but also by extending the repertory of powerful black roles. Indeed, Aldridge is reported to have said as much to the reviewer from the *Brighton Herald*: "Mr Ira Aldridge tells us that being as a man of colour limited in his repertoire, he was ambitious of adding *Aaron*, the Moor, to his list of characters, and therefore 'adapted' *Titus Andronicus* for modern representation.... Mr. Aldridge has constructed a melodrama ... of which *Aaron* is the hero."[72]

In taking the archetype of black villainy and turning him into a heroic figure, Aldridge was perhaps doing more than he realized. This is not so much the extension of the range of black roles as the subversion of one of the oldest stereotypes of the black, that of the murderous and evil-natured Moor.

The *Era*, reviewing his performance as Aaron (see figure 8.2) after his *Titus Andronicus* had been revived at the Britannia in April 1857, was complimentary and demonstrated the range of emotion and expression that this adaptation had made available to Aldridge. His Aaron was obviously not constrained within the straitjacket that bound most black roles (*Othello* is the notable exception):

> Aaron is elevated into a noble and lofty character; Tamora, the queen of Scythia, is a chaste though decidedly strong-minded female, and her connexion with the Moor appears to be of a legitimate description; her sons, Chiron and Demetrius, are dutiful children, obeying the behests both of their mother and—what shall we call him?—their "father-in-law".... Mr. Aldridge's conception of the part of Aaron is excellent—gentle and impassioned by turns; now, burning with jealousy, as he suspects the honour of the Queen; anon, fierce with rage, as he reflects upon the wrongs which have been done him—the murder of Alarbus and the abduction of his son; and then all tenderness and emotion in the gentler passages with his infant. All these phases of the character Mr. Aldridge delineated with judgment and great force of expression.[73]

At least Aldridge was now being taken seriously by the reviewers—after more than twenty-five years. The *Era* was one of Aldridge's most consistent supporters throughout his career and frequently argued that he should be given more opportunities to perform in London.

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Figure 8.2 Ira Aldridge as Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* (published in Tallis's *Drawing Room Book of Theatrical Portraits, Memoirs and Anecdotes*. London and New York: John Tallis & Co., 1851).

Aldridge's Legacy

Not until near the end of his career (he died suddenly in Poland in 1867 of a lung complaint) did Aldridge gain recognition at the more prestigious London venues of the Lyceum (1858) and the Theatre Royal Haymarket (1865) for his performance as Othello, a part he had been working on almost unceasingly for nearly forty years. And, since his Othello did attract more sustained notice from the reviewers than any of his other roles, it is possible to trace, however indirectly, the development of certain qualities in it. For example, the *Morning Post* had said of his 1833 Othello at Covent Garden that he was "dignified," that his voice was "fine, full, melodious," but that there was "nothing sufficiently great or original" in his performance.[74] The *Times* had found that it was only "by chance" that his "drawling and unimpressive" manner rose to "a higher strain," in which the reviewer detected "the elevation of rant, not the fiery dignity of soul-felt passion"; Aldridge "wanted spirit and feeling" and was weak in the third act.[75] Similar complaints were made by the *Spectator* and the *Athenaeum* (see above): that Aldridge did not understand the words he was saying, that his emphasis was false.[76]

But, by the late 1840s, his Othello was "a very superior piece of acting, well considered and well developed; the latter part, where after the death of *Desdemona* he becomes conscious of her innocence, his desperation, and the abandoning of himself to the furies of his mind, were touches of the highest excellence."[77] The *Era*, similarly, called him "very fine in the character":

> In Othello he delivers the most difficult passages with a degree of correctness that surprises the beholder, and, at times, he ascends, to a pourtrayal [*sic*] of the conflicting passions of the jealous husband in a manner both artistical and true. . . . The workings of his mind, and sensations of his heart, were conspicuous in his swarthy visage, and depicted in his every gesture.[78]

So much for his inexpressive countenance and failure to understand his lines. In the provinces, comment was even more enthusiastic. In 1846, the *Era* reprinted a lengthy and laudatory piece on Aldridge from the *Warwick Advertiser*: his acting was "consummate," "impressive beyond . . . description," noting that "we have seen Edmund Kean, Young, Macready, and other masters of the art, in the character of Othello."[79]

By now, Aldridge has begun to win plaudits for the originality of his conception of Othello. Here is the *Era* again, this time citing a review of his performance in Devonport:

> Mr. Aldridge's Othello was a very superior piece of acting; his readings were good, his action well-regulated and graceful. In the subdued portions of the tragedy his gentleness contrasted admirably with the force and power he showed in the more terrible conflicts of

> passion. In this he was highly original, and when to the merit of originality is added that of judgment, the commendation cannot be mean. We believe he possesses the elements of a great tragedian.[80]

By the time of his next London performances—as Aaron at the Britannia in 1857[81] and as Othello at the Lyceum in 1858—he can no longer be ignored or straightforwardly despised by the luminaries of the *Athenaeum* or the *Times*. It is true that neither noticed his performance as Aaron at the Britannia (despite its innovatory quality, for which see above, which was highly praised by the *Era*), but the Lyceum was a different matter. Having had to "subdue" a "repugnance" to this Othello's "labial peculiarity" (that is, his thick lips), the *Athenaeum*'s reviewer is won over, finding that "not only does the sable artist pronounce our language distinctly and correctly, but with elocutional emphasis and propriety":

> One small peculiarity, too, soon subtly indicates itself with remarkable significance. We have before us an Othello, with his hands ungloved, and the finger-nails expressively apparent. We begin to perceive the play and action of the hand, and the remarkable assistance which its variety of gestures may give to the meaning; and then to recollect with some surprise that this is an advantage of which Othellos have been in general deprived. . . . to the critical observer it is wonderful what additional animation this unwonted sign of life gives to the entire man.[82]

Here is not only an acceptance of Aldridge's skill but a recognition of what he, as a black actor, could bring to the part of Othello. Elsewhere, the reviewer comments (though not uncritically) on the originality of Aldridge's conception. This is one of the most thoughtful and informative reviews that he ever received from that journal. So encouraged was Aldridge by this response that he wrote to the *Athenaeum* from Russia, requesting the journal to mention his progress there.[83] Even the *Times*, that most consistently hostile of publications to Aldridge, while condemning his delivery of the speech to the Senate as that of an "elocutionist" who does not understand the connection between meaning and gesture and is unable "to sustain a strong emotion," concedes that: "if his acting throughout had been up to the level of the utter despondency with which he exclaimed, 'fool, fool, fool,' in the last scene, there would have been little to desire as far as one side of the character is concerned."[84]

The black theater historian Errol Hill locates Aldridge as one of those who originated a more naturalistic approach to acting. Hill cites, among other things, Aldridge's performance as Aaron at the Britannia in 1857, quoting from the *Era*:

> He rants less than almost any tragedian we know—he makes no vulgar appeal to the gallery. . . . he is thoroughly natural, easy, and sensible, albeit he has abundance of *physique* at his command when the exercise of it is required. In a word, he evidently knows what he is at, and there is as little "fustian" about him as in anyone.[85]

In relation to Aldridge's Othello, however, Hill goes on to dispute Madge Kendal's account, in her memoirs, of his pulling her as Desdemona out of bed by her hair and dragging her round the stage before he smothered her. This was in his last major London performance, at the Theatre Royal Haymarket, in 1865. "So brutal did it seem that the audience hissed the business vociferously."[86] Hill claims that this ran counter to the nobility that Aldridge would have wanted to inculcate and that the recollection has been confused with a similar piece of business in the popular dramatization of *Oliver Twist*, in which Bill Sikes dragged Nancy round by her hair. It is not mentioned in the *Athenaeum*'s review, which praised Aldridge's 1865 performance (and the whole production): "He plays with feeling, intelligence and finish. . . . We may claim this black, thick-lipped player as one proof among many that the negro intellect is human, and demands respect as such."[87] But a cutting in the Theatre Museum's production file for this performance states that

> In the third act he was pointed and happy; and, as most of Othello's action was novel, the temptation scene had an air of originality seldom realised. Miss Madge Robertson was excellent in Desdemona; and had to undergo some new business in the bed-scene which added to her murder some incidents that were extremely striking.[88]

This would imply that Kendal's memoirs (she was acting opposite Aldridge) were correct. Moreover, in this Aldridge was developing a precedent that was later taken up by the Italian actor Salvini, who, according to Marvin Rosenberg, was "one of the theater's greatest Othellos."[89] Salvini too "drags her [Desdemona] to her feet . . . grasps her neck and head with his left hand, knotting his fingers in her loose hair, as if to break her neck."[90] Rosenberg acknowledges Aldridge (and even mentions the hair-dragging) but more as a "novelty" than as evidence of an actor who added anything to the interpretation of Othello.

Possibly more with Aldridge than any other actor, it is difficult to gain a true picture of his stature, amid so much biased comment—certainly, in the earlier stages of his career, many of the English press reviews give the impression, even when favorable, of being somewhat grudging; the accounts of enthusiastic audiences sit alongside a certain disparagement. The review of Aldridge's 1865 performance by the *Athenaeum*, with its well-meaning but paternalist assumption that membership of the human race still had to be proved for those with black skin, is a case in point. On the other hand, a certain hyperbole informs one or two reviews, and this, one feels, may also have to do with the color of Aldridge's skin; witness the ardent review, quoted earlier, from the *Warwick Advertiser*. One has often to read into and against the grain of the text.

Yet there is one evocative account of a performance by Aldridge that does not have to be read in this way, for it is by the black abolitionist, William Wells Brown, himself a former slave, who first visited Britain on a lecture tour between 1849 and 1854 and whose daughters remained there to be educated. Wells Brown

became a playwright, novelist, and man of letters and met many of England's literati. (Wells Brown also saw one of Aldridge's rare portrayals of Hamlet and was deeply impressed.) He describes the scene, probably the 1858 performance at the Lyceum:

> Though the doors had been open but a short time, when I reached the theatre, the house was soon filled, and among the audience I noticed Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton.... As the time approached for the curtain to rise it was evident that the house was to be jammed. Stuart, the best "Iago" since the days of Young, in company with "Roderigo," came upon the stage as soon as the green curtain went up. "Iago" looked the villain and acted it to the highest conception of the character. The scene is changed, all eyes are turned to the door at the right and thunders of applause greet the appearance of "Othello." He seemed to me the best "Othello" I had ever seen. As "Iago" began to work upon his feelings the Moor's eyes flashed fire, and, further on in the play, he looked the very demon of despair.[91]

On his death in 1867, the *Era*'s obituary of Aldridge praised an achievement that it saw as enhancing the "credit of English literature" and "the reputation of [our] ... National Poet."[92] To this could be added the fact that he did it as the perennial outsider from English society; never achieving the position that would have been commensurate with his talents; never achieving anything like a lengthy run with any one company; always on the move; always the "novelty," never the local "favorite" of any particular theater.

What the *Era*'s obituarist could not have understood, steeped as he would have been in a culture that was not only saturated with racial beliefs but in which such beliefs were taking on an ever more "scientific" authority, was how significant the life of this American-born black artist would be to future generations. Aldridge's example inspired black troupes of players in America. There is an Ira Aldridge Theatre at Howard University; a chair is dedicated in his honor at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford; a monument was erected to him in Poland, where he died; there have been innumerable exhibitions in which he has featured. But it is not the monuments or museum pieces, valuable as they are, that are the real point. His lifelong, arduously won personal achievement can be set alongside those of the great American black liberationists of the period, who fought so perspicaciously and to such purpose against slavery. But there are differences; not only was Aldridge's a fight on the cultural front and so with a less clearly defined focus and target than the political battle against slavery, but it was also fought almost entirely alone. One black actor, Morgan Smith, followed Aldridge to England in 1866, the year before Aldridge's death; James Hewlett of the African Theatre may *possibly* have performed once or twice in England in 1824 or 1825, the year of Aldridge's debut. Single-handedly, and with great courage and determination, Aldridge gave the lie to the racist assumptions of English society. He not only struggled to achieve, as a black, the height of fame in one of the most valued and popular cultural arenas but went on to extend the range available to

the black artist. He did not recognize the fixed and tightly defended barriers that were meant to keep him in his place; hence the vituperation he sometimes met with. In his person and his practice, he challenged a racism that had become endemic, and, although he was finally allotted a limited space in the nation's cultural life, he could do little to dent that racism—at least, at the levels of middle- and upper-class commentary that are now our main contact with the period.

But while comment and reviews can be analyzed, the effect on the hearts and minds of ordinary theatergoers who witnessed him at the height of his powers is unquantifiable. On that night in 1858, as Wells Brown records,

> The audience with one impulse rose to its feet amid the wildest enthusiasm. . . . "Othello" was called before the curtain and received the applause of the delighted multitude.

That applause echoes still.

Notes

1. See Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* 1776–1848 (London: Verso, 1988), chapter 7, especially 273–74 and 290.

2. See Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 11–18, and Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (London: Rockliff, 1958; Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1993, with an introduction by Errol Hill), chapter 4.

3. Records of his life are fragmentary, and it was largely owing to a black historian, the late Edward Scobie, who was a close friend of Aldridge's youngest daughter, Amanda Aldridge (who died in 1956), that what English language records there are survive. Scobie was instrumental in making these available to Aldridge's best-known biographers, Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock. Scobie's own work was never finally completed for publication. I owe a great debt of gratitude to the distinguished historian Jan Carew, professor emeritus of Northwestern University, a close friend of Scobie's, who generously sent me copies of some of the latter's papers, including Cyril Bruyn Andrews's manuscript, "Victorian Ebony: The Story of Ira Aldridge (Known as The African Roscius)," at a time when nearly every item I attempted to trace appeared no longer to exist. And I am also deeply indebted to Bernth Lindfors, professor emeritus of The University of Texas at Austin, who sent me a wealth of material, including a copy of Owen Mortimer's invaluable *Speak of Me as I Am: The Story of Ira Aldridge* (Wangaratta, Australia: Owen Mortimer, 1995) and the full text of *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius* (London: Onwhyn, n.d.), as well as contemporary press cuttings and Lindfors's own articles.

4. See Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, chapter 11; Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination,* 1830–1867 (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 107–9.

5. Announcement in the *Times* (London), October 10, 1825, quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 53.

6. Reproduced in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, facing 41.

7. "The Coburg Theatre," *Times* (London), October 11, 1825, 2.

8. "Baker-knee'd" means knock-kneed.

9. One such crossing sweeper achieved it. Billy Waters, who played the fiddle on the streets as well as keeping a crossing, was made into a character in the popular play, *Tom and Jerry*. Portrayed as leading rather a high life, he died in the workhouse in utter poverty, supposedly lamenting that, after *Tom and Jerry*, he was assumed to be well off and in consequence made nothing for his efforts. See the preface to W. T. Moncrieff, *Tom and Jerry; or, Life in London*, Lacy's Acting Edition of Plays, 88 (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, [1850]).
10. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 63.
11. *A Brief Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Tragedian* (London: Henry Pownceby, n.d.), 5. This is a shortened version of the anonymous *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius* (London: Onwhyn, n.d.).
12. Edward Scobie, *Black Britannia: A History of Blacks in Britain* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1972), 131.
13. See Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 450. See also James Walvin, "The Rise of British Popular Sentiment for Abolition 1787–1832," in *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform*, ed. Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher, 149–62 (London: Wm. Dawson, 1980).
14. See Lowell Joseph Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean* 1763–1833*: A Study in Social and Economic History* (New York: Century, for American Historical Association, 1928), 427–29.
15. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class*, 429.
16. "The Surrey," *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper*, March 25, 1848, 407.
17. "The Surrey," *Era*, March 26, 1848, 11.
18. "Surrey Theatre," *Morning Post*, March 21, 1848, 6. The "millions" referred to were the £20 million paid in compensation to slave owners upon abolition.
19. Almost every comment on his performances, even when dismissive of his ability as a tragic actor, approves his comic power—but then, it was acceptable for a black to be laughable. See, for example, "He . . . performed Mungo . . . with so much humour . . . it is doubtful whether his forte be not rather comedy than tragedy." *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper*, March 25, 1848, 407. Also, "His Mungo, in the 'Padlock,' low as is the comedy, was one of the most successful and irresistibly ludicrous performances it has been our fortune to see." "Norwich," *Era*, January 9, 1848, 12.
20. See, for example, "The Surrey," *Era*, March 26, 1848, 11: "It is novel to see one who has been obtaining much applause in pourtraying [*sic*] passion in its most poetic shape, descend to the broad farce of mock drunkenness. . . . it is only a man of natural genius who can do both so as to be commended for the faithfulness of his mimicry."
21. See Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 87–88, 90–95; see also William G. Knight, *A Major London "Minor": The Surrey Theatre* 1805–1865 (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1997). I am indebted to Professor Bernth Lindfors for informing me that Knight is, however, mistaken in asserting that Aldridge played Fang in *Oliver Twist*.
22. See Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 287–88; Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, 20. Andrews's "Victorian Ebony," 81–82, also contains a transcript of a letter from the British consul at Odessa, dated February 2, 1866, that describes Aldridge's "reading of the character of the semi-Oriental Jew of the middle ages . . . [as] a masterpiece of art."
23. Quoted by Bernth Lindfors, from an unpublished translation, by Herbert Marshall, of S. Durylin, *Ira Aldridge* (Moscow–Leningrad: State Publishing House, 1940), in Lindfors's "'Mislike me not for my complexion . . . ': Ira Aldridge in Whiteface," *African American Review* 33, no. 2 (1999): 352.
24. See Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 94–95, 177.
25. Ibid., 65.
26. Quoted in Ibid., 148, from *Northern Whig* (Belfast), May 1, 1838.
27. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 150.
28. From the *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius*, 12, quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 46.

29. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 89. See Hazel Waters, "'An African's Revenge': The Black Figure on the Early Nineteenth-Century Stage," *Race & Class* 40, no. 1 (1998): 13–31, for a more detailed discussion of *Obi; or, Three-Fingered Jack*, attributed to W. H. Murrey [Murray], Dicks' Standard Plays, 478 (London: John Dicks, n.d.). All quotations are from this edition, with page numbers indicated in parentheses.
30. *Theatrical Journal*, May 6, 1857, 138.
31. Leman Thomas Rede, *The Road to the Stage; or, the Performer's Preceptor* (London: Joseph Smith, 1827), 38.
32. William Hazlitt, "Mr Booth's Iago," in *Lectures on the English Poets and A View of the English Stage*, vol. 5, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt in Twenty-one Volumes*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: J. M. Dent, 1930), 357.
33. Interestingly, the actor-manager John Coleman, who writes about Aldridge in his *Fifty Years of an Actor's Life* (London: Hutchinson, 1904), 2:402, claims that, when he played Iago to Aldridge's Othello in Bristol, "The Roscius, who was as dark as ebony, toned his sable hue down to a copper tint; on the other hand, I was black as burnt cork and Indian ink could make me." According to Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 155, Aldridge's skin color was "more copper-colored than black." Elsewhere, Coleman disparages Aldridge as "an elderly, obese, woolly-headed Ethiopian" (1:92) and quotes another actor's description of him as "a hideous old buck-nigger" (2:404).
34. Quoted in Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 195.
35. See Maurice Charney, *Titus Andronicus* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), xiv; and Alan C. Dessau, *Titus Andronicus* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1989), 11.
36. See Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello*, 29–33.
37. *A Critique on the Performance of Othello by F. W. Keene Aldridge, the African Roscius* (Scarborough, UK: John Cole, 1831).
38. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 103.
39. *Figaro in London* 42 (September 22, 1832): [1]68.
40. *Figaro in London* 70 (April 6, 1833): 56.
41. In later issues, the Garrick was often on the receiving end of *Figaro*'s venom for, allegedly, being the haunt of Jews. See, for example, "Wit at the Garrick," *Figaro in London* 233 (May 1836): 83.
42. *Figaro in London* 71 (April 13, 1833): 60.
43. *Figaro in London* 73 (April 27, 1833): 64.
44. *Figaro in London* 74 (May 4, 1833): 72.
45. *Figaro in London* 76 (May 18, 1833): 80; and 77 (May 25, 1833): 84. Quotations from some of the *Figaro* articles are given by Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 137–38; however, they are unaware of the origin of these quotations, which is as given in the preceding references.
46. "Theatricals," *John Bull*, April 14, 1833, 118.
47. "Covent-Garden Theatre," *Times* (London), April 11, 1833, 3.
48. "Covent Garden," *Athenaeum* 285 (April 13, 1833): 235–36. The allegation that Aldridge had been a servant—or, according to some accounts, a slave—to one or other of the Wallacks was frequently made. Aldridge had met both brothers in New York; according to his *Memoir*, he brought with him to England a letter of recommendation from Henry Wallack and, according to McCune Smith, he was engaged as a personal attendant to James Wallack on the passage to England. (Marshall and Stock. *Ira Aldridge*, 45–46). A slightly different version of the story, which describes a rupture between Aldridge and James Wallack, is given by Aldridge's friend J. J. Sheahan, writing in *Notes and Queries*, 4th series, 10 (August 17, 1872): 133.
49. Sheahan, *Notes and Queries*, 133.
50. "The African Actor," *Spectator* 250 (April 13, 1833): 328.
51. "Theatres," *Morning Post*, April 11, 1833, [3].

52. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge,* 123–24.
53. *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius*, 17; quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 130–31.
54. Knight also places him at the Surrey in 1838 and mentions a projected appearance in 1844: see 170, 209.
55. "Lyceum," *Athenaeum* 1605 (July 31, 1858): 144; *Times* (London), July 26, 1858, 9.
56. Quoted in full in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge,* 229–31. This lengthy passage from Gautier was the only omission in the translation by de Sumichrast of Gautier's complete works and was discovered by a black American PhD student working on Gautier in the early 1930s (Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge,* 8–9).
57. Jack Gratus, *The Great White Lie: Slavery, Emancipation and Changing Racial Attitudes* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), 189–90.
58. Ibid., 190.
59. I. V. Bridgeman, *The Black Doctor* (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, n.d.), first performed at the Royal Victoria Theatre, November 13, 1846; Ira Aldridge, *The Black Doctor*, Dicks' Standard Plays, 460 (London: John Dicks, n.d.), said to have been first performed at the City of London Theatre, July 1841, but this date is incorrect.
60. Bridgeman, *The Black Doctor,* [vi]; Aldridge, *The Black Doctor*, 2. All quotations are taken from the edition attributed to Aldridge, with page numbers indicated in parentheses.
61. See *Era*, February 14, 1847, 10; January 2, 1848, 12; January 9, 1848, 12; January 16, 1848, 12; April 2, 1848, 12.
62. "Surrey," *Satirist or, The True Censor of the Times*, March 26, 1848, 102.
63. *Theatrical Journal*, March 31, 1852, 99.
64. Quoted in Andrews, "Victorian Ebony," 87.
65. *Notes and Queries*, 4th series, 10 (November 9, 1872): 373.
66. "Britannia Saloon," *Theatrical Journal*, March 24, 1852, 91.
67. See Charney, *Titus Andronicus*, xiv; and Dessau, *Titus Andronicus*, 7–11.
68. *Notes and Queries*, 4th series, 9 (May 25, 1872): 423.
69. *Notes and Queries*, 4th series, 10 (August 17, 1872): 132.
70. *Notes and Queries*, 4th series, 10 (November 9, 1872): 373.
71. Andrews, "Victorian Ebony," 91–92. The letter is signed C. A. Somervil—whether this is a misreading of Somerset's handwriting or a typing error, I do not know.
72. "The Theatre—'Titus Andronicus,'" *Brighton Herald*, October 6, 1860, [2].
73. "Britannia," *Era*, April 26, 1857, 1.
74. "Covent-Garden Theatre," *Morning Post*, April 11, 1833, [3].
75. *Times* (London), "Covent-Garden Theatre," *Times* (London), April 11, 1833, 3.
76. *Spectator* 250 (April 13, 1833): 328; and *Athenaeum* 285 (April 13, 1833): 236.
77. "Surrey," *Satirist, or The True Censor of the Times*, April 2, 1848, 110.
78. "Surrey," *Era*, April 2, 1848, 12.
79. "The African Roscius," *Era*, March 22, 1846, 6. At times, the reviewer's enthusiasm does run away with him. Considering Aldridge in other parts (Gambia, Rolla), he declares him "the greatest wonder we have ever seen, even upon the stage."
80. "Provincial Theatricals, Devonport," *Era*, December 20, 1846, 10.
81. I am indebted to Professor Bernth Lindfors for informing me that Aldridge, in addition to his other roles encompassing aspects of black resistance, in December 1856 performed in Belfast and Cork as the rebel escaped slave Dred in a dramatization of Stowe's 1856 novel. It is perhaps significant that Aldridge appeared as Dred in Ireland—then also undergoing its own long struggle for self-rule.
82. "Lyceum," *Athenaeum*, 1605 (July 31, 1858): 144. Madge Kendal, his last Desdemona, in her memoirs, comments on the play that Aldridge would make on the contrast between her white hand and his black one. See *Dame Madge Kendal by Herself* (London: John Murray, 1933), 87. See also an earlier edition of her memoirs, *Dramatic Opinions* (London: John Murray, 1890), 11.

83. Photocopy of Aldridge's letter, dated November 2, 1858, from Scobie's papers, in my possession.
84. "Theatres and Entertainments," *Times* (London), July 26, 1858, 9.
85. "Britannia," *Era*, April 26, 1857, 10. Quoted in Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, 19, and Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 171–73.
86. Kendal, *Dame Madge Kendal*, 87. See also her *Dramatic Opinions*, 11.
87. "Haymarket," *Athenaeum* 1974 (August 26, 1865): 285.
88. Theatre Museum production file for *Othello*, Theatre Royal Haymarket, August 21, 1865.
89. Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello*, 102. Frustratingly, Rosenberg does not give dates for Salvini's performances.
90. Quoted in Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello*, 113, from Edward T. Mason, *The Othello of Tommaso Salvini* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1890).
91. Quoted from the *Negro Times*, October 16, 1922, in Andrews, "Victorian Ebony," 70. There is also a briefer account in William Wells Brown, *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius and His Achievements* (Boston: James Redpath, 1863), 118–19. Wells Brown claims in the book that this performance was given at the Haymarket—but his book was published two years before that last London performance. He also describes a performance by Aldridge of Hamlet—comparing it favorably to one given a few nights before at the Princess's by Charles Kean. The *Othello* that Wells Brown saw must, I think, have been the 1858 one at the Lyceum, in which Stuart did play Iago, and which was obviously an "occasion" of the sort described by Wells Brown.
92. "The late Ira Aldridge," *Era*, August 25, 1867, 10.

9

Ira Aldridge in Manchester

Ruth M. Cowhig

On Saturday, February 10, 1827, the *Manchester Guardian* announced the coming appearance of "the African Roscius" at the Theatre Royal, Manchester. After referring to his "success in New York, and in all the principal theatres of the United States" and to his performances "in the Theatres Royal, Bath, Bristol, Brighton, Plymouth, Exeter, and upwards of Fifty nights at the Royal Coburg Theatre, London, with universal approbation," the notice stated that he would spend one night in Manchester on his way to Edinburgh and Glasgow. A note in the *Manchester Courier* the following week (February 17, 1827) emphasized the adventurous nature of the theatrical event, telling the public that "the spirited manager of this establishment seems determined to spare no pains to render the amusements at the theatre as attractive as circumstances will permit." The attitude behind this retains a protective ambiguity toward the experiment of introducing a black actor.

The "African Roscius" was the way in which Ira Aldridge, who began to act in Britain in 1825, was usually billed. He also appeared under the name of "Mr. Keene," thus borrowing some of the prestige of Edmund Kean, then the foremost tragedian of the English stage: at that time this was considered an acceptable method of publicity. The Manchester playbill advertising his second appearance on February 17, 1827, calls attention to "the singular novelty of *An Actor of Colour*, personating the routine of Moorish and African characters," and encourages the public with assurances of the crowded audiences that have appreciated his talents. On that same day the *Manchester Guardian* published an appreciation of Aldridge's performance as Gambia in *The Slave*, saying it was done "without having the slightest occasion for having the cosmetic assistance of burnt cork." The theater critic asserts his intention of "forming a more correct judgement of the powers of this new aspirant to dramatic fame, this evening; when he will appear in the character of Othello"—the one-night stand announced previously being a very usual publicity gimmick. Unfortunately, the paper had no space for the critic's

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comments on this performance, or perhaps the critic never wrote his piece. For whatever reason, this important occasion, Aldridge's first appearance as Othello in Manchester, goes without comment. The *Manchester Courier* does praise the African Roscius's appearance as Gambia "in a style so truly natural, that one might have taken him for the character he represented."

Although the statement concerning Aldridge's successes all over the United States is an exaggeration, the reference to his provincial tours in Britain are mostly verifiable. After his appearances in Manchester, there can have been few provincial theaters that Aldridge did not visit before his death in 1867. In January 1827, before coming to Manchester, he appeared in Sheffield and Halifax; after leaving Manchester, he traveled to Sunderland, Newcastle, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Beverley, Lancaster, Liverpool, Nottingham, Gloucester, and Newark in the same year. By the end of 1832 he had fulfilled engagements in Hull, Belfast, Richmond, Swansea, Bristol, Kendal, Derby, Scarborough, Dublin, Aberdeen, and King's Lynn. The list compiled by Arthur Schomburg of New York and supplemented by Miss F. Shepherd records further visits to forty-seven towns and cities in the British Isles, from Inverness in the north to Southampton in the south, Galway in the west, and Yarmouth in the east.[1] Bearing in mind the fact that Aldridge also performed in all the main cities in Europe, this represents an acting career of remarkable energy and endurance.

The date of Aldridge's arrival in Britain is uncertain, but was probably 1824, when he was only seventeen years old. He had some acting experience in New York, but when he played in London in the Royal Coburg Theatre in October 1825, he was still a very young actor. This was billed as "the first instance in which one of that Complexion has displayed a striking degree of Histrionic Talent." It is all the more remarkable that his performance, in Southerne's play *Oroonoko*, received a very favorable notice a few months later in Brighton:

> We could only be present at a partial developement [*sic*] of the task he had chosen, but with that part, we are ready to confess, that we were not only surprised, but commensurately gratified. In his carriage there was much of dignity; and, frequently, that apparent exercise of the mind, in the delivery of his words, which gave extraordinary force to the text. His attitudes were often well chosen and graceful—his action was easy and unembarrassed; and his knowledge of the general agency of the scene in nowise confined. In what he attempted, nothing in the shape of direct failure could be attributed to him; while, at intervals, he elicited sparks of genius that called down peals of approbation.[2]

Aldridge's repertoire, especially in his early years in Britain, tended to be limited to parts appropriate to his blackness. Perhaps the most popular was Mungo in *The Padlock*, by Isaac Bickerstaffe. The plot of this play was adapted from Cervantes, and first performed at Drury Lane in 1768, retaining its hold on theater audiences for many years. Mungo was a slave belonging to an Indian planter who led him a dog's life:

What e'er's to be done
Poor black must run
    Mungo here, Mungo dere,
    Mungo everywhere;
    Above and below,
    Sirrah come, sirrah go,
    Do so, and do so,
    O! O!
Me wish to de Lord me was dead.[3]

The Padlock originally aroused support for the abolition of slavery, but it gave Aldridge many opportunities to show his gifts as a comic actor. He also played Zanga in Edward Young's *The Revenge*, which was based on a mixture of the Jacobean *Lust's Dominion*, *Othello*, and a play by Aphra Behn. Other obvious parts for black actors were in *Oroonoko*, *The Black Doctor*, and *The Virginian Mummy*.[4] But on the Continent of Europe, Aldridge had greater opportunities. Théophile Gautier asks, since white actors black themselves to play white parts, why a Negro "ne s'infarinerait-il pas de céruse pour jouer un rôle blanc?"[5] Aldridge did just this when he played Lear in St. Petersburg in 1858, wearing a flesh-colored skull with long gray hair. Gautier thought him even better in this part than in Othello. His achievement is the more remarkable since Aldridge played in English while the rest of the cast spoke in German.

Although there seems to be no critical article on any individual performance by Aldridge in February 1827, the theatrical announcements make it clear that he was a success. He is defended against potential racial prejudice:

> Tonight the African Roscius takes his benefit. He performs in a manner which practically contradicts the argument of the advocates of slavery, that the sable race are deficient in intellect.[6]

> We are sorry that want of room prevents our giving a notice of this copper-coloured actor's performances. We hope that a generous public will show their liberality to this descendant of the suffering sons of Africa. It need not be said that worth and merit are confined to no country. The African Roscius, in those characters for which his complexion and accent are peculiarly adapted, approaches nearer to nature than any European actor that we ever saw.[7]

The characters for which he was considered "peculiarly adapted" would be especially in such antislavery plays as *Oroonoko*, *The Padlock*, or *The Revenge*. The role of Othello obviously presented a greater challenge but Aldridge was fully equal to it. Here is a brief tribute:

> This evening the African Roscius makes his second appearance, in the very difficult character to personate Othello. His reception on Saturday last was favourable, and he obtained considerable applause in the declamatory scenes.[8]

Far from appearing for one night only, as originally advertised, Aldridge remained in Manchester for a full fortnight in February, performing at the Theatre Royal as follows:[9]

Saturday 10th	Gambia in *The Slave*
Saturday 17th	Othello in *Othello*
Wednesday 21st	Hassan in *The Castle Spectre*
Thursday 22nd	Mungo in *The Padlock*
Saturday 24th	Rolla in *Pizarro*, and Mungo in *The Padlock*
	(For the benefit of the African Roscius)

The songs in *The Padlock* are listed as "What a terrible life am I led," "Let me when my heart's a sinking," and "A great way off at sea." A study of theater programs of the period makes it clear that light entertainment of a music-hall type played a considerable part in assuring a company of popular support. Liberties were taken with Shakespearean texts, which were often abridged. The audience obviously expected its money's worth. The Theatre Royal, Manchester, for instance, opened its doors at 6:30 p.m. and the performance started at 7. After an interval, the second piece began at around 9. This was either a short comedy or a musical. Burlesque versions of Shakespeare's plays were popular. On June 24, 1831, the Queen's Theatre in Manchester presented *The very laughable Extravaganza of "Hamlet Travestie,"* written by J. Poole Esq. The music of the best quality selected from any composer that could best answer the purpose. The scenery has all been seen, and got great applause." We are also told that in the course of the piece there would be twenty songs, eight duets, and one trio, and in the last scene "a set-to and milling match"! In May 1837, a version of *Othello* describes Othello as "formerly an independent Nigger from the Republic of Hayti" and Desdemona as "a very good-natured lady, wife of Othello and not a bit too well treated by him." One would like to know what Aldridge thought of these "travesties"!

It is interesting that Edmund Kean, who had made a great success as Othello, was a warm supporter of Aldridge. On January 3, 1832, he wrote a recommendation of Aldridge to the manager of the Theatre Royal, Bath, which emphasized Aldridge's "wondrous versatility."[11] Kean's acceptance of Aldridge as Othello is surprising in view of the fact that Kean was the actor who first introduced the English stage to Othello as a "tawny Moor."[11]

Soon after leaving Manchester, Aldridge played in the Theatre Royal, Newcastle. In the *Tyne Mercury* of March 20, 1827, the critic begins by explaining that he had no expectations of merit from this "South African, one of the darkened children of the sun"; but that he had been mistaken, as, "there were points in his performance of *Othello* which would not disgrace the first actor on the boards." There follow detailed references to Aldridge's gestures, to his "strange and affecting tone of voice when impassioned," and to the "remarkably African" actions and attitudes that European actors could not achieve. On the other hand, the "soft melancholy cadence" that Othello's farewell speech demanded was felt to be

lacking. These comments are free from the racist bias that is so blatant in many notices of Aldridge's acting. It would seem likely that the audiences in Manchester, center of the antislavery movement, would also be relatively free from prejudice.

Aldridge's appearances in Manchester are particularly interesting because they probably influenced the decision of the Royal Manchester Institution to purchase, as its very first acquisition from its first exhibition in May 1827, a portrait by James Northcote entitled *Head of a Negro in the Character of Othello*. They considered this to be "the best executed painting in the exhibition," and it is indeed a remarkable portrait, which can now be seen in the Manchester City Art Gallery. The sitter was never identified, but since Ira Aldridge first played Othello in London at the Royalty Theatre in 1825, the year before Northcote completed the painting, and Northcote was still going to plays although an old man of eighty at this time, it has now been accepted that the sitter must have been Aldridge (see figure 9.1).[12]

The Royal Manchester Institution was founded in 1823, and held its first art exhibition in 1827. The minutes of the organizing committee record that a long list of painters were invited to submit pictures, including James Northcote (1746–1831) of 8 Argyle Place, London. The exhibition opened on May 7 in temporary premises in Market Street. Courses of lectures were given; there was much publicity in local papers; and 1,500 catalogues were printed. The exhibition was originally due to close on July 7, but was so well patronized that it remained open until November 10. The decision to purchase Northcote's painting was taken at the August meeting of the committee and endorsed by a general meeting on August 27, 1827, which authorized payment of £31. 10s. to be sent to Mr. Northcote. The title, *Head of a Negro in the Character of Othello*, was Northcote's own, recorded in his notebooks. The minutes reveal nothing of the discussion about the purchase, apart from the tribute to the excellence of the painting. But it is surely noteworthy that the one chosen was not only the sole portrait in the exhibition but was of a black man. Apart from the portraits of black page boys with their masters or mistresses, there had been very few individual portraits of black people before this: Gainsborough's of Ignatius Sancho, and Reynolds's of Francis Barber and Omai are conspicuous. One would very much like to know whether the purchase of the Northcote painting was influenced by the antislavery movement, which generated much sympathy for and interest in black people.

This portrait is now the earliest known representation of Aldridge. It shows a black man who looks askance, with a suspicious, somewhat hostile expression—appropriate enough at various points in the action of the play. The color of the skin is of the lighter kind of black, and the actor's appearance is quite consistent with a description of Aldridge's Othello in London's *Morning Chronicle* of April 11, 1833:

> his complexion ... is rather a fine dark olive than a deep black, so that its transparency is evident, and on the surface is none of that disagreeable gloss given by the pomatum pot, and which shines so conspicuously by the aid of the foot-lights. His features are those of a negro

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Figure 9.1 James Northcote's portrait, *Head of a Negro in the Character of Othello* (by permission of the Manchester Art Gallery, UK).

somewhat refined—the full lip, the flat nose, and the eye tinged with the liquid that discolours the skin; but altogether they are capable of forcible expression.

The painting by Henry Briggs (1791–1844) in the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC, dated about 1830 and the only other early portrait of Aldridge, also shows a young man with a light skin and refined features. This supports, although it does not prove, the identification of the Northcote picture. It seems very strange that, in the title of Northcote's painting, all reference to Othello was omitted in the first catalogue of the Permanent Gallery of the Royal Manchester Institution, compiled in 1848. Most of the paintings in the list of twenty-nine in this catalogue were landscapes: there were two exhibits by Northcote. No. 16 has the historical subject of *John Baliol Surrendering His Crown to Edward I of England, AD* 1296, but Northcote's full title was not included in the catalogue. No. 17 is listed simply as *A Moor*, with the note that it was "purchased by the Council of the Institution out of the exhibition of 1827." Perhaps the compiler of the catalogue was influenced by the revulsion against the idea of a black Othello, expressed so forcibly by Charles Lamb and Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

I appeal to every one that has seen Othello played, whether he did not . . . sink Othello's mind in his colour; whether he did not find something extremely revolting in the courtship and wedded caresses of Othello and Desdemona; and whether the actual sight of the thing did not over-weigh all that beautiful compromise which we make in reading.[13]

It would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable Negro.[14]

There is an added mystery in that another version of the portrait exists, differing only in minor ways from the one in Manchester. It is in the possession of the Rt. Hon. Paul Channon, former M.P., and has been in his family for many years, but its origin is unknown.[15] I have wondered whether it was ever owned by Aldridge himself.

Aldridge visited Manchester again in July 1846, and this was described as an "immense success"; he returned not only in September 1847 but again in May 1849 and August 1850. Later still, he played in the Theatre Royal in October 1857 and at the Queen's in July 1859. There is a very interesting account of his Othello of 1846. By this time he was a very experienced actor whose early promise had been fulfilled, and whose reputation was high. He is billed as "Mr Aldridge, the African Roscius."

"The African Roscius" (the title bestowed upon the son of a clergyman in the United States, which clergyman was the son of Prince of the Fulah tribe on the banks of the Senegal river), made his appearance on Monday night, at the Queen's Theatre, in the character of *Othello*. This, in our opinion, is the most finished performance in the tragic line, of this remarkable

> man. Throughout it is a most elaborate piece of acting; it gives indication of a cultivated mind and of good taste; it is nowhere marred by extravagance or rant; but still, marvellous to say, the native African cannot depict as well as phlegmatic Englishmen have done, the fiery-souled, noble-minded, suspicious Moor. The outward embodiment is there in perfectitude; the ordinary emotions are easily and well simulated; the art of the rhetorician, combined with earnestness in manner, good gesticulation and attitudes, give effectiveness to a large portion of the part; but the sable actor cannot depict the workings of a tossed, troubled, doubting mind.[16]

It is extremely difficult to assess the variations in the estimates of any actor of the past. Aldridge is accused by some of lacking in force and vigor, but one suspects that the fashion for a rhetorical style of acting led to some failure to appreciate greater subtlety of feeling. However that may be, all those who are interested in the career of this great black actor should visit the Manchester City Art Gallery. They will not be disappointed in his portrait.

Notes

1. Arthur Schomburg's "List Showing the Theatres and Plays in Various European Cities Where Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius, Acted during the Years 1824–67" (held at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a branch of the New York Public Library) records performances at the Royal Coburg Theatre in London in October and November 1825: in the Theatre, Sheffield, on January 11, 1827: and in the Theatre, Halifax, on January 24, 1827. I am indebted to Dr. Bernth Lindfors of the University of Texas at Austin for recording Aldridge's performances in Brighton, December 13–17, 1825: in Bristol, February 1–3, 1826: and in Exeter, April 25–28, 1826. Thus, only the mention of Bath and Plymouth in the *Manchester Guardian* of February 10, 1827, could perhaps be an exaggeration; if so, this anticipates his later visits to these cities in 1832 and 1850.
2. *Herald*, December 17, 1825: 3; reprinted with a few modifications in the *Morning Post* (London), December 17, 1825, 3.
3. Quoted in Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (London: Rockliff, 1958), 73.
4. For an account of these and other plays in Ira Aldridge's repertoire, see Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 55–57, 75–76, 85–88, 155–58.
5. Théophile Gautier, *Voyage en Russie*. (Paris: Charpentier, 1895), 254–55.
6. *Manchester Gazette*, February 24, 1827, 3.
7. *Manchester Courier*, February 24, 1827, 3.
8. *Wheeler's Manchester Chronicle*, February 17, 1827, 4.
9. See playbills for the Theatre Royal, Manchester, in Manchester Central Library.
10. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 103.
11. See Ruth Cowhig, "Actors, Black and Tawny, in the role of Othello,—and Their Critics," *Theatre Research Journal* 4 (1979): 133–46; and "Blacks in English Renaissance Drama and the Role of Shakespeare's Othello," in *The Black Presence in English Literature*, ed. David Dabydeen, 1–25 (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1985).
12. For a full account of this identification, see Ruth Cowhig, "Northcote's Portrait of a Black Actor," *Burlington Magazine*, December 1983, 741.

13. Charles Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, considered with reference to their fitness for Stage Representation," quoted in *Shakespeare Criticism*, ed. David Nichol Smith, World Classics, 212 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1916), 234.
14. S. T. Coleridge, "Lectures on Shakespeare," quoted in Smith, *Shakespeare Criticism*, 302.
15. This version of the portrait is identical to the other, except that the angle is marginally different, and the background of clouds is more prominent and colorful. In the Manchester portrait, the background is of a somber greenish gray, and the only bright color is in the red stripes of the sash.
16. *Manchester Examiner*, July 4, 1846, 5.

10

Acting Black

Othello, Othello *Burlesques, and the Performance of Blackness*

Joyce Green MacDonald

In 1833, London audiences had the opportunity to see, for the first time in the play's history, the role of Othello played by a black actor. This actor was the New Yorker Ira Aldridge, who in 1825 had left the United States to pursue his career in Europe. Aldridge's Covent Garden *Othello* came five months after the wildly successful production of that play at Drury Lane, in which Edmund Kean played Othello with William Macready as Iago. To pique renewed public interest in the play so soon after such a theatrical event, the Covent Garden management added a special emphasis to its advertisements for Aldridge's London debut: "MR. ALDRIDGE, Known by the appellation of the AFRICAN ROSCIUS," is now further identified as "A Native of Senegal." New roles have been added for the engagement as well; he will also appear in "the Tragedy of THE REVENGE" as the Moorish antihero Zanga, "After which, the musical Entertainment of THE PADLOCK," with Aldridge in the role of Mungo.[1]

A third manifestation of the London playgoing public's heightened awareness of *Othello* during the early 1830s was provided by Maurice Dowling's *Othello* burlesque of 1834, premiering at Liverpool's Liver Theatre. Dowling's Othello, "Moor of Venice, formerly an Independent Nigger, from the Republic of Hayti,"[2] speaks the minstrel show black dialect first popularized in England by Charles Mathews on his return from an 1822–23 American tour. He is convinced of Desdemona's guilt by her loss not of a handkerchief endowed with magical powers but of a bath towel, and sings his version of "It is the cause" to the tune of "King of the Cannibal Islands."

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These versions of *Othello* mark, I suggest, critical moments in the history of the play's staging of race and racial difference. Apparently, since its first performance at the Jacobean court, *Othello* had featured a white man in blackface in the title role.[3] Edmund Kean's "tawny" Othello of 1814 revised this tradition, formally linking the erasure of the Moor's black body to his successful impersonation of "those minute differences and delicate shades which constitute the very essence of character."[4] As a black man playing the role of a black man, Aldridge forged a new link between signs and meanings. His performance undid Kean's visual erasure of blackness as a locus of meaning in the play, and also challenged the relevance of previous centuries' efforts by white actors to "act black." Dowling's *Travestie* of *Othello*, among many others, operated in its turn as a reinscription of the white production of black people, in this case particularly black men, on English stages and within English culture at large.

As Aldridge made his London debut, Parliament was engaged in the debates that culminated in the passage on July 31, 1833, of a bill emancipating British-owned slaves in the West Indies. Premiering in the city that was home to Britain's oldest antislavery society but was also one of the primary ports through which African slaves entered Britain and were shipped to the New World, Dowling's *Travestie* was made possible by the racism and class anxieties stimulated by Caribbean emancipation.[5] Dowling's work not only burlesques Shakespeare's Moor—here an "Independent Nigger" who had fought with Toussaint L'Ouverture in the 1795 slaves' rebellion that defeated a joint Spanish-British invasion and proclaimed a free republic in 1804—but also, as do other Shakespearean burlesques, poises itself to mock Shakespeare's burgeoning presence as a marker of high culture.[6]

This essay, then, is interested in discussing just what it meant to perform race during Aldridge's theatrical career. The Aldridge phenomenon is contextualized by abolition and its cultural aftermaths. Emancipation and revolt—the 1833 act was preceded by a major slave rebellion in Jamaica at Christmas, 1831—sharpened the attention the British public paid to the position occupied by the continuing successful exploitation of nonwhite bodies in maintaining empire, as the imperial focus shifted from the New World to Africa and Asia. Aldridge's onstage presence was just as powerfully conditioned theatrically, by the existing tradition of blackface and tawny Othellos and by the almost exactly contemporary growth of the minstrel show tradition in the United States. The minstrel show, with its parodic exaggeration of black physicality, provided—just as did Dowling's *Othello Travestie* and later "darkey dramas" like the American *Dar's De Money* or *Desdemonum, An Ethiopian Burlesque*[7]—a means of rewriting what white Anglo-American cultures regarded as "the more threatening, chaotic, and subversive aspects of the black body."[8] Othello's black body in Shakespeare's play proved an intense and disorienting problem for nineteenth-century actors, producers, and audiences, as has the subject of Africa in Western discourse generally.[9]

Dowling's *Othello* reveals mass culture in the act of "othering" blackness and reproducing it as a proper colonial subject, a process it accomplished through an

even more aggressive dismemberment and reconstitution of what the Kean-Macready *Othello* so recently had affirmed as one of high culture's Shakespearean icons. While my Shakespearean colleagues might be troubled by the equation of playing Othello with playing *Othello Travestie* or with jumping Jim Crow, both kinds of performance—one high culture, two mass culture—are linked by their recourse to blackface.[10] For a white man to play a black man, or a "tawny" man, is to open the performance to questions about agency, social class, and the possibilities both of knowing and of stabilizing racial identities for both white and black subjects.[11] As we shall see, this process of fixing names and identities was not (and is not) accomplished easily or fully. Playing race became a deadly serious kind of cultural work aimed at appropriating discourses of racial difference, discourses that often revealed themselves to be inadequate to the problem of incorporating black or African things into the dual Western consciousness of white self and alien other. When Ira Aldridge arrived in Europe to begin playing black men, he disrupted and complicated this economy of race in unforeseen ways. White responses to the theatrical self-authorization of blackness, and the effects of Aldridge's performances in roles previously played by white men in blackface, are the dual subjects of the rest of this essay.

Aldridge arrived in England with some personal experience of the shocking effects that seeing black people playing Shakespeare could have on white audiences. Having been born into Manhattan's community of free blacks in 1807 and acculturated into that community through two of its most visible institutions, the African Free School and the African Theatre, he had an early opportunity to participate in the unfolding of some of the critical issues attending black performance in antebellum America and Victorian England.[12]

The African Theatre was founded in 1821 by impresario William Brown, with the help of James Hewlett, the first black American known to have played Shakespeare. Newspaper reportage of their shows at the theater they built near the corner of Bleecker and Mercer streets, the eager crowds of black patrons they attracted, and estimates of their financial success soon attracted the attention of the police. According to the hostile reports of the *National Advocate*, a Manhattan newspaper, "some of the neighbors, not relishing the jocund nightly sarabands of these sable fashionables, actually complained to the Police, and the avenues of African Grove were closed by authority."[13] The defiant response of the African Theatre was to hire a hotel hall near the Park Theatre for the purpose of presenting *Richard III*. Once again, the police were called, and another New York newspaper reported another silencing:

> The audiences were generally of a riotous character, and amused themselves by throwing crackers on the stage, and cracking their jokes with the actors, until danger from fire and civil discord rendered it necessary to break up the establishment. The ebony-colored wags were notified by the police that they must announce their last performance, but they, defying the public authority, went on and acted nightly. It was at length considered necessary to interpose the arm of authority.

The police finally disrupted a performance by arresting the actors and holding them "in one green room" until, after an evening of harassment, they were released on the promise "never to act Shakespeare again."[14]

This assumption of the impropriety of black people playing Shakespeare is shared by English comic actor Charles Mathews, who toured the eastern United States in 1822–23. While in New York,

> Mr. Mathews takes an opportunity of visiting the Niggers (or negroes) Theatre. The black population being, in the national theatres, under certain restrictions, have, to be quite at their ease, a theatre of their own. Here he sees a black tragedian (the Kentucky Roscius) perform the character of Hamlet, and hears him deliver the soliloquy "To be or not to be, dat is him question, whether him nobler in de mind to suffer or lift up him arms against one sea of hubble bubble and by opossum (oppose 'em) end em." At the word opossum the whole audience burst forth into one general cry of "opossum, opossum, opossum." On enquiring into the cause of this, Mr. Mathews was informed, that "Opossum up a Gum Tree," was the national air, or sort of "God Save the King" of the negroes, and that being reminded of it by Hamlet's pronunciation of "oppose 'em," there was no doubt but that they would have it sung.[15]

Mathews's report of his tour of American theaters suggests his notion of just what the place of blacks was in performance. He includes an afterpiece, "A Monopologue, called All Well at Natchitoches," which is a brief synopsis of the farcical courtship of a Miss Mangel Wurzel by Colonel Hiram Peglar. Included in the piece's gallery of emerging American types is Agamemnon, a black slave belonging to Miss Mangel Wurzel's jealous guardian, Jonathan W. Doubikin. These four characters are included in a color illustration bound into the front of Mathews's popular pamphlet, instead of any of the other eminently caricaturable people or events he describes. Smiling, obese, ragged Agamemnon, in contrast to the other characters, is caught in the act of moving toward us, a violin in one hand and its bow in the other. It is this same energetic, mischievous, sensuous American type that entered the minstrel show on both sides of the Atlantic as the most prevalent dramatic portrayal of black characters during the years when Ira Aldridge was making a career in Europe.[16]

Between the censorship of the all-black *Richard III* and Thomas Rice's first performance as Jim Crow in 1828, Ira Aldridge left the United States for England. The attempt to suppress the agency of black performance and the concomitant appropriation of blackness as a spectacle for the consumption of white audiences marks a recurrence of a double representational process whose theatrical roots can be traced to the Renaissance.[17] What distinguishes the censorship of the all-black *Richard III* and the furor of publicity surrounding Aldridge's European performances is the role played in them by the institution of Shakespeare. The green room was where the enterprising members of the African Company were forced to wait for "authority" to permit them access not only to the serious capitalist endeavor of making money[18] but apparently also to

the equally serious cultural business of playing Shakespeare. A condition of their release was the promise never to perform Shakespeare again, as though their black skins marked them as incompetent signifiers for the communication of Shakespearean meanings. Controlling their own conditions of performance, winning audiences, giving proud voice to their community's presence in New York, progressing from songs and dramatic monologues to an assay of the role in which Edmund Kean himself had created such a sensation in London and on his 1820–21 tour of the United States, the African Company succeeded almost too well, and was duly punished by what the newspapers repeatedly referred to as "authority." In this case, "authority" was embodied by white police power coming to the defense of Shakespeare.

The African Company raid is an early example of the use of Shakespeare as a tool for enforcing cultural and political hegemony.[19] Instead of imperial or colonial power, however, the New York police mounted their defense of Shakespeare on a platform of the cultural authority of whiteness. By aspiring to play Shakespeare publicly for a paying audience, the actors of the African Company exacerbated existing white unease about the possibility of maintaining the prevailing constructions of the relative positions and natures of the races.[20] The danger and transgressive power of black Shakespeare lay in its public contradiction of the supposedly rigid and absolute construction of ideologies of racial difference. In performing Shakespeare, the black actors were also enacting and appropriating the cultural sanction bestowed by his works. In exchange for the uncomfortable spectacle of blacks acting white, the audiences of minstrel shows or *Othello* "burlettas" would be offered the more reassuring spectacle of whites acting black, of reasserting a relation between observer and object that affirmed white authority over, and authorship of, narratives of racial difference.[21]

When Ira Aldridge arrived in London from New York, he began a series of appearances throughout the British Isles in a repertory largely consisting of adaptations of Renaissance and Restoration plays concentrating on heroic black characters.[22] The novelty of having a real black man play these parts after centuries of white men in blackface was emphasized to the playgoing public: in the musical melodrama *The Slave*, Aldridge would take the stage "without having the slightest occasion for having the cosmetic assistance of burnt cork."[23] *The Revolt of Surinam, or a Slave's Revenge* "must receive an immense portion of additional interest from being supported in its principal character by a *Man of Colour*."[24] One critic marveled that Aldridge's presence seemed to blur the boundaries between reality and theatrical illusion: he played "in a style so truly natural that one might take him for the character he represented."[25]

This blurring of actor and role was not always such a marvelous or persuasive phenomenon to its English beholders. One spectator actively resisted these bland assurances of theatrical magic in his account of seeing Aldridge in a "Fashionable Dramatic Entertainment" in Dingwall, Scotland, in 1840, on one of his provincial tours. In a letter written on the back of the playbill (see figure 10.1), he tells how he "witness'd the performance of Zanga last Even g—the Audience was

respectable—but with the exception that he *dress'd* and *look'd* the Moor it was otherwise contemptible."[26] Even as he notes how immune to and uninterested in Aldridge as a phenomenon he was, however, the writer may well be showing himself to have fallen under the sway of the mimetic power Aldridge embodied. The writer's phrase "the performance of Zanga" seems to suggest either that the names "Zanga" and "Aldridge" are interchangeable for him, or that the power of the role so compelled his attention that the rest of the evening—which included violin solos, scenes from *Merchant of Venice* and a farce, *The Padlock*, as well as Aldridge's performance of "an entire New Version of JIM CROW"—made no great impression. What he is at pains to communicate in his letter to Miss Munro is instead his disgust with the way in which Aldridge has "gull'd" his audiences "most completely":

> —he arrived here (would you believe it—) in his own Carriage, a smart Chariot & pair (Horses his own) mounted Postilion flashy Livery, Black Velvet Hunting Cap trimm'd with Gold Lace & Two Ladies (White inside) Imperials on the Top—and his Butler in the Rumble—is that not going it—He has left this for Tain[27] today—Give these two bills to my Friend Simson in the Strand, who together with Mrs. S. I hope is well—It will shew him a new way of raising the wind, and paying a visit to John O Groats, Gratis.[28]

This brief note is rich in racial, sexual, and class outrage. First, the writer shares the indignation of much white antebellum society in the United States about what it regarded as the social pretension of unsupervised black people. Aldridge's flashy carriage,[29] pulled by his own (not hired) horses, and his liveried servants might awe the credulous, the writer implies, but fail to impress him. Aldridge arrived not only in ostentatious state, but in the company of "Two Ladies (White inside)," that tangled syntax eliding the fact that Aldridge's female companions were white instead of black yet privately placed with him inside the closed carriage. White ladies inside a private space with a black man, or ladies who were white inside the darkened carriage interior, or ladies who glowed white within the dusky penumbra of Aldridge's presence—any way that this phrase can be rendered into literal sense, it connotes a vaguely sexualized discomfort.

The idea of white ladies in close proximity to black men, together with the discomfort it aroused, has been of course identified as a major element of critical response to *Othello*.[30] Just as Ludovico insists at the play's end that the sight of Othello and Desdemona dead together in their marriage bed must be "hid,"[31] the Dingwall writer finds it strangely difficult to describe clearly just what he sees in that carriage. He was looking at a spectacle that, with all its suggestions of a double racial and sexual transgression, challenged the limits of the scopophilic power of white gazes to produce black and female subjects.

Apart from his brief and confused allusion to Zanga the Moor, the writer does not comment on the pieces that made up Aldridge's performance that night at the Caledonian Hall; the mere phenomenon of his presence occupies the writer's attention and passion. I would like now to turn to one of the pieces that Aldridge

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Figure 10.1 Unsigned letter to Miss Munro, No. 9 Vine Street, Westminster, written on the back of a playbill advertising Ira Aldridge's performances at Caledonian Hall, Dingwall, Scotland, on May 1, 1840 (by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library).

performed, and to speculate on the effects of Aldridge's presence on the ways in which they produced their notions of blackness.

The "Comic Extracts from THE PADLOCK" that concluded the show the Dingwall spectator saw doubtless sent the audience home happy. Isaac Bickerstaffe's two-act farce premiered in 1768 to immediate success, playing fifty-three nights in all during its first season and remaining in repertories all over Britain well into the next century. Comic actor Charles Dibdin came to be permanently identified with his blackface work as Mungo, a disrespectful, sly, presumptuous, music-loving slave. In the play, Don Diego, an elderly Salamancan grandee, has taken the beautiful but poor young Leonora into his house. He has told her parents that at the end of a three-month trial period, he will either marry her or send her back to them still a virgin. As the action opens, he is preparing to go to her parents to tell them of his decision, leaving Leonora in the care of his foolish housemaid Ursula. Returning unobserved, he locks Leonora, Ursula, and Mungo into the house with a large padlock: "Fast bind, safe find, is an excellent proverb."[32] Mungo and Ursula—the one joyously seduced by music, the other displeased by Diego's lack of trust—allow Leander, a young student who loves Leonora, to climb over the house's back wall and see her. When Diego finally returns, he finds Mungo drunk and discovers Leander with Leonora. The young man swears his love and identifies himself as being from a good family. Chastened, Diego admits his folly in attempting to achieve such an inappropriate match, releases Leonora from all obligations to him, fires Ursula, and threatens to beat Mungo. The play finishes with a song mocking Diego's foolishness.

Although music—including Mungo's popular song, "What a terrible life am I led," which Aldridge sang at the 1840 show in Dingwall—is a part of this early version of *The Padlock*, later evolutions of the show came to include more, and more elaborate, musical interludes. A nineteenth-century acting edition adds six new numbers, changing a seventh from the 1768 version (the final quartet on the moral of the story by Ursula, Leander, Mungo, and Leonora) into a trio for Mungo, Diego, and Leonora.[33] The acting text also includes an engraving of the delighted Mungo dancing to the song Leander plays for him as the price of admission to the house's back gate. Arms raised, standing on one foot with the other leg kicked out, he contrasts with the sedate posture of the mandolin-playing Leander, and recalls Mathews's Agamemnon. The energy and movement of Mungo in the engraving matches the subversive spirit of the dialect song he sings in both versions:

> Let me, when my heart a sinking,
> Hear de sweet guitar a clinking;
> When a string speak,
> Such moosic he make,
> Me soon am cur'd of tinking.
> Wid de toot, toot, toot,

Of a merry flute,
And cymbalo,
And tymbalo,
To boot,
We dance and we sing,
Till we make a house ring,
And, tied in his garters, old Massa may swing.[34]

However, the pleasure and wildness that Mungo in his song claims for himself is always seen through the focusing lens of his "terrible life" as Diego's slave:

Whate'er's to be done,
Poor black must run;
Mungo here, Mungo dere,
Mungo every where;
Above and below,
Sirrah come, sirrah go;
Do so, and do so.
Oh! oh!
Me wish to de lord me was dead.[35]

The play carefully modulates the emotions of a white audience as it watches the antics of Mungo: sentimental pity evoked by "What a terrible life I am led" segues into boisterous amusement at his abandoning himself to Leander's music and changes again into scandalized laughter at the spectacle of his drunkenness. In his cups, Mungo tells Diego the truth: "Make no noise, I say; dere's young gentleman wid young lady; he play on guitar, and she like him better dan she like you. Fal, lal, lal."[36] As foolish and impotent and old as he is, however, Diego is still white; he ends the play as he begins it, threatening Mungo with a beating.

The character of Mungo had a life of its own, as evinced by the popularity of his songs from the play; "Mungo here, Mungo there, Mungo every where" became a widely known catchphrase. The kind of capital that Dibdin made of the role is suggested by his probable authorship of a kind of commonplace book of philosophical and moral occasional pieces called *The Padlock Open'd: Or, Mungo's* Medley. *Being a Choice Collection of the Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose and Verse, Serious and Comic, Of MUNGO The Padlock-Keeper of Drury Lane*.[37] A handwritten note attached to the flyleaf of this volume notes the success of *The Padlock* in its 1768 London premiere and suggests that Dibdin, who "very successfully represented" the role of Mungo, may have been "induced" to seek further "profit under a name which had taken the town." The Mungo of *The Padlock Open'd* writes thoughtfully on such subjects as educating children, spiritual faith, and "an old Epigram in a Fragment of Petronius Arbiter" in standard English, not in minstrelized dialect.[38] The book's dedication and preface, however, do make allusion to

what were presumably the more memorable moments from Mungo's onstage history; its dedication offers the book to its patron "in return for Civilities received; particularly your Humanity in saving from my *Master* DON DIEGO'S *ever-memorable* RATTAN, the poor *back* of your Humble Servant, MUNGO."[39] The author's preface to his readers asserts that if he can but succeed "in exhilarating the Mind, or amending the Heart, I shall think my time not spent amiss in my hours of leisure from the hard and cruel service of my *Maste*r, DON DIEGO, which could be rendered tolerable only by my sweet and gentle *Mistress* LEONORA."[40] Dibdin speaks and writes as a white man of the amusing spectacle of his black character's subjection to white power as embodied by the impotent old Don Diego, and by Mungo's compensatory access to the charms of "Mistress Leonora." Both he and his audiences—first in performance, and now in print—know he is joking about Mungo from a privileged vantage point of whiteness, one that he shares with them despite his disguised work in performing the joke.

This racial in-joking about the attractions of white women and white men's power over black men obviously was unavailable to Aldridge if, as Dibdin suggests, the fun of Mungo in the theater rested on a kind of collusion between white audience and white actor in blackface. But Aldridge's Mungo opened a new set of representational opportunities to a white audience. The commodification of blackness as theatrical property proceeded in a new and different way, one in which a black subject was seen to cooperate willingly and so convincingly that "one might take him for the character he represented."

If Aldridge as Mungo thus added verisimilitude to the burlesque production of black manhood on white stages, then Aldridge as Othello may well have unsettled the appropriation and re-presentation of narratives of fixed racial identity produced by the play's heritage of blacked-up white men in the title role. The physical presence of black performers, as was so powerfully suggested by the policing of the African Company, challenged the containment and erasure of blackness effected by mainstream theatrical practice, at least momentarily disrupting and further complicating the complicity between white actor and white audience. The physical impact of blackness was itself blamed for a kind of imperviousness to interpretation; one reason Edmund Kean advanced for his innovation of tawny instead of black Othello makeup was that black paint obscured "the play of the countenance."[41] This mysterious and stubborn resistance of blackness to being read and fully understood by whites is a recurring trope in European discourse about Africa and Africans, from antiquity through the nineteenth century.[42] British reviewers were haunted by Aldridge's physical appearance, and their fascination with the visual effects of his blackness probably constitutes a variation on this recurring theme of the resistant strangeness of black bodies.[43]

The more that the play's ultimate truth about Othello's black body—that it had lain with Desdemona's white one—was hidden and denied in nineteenth-century theatrical practice, the more power that this miscegenous secret seemed to exercise over the imagination of white audiences.[44] The sexual shock of Othello's

blackness, even as played by white men, was such that a trick like William Macready's "thrusting of his dark despairing face, through the curtains of the bed when Emilia calls to him" was enough to cause one female spectator to faint.[45] Even Kean, while choosing a less-black Othello, invested his characterization with a new romantic intensity and passion that his reviewers found stirring: only as Othello more closely resembled a white man physically could his true degree of emotional distance and strangeness from white spectators be fully revealed.[46] Representational attempts such as Kean's to deny the bodily manifestation of a racial difference may in fact have worked in exactly the opposite way, to affirm its presence. Aaron, Shakespeare's first black character, boasts of his blackness's resistance to incorporation within other racial or social orders:

> Coal-black is better than another hue,
> In that it scorns to bear another hue;
> For all the water in the ocean
> Can never turn the swan's black legs to white,
> Although she lave them hourly in the flood.[47]

The perhaps unexpectedly contradictory result of Kean's racial strategy of whitening Othello points to a similar resistance of black signs to seamless incorporation within narratives of white superiority.

The *Othello* burlesques work hard to divest Shakespeare's climactic scene, the marriage-bed murder of a white girl by her black husband, of its power to assault the sensibilities of whiteness, a power that persisted despite the theatrical trend toward the gradual whitening of the Moor. In *Desdemonum*, all the characters, including "Desdemonum" herself, speak in blackface dialect; a minstrel in drag playing Shakespeare's heroine firmly muzzles the sexual and cross-racial horrors incited by Shakespeare's climax. The very title of the burlesque *Dar's de Money* mocks the institution of Shakespeare generally, and more specifically the work of such stage stars as Macready, as moneymaking scams foisted on the insufficiently skeptical and insufficiently "white" spectator. Here, two sheet-draped chairs stand in for what Jake rather grandly calls "the nuptial couch." In their rehearsal of the murder scene, Jake reveals that "all the great tragediums" create Othello's frothing madness by putting "a bit o' Brown Windsor in deir mouf." Pete, as Desdemona, falls between the two chairs, "the sheet around him over his head and only off his black face,"[48] in what seems a direct attack on the representational power of blackness as it had been traditionally portrayed in the scene.

Dar's de Money is indeed unique among the three burlesques for a moment that specifically points to the kinds of discursive rupture—both performative and spectatorial—that I have been discussing. The play argues that whatever their class and artistic pretensions, those uncomfortably powerful straight Othellos are ultimately brothers beneath their blackened white skins to the lazy, scheming "black" buffoons onstage at Wood's Minstrel Hall in New York, where *Dar's de Money* was played; the

piece exists figuratively to return black men to the reservation of white discursive power. Yet in lampooning the power of a Macreadyesque moment as a huge joke on white spectators somehow ideologically uncertain of their status as white people, *Dar's de Money* also admits the difficulty of making and keeping meaningful rules of racial difference. Pete, ready to turn to playing Shakespeare in his search for ways of making money without really having to work, tells Jake the story of his "las' dodge": "I whitewashed my hands, and implored persistence as a man what had been garotted. 'Long come one feller, dough, who says, says he: 'Wictim ob de garrotters—you don't say so! Yes, I see! black in de face wid de choking! But,' says he, 'dey must have strangled your wrists a little to make your arms so black!'"[49]

The sharp-eyed white man escapes Pete's racial con, but, *Dar's de Money* seems to imply, many other white people haven't been so lucky or so wise. If white men can play black ones, then black ones can also at least attempt to play white ones, so that the effacing of lines of racial difference represented by passing—or miscegenation—becomes the ultimate nightmare of white supremacy.[50]

The memoirs of Dame Madge Kendal, who as Madge Robertson was Aldridge's last English Desdemona in 1865, share this awareness of the peril into which the presence of a real black man in what previously had been blackface roles could place firm principles of racial difference. Her anecdotes affirm the importance of racial signs in *Othello*:

> Mr. Ira Aldridge was a man who, being black, always picked out the fairest woman he could to play Desdemona with him, not because she was capable of acting but because she had a fair head. One of the great bits of "business" he used to do was where in one of the scenes he had to say, "Your hand, Desdemona." He made a very great point of opening his hand and making you place yours in it; and the audience used to see the contrast.[51]

Kendal's formation by a white racial consciousness of the play must thus acknowledge the enunciative power of a racial position that is white's opposite. Similarly, her identification with the male spectator in the murder scene surely produces her memories of her Desdemona as a helpless white girl, despite the professional and social eminence from which she writes her life story. "Although a genuine black," she notes of Aldridge, "he was quite *preux chevalier* in his manners to women. The fairer you were, the more obsequious he was to you.[52]

The Dingwall writer's angry eyewitness testimony, Mrs. Kendal's memoirs, and the many burlesques and travesties of *Othello* are all animated by their responses to the conjunction of black male and white female bodies. The cover of *Desdemonum*, for example, features the smiling face of a black man in a stiff collar emerging from beneath the stage curtain.[53] Such a prodigiously exaggerated portrayal of a black man's body and his body's powers articulates, as did the relatively restrained earlier engraving of Mungo dancing, versions of the problems and threats black bodies were perceived to embody by white culture. These stories and pictures and plays perform acts of narrative mastery over an otherwise troublingly vagrant signifier. That these comic inversions were sometimes uneasy—

Desdemonum's "Oteller" is smiling, but his head is also monstrous, half as tall as a very high proscenium space—embodies the difficulty of establishing firmly closed narratives of racial order.

At first glance, the overtly racist *Othello Travestie* might well appear to succeed where other white productions of blackness fail; that is, this rewriting of *Othello* as a sexualized farce of black presumption and impertinence seems to succeed in remastering the Moor. Dowling's project of burlesquing Shakespeare is readily underwritten by the equally important project of affirming that "the courtship and wedded caresses of Othello and Desdemona" must indeed be "extremely revolting."[54] Articulating the powers of whiteness for its audience, *Othello Travestie* restages Shakespeare's love tragedy as a racial farce whose utter incongruity rests on a foundation of thwarted and perverted desire.

As critics sensitive to *Othello*'s status as a document saturated with languages of color and racial distinction have pointed out, Shakespeare's play makes the Moor available to the other characters and to himself only through recourse to existing discourses of blackness.[55] To Roderigo, frustrated over losing all hopes of winning Desdemona's love, Othello is the lucky "thick-lips" (1.1.66); Iago stirs Brabantio's patriarchal rage by reminding him that his daughter not only has married without consulting him but is "making the beast with two backs" with a man who is closer to "a Barbary horse" (1.1.116–17, 111–12) than to the kind of man he would have chosen for her. Desdemona herself admits she was won through her sensitivity to an exotically Orientalizing narrative of Othello's origins. When Iago succeeds in planting doubt in Othello's mind, the Moor immediately expresses this doubt in terms of a construction of irreconcilable racial and moral difference; although he can barely believe that she has been unfaithful, if she has it may be because he is black. Physically separated from Venice, emotionally separated from his certainty of Desdemona's love, he is no longer recognizable as the "noble Moor" (4.1.264) who has so well served Venice's ends; indeed, he comes to resemble the barely domesticated beast of burden that Brabantio so readily assumes he is in act 1.

For all its slangy impertinence and willingness to subvert Shakespeare worship, Dowling's *Othello Travestie* preserves this half-submerged, half-unconscious language of racial exclusion. Dowling's updated vocabulary and inclusion of musical numbers set to popular tunes of the day share with their original the same knowledge of and recourse to discourses of blackness, here given additional point by the white British public's new task of learning how to define itself against a world without British-owned black slaves. What Dowling alters, and must alter, most radically is, of course, the character and motivations of Shakespeare's Moor himself. Dowling's changes work to forestall every opportunity for his Othello to display discursive power within the sharpened vocabulary of black and white, bond and free. Instead of entering in the quiet authority of a "Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them" (1.2.59), suggesting his ability to command and to be obeyed in Venice, the *Travestie* Othello insists, in minstrel dialect, that he does not fear Brabantio: "Othello soger—him no run away."[56] Instead of the simple assurance that the "services" (1.2.8) he has done Venice will speak louder

than any of Brabantio's complaints, thus suggesting a set of terms under which he can be allowed a certain status and dignity in the signiory, Dowling's Othello tries to explain to Brabantio that even the sexual intimacies of marriage may affirm the racial superiority that Brabantio fears will be destroyed:

> S'pose him dark—him wife so light,
> De snow itself from her might borrow!
> De piccaninnies may be white
> So what de use make more sorrow.[57]

This breezy abdication of the irreducible quality of his blackness detours around the complications posed by legitimate actors' investment of the role with mimetic passion. By suggesting that whiteness will triumph over blackness even in the crucible of a racially mixed bed, Dowling's Othello gives up the racial power that remained in straight versions of the play, however much the Moor was physically made to resemble a white man.

This emptying out of the sign of Othello's blackness is accompanied by an evacuation of his and Desdemona's mutual sexual passion. While Shakespeare's *Othello* posits that the sexual love between Othello and Desdemona is at least potentially capable of shattering the delicate balance through which Othello the Moor can enjoy a position of prestige and authority in white Venice, Dowling's burlesque concentrates on belittling the nature of the bond's power. Dowling's strategy is to attack it through Shakespeare's Desdemona's culturally improper admission of her passion for her husband, an impropriety compounded by the facts of who and what her husband is. Instead of the Shakespearean character's desire to remain at her husband's side, lest she be bereft of those rites for which she loves him, Dowling's heroine sheepishly admits a helpless sexual attraction. Her admission decontaminates the play's miscegenation of the fearsome fascination it held for its nineteenth-century audiences, reducing this racial fear, that perhaps black and white were not different species, to the patriarchal attitude toward the ownership of white women's bodies and sexuality that enabled it.[58] Dowling's Desdemona sings, to a popular tune of the day, of how she would listen to Othello's stories every night while she curled her hair in her father's kitchen:

> Once while darning father's stocking,
> Oh! he told a tale so shocking;
> So romantic—yet so tender,
> That I fell fainting 'cross the fender.
>
> When I came about—ah, me!
> I was sitting on his knee—
> Grateful for the scrape I'd missed—
> I thanked him—and he welcome kiss'd.[59]

Dowling's version of high culture's masculine and white pleasure of seeing Shakespeare's Desdemona murdered by her black husband is open laughter at Desdemona's shame-faced admission that, after all, she asked for it by being attracted to Othello in the first place. The pornographically displayed victim of monstrous black passion here becomes a willing co-conspirator in *Othello*'s racial and sexual challenges to white patriarchal authority:

> Listen, ladies, if you please—
> Never sit on young men's knees,
> For though I got a husband by it,
> The plan's not good—so pray don't try it.[60]

Dowling's efforts to erode the secret fear at the heart of the play are successful to the precise degree to which they make satirically explicit the contours of the racial unconscious from which *Othello* draws its power in performance. The major departure of the burlesque from Shakespeare's plot comes at the climax of *Othello Travestie*. In Dowling, after Othello smothers Desdemona, her ghost "rises between the lights and the bed"[61] and sings a song to the assembled cast explaining that she has been murdered by Othello. The Moor, stereotypically terrified of ghosts—"Oh! no say dat you come for him/Him tremble so in all him limb"—is seized around the throat by the ghost, and with this threatened revenge

> de truth he come
> Into him perricranium,
> Him no speak more—him feel struck dumb.[62]

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, of course, it is Iago who refuses to speak and explain the carnage which so "poisons" (5.2.364) Ludovico's sight. By having his Othello shocked into silence, instead of Iago choosing silence as his last psychic weapon, Dowling defuses Shakespeare's bitter mystery. Indeed, Dowling's Iago even confesses his perfidy: "Oh dear! I know I am a villain."[63] This confession, however, comes only after the broadest burlesque in the play: Dowling's Desdemona rises from the dead and accuses Iago. After Iago deters Othello from cutting his throat, Roderigo declares, "Then let the past be all forgot," with Othello, Desdemona, and Iago agreeing.[64]

Silencing Othello and having all the assembled characters agree simply to forget what has happened to them doubly revises *Othello*, both revisions suggesting the kinds of tensions that Shakespearean blackface may be designed to address. The silencing of Othello in fact begins with the process of rendering that famous "Othello music"[65] as minstrel show dialect or working-class slang; undoing the power of Shakespeare's language undoes the uneasy power of Shakespeare's scenes, as the burlesquers well understood. To make explicit the ways in which Desdemona's behavior outrages patriarchal norms, as does *Othello Travestie*, or to

mollify white fear by exposing and quashing black people's dangerous racial pretensions, as does *Dar's de Money*, accomplishes through characterization the same kind of reversal and devaluation that minstrel language accomplishes poetically.

To agree to behave as though the murder never happened also works to perform a kind of communal forgetting of just how closely the Shakespearean spectacle approached the sexual and racial fears of white audiences. For it seems that however strenuously the resources of nineteenth-century English stagecraft attempted to blunt the effect of that scene of enactment of black power over the products of the white imagination, it could never entirely efface it. Indeed, when it was attempting to be most elliptical, as in the movement toward less black Othellos and less explicit murder scenes, its synecdoche succeeded most powerfully in thrilling and shocking audiences. The less white audiences could actually see of the murder, the more they could imagine, and their imaginings were apparently truly fearful. To rewrite Shakespearean tragedy into racial farce is to reroute spectators' experience of the play onto less obstructed paths of the racial unconscious. But, as I have attempted to show, no part of the dominant Anglo-American culture's imagining of relations between the races, whether after emancipation in Britain or in the decades before the Civil War in America, can be said to be truly safe.

This resistance to certain kinds of representations of blackness became, in the case of Ira Aldridge, a resistance to black performance. After early observing the suppression of black performance in New York, he apparently never truly caught on with producers or audiences in London. Instead, his career unfolded on the road, in British provincial theaters and in venues all over Europe and Russia. Indeed, it was in Russia that Aldridge seems to have been most deeply appreciated as a performer.[66] Today, Aldridge survives more strongly as a myth than as a well-documented performer; we know many of the roles he played, including Lear in whiteface in Berlin and St. Petersburg, but his acting texts apparently do not survive, and extended commentary on his methods is scanty. The manuscript file on Aldridge at the Folger Shakespeare Library contains one highly suggestive letter, consisting of the "Othello's occupation's gone" speech from act 5 of the play, copied out and mailed, presumably to an admiring spectator, in 1853. Aldridge's work has largely vanished, but traces of the phenomenon of his presence survive, themselves a kind of witness to the disruptively stubborn sign of blackness in nineteenth-century versions of *Othello*.

Notes

1. Covent Garden playbills of April 10 and 12, 1833.

2. Maurice G. Dowling, *Othello Travestie, An Operatic Burlesque Burletta* (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, n.d.), 2.

3. See Ruth Cowhig, "Actors, Black and Tawny, in the Role of *Othello*,—and Their Critics," *Theatre Research International* 4 (1979): 133–46.

4. F. W. Hawkins, *The Life of Edmund Kean. From Published and Original Sources* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1869), 1:221. Hawkins notes that Kean's tawny Othello "got rid of the difficulty arising from the supposed necessity of blackening the Moor's face, by which much of the play of the countenance was lost."

5. Britain's slave trade was declared illegal in 1807, and full abolition (as opposed to the gradual emancipation of the 1833 act) was passed in 1838. For the class and economic elements of Caribbean emancipation, see Michael Craton, *Sinews of Empire: A Short History of British Slavery* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1974), 238–84; and James Walvin, *England, Slaves, and Freedom, 1776–1838* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 74–82.

6. Ray B. Browne, "Shakespeare in American Vaudeville and Negro Minstrelsy," *American Quarterly* 12 (1960): 374–91, is a full early survey of the subject, although Browne does not address his material as I attempt to do here. *Nineteenth-Century Shakespearean Burlesques*, ed. Stanley Wells (London: Diploma Press, 1977), notes that the first nineteenth-century burlesque, John Poole's 1810 *Hamlet Travestie*, complete with mock editorial annotations, was inspired by Poole's disgust with the "folly," "affectation" and "arrogance" of Shakespeare's modern editors (1:xvii). Jonathan Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730–1830* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), is extremely useful on ways in which the institution of Shakespeare became the property of different political and social ideologies in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; see particularly 41–45 on the "Old Price" riots of 1809, occasioned by the management's raising of ticket prices at the new Covent Garden Theatre. Bate sees the riots "as a battle for the possession of Shakespeare" (43); Shakespeare's plays made up a significant part of the repertory at Covent Garden and the riots equally "had economic, as well as Bardolatrous, motivations" (45).

7. "Darkey Dramas" is the heading of section 22 of the "International Descriptive Catalogue of Plays and Dramatic Works" listed inside the front cover of the printed edition of the anonymous *Dar's De Money* (London: French's Acting Editions, ca. 1880). *Desdemonum* was printed in New York by the Happy Hours Press in 1874, although both plays had probably been performed much earlier.

8. Eric Lott, "'The Seeming Counterfeit': Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy," *American Quarterly* 43 (1991): 235. Other works on the minstrel show that I have found useful include Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 3–103; Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 248–86; and Alexander Saxton, "Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology," *American Quarterly* 27 (1975): 3–28.

9. See Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). Miller notes that Africa is a destabilizing "third element" (16) in the West's self-conscious attempts to imagine cultures and peoples through their diametrical opposition to itself. He suggests that European writing and thought about Africa "represents a radical confounding of European discourse in its production of objects, for the object 'Africa' (or 'blackness' or 'idolatry' or 'irreflection') will call into question the terms and conditions of the discourse that created it" (23).

10. George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), 3:631, reports that Thomas "Daddy" Rice jumped Jim Crow, the blackface character he popularized, as the afterpiece of a performance of the Edwin Booth-Thomas Hamblin *Othello* at New York's Bowery Theatre on November 15, 1832. This conjunction of high and low was a literal demonstration of what I argue is the racial link between the two forms.

11. While I am aware that the notion of "race" and the binary thinking that produces it can be used to perpetuate the categorization of white as normal and everything else as deviant, I choose to retain the term because of my conviction that Renaissance and early modern cultures hinged a whole range of gendered political, social, and representational practices on it. In arguing the cultural work performed by concepts of racial difference, for example, Michele Barrett and

Mary McIntosh, "Ethnocentrism and Socialist Feminist Theory," *Feminist Review* 20 (1985): 27, call attention to ways in which "the black/white distinction" has been the means by which "the social and ideological force of racism" has been inscribed in the conduct of Western societies. What intrigues me about Aldridge's performances is the degree to which they may have troubled whiteness as the central or only enunciative position in racial discourse. I believe neither that his performances alone undid an entire binary racial consciousness nor that languages of race are single and internally coherent.

12. Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (1958; Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), 39, report that Aldridge performed in at least one African Theatre production. Although maddeningly sketchy in some of their work's documentation, Marshall and Stock produced the first and fullest biography of Aldridge. My account of the African Company's Shakespearean projects also derives from Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, 3:35–37 and 3:70–71, and from Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 11–16. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 23–47, is particularly useful on Aldridge's early life in New York.

13. *National Advocate*, n.d., as cited in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 33.

14. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 35–36.

15. Anon., *Sketches of Mr. Mathews' Celebrated Trip to America, Comprising a Full Account of His Admirable Lecture on Peculiarities, Characters, and Manners; With the most Laughable of The Stories and Adventures, and Eight Original Comic Songs* (London: J. Limbird, 1823), 9. James V. Hatch, "Here Come Everybody: Scholarship in Black Theatre History," in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*, ed. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 158, suggests that the performer Mathews saw may have been Aldridge himself; Aldridge was frequently billed as the "African Roscius" and often included "Opossum up a Gum Tree" in his performances.

16. Toll, *Blacking Up*, 27, notes that although New York was the birthplace of minstrelsy, it was Charles Mathews who popularized the minstrel show version of the black man both in the United States and in Britain, and that the earliest minstrel show songs were set to existing British melodies.

17. See, for example, Kim F. Hall, "Sexual Politics and Cultural Identity in *The Masque of Blacknesse*," in *The Performance of Power: Theatrical Discourse and Politics*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case and Janelle Reinelt, 3–18 (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991); and Joyce Green MacDonald, "'The Force of Imagination': The Subject of Blackness in Shakespeare, Jonson, and Ravenscroft," *Renaissance Papers* (1991): 53–74. The 1993 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America included a seminar on "Race, Ethnicity and Power in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries," and members' papers and discussion offered much suggestive evidence of my contention here.

18. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 31 and 36, cite the suggestion of the anonymous *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius* (London: Onwhyn, n.d.) that the 1821 *King Richard III* was halted at the instigation of Stephen Price, manager of the much bigger Park Theatre, who was then in the midst of sponsoring Edmund Kean's tour of the United States. Price, according to the theory of the *Memoir*, was "jealous" of the African Company's success in siphoning off the Shakespeare audience and used his influence with the police to get the shows stopped.

19. For example, Jyostna Singh, "Different Shakespeare: The Bard in Colonial/Post-Colonial India," *Theatre Journal* 41 (1989): 445–58.

20. A persistent undercurrent in the New York newspaper accounts of the African Company and its black audiences, for example, criticizes the cohesiveness and the cultural ambitions of the city's neighborhoods of free blacks. As the *National Advocate* of August 3, 1821, put it, "As their number increased, and their consequence strengthened, partly from high wages, high living, and the elective franchise, it was considered necessary to have a place of amusement for them exclusively. . . . [A]ccoutered and caparisoned, these black fashionables saunter up and down . . . in all

the pride of liberty and unconsciousness of want. In their dress, salutations, familiar phrases, and compliments, their imitative faculties are best exhibited" (cited in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 32–33). See also Toll, *Blacking Up*, 3–24; Emma Jones Lapsansky, "'Since They Got Those Separate Churches': Afro-Americans and Racism in Jacksonian Philadelphia," *American Quarterly* 32 (1980): 54–78.

21. The notion of mimicry as a primary means through which colonial discourse attempts to stabilize itself and its others is explored by Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28, no. 1 (1984): 125–33. Here, Bhabha argues that the mimetic strategies employed by colonizers toward their subjects produce such subjects as "the appropriate objects of a colonialist chain of command, authorized versions of otherness. But they are also . . . the figures of a doubling, the part-objects of a metonymy of colonial desire which alienates the modality and normality of those dominant discourses in which they emerge as 'inappropriate' colonial subjects" (129). While I am not as sanguine as Bhabha is here that the sign of otherness is always necessarily so disruptive, I believe that the disruptive effects he argues are probably more available in the special kind of discourse called performance, in the seeing and doing of otherness, than in nonperformative discourses.

22. Jeremy Crump, "The Popular Audience for Shakespeare in Nineteenth-Century Leicester," *Shakespeare and the Victorian Stage*, ed. Richard Foulkes, 271–82 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), is a good account of the circumstances of Shakespearean production for such provincial audiences. Crump (271) notes that the *Leicester Journal* of March 27, 1857, approved of an Aldridge *Othello* as "the drama it should be."

23. From a review in the *Manchester Courier*, cited by Ruth Cowhig, "Ira Aldridge in Manchester," *Theatre Research International* 11 (1986): 240. A slightly revised version of this article appears in the present volume.

24. Playbill, Royal Coburg Theatre, from Aldridge's first London engagement in 1825, quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 54.

25. Undated anonymous review in the *Manchester Courier*, quoted by Cowhig, "Aldridge in Manchester," 240.

26. Unsigned letter to Miss Munro of No. 9 Vine Street, Westminster (written on the back of a playbill advertising Ira Aldridge's performances at the Caledonian Hall, Dingwall, Scotland, May 1, 1840), Manuscript File on *Othello*, Folger Shakespeare Library. The writer is referring to "Zanga," the passionate Moorish hero of Edward Young's *The Revenge*, scenes from which, according to the playbill, Aldridge performed that night.

27. A town nineteen miles northeast of Dingwall.

28. Unsigned letter to Miss Munro.

29. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (online), lists an 1826 usage of "imperial" to describe "a kind of roof or which, viewed in its profile, is pointed towards the top, and widens itself more and more in descending towards its base." The Dingwall writer's use of the plural indicates that the roof of Aldridge's carriage bore more than one of these domes.

30. See especially Michael Neill, "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in Othello," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 4 (1989): 383–412.

31. I take all Shakespeare citations from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974); here, *Othello* 5.1.365. References are to act, scene, and line.

32. I cite *The Padlock. In Two Acts. By Mr. Isaac Bickerstaffe*, the promptbook for a 1783 performance in Edinburgh marked for Ursula; here, 273. This copy, at the Folger Shakespeare Library, is bound with a prompt for *Catherine and Petruchio* and is missing pages 269–73.

33. *The Padlock*, in *Dolby's British Theatre, with original Prefatory Remarks, Biographical Sketches, and Notes* (London: Thomas Dolby, 1823).

34. Ibid., 21.

35. Ibid., 15.

36. Ibid., 25.

37. *The Padlock Open'd: Or, Mungo's* Medley. *Being a Choice Collection of the Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose and Verse, Serious and Comic, Of MUNGO The Padlock-Keeper of Drury Lane* (London: C. Corbett, 1771). Bickerstaffe's Mungo was so much responsible for the family fortunes that Dibdin's mistress, dancer Harriet Pitt, named their first son Charles Isaac Mungo (*Dictionary of National Biography*, 1917 ed., reprinted 1959–60).
38. *The Padlock Open'd*, ix.
39. Ibid., iii.
40. Ibid., vi.
41. Hawkins, *The Life of Edmund Kean*, 1:221. Hawkins notes that Kean "regarded it as a gross error to make Othello either a negro or a black, and accordingly altered the conventional black to the light brown which distinguishes the Moors by virtue of their descent from the Caucasian race." Despite his recognition that Shakespeare describes Othello "with a minuteness which leaves no doubt" that he thought of him as black, Hawkins insists that "there is no reason to suppose that the Moors were darker than the generality of Spaniards, who indeed are half Moors, and compared with the Venetians he would even then be black." This confused ethnography, with its determination to characterize every race by its degree of closeness to or distance from a norm that is unquestioningly conceived of as "white," suggests the ideological underpinnings of a decision that Kean and Hawkins present as a matter of innovative and efficient theatrical practice, and further emphasizes the role of racial discourse in producing *Othello*.
42. Miller, *Blank Darkness*, 23–29.
43. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, cite an anonymous review of Aldridge in *Oroonoko* from the *Times* (London), October 11, 1825: "This gentleman is in complexion of the colour of a new halfpenny, barring the brightness; his hair is woolly, and his features, although they possess much of the African character, are considerably humanized. His figure is unlucky for the stage; he is baker-knee'd and narrow-chested; and owing to the shape of his lips it is utterly impossible for him to pronounce English in such a manner as to satisfy even the unfastidious ears of the gallery" (62). Marshall and Stock also quote an anonymous 1858 reviewer from the *Athenaeum*, expressing "repugnance" at "the labial peculiarity of which we had been forewarned" (213). This emphasis on orality and the appetitive energy suggests how dominant binary racial discourses operated to infantilize black men, and how they attempted a comic neutralization of the economic and sexual threats black men were seen to embody. The broadly whitened lips of typical blackface makeup emphasized the size of the mouth and lips; Toll, *Blacking Up*, 254–56, and Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 258–59, both note the degree to which the size of the mouth of black minstrel performer Billy Kershands became a major focus of his act.
44. Paul H. D. Kaplan, "The Earliest Images of Othello," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39 (1988): 171–86, notes the popularity of the smothering scene as a choice for illustrating printed editions of the play. See also James R. Siemon, "'Nay, that's not next': *Othello*, 5. 2. in Performance, 1760–1900," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (1986): 38–51.
45. Julie Hankey, ed., *Othello*, Plays in Performance Series (Bristol, UK: Bristol Classical Press, 1987), cites this anecdote from volume 1 of Westland Marston's *Our Recent Actors* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1888), 64.
46. Cowhig, "Actors," 135–36, and Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions*, 38–42, discuss the reception of Kean's acting style. Cowhig notes, but does not critically pursue, the "ironic" elements of the sensational impact of "the first tawny Othello . . . in expressing the passionate feelings traditionally associated with black Moors" (136).
47. *Titus Andronicus*, 4.2.99–103.
48. *Dar's de Money*, 25.
49. Ibid., 22.
50. See Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man": "The ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from *mimicry*—a difference that is almost nothing but not quite to *menace*—a difference that is almost total but not quite. And in [this] other scene of colonial power, where history turns to farce

. . . can be seen the twin figures of narcissism and paranoia that repeat furiously, uncontrollably" (132). Toll, *Blacking Up*, 39–40, notes that the sheet music for the songs performed by an early blackface troupe, the Ethiopian Serenaders, showed the performers both in blackface character and as undisguised white men. This visual demonstration of true and assumed racial identities further suggests the representational potency of blackface disguise.

51. Mrs. Kendal, *Dramatic Opinions* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1890), 28–29. In a later version of her memoirs, *Dame Madge Kendal by Herself* (London: John Murray, 1933), 86–87, this bit of stage business is recalled in different words.

52. Kendal, *Dramatic Opinions*, 29. Mrs. Kendal adds that in the murder scene, Aldridge "used to take Desdemona out of bed by her hair and drag her around the stage before he smothered her. . . . I remember very distinctly this dragging Desdemona about by the hair was considered so brutal that it was loudly hissed" (30). In *Dame Madge Kendal by Herself*, 87, she says, "In the last act, in which he made me wear toed stockings with sandals to suggest being undressed, he used to take me out of bed by my hair and drag me round the stage before he smothered me. So brutal did it seem that the audience hissed the business vociferously." Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, 21, observes that no contemporary account of the performance mentioned this sensational flourish, and thinks Mrs. Kendal, writing twenty-five years after the fact, may somehow be conflating her *Othello* memories with those of a contemporary *Oliver Twist*, whose Bill Sykes dragged Nancy around the stage by the hair twice before dashing her brains out on the floor. This particular confusion of detail suggests the power of the play's reproduction of, and of Kendal's production within, white ideologies of Othello's blackness.

53. Neill, "Unproper Beds," 386–89, includes several illustrations from the Folger Shakespeare Library's Art File on the play that foreground, in increasingly voluptuous detail, the appearance of Desdemona in the bed just before the angry Moor awakens and attacks her. Neill also reproduces an undated caricature from a series called *Tregear's Black Jokes*, which he believes is also a response to Aldridge's Othello: "The caricaturist sublimates his anxiety at the scene's sexual threat through the burlesque device of transforming Desdemona into an obese black woman, her snoring mouth grotesquely agape" (391). In the illustration, a dialogue balloon over the head of the grimacing Othello holds that Desdemona "must die, else, she'll betray more *Niggers*" (392).

54. Charles Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for Stage Representation," *The Dramatic Essays of Charles Lamb*, ed. Brander Matthews (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1891), 188. Lamb argues that the physical specificity of performance works to emphasize what might otherwise be mediated through the "beautiful compromise" effected by readers' imaginations, and that the results of this emphasis are sometimes aesthetically and emotionally untenable. His assertion that the onstage spectacle of a black Othello making love to a white Desdemona is necessarily and unalterably "revolting" to a white spectator seems particularly applicable to my argument here about the motivations of theatrical attempts to undo Othello's blackness.

55. Besides Neill, see, for example, Martin Orkin, "Othello and the 'Plain Face' of Racism," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38 (1987): 166–88; and Jyostna Singh, "Othello's Identity, Postcolonial Theory, and Contemporary African Rewritings of *Othello*," *Women, Race, Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 287–99, 365–68.

56. Dowling, *Othello Travestie*, 7.

57. Ibid., 8.

58. Edward A. Snow, "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in *Othello*," *English Literary Renaissance* 10 (1980): 384–41; Karen Newman, "'And wash the Ethiop white': Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*," in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor, 143–62 (London: Methuen, 1987).

59. Dowling, *Othello Travestie*, 11.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid., 36 (stage direction).
62. Ibid., 36.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid. In *Desdemonum*, Oteller smothers the title character only to have "Cashum" (Michael Cassio) enter and tell him that he found the handkerchief on "de stairs" and used it to blow his nose. Relieved to discover the truth, Oteller stabs himself and falls on his wife's body to the accompaniment of fiddlers and pipers. According to the final stage directions, the assembled characters "join hands and dance around them. Steller [*sic*] and Desdemonum get up and join in" (8).
65. The phrase is the title of G. Wilson Knight's chapter, "The *Othello Music*," in *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), 97–119.
66. Hankey, *Othello*, 80–83.

11

Ira Aldridge

Shakespeare and Minstrelsy

Nicholas M. Evans

Ira Aldridge (1807–67) was one of the first actors of African descent to appear on British and other European stages, and he was the first to achieve widespread fame and recognition. Born in New York, Aldridge began his theatrical career there before emigrating to England in about 1825. Although he is little known currently in the United States, he was a celebrated Shakespearean, most notably in the roles of Othello, Macbeth, Shylock, and Lear. His success brought him into contact with a diverse collection of personages that included the British tragedian Edmund Kean, the German naturalist Baron von Humboldt, "the Swedish Nightingale" Jenny Lind, Alexandre Dumas (père), Hans Christian Andersen, probably Franz Liszt, and possibly Richard Wagner (an Aldridge admirer). His two daughters, Luranah and Amanda, also earned considerable renown in Europe as classically trained singers and, in Amanda's case, as a composer who also gave voice lessons to the likes of Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, and Paul Robeson.[1]

The single substantial work of Aldridge scholarship in English is Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock's biography, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (1958), which includes a wealth of primary reference materials.[2] According to Marshall and Stock's research, Aldridge was born in New York City on July 24, 1807. Son of Luranah Aldridge and Daniel Aldridge, a lay preacher and street vendor of straw, Ira attended one of New York's African Free Schools in his teens. There he received a formal education rare for African Americans at the time: "boys were taught reading, writing, arithmetic, English grammar, composition, geography, astronomy," and other subjects.[3] His amateur and semiprofessional experience in drama began with the African (or African Grove) Theatre, which existed from about 1820 to 1823, where he may have played Shakespeare's Romeo and Rolla in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's adaptation of *Pizarro*.

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The African Theatre was the scene of an important episode that affected Aldridge's career from its inception to its end. This episode underscored the fact that Aldridge's performances encompassed not only Shakespeare but also blackface minstrelsy and various points in between.

Act 1: Hamlet in Blackface?

In *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott briefly discusses the British actor Charles Mathews (1776–1835), a precursor of the United States minstrels of the 1830s onward. Mathews's "American caricatures included black preachers and other such types—the first popular antecedents of blackface acts."[4] One of his most successful skits was an alleged imitation of Aldridge. Mathews's parodic impersonation consisted of "reenacting" an incident he claimed to have witnessed in New York's African Theatre during an 1822–23 United States tour. In the midst of delivering Hamlet's most famous soliloquy, Aldridge, Mathews asserted, was ridiculously interrupted by the rowdy black audience and persuaded to sing a "Negro ballad" entitled "Opossum Up a Gum Tree."

In Mathews's caricature, Aldridge speaks in stereotyped "Negro" dialect and displays the types of ostentatious behavior later employed in minstrel acts.[5] Mathews's apparent aim was to emphasize the incongruity between Shakespeare and African American culture, as embodied by "Opossum." The song's thematic content certainly seems a departure from *Hamlet*; its central conceit involves a possum who, while climbing a tree, has his tail pulled by a raccoon (usually spelled "racoon") hiding in a hollow. An excerpt from Mathews's own 1824 account of the African Theatre incident reveals as much:

Opossum up a gum tree,
  Tinkey none can follow:
Him damn quite mistaken,
  Racoon in de hollow.
Opossum him creep softly,
  Racoon him lay mum,
Pull him by de long tail,
  Down opossum come.
Jinkum, jankum, beaugash,
  Twist 'em, twine 'em, run,
Oh de poor opossum,
  Oh, de sly racoon.[6]

Mathews underscores the absurdity of combining such a song with *Hamlet* by characterizing "the sable tragedian" as a blowhard buffoon:

> Finishing his song, this versatile genius, retiring up the stage, is strutting down with one arm akimbo, and the other spouting out in front, just for all the world like a black teapot, bellowing out—"Now is de winter of our discontent made de glorous summer by de sun of New York." And on a person in the boxes telling him he should play Hamlet and not Richard III, replies, "Yes, him know dat, but him tought of New York den and could not help talking about it."[7]

This performance hardly seems the work of a renowned Shakespearean.

What interests Eric Lott about Mathews's skit is that Aldridge, despite denying that the alleged incident ever occurred, eventually began performing the "Opossum" song himself at audiences' request. In effect, Aldridge adopted Mathews's impersonation of him as an "authentic" self-representation. To Lott, this acceptance shows how Aldridge was "making himself, in a morbid play on Sartre, of what he had been made."[8] Onstage, at least, the black Shakespearean appears to have willingly allowed himself to be degraded into a racist caricature. Dominant discourses of race—combined with the lure of profit, as Lott suggests—overtook Aldridge, despite the fact that he established himself as a respected tragedian.

This interpretation of Aldridge's performance decisions clashes with the perspective offered by Marshall and Stock. The biographers persistently argue that, in virtually every aspect of his life and career, Aldridge advanced the goal of demonstrating racial equality. They show convincingly that Aldridge's considerable skills as a tragedian caused some audience members to question racist predispositions. As for his "comic" roles, including his singing of "Opossum Up a Gum Tree," Marshall and Stock contend that performing both comedy and tragedy displayed Aldridge's dramatic range and thereby reinforced his greater humanity.

Lott's interpretation of "Opossum" productively complicates Marshall and Stock's view by emphasizing that the meanings of Aldridge's performances operated in larger social and cultural contexts that were beyond his control (and possibly exercised some control over him). Despite the best of intentions, a "comedic" minstrel-like role could bolster racist predispositions, not challenge them. Indeed, the same can be said of some aspects of Aldridge's tragedic roles, as we shall see. The actor's career cannot be narrated as a seamless antiracist project.

On the other hand, Lott's brief assessment of Aldridge's engagement with nascent blackface minstrelsy can also be productively complicated. Aldridge's performance of "Opossum" could additionally represent a sly reappropriation of the alleged incident that inspired Mathews's caricature—one that unearthed different meanings from Hamlet's segue into song. The thrust of Mathews's skit was to ridicule black Shakespeareans as pretentious and audacious and to present their "true" clownishness—to "put them in their place" (an effort that reveals Mathews's anxiety about formally educated African Americans). In contrast,

Aldridge's reprises of "Opossum" may have echoed meanings in Shakespeare's work that spoke to Aldridge's own struggles with the very racism that encouraged him to perform the song.

Nationality joined race as an issue that conditioned Aldridge's performances. Mathews's "Opossum" skit, which Aldridge's playbills reminded theatergoers was part of a larger piece entitled "A Trip to America," recalled Aldridge's birthplace. However, the actor's relationship with his native country was complicated, and often he obscured his national origin. After leaving the United States early in life, Aldridge never returned; he became a British citizen in 1863. Initially billed as "American" in his first London performance, very soon thereafter—and for the rest of his career—he became labeled "African." Eventually Aldridge began claiming Senegalese origins (royal Fulah birth, no less) and claiming to have emigrated to the United States at age nine.

Regardless of Aldridge's apparent efforts to distance himself from a United States identity, the musical and theatrical culture in which he participated in Europe remained permeated by American influences. The blackface minstrel acts that began visiting England in the 1830s are a prime example. This cultural dynamic underscores how minstrelsy and related forms, such as early vaudeville-like "variety" shows, were transatlantic phenomena. Indeed, the influence flowed in both directions, for British musical theater was a primary progenitor of early nineteenth-century blackface acts.[9] Charles Mathews's case exemplified these trends: both while visiting the United States and after returning to England, he developed acts that combined alleged imitations of African Americans with English stage music, thereby becoming a de facto father of "American" minstrelsy. For these reasons, Aldridge's work should be considered in the context of what Paul Gilroy calls the "black Atlantic"[10] in addition to the context of conventionally defined American and British national boundaries.

Act 2: Life and Times

A central reason Aldridge emigrated to England to pursue a "serious" acting career was the hostile environment in New York toward African American artists. This hostility appeared in the closing of the African Theatre, which both Lott and Marshall and Stock link to the rise of minstrelsy. Apparently due to its success with both black and white audiences, this theater was temporarily shut down numerous times, and eventually for good, by the machinations of white theater managers. An 1822 press account of one such closing reports the official justification as "danger from fire and civil discord," and the same account indirectly exposes a source of the perceived "civil discord": the black actors were held by the police until they "promised never to act Shakespeare again."[11] It seems the African Americans' performance of Shakespeare upset the dominant economy of cultural authority, inspiring a forceful effort to retrench that economy. The emergence of

early United States blackface minstrelsy acts at around the same historical moment arguably complemented that effort. Marshall and Stock argue that minstrel acts "forced out" the African Theatre and what it represented, the early institution of American black theater. Lott concurs: "the shutting down of the African Grove seems a rather more direct result of the caricatures that went some way toward replacing it."[12] In England, Aldridge escaped the prohibition on Shakespeare, but he could not escape the trend toward very different representations of blackness on the musical stage.

Aldridge arrived in England in 1824 or 1825, and he reached the London stage at the Royalty Theatre by spring of the latter year. On October 10, 1825, he began a six-week run at the Coburg Theatre, in whose playbills he received top billing. During this engagement he performed in the title role of an adaptation of Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko* (itself an adaptation of Aphra Behn's eponymous 1688 novella) and also portrayed other, similarly tragic African heroes who suffered and rebelled against enslavement. This repertoire suggests something that held for much of Aldridge's early career: its entwining with English abolitionism. However, this political undercurrent to Aldridge's roles was complicated even in his inaugural run at the Coburg. In Thomas Morton's *The Slave*, Aldridge played "a character entirely different from Oroonoko": Gambia, a "sentimental, super-patriotic colonial slave, servile to his masters."[13]

Aldridge did not receive offers from any other London theater after his Coburg engagement, which presaged the professional difficulty he would have throughout his career in the British capital. However, he found fairly steady work in the British provinces. From 1826 to 1852, he regularly toured the regional cities of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, gradually establishing and cementing his reputation as a master actor. Early in this period he continued playing the likes of Oroonoko and Gambia but also began expanding his professional tragedic repertoire to include such roles as Othello (in late 1825), which would remain a staple throughout his career; additional antislavery parts such as those of Zanga in Edward Young's *The Revenge* and Hassan in Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Castle Spectre* (in 1827); and Shylock (in 1831), Macbeth, and Richard III (both in 1832).[14]

During the same period, Aldridge also began to assay and to be acclaimed for comedic roles. In 1826 he first appeared as the West Indian slave Mungo in Isaac Bickerstaffe's musical, *The Padlock*. A similar character that he adopted later (apparently during the 1840s) was that of a United States slave, Ginger Blue, in *The Virginian Mummy*. Aldridge reprised the latter role until at least 1860, and Mungo "is the one role, apart from Othello, that he played the whole of his life, without a break." Aldridge's entr'acte performances of "Opossum Up a Gum Tree" which he undertook for at least twenty years starting in the late 1820s, making the song "famous all over Europe," also qualifies as one of these roles.[15]

Aldridge's musical performances between and within plays point to an important aspect of British stage history that also relates to nineteenth-century United

States musical theater. From the Restoration to 1843, "legitimate drama" like Shakespeare's works could be performed only at the so-called patent theaters; in London these were Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and (later) the Haymarket. Some minor theaters subverted the prohibition by securing a burletta license, which allowed the performance of a type of comic popular opera; the theaters simply added some degree of musical accompaniment to plays, including adaptations of Shakespeare's tragedies and histories. Under cover of the license, the term *burletta* came "to cover almost any play the minor theatre manager wished to perform as long as it was written in three acts and had a minimum of five airs."[16] Although the distinction between a burletta and a strictly defined play was considerably blurred by the 1830s, until 1843 many of the pieces in which Aldridge appeared would have been considered burlettas. These works included not only *The Padlock* but Morton's *The Slave*; James Cobb, William Reeve, and Joseph Mazzinghi's *Paul and Virginia*; and John Fawcett and Samuel Arnold's *Obi, or Three-Fingered Jack*. Hans Nathan identifies all of these tragedies and comedies as "operas" or "plays with incidental music."[17]

The combination of performative elements driven by burletta licenses encouraged the development of song-laced dramas and comedies as well as stage programs that interspersed plays with sketches, musical acts, and the like. Charles Mathews's skits fitted into such programs, as did a similar type of composite entertainment that Aldridge presented for a time. From 1838 to 1846 he performed a one-man show that combined various small pieces, including a lecture on dramatic criticism, reflections on slavery, excerpted monologues from his most famous parts, and comic skits such as those from Mathews's "A Trip to America." Accompanying himself on the guitar, Aldridge also performed songs such as "West India Courtship," "Lubly Rosa, Sambo Come," and "Opossum Up a Gum Tree."[18] These eclectic performances resembled the one-man "lectures" that Mathews delivered, of which "A Trip to America" was an example. Such works clearly exemplify early "variety" shows. Indeed, the burlettas' legacy of influence ranged from English music halls and Gilbert and Sullivan operettas[19] to United States minstrelsy, vaudeville, and Broadway and Hollywood musicals. In 1852, Aldridge himself referred to one of his musical comedies as a "Vaudeville," by which Marshall and Stock explain he meant "a light or comic opera" such as *The Padlock*.[20]

The transatlantic correspondences of these cultural forms recall another kind of traffic emphasized by the many slave characters that Aldridge played. As was fitting for dramas (and even some comedies) with abolitionist leanings, works like *Oroonoko* and *The Padlock* were set in the New World—Surinam and the West Indies, respectively. Slavery was hotly debated in England early in Aldridge's career and abolished in the British colonies in 1833, suggesting a very palpable sense of a "black Atlantic" at that place and time. Aldridge himself, despite being the son of a Northern freeman, nevertheless found it necessary to emigrate across the ocean seeking greater opportunities—only to find himself symbolically

"returning" in the figures he portrayed. The "central organising symbol" of Paul Gilroy's notion of the black Atlantic consists of "ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean," suggesting cultural processes characterized by "creolisation, metissage, mestizaje, and hybridity."[21] Charles Mathews's British burletta skits caricaturing African American Shakespeareans represent one possible outcome of a black Atlantic. Ira Aldridge's adaptation and appropriation of those skits—along with his many "African" roles, including Othello, which were created by Britons and traditionally performed in blackface—represent another.

Aldridge's disparate repertoire of "serious" and quasi-minstrel roles, as well as his negotiation of their problematic aspects, suggests a performative manifestation of Du Boisian double consciousness. In a manner consistent with Gilroy's contentions, the actor's experience of this condition might have been heightened by his emigration from the United States and his reception in England, drawing novel resonances from Du Bois's famous description. "[T]his American world," Du Bois writes, is

> a world which yields [the Negro] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[22]

Aldridge's particular case inspires double readings of many phrases in this passage. The most prominent example is to read "England" both with and against "America." Aldridge's experience as a young man in New York inspired him to abandon pursuit of the full rights of American citizenship, yet he sought a similar status in the greater opportunities of—and his eventual naturalization in—England. Nevertheless, "this American world" also found a home in England via the likes of Mathews's "Opossum" caricature, arguably inspiring a similar sense of "twoness": a Briton, a "Negro."

Aldridge enacted and was emblazoned with this dual sense of social identity in the theater: on stage, he was both a Shakespearean (British) and a New World "Negro." Yet even in this symbolic performance of dual identity, "no true self-consciousness" might be obtained, for even a Shakespearean role like Othello manifests a British view of black identity and still "only lets [the Negro] see himself through the revelation of the other world." Moreover, the British theater as an institution (in another double reading of Du Bois's passage) ritualized and made especially palpable "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." Playing roles that were defined by others perpetuated a struggle of consciousness for Aldridge.

Aldridge's limited opportunities in London throughout his career also perpetuated this struggle by emphasizing his distance from the full benefits and accomplishment of artistic status and British identity. After his 1825 engagement at the Coburg, Aldridge apparently did not perform in London again until April 1833. He took what could have become a significant step in the development of the English stage by appearing at Covent Garden, one of the patent theaters, playing Othello. The venue needed to replace the celebrated tragedian Edmund Kean, who had occupied the title role but became ill and soon died. Aldridge stepped in to perform with a virtually identical cast. However, his engagement lasted only two nights. Some of the reviews he received were extremely harsh; Marshall and Stock attribute them to proslavery sentiment, for the slave trade lobby was "at [that] very moment fighting a last rearguard action" against abolitionism.[23] Aldridge quickly arranged to appear at a minor London theater, the Surrey, where he performed intermittently for a month, but thereafter he did not return to the capital for fifteen years. He had only a few more London performances in his career, including engagements at the Surrey again and another minor theater in 1848, at the Lyceum in 1858, and at the Haymarket in 1865.

Although the British provinces offered Aldridge much more opportunity to practice his art than did New York, London—the center of dramaturgical status and recognition in the English-speaking world—proved only slightly more hospitable than New York. Aldridge's chilly reception there contributed to his embarking on numerous Continental tours beginning in 1852. The last fifteen years of his life saw performances in Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Holland, France, Sweden, Poland, and various parts of the Austrian Empire. Throughout these travels, Aldridge garnered acclaim that, perhaps ironically, helped him secure his appearances at the Lyceum and the Haymarket. In his last decade he also frequently toured Russia, where he received a particularly warm welcome. It was in St. Petersburg in 1858 that he first performed King Lear. Although Aldridge's official residence was in London, he visited England only infrequently in his final years. He died on August 7, 1867, on tour in Lodz, Poland, where he is buried.

Act 3: Othello and Mungo

Although Marshall and Stock admit it is doubtful that Aldridge subscribed to any type of "radical" politics, in the same breath they insist that "[h]e was, of course, a staunch fighter for racial equality."[24] In a review of the 1993 republication of *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian*, Edward T. Washington allows the plausibility of the "argument that Aldridge actively opposed racial discrimination and slavery," but he adds that "too often [Marshall and Stock's] text fails to provide sufficient documentation for this portrayal."[25] Washington's assessment is accurate. Never-

theless, by reproducing numerous contemporary reviews of Aldridge's performances, Marshall and Stock do provide extensive evidence that the actor's stage work often effected challenges to the more noxious racial theories and perspectives of his day.

The roles that most produced this effect were those of Shakespearean tragic heroes, especially Othello. Reviewers almost unanimously agreed that skillfully portraying such noble figures disproved allegations of "Negro" inferiority and demonstrated Aldridge's humanity. It is probably due to this trend of reception that Marshall and Stock selectively emphasize Aldridge as a tragedian in their book's subtitle. However, reviewers sometimes attributed just as much significance to Aldridge's humorous roles, especially Mungo in *The Padlock*. Indeed, Othello and Mungo were often paired as a joint representation of both Aldridge's versatility as an actor and his capacity for the full range of human emotion and experience. Musical performance contributed to this assessment, since Aldridge's renditions of Mungo's plaintive and merry songs impressed audiences. Nevertheless, the nineteenth-century staging of both roles—including their musical aspects—also harbored potentially racist elements that ran counter to the egalitarianist trend of Aldridge's reception.

Although Aldridge certainly had his detractors (especially earlier in his career), testimonials to his theatrical abilities appeared as early as his first performances and gradually came to dominate his reception. As early as 1829, a central component of his performances was a departure from the exaggerated, "ranting" theatrical style that dominated the European acting of the day. Aldridge presented his characters so "realistically" that some reviewers wondered whether he was acting at all; to them he "became" his characters. Errol Hill notes that this "naturalistic approach to speech and acting, an approach that now dominates the contemporary stage," is generally agreed to have "occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century." He feels that theater historians have neglected Aldridge's contributions to the development of this approach.[26]

Generally speaking, the degree to which reviewers admired Aldridge's skills and approved of his theatrical style corresponded directly to the degree to which they perceived his work as challenging dominant racial discourses. Robert J. C. Young shows that nineteenth-century Europe hosted many variants of racial theory; two prominent forms were outright polygenism and a qualified form of monogenism, both of which could ideologically support colonialism. Polygenism asserts that people of different "races" embody distinct species. Its most common form was a tripartite scheme of black, yellow, and white races. Supposedly "the yellow race was only partly capable of civilization, the black never at all," a view that presented Africans and their descendants as subhuman. The form of qualified monogenism that Young considers "the dominant [racial] view from the 1850s to the 1930s" portrayed all "races" as belonging to a single species, but it preserved the notion of a scale of human civilization: black people were allegedly the least developed, white people the most developed.

The dominant form of qualified monogenism could certainly support racism, but it contained a residual concept from the eighteenth century: the Enlightenment view that all humans possess an equal capacity for development, education, and self-improvement. This view is relatively egalitarian, but it was usually employed Eurocentrically. The direction of "development" was inevitably toward European formations of culture and society; it was the adoption of or integration into these formations that supposedly represented improvement.[27]

Reviewers who lauded Aldridge and found his work proof of racial equality tended to rely on the Enlightenment tenet of universal improvement to refute polygenic perspectives. These significant refutations offered an important way for nineteenth-century Europeans to understand a "Negro" like Aldridge as a fellow human being. However, the usually unspoken basis of the reviewers' egalitarianism was Eurocentric: Aldridge achieved "humanity" by mastering one of the highest forms of British art.

A few sample reviews of Aldridge's tragedic performances from three moments in his career illustrate the point. In December 1825, the *Brighton Gazette* approved of Aldridge's "graceful" impersonation of Oroonoko. His performance was

> a curious and an interesting spectacle well calculated to awaken a trend of deep reflections, as we view the emanations of that "untutored mind" which we have been taught to consider on a level with the brute creation, and incapable of raising itself to the common range of humanity.[28]

Of Aldridge's Othello in Brighton the following week, the London *Morning Post* theater critic wrote that Aldridge's clearly evident

> intellectual ability afforded a powerful illustration that blacks as well as whites may be equally fashioned by education—and that to education, principally, is to be ascribed that mental superiority which the latter have too often endeavoured to persuade themselves that they exclusively enjoy.[29]

In 1844, at mid-career, Aldridge's Shylock in Newport produced this response from the *Merlin*:

> It is a subject of interesting contemplation for the moralist, to find a native of the land of Jugurtha, one of a race made mere merchandise for ages, now of equal rank with his fellow men in civilised life, and delighting, by his cultivation and accomplishments, an intellectual British audience.[30]

Finally, in 1862 in Moscow, a commentator replied to critics who attributed Aldridge's "realistic" enactment of Othello to innate savagery and a lack of training. The defender, S. Almazov, asserted that Aldridge, "who has received in Europe an aesthetic education," acts naturally by design: "in parts of the play,

where it is necessary, he very vividly represents the movements of a man in whom is suddenly awakened the feelings of a savage, but he does this deliberately and these are not his personal feelings."[31] To this commentator, Aldridge's formal schooling trumped any presumed racial inferiority and helped him masterfully convey the full range of human emotions.

In some cases, reviewers applied this same basic argument to Aldridge's American nationality instead of—or in addition to—his race. Almazov's pointed assertion that Aldridge's "aesthetic education" was *European* implies an assumed lack of such schooling in the United States as much as in Africa. Similarly, a reviewer of Aldridge's Oroonoko at the Coburg found his "impressive" and "judicious" portrayal all the more remarkable "considering he has attained his eminence under all the disadvantages of the present state of American society."[32] These "disadvantages" seem principally to be those of national culture, though they also hint at the institution of slavery. Similar characterizations involved Aldridge's accent. The actor supposedly shed some of "the peculiarity which is attached by his countrymen to the pronunciation of certain syllables" in order to speak "with a good accent"—that is, in the manner of the King's English.[33] Gesturing toward the ambiguity of the term *countrymen*, Marshall and Stock observe that "Whether the 'peculiarity' refers to American or Negro speech is not clear."[34]

While these evaluations show how Aldridge's acting could effect more egalitarian conceptions of Africans and Americans, they do not encompass the full expanse of issues raised by a "Negro" performing in British drama—especially Shakespearean tragedy, particularly *Othello*. Almazov's concern to differentiate between the educated Aldridge and Othello's episodically "savage" behavior hints at issues of characterization that limit how ennobling playing Othello could (or can) be. At least for nineteenth-century English audiences, *Othello* irrepressibly evoked anxieties about interracial sexuality and helped reinforce perceptions and fears of black men as dangerously aggressive. Marshall and Stock comment on aspects of these issues but dismiss their possible effect on Aldridge's career too lightly and quickly.

Surveying the scholarship on representations of blackness in *Othello*, Lisa Starks focuses on the important image of Othello and Desdemona's "marital bed." It

> was the preoccupation of stage performances, as well as visual art depicting the scenes from Shakespeare's tragedy, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. On stage the bed was hidden from sight, while ironically it remained the central obsession of the audiences both on and off stage. This fascination and horror of Othello and Desdemona's sex life culminated in the death scene, when the imagined bed was shown and the act of sexual intercourse between the black Othello and his white bride envisioned on stage as murder.[35]

The connotations of Othello as deadly sexual aggressor invaded contemporary discourse on Aldridge. Marshall and Stock document and then prematurely belittle the significance of rumors that began circulating in 1858 that Aldridge—

supposedly displaying his "true" savagery—actually suffocated the actresses playing Desdemona.[36] The actress who played Desdemona to Aldridge's Othello in 1865 at the Haymarket made less severe but no less significant allegations:

> In the last act he used to take Desdemona out of bed by her hair, and drag her round the stage before he smothered her. You had to wear sandals and toed stockings to produce the effect of being undressed. I remember very distinctly this dragging of Desdemona about by the hair was considered so brutal that it was loudly hissed.[37]

Hill claims that Aldridge never did play Othello this way,[38] but the truth of the matter could easily be overwhelmed by the imagery's salience in the popular imagination. Hints of these perceptions emerged much earlier in Aldridge's career; a review of his 1833 Covent Garden appearance lamented that the actress playing Desdemona was "subjected" to "the indignity of being pawed about" by Aldridge.[39] This general view of African American men as sexual predators of white women was common in the nineteenth-century United States as well, of course, especially in the postbellum South.

Bernth Lindfors suggests a more immediate context for the attachment of these racial/sexual anxieties: Aldridge's personal life. The actor was married twice (in 1825 and 1865), both times to white women: first to Margaret Gill, an Englishwoman, and second to Amanda Pauline von Brandt, a Swede. Aldridge established a second household and began having children with Amanda in the early 1860s, before Margaret's death. The Aldridge family's somewhat unconventional arrangements actually began earlier: Aldridge's first son, Ira Daniel, was born in 1847 to an unidentified Irishwoman but raised by Margaret as her own child. This was not an isolated incident: as Lindfors documents, in 1853 a fellow actor's wife bore Aldridge's child, after which the husband sued his colleague. The resulting court case "received wide publicity throughout the British Isles." Lindfors concludes that Aldridge was well known and resented as a paramour of white women and speculates that this reputation might have been "the primary reason that he was kept off the London stage for most of his career."[40]

However much Aldridge's personal life might have contributed to rumors of his sexual violence toward his Desdemonas, the rumors were clearly exaggerations based on more than biographical detail. They manifest a broader set of connotations of imaginary blackness, and in this context we must remember the long stage tradition of performing Othello in blackface. Joyce Green MacDonald contends that Aldridge's 1833 appearance at Covent Garden interrupted and troubled that tradition by questioning the representation of "African" identity that blackface—and Shakespeare's play—supposedly portrayed with authority. That is, as a skilled actor who actually was black, Aldridge both exposed the artificiality of blackface as a stage convention and undermined the assumed black savagery that white actors in blackface so often

promulgated.[41] MacDonald finds it significant that Aldridge replaced Edmund Kean in the Covent Garden production: the icon of the British stage famous for his (blackface) Othello was, in effect, directly displaced by a black successor—in one of the capital's royal patent theaters, no less. It was the threat of this potential appropriation of cultural power, MacDonald suggests, that may have inspired London theater managers' aversion to Aldridge.

MacDonald also proposes that various *Othello* burlesques that followed Aldridge's Covent Garden appearance, such as Maurice Dowling's *Othello Travestie* (1834), functioned to defuse the possible cultural threat of Aldridge's Othello. These burlesques featured songs and may have been categorized as burlettas, as the two words' shared root suggests (*burla*, or joke). The Moor of the *Travestie* was modeled on Charles Mathews's caricatures of African Americans: he speaks in "minstrel show black dialect"[42] and is otherwise a stereotypical buffoon. MacDonald also shows how the *Travestie* attempts to belittle the sexual attraction between Othello and Desdemona and ridiculously transforms the final murder scene to muffle audiences' concern about its conflation of interracial sex with murder. In the face of Aldridge's growing fame, the *Othello Travestie* and its ilk embodied cultural efforts to preserve more familiar, less threatening representations of imaginary blackness.

This discussion returns us to the subject of Aldridge's comedic performances, which themselves could function in ways similar to the *Othello* burlesques. Marshall and Stock appear to ignore this possibility completely. Noting that roles like Mungo (see figure 11.1) garnered Aldridge acclaim for versatility, the biographers also repeatedly assert that these roles reinforced perceptions of the actor's humanity. For example, they cite a review of an 1833 performance in Wales that applauded both Aldridge's Othello and his Mungo; the latter "displayed the versatility of his talent, and astonished and delighted the audience."[43] On such praise for this pair of roles, Marshall and Stock approvingly quote the Aldridge scholar Sergei Durylin: Othello and Mungo represent "two truths: a mighty truth and a tiny truth about one man—a black."[44] In other words, the lofty tragic hero and the humble but spirited servant dialogically portray a fullness of experience and identity that is both racially particular and possibly universal (reading the "one man" as emblematically representative).

Marshall and Stock also associate Mungo with the abolitionist tragedies in which Aldridge played, such as *Oroonoko*. They highlight passages in *The Padlock* showing Mungo's protests against his exploitation. Some of these protests appear in the servant's songs, such as "What a terrible life am I led":

> A dog has a better, that's sheltered and fed,
> Night and day 'tis de same,
> My pain is dere game,
> Me wish to de Lord me was dead.[45]

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Figure 11.1 Ira Aldridge as Mungo in *The Padlock* (published in Tallis's *Drawing Room Book of Theatrical Portraits, Memoirs and Anecdotes*. London and New York: John Tallis & Co., 1851).

As Nathan notes, the English currency of this type of "pathetic" song about slaves' suffering "reached a crescendo towards the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries."[46] A similar tradition existed in the United States, which, even after the end of slavery in the British colonies, apparently helped preserve English abolitionist feeling. Marshall and Stock emphasize that, after the 1852 publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, audiences evoked that book to sentimentalize Mungo's suffering.[47]

Nevertheless, the biographers never address how the principally comic nature of Mungo could run contrary to Aldridge's ennoblement. The history of *The Padlock* provides additional context for its compromised portrayal of the servant. This very successful comedy was originally produced at Drury Lane in 1768 with music by Charles Dibdin, who originated the role of Mungo. Dibdin played in blackface, of course, and became famous for the character. His quasi-minstrel performances, which again emphasize the transatlantic nature of blackface forms, predated Charles Mathews's skits by more than fifty years. Aldridge inherited and extended this legacy when he began enacting Mungo and similar burletta roles. The format of Mathews's eclectic "lecture" performances, which influenced Aldridge's one-man shows, was modeled on Dibdin's similar "Table Entertainments," and *The Padlock* and other English "operas" and "plays with incidental music" in which Aldridge appeared contributed directly to the development of blackface minstrelsy.[48]

Some of the stereotypical aspects of Mungo were apparently unavoidable: he can be lazy, he enjoys drinking, and he loves music and dancing. Audiences might sympathize with Mungo's plight as a slave, but their laughter probably also expressed the way the character reassured them of their perception of the clowning "darky." One Aldridge reviewer indirectly revealed as much by emphasizing and lovingly describing a scene that many other commentators also favored: "Holding in one hand a bottle of rum and in the other a lighted candle, Mungo, instead of the bottle, put the lighted candle in his mouth, after which he spat it out, laughing, grinning with all his white teeth, rolled his eyes and sang and danced."[49]

If even the character of Mungo, with its antislavery dimensions, could reinforce European audiences' racist views, why did Aldridge perform it throughout his career? Lindfors suggests one possible explanation that involves Mungo's pairing with Othello. Aldridge often followed the tragic hero with its comic companion on the same bill to enhance and extend the way in which Othello complicated and challenged audiences' racial predispositions:

> Some spectators came to the theater anticipating that the spectacle of an African doing Shakespeare would be amusing in itself—a black burlesque of the Bard. What they found was something entirely different—a noble, dignified, and very moving performance of a great tragic role. Aldridge then turned the tables on them again by coming out in the afterpiece as the kind of black man they had expected to see in Othello—a humorous buffoon singing, dancing, and speaking in black dialect who was not in full command of his senses or his statements.[50]

Although seeing Mungo after Othello could bolster people's racist views, the multiple twists and turns in Aldridge's manipulation of audience expectations could also productively confuse those views. After witnessing Aldridge's version of the tragic hero, could any theatergoers return to their initial perceptions without doubts? Playing Mungo after Othello seems to have invited this process of interrogation.

In this regard, the persona that Aldridge adopted in singing "Opossum Up a Gum Tree" could have the same effect as Mungo's character, depending on how and where Aldridge integrated it into an evening's program. Yet this persona also had additional significance. Its specific history with Charles Mathews gave it a context of meaning that Aldridge could mine for his own purposes. Aldridge's impersonation of Mathews's figure drew inspiration from "Opossum" itself and from the Shakespearean passage that supposedly preceded it—Hamlet's soliloquy—to ask broad questions about the entire enterprise of Aldridge's own career.

Act 4: "Opossum"

Charles Mathews did not represent the full extent of Aldridge's association with American blackface minstrelsy. After United States minstrels began touring England, Aldridge added some of their songs to his repertoire. In 1836, T. D. Rice, of "Jump Jim Crow" fame, appeared at London's Surrey Theatre, after which Aldridge began performing variations of the same song-and-dance routine. By the time the Ethiopian Serenaders minstrel troupe arrived in England in 1846, reviewers felt compelled to compare them directly to Aldridge, especially his rendition of "Opossum Up a Gum Tree."[51]

In the early nineteenth century, "Opossum" appears to have been a popular folk song among both blacks and whites in South Carolina.[52] Mathews was not the only performer to adapt it. Some of its lyrics were "paraphrased in two minstrel songs of the late twenties and the early thirties," the infamous "Zip Coon" and "a rare version of 'Jim Crow'" itself.[53] No complete records of the original song's tune or lyrics seem to survive; the transcriptions that do exist were provided by Mathews, who evidently doctored them. In about 1824, Mathews oversaw the London publication of "Opossum" sheet music. Nathan notes that this version's melody sounds representative not of American but of traditional "British vocal music"; reprinting twelve bars of Mathews's tune, he shows its "conspicuous" similarity to a 1793 version of "The Lasses of Dublin." Nathan also observes that the sheet music's lyrics coexist with two other renderings that were published around the same time; none is identical. He finds the sheet music's version most remote from the original song. Of its four stanzas of lyrics, Nathan deems only the first to derive directly from the song; "the second, third, and fourth stanzas, being completely different from the other two versions of the song, are undoubtedly by Mathews himself."[54]

Marshall and Stock cite all four stanzas from the sheet music as well as one of the alternate versions of the lyrics. This alternate version, which is included in the account of the African Theatre episode, is the one cited and analyzed in detail in the present essay.[55] Both versions feature the central conceit illustrated by the first stanza (cited earlier): that of a possum who, climbing a tree, has his tail pulled by a trickster raccoon hiding in a hollow. The biographers' interpretation of the song's significance seems to emphasize the sheet music version, which departs from this conceit after the first stanza. Marshall and Stock say "Opossum" harmonizes with the likes of Mungo's "What a terrible life am I led" in expressing Aldridge's "identity with his people and their protest against slavery."[56] This "protest" appears in the sheet music stanzas likely written by Mathews, which portray the beatings suffered by a "Negro Boy" and another slave named Caesar. This subject matter conforms to the tradition of "pathetic" songs that Nathan identifies.

In contrast, the alternate set of lyrics preserves and elaborates on the central conceit. In this version the raccoon apparently pulls the possum into the hollow with the aim of capturing him. At this point the raccoon is outsmarted by a black man who takes his turn pulling the possum's tail, thereby stealing him from the raccoon:

Opossum up a gum tree,
 Racoon pull him down;
Tink him got him snugly,
 Oh, de poor racoon.
Racoon in de hollow,
 Nigger down below,
Pull opossum's long tail,
 Racoon let him go.
Jinkum, jankum, beaugash,
 Twist 'em, twine 'em, run,
Oh de cunning nigger,
 Oh, de poor racoon.[57]

There are apparently no surviving records of the specific words that Aldridge sang in his renditions. However, because he admitted being familiar with Mathews's account of the African Grove, he probably knew these lyrics. This version, in which the black man tricks the trickster, arguably appealed to Aldridge and contributed to his repeated performance of the song for twenty years or more.

One possible interpretation of the song is that Aldridge, corresponding to the black man, is playing a trick on theater managers and audiences, corresponding to the raccoon—but what trick, and why? Besides a moderate income (in England, at least), what possum prize could Aldridge have imagined stealing from them? Whatever the case, the general implication of the actor slyly getting the better of

those on whom he depended resonates again with Mungo, who—in Marshall and Stock's interpretation—often subverts his master's will. Yet there is much more to the song, as we shall see.

Singing "Opossum" and playing Mungo were similar in yet another way: both were paired with Othello to fashion a performative dialectic of comedy and tragedy. However, in one important instance, there is a significant difference in the description of the two comic roles. Around 1848, a slender volume about Aldridge entitled *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius* was published, anonymously, in London. This book "is obviously based on material and information supplied by Aldridge himself," and he "may even have been the author."[58] In a passage on Aldridge's versatility as both a tragic and a comic actor who can, in turn, masterfully sadden and delight audiences, the *Memoir* offers the following evidence: "The ecstasy of [Aldridge's] long shrill note in 'Opossum up a gum-tree' can only be equaled by the agony of his cry of despair over the body of Desdemona."[59] The difference in this description of one of Aldridge's comic roles, which two sentences earlier are called "exceedingly amusing," is the jarring word *shrill*. A "long shrill note" sounds more disturbing than amusing.

This dissonance potentially adds another dimension to Aldridge's performance of "Opossum." If singing the song involved playing a trick on the audience, the singer did not draw unbridled pleasure from it; he also experienced hidden discomfort or even pain. This possibility returns us to the interpretation of the song's central conceit. If "master" raccoon represents theater managers and audiences, who or what might the possum correspond to, and what kind of trick does pulling its tail represent? Aldridge himself could be the possum—in addition to the "cunning" black man. In this case, the managers and audiences' trick could consist of getting the actor on stage in the first place to play roles not of his own making. These roles could certainly include "comic" ones with degrading, minstrel-like trappings, but they could also include tragic heroes whose traditions of stage presentation involved blackface. By climbing up the tree, the possum aspires to greatness, but the raccoon—the British theater—keeps pulling him back down.

However, the final rub is that the black man pulls down the possum, stealing him from the raccoon, and ties him up ("Twist 'em, twine 'em") before carrying him off. This view suggests a significant degree of reflexiveness and even self-criticism on Aldridge's part; the song nearly constitutes an admission of his willing collusion in maintaining the racial and artistic constraints that he simultaneously resented. Perhaps the "long shrill note" was the sound of this paradoxical realization.

The catalyst for "Opossum" in Mathews's skit—Hamlet's soliloquy on death—provides yet another possible dimension to the song's significance for Aldridge. Mathews's account of the alleged incident at the African Grove Theatre ridicules African Americans' performance of Shakespeare from the very beginning. The caricatured black tragedian garbles the soliloquy in minstrel show dialect, only to be interrupted by the intemperate "Negro" crowd:

> "To be or not to be, dat is him question, whether him nobler in de mind to suffer or lift up him arms against a sea of hubble bubble and by opossum (oppose 'em) end 'em." At the word Opossum, the whole audience burst forth into one general cry of "Opossum, Opossum, Opossum." . . . [B]eing reminded of [the song] by Hamlet's pronunciation of "oppose 'em," there was no doubt but that they would have it sung. . . . [T]he sable tragedian comes forward, and addressing the audience, informs them that he will sing their favourite melody, with him greatest pleasure, and accordingly sings it.[60]

Lott suggests that this account accurately describes nothing more than "the skit Mathews manufactured."[61] The depiction refuses to allow African Americans to employ Shakespeare's powerful speech, by insisting that they are incapable of it.

Aldridge proved Mathews completely wrong, of course, but why then would he adopt Mathews's caricature as his own? When Aldridge sang "Opossum," he may have enacted all or part of the skit. Even if he performed only the song, Mathews's entire account could still resonate for Aldridge and for anyone else who knew the story. In this context, "opossum" could repeatedly evoke "oppose 'em," reinforcing the song's expression of opposition to theater managers and audiences ("master" raccoon).

More to the point, the song could evoke the entire soliloquy, or at least the opening lines that Mathews mangles. It is unclear whether Aldridge ever played Hamlet; William Wells Brown claimed to have seen him do so in Sheffield in 1856, and he especially praised Aldridge's "rendering of the 'Soliloquy on Death.' "[62] At any rate, Aldridge likely knew the text, which raises questions pertinent to his dilemma of self-assertion in the face of ongoing discrimination:

> To be, or not to be, that is the question,
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing, end them?[63]

Aldridge did not take up arms against the racial snobbery of London theaters or the more demeaning roles he was asked to play, but he did play characters who battled slavery. Perhaps he chose most "in the mind to suffer," hoping it to be the "nobler" course, but he also apparently sought ways to mitigate his resentment by expressing it indirectly. These fluctuations of sentiment suggest an ongoing struggle of consciousness that, perhaps, could not be resolved. From this perspective, the most important aspect of "Opossum Up a Gum Tree" is its indirect evocation of open questions about the nature of being; Aldridge's repeated performances of the song, night after night, may have manifested ongoing self-interrogation. Despite its apparent humbleness, the song, together with its performance history in Aldridge's England, crystallized all these dynamics in simultaneously enacting both overt minstrelsy and covert Shakespeare.

Act 5: Double Consciousness, Double Legacy

Aldridge's simultaneous embrace and criticism of the institutions of British theater and of some of his roles recall the Du Boisian condition of double consciousness. So does Aldridge's pursuit of British citizenship even as he continued to experience professional and general racial discrimination. On this count, Gilroy emphasizes that the black Atlantic involves a sense of both the sociopolitical and the cultural benefits of Western modernity and of its limitations.[64] Ira Aldridge was neither Marshall and Stock's antiracist hero nor a hapless victim of dominant racial discourses, but a deliberate worker of the tensions between the two.

These tensions appear in indications of Aldridge's United States legacy in the years surrounding his death. This legacy, which involved both "legitimate" theater and minstrelsy, shows how Aldridge's influence (in lieu of the actor himself) made at least one more transatlantic trip. Errol Hill documents scores of African American theater companies, "amateur or semiprofessional," that "presented dramatic plays" in the decades following the Civil War. Some of these groups performed Shakespeare (including *Othello*, *King Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *Merchant of Venice*, and *Hamlet*), and "[f]our groups—in Brooklyn, New Haven, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C.—named themselves after Ira Aldridge."[65] In 1863, Philadelphia was also the site of at least one performance by a group of African American minstrels called the Ira Aldridge Troupe. According to Jack Shalom, this group, who played to a racially mixed but predominantly black audience, both flirted with and subverted minstrel conventions and stereotypes. They performed sentimental songs popularized by white blackface minstrels, making them salient for African Americans; in something of a reverse process, they cast black actors without makeup as white characters to engender both laughter and overt expressions of aggression toward whites.[66] The fact that both this minstrel group and the dramatic theater companies bore Aldridge's name would seem nonsensical without a fuller view of Aldridge's range of roles. Although Ira Aldridge's name might not have sustained the ongoing existence of either type of such companies in the United States or elsewhere, the diverse and paradoxical dimensions of his performances had cultural significance beyond the bounds of his own life and career.

Notes

1. For basic biographical information on Aldridge, see Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (1958; Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968).

2. Marshall and Stock's work was preceded by a book-length study in Russian, Sergei Durylin's *Ira Aldridge* (1940). The ninety-odd years between the actor's death and the English biography's publication witnessed very little Aldridge commentary in Britain and the United States, and the

same held true for almost thirty years after the book's initial release (a paperback edition appeared in 1968). Since the mid-1980s, however, at least a dozen English-language essays and articles have appeared, and in 1993 Howard University Press republished Marshall and Stock's text.

3. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 25.

4. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 45; cf. Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 26–27.

5. Although Mathews's account of the African Theatre performance never mentions Aldridge explicitly and was published in England before Aldridge arrived in that country, Mathews continued presenting the skit for years after Aldridge gained fame in Britain, and English audiences assumed the caricatured black thespian to be Aldridge. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 43, believe that "Mathews saw no reason to correct this impression."

6. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 4l; cf. Hans Nathan, "Charles Mathews, Comedian, and the American Negro," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 10 (1946): 193–94.

7. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 40–41.

8. Lott, *Love and Theft*, 46.

9. Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 3–48.

10. Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

11. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 35–36.

12. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 37; Lott, *Love and Theft*, 44.

13. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 57.

14. Bernth Lindfors, in " 'Mislike me not for my complexion . . .': Ira Aldridge in Whiteface," *African American Review* 33 (1999): 349, notes that "In his youth [Aldridge] played only Othello in [that play's] entirety"; he "mainly did scenes or selected speeches from Shakespeare as part of a long bill," which was not uncommon at the time. Aldridge did not perform complete versions of *Macbeth* and *King Richard III* until about fifteen years after first attempting the roles. The essay cited here is reprinted in the present volume.

15. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 76, 150.

16. Phyllis T. Dircks, *The Eighteenth-Century English Burletta* (Victoria, BC, Canada: English Literary Studies, 1999), 134.

17. Nathan, *Dan Emmett*, 13–14.

18. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 147–51.

19. Dircks, *The Eighteenth-Century English Burletta*, 135–36.

20. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 179.

21. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 2, 4.

22. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reprinted in *Three Negro Classics*. New York: Avon, 1965), 214–15.

23. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 119.

24. Ibid., 328.

25. Edward T. Washington, review of *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian*, by Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45 (1994): 493.

26. Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 19.

27. Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 18, 31–34, 69.

28. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 66.

29. Ibid., 67–68.

30. Quoted in Lindfors, " 'Mislike me not for my complexion,' " 350.

31. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 273.
32. Ibid., 63.
33. Ibid., 64.
34. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 64.
35. Lisa S. Starks, "The Veiled (Hot) Bed of Race and Desire: Parker's *Othello* and the Stereotype as Screen Fetish," *Post Script* 17, no. 1 (1997): 67.
36. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 268–71.
37. Mrs. Kendal, *Dramatic Opinions* (London: John Murray, 1890), 11; quoted in Bernth Lindfors, "'Nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice': New Biographical Information on Ira Aldridge," *African American Review* 28 (1994): 470.
38. Errol Hill, Introduction to *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian*, by Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1993), xiv–xv.
39. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 127.
40. Lindfors, "'Nothing extenuate,'" 462, 471.
41. Joyce Green MacDonald, "Acting Black: *Othello*, *Othello* Burlesques, and the Performance of Blackness," *Theatre Journal* 46 (1994): 231–49 (this essay, in slightly revised form, appears in the present volume). A similar point about disrupting dominant discourses of racial and cultural power could be made, albeit somewhat in reverse, about another dimension of Aldridge's career: his performance of Shylock, Macbeth, Richard III, Lear, and other roles in whiteface. As Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 88–89, note, "in playing white parts he used white make-up and a wig, possibly a beard."

In "'Mislike me not for my complexion,'" 354, Lindfors suggests that whiteface was merely a superficial stage convention that, most importantly, gave Aldridge the opportunity to demonstrate his skill in a wider range of revered roles. However, Lindfors does make a regional distinction in the British reception of Aldridge in these roles. He claims that audiences in the provinces "evidently found nothing unusual about a black actor playing a white part. Only in London was this remarked upon as 'a manifest incongruity.'" Lindfors's discussion raises at least two important issues: why English discomfort about Aldridge in white roles predominated in the capital, and how whiteface makeup itself—especially worn by a black man—might have contributed to that discomfort. MacDonald's argument about blackface helps to shape a possible explanation for both questions. If Aldridge's lack of blackface as Othello bothered London theater managers because it threatened the assumed power of whites to represent blacks, then wearing whiteface would also understandably discomfort them: a black man wearing whiteface fully reversed the blackface convention, turning the tables of racial representation. These issues deserve further analysis elsewhere.

42. MacDonald, "Acting Black," 231.
43. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 139.
44. Ibid., 76.
45. Ibid., 73.
46. Nathan, *Dan Emmett*, 4, 6.
47. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 233.
48. Nathan, "Charles Mathews," 191; Nathan, *Dan Emmett*, 13–14, 23–24, 33, 44.
49. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 76.
50. Lindfors, "'Mislike me not for my complexion,'" 348.
51. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 150–51, 165.
52. Toll, *Blacking Up*, 42; Nathan, *Dan Emmett*, 48.
53. Nathan, "Charles Mathews," 194.
54. Nathan, *Dan Emmett*, 46–48.
55. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 40–41, cite the alternate lyrics from the 1824 Charles Mathews text, *Mr. Mathews at Home*. These lyrics are very nearly identical to those in *Sketches of Mr. Mathews' Celebrated Trip to America*, which also includes an apparently identical account of the

African Theatre episode (cf. Nathan, "Charles Mathews," 193–94). Nathan identifies the "Opossum" lyrics in *Sketches* and those in another work entitled *The London Mathews* as the two alternate versions to the sheet music (Nathan, *Dan Emmett*, 46n20). Both of these texts were published about 1824.

56. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 22.
57. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 41.
58. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 11.
59. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 44.
60. Ibid., 40.
61. Lott, *Love and Theft*, 45.
62. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 204.
63. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare: The Cambridge Text* (London: Octopus Books, 1980), 3.1.56–60.
64. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 37–39.
65. Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, 44–45.
66. Jack Shalom, "The Ira Aldridge Troupe: Early Black Minstrelsy in Philadelphia," *African American Review* 28 (1994): 653–55.

12

"Mislike me not for my complexion . . ."

Ira Aldridge in Whiteface

Bernth Lindfors

Ira Aldridge, the first important black American Shakespearean actor, had an odd but remarkable theatrical career. Born in New York City in 1807, educated for a few years in the second African Free School in lower Manhattan, employed in his youth at various menial jobs in the city, including a brief stint as a costume carrier for a visiting British actor, and then involved in several small dramatic productions put on by ragtag black acting companies at a short-lived establishment called the African Theatre, he fell in love with the stage and aspired to become a professional actor. Since he could not fulfill this ambition in the United States, which had proven "not yet ready to accept black actors in the legitimate drama,"[1] he emigrated to the British Isles, where he was fortunate enough to secure his first engagement with top billing at London's Royalty Theatre in May 1825 when he was only seventeen years old.[2]

In those days it was customary to hail a talented young performer as a "Roscius," a name alluding to the great Roman actor Quintus Roscius Gallus. Garrick had been the first "English Roscius." Next came Mr. Betty, the phenomenally successful juvenile thespian who was heralded as the "Young Roscius," and thereafter the name was linked to theatrical precocity. Master Grossmith, a seven-year-old, was introduced on the stage as the "Celebrated Infant Roscius," and Miss Lee Sugg, another child prodigy, as the "Young Roscia." Inevitably, Scottish, Irish, Welsh, and several American Roscii and Rosciae, including a Kentucky Roscius, soon appeared. Since Aldridge was both young and black, he was quickly dubbed the "African Roscius," an honorific title given extra resonance when theater

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managers began to spread the word that he was the son of a Christian Fulah (Fulani) prince from Senegal. Aldridge, whose staple role was Shakespeare's Othello, could be said to have made a career out of playing a Moor playing a Moor. This may have been an adroit theatrical strategy, given the obstacles a black neophyte would have had to overcome to be accepted as a legitimate player on a foreign stage.

But at the outset this was not an easy way to make a living. Though Aldridge could depend on his novelty value to draw people to the theater, there were only a limited number of roles a black performer could take on, and in the first half of the nineteenth century the normal practice in British theaters was to perform at least two plays each night and to change the bill every day. Long runs of a single play were not common until later in the century and then only in London. For Aldridge to be employable, he had to be able to offer a reasonable number of well-known roles and to keep moving from place to place. He could not find a permanent position in one of the London theaters, nor could he secure engagements outside London for more than a week or two at a time. So he turned into a perpetually touring player, an exotic "star" who made his rounds principally in the provinces week after week, month after month, year after year after year.

But first he had to establish a reputation as a performer. Being an "African" was not enough; he also had to prove his credentials as a "Roscius." One way he did this was to draw upon antislavery sentiments by playing long-suffering slaves in abolitionist melodramas set in the New World. Gambia in Thomas Morton's *The Slave*, Oroonoko in stage adaptations of Aphra Behn's eponymous novel, and Christophe in J. H. Amherst's *The Death of Christophe, King of Hayti* were the principal tragic roles he assumed early in his career to supplement his performances of Othello. He also played dark strangers, some of whom were villains: Zanga the Moor in Edward Young's *The Revenge*, Rolla the heroic Peruvian army commander in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *Pizarro*, and Hassan the vengeful Moor in Monk Lewis's gothic thriller, *The Castle Spectre*. These "heavy" roles helped to establish his competence as a tragedian.

To balance the heaviness, Aldridge made a point of performing a light role in the afterpiece, the short farce that followed the main offering of the evening. In this part of the bill, his favorite character was Mungo, a cheeky, drunken servant in Isaac Bickerstaffe's *The Padlock*, which many critics considered his best role, even better than his Othello.[3] He developed the habit of playing both Othello and Mungo on the first evening of a provincial engagement, thereby impressing his audience with his versatility as an artist. Some spectators came to the theater anticipating that the spectacle of an African doing Shakespeare would be amusing in itself—a black burlesque of the Bard. What they found was something entirely different—a noble, dignified, and very moving performance of a great tragic role. Aldridge then turned the tables on them again by coming out in the afterpiece as the kind of black man they had expected to see in Othello—a humorous buffoon, singing, dancing, and speaking in black dialect, who was not in full

command of his senses or his statements. Mungo was a hilarious comic caricature, almost a prototype of the blackface minstrel. The double surprise never failed to win Aldridge additional applause. Some provincial newspapers called him the most talented actor of both tragedy and comedy that they had ever seen.

Aldridge developed other comic roles that helped to sustain his reputation for versatility. He was especially popular as Ginger Blue, a character in *The Virginian Mummy*, described in playbills as "an independent nigger, head waiter, always absent when wanted, yet mindful of his perquisites, remarkably familiar, bursting with fun and laughter, very industrious (by deputy), receiving all gratuities in person, a most accommodating appetite; love of money induces him to become a mummy." It was the slapstick associated with Ginger Blue's frightened personification of a mummy that generated most of the laughs in this play. Another equally successful farce was *Stage Mad*, in which Aldridge enacted the part of Massa Jeronymo Othello Thespis, a stage-struck servant whose outstanding foible was a penchant for misquoting famous lines from Shakespeare. In a sense this character was a parody of the kind of person an "African Roscius"—that is, an ambitious but comically inept black performer—was presumed to be. It was an attempt by Aldridge to exploit and explode a stereotype of himself.

To broaden his repertoire still further, Aldridge began experimenting with white roles, using makeup to whiten his face and sometimes wearing a wig and a beard. His biographers claim that he was "the first Negro to play white roles,"[4] but recent scholarship has found a black actress in Scotland playing Polly in *The Beggar's Opera* and Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* without transforming makeup as early as the 1770s.[5] The earliest of Aldridge's whiteface experiments appears to have taken place in 1830, when he assumed the character of Dirk Hatteraick, the Dutch sea captain in a stage adaptation of Sir Walter Scott's *Guy Mannering*. A year later he took the role of the outcast pirate hero in R. C. Maturin's *Bertram, or the Castle of Aldobrand*, who seeks revenge on his enemy by seducing his wife. Both plays end with the passionate, defiant hero committing suicide. Shortly after trying out these melodramatic impersonations, Aldridge turned to white Shakespearean roles, adding Shylock (see figure 12.1), Richard III, Macbeth, and eventually King Lear to his classic repertoire. In mid-career he expanded his opportunities further by becoming the first actor in 128 years to revive *Titus Andronicus*, which he arranged to have blended with a melodrama specially written for him by an Irish playwright, so he could play Aaron the Moor as a hero rather than a villain. The available biographical record, based on surviving playbills and newspaper reportage, shows that he was only twenty-four when he first performed Shylock, Richard III and Macbeth, that he was forty-two when he resurrected *Titus Andronicus*, and that he was fifty-one and performing in St. Petersburg when he initially presented himself as King Lear. This chronology is a trifle misleading, however, for while he was in his twenties and thirties, he mainly did scenes or selected speeches from Shakespeare as part of a long bill in which he demonstrated his talents by reciting from an assortment of well-known tragedies and

comedies. He was nearly forty when he first tried doing the whole of Macbeth, and he was at least forty-one when he finally ventured to attempt a complete Richard III. So Aldridge took on most of his full-scale Shakespearean roles in middle age. In his youth he played only Othello in its entirety and Shylock in a popular four-act version or in set pieces from the trial scene or from dialogues with Tubal.

Records show that Aldridge launched many of his new roles in Hull, a town in which he fairly regularly secured engagements for two weeks or more. His biographers feel that "it is significant that Aldridge chose Hull as a testing-ground for so many of his new roles, particularly his first white Shakespearean parts. It will be remembered that this was the birthplace and home of Wilberforce, and sympathy would be strong for the young Negro actor, especially in this period when Wilberforce was still leading the fight in the House of Commons for the abolition of slavery in the Colonies."[6] Perhaps in such a liberal atmosphere one could take risks that might not be so well received elsewhere. It was in Hull that Aldridge made his debut in Britain as Shylock, Macbeth, and Richard III and, after his first triumphant Russian tour, as King Lear. The white Shakespearean role he performed most often and over the longest span of time was that of Shylock, so it may be well to concentrate our attention on how he chose to interpret this character and on how audiences responded to what they heard and saw.

Unfortunately, Aldridge's earliest efforts at rendering Shylock in full or in pieces—experiments that took place in September of 1831 and again in February and March of 1832—were not reported on in the local newspapers, possibly because Aldridge was employed at two minor theaters in Hull—the Royal Adelphi and the Royal Clarence—rather than at the Theatre Royal. This was one of the hazards of being a relatively unknown itinerant thespian making the rounds in the provincial theater circuit or even skirting the fringes of the West End in London: it was difficult enough to get noticed, much less to command serious critical attention, if one played in unfashionable houses. The very first mention in the press of Aldridge in *Merchant of Venice* was not recorded until he performed the trial scene at Dublin's Theatre Royal in January 1833, when the Dublin *Express* commended him for displaying "considerable discrimination, and a judicious conception of the peculiarly difficult character of *Shylock*."[7] A year later, theatergoers were offered a few more details when a critic in Cork reported having witnessed "our friend Aldridge in the difficult character of *Shylock*, which he sustained with his usual success, and in which he was frequently applauded by a very full house. Where the Jew discovers the flight of his daughter and his ducats before Salario and Salarino, and afterwards with *Tubal*, he was very effective, and thro' the arduous scene of the Court of Justice, he gave the sharp answers and bitter remarks of the revengeful Israelite with great force and truth. As a Tragedian, Aldridge is unquestionably a powerful actor."[8] In the months that followed, Aldridge continued to impress audiences elsewhere in Ireland with his handling of the role, the *Wexford Freeman* testifying that "We admired his Shylock very

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Figure 12.1 Photograph of Ira Aldridge as Shylock (by permission of the McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library).

much, he gave full effect to the character and displayed as usual a just conception of the author.... we must say he fully sustained the fame of those talents which have already placed him amongst the highest on the British stage."[9]

Once Aldridge had won such a high reputation for himself in *Merchant of Venice*, comparisons with other famous interpreters of Shylock were inevitable. In 1844, when he performed the role in Newport, he was set beside—or, rather, between—Edmund and Charles Kean:

> His Shylock ... was a clever representation of the avaricious and revengeful Jew. In this character he appears to have taken the great Kean as a model, and to have studied him closely. He is far above Kean, jun., in the part, particularly during the adverse adjudication of the Court, in which the conflict of his master passions produced a terrific tornado: he was calm, calculating, nervous, and impassioned throughout, with masterly dramatic discrimination, and was loudly applauded by a densely crowded house.

The reviewer went on to draw a pertinent moral from this, saying that

> it is a subject of interesting contemplation for the moralist, to find a native of the land of Jugurtha, one of a race made mere merchandise of for ages, now of equal rank with his fellow men in civilised life, and delighting, by his cultivation and accomplishments, an intellectual British audience.[10]

But it cannot be said that Aldridge's cultivation and accomplishments delighted every British audience. For reasons that have yet to be adequately explained, he was kept off the London stage for most of his career. Some attribute this to his inability to win respect as a competent actor on the two nights in April 1833 when—at age twenty-five—he played Othello at Covent Garden, one of London's patent theaters. Indeed, though he received several favorable notices and much applause, the majority of theater critics treated him so harshly that he had to spend virtually the next seven years in theatrical exile in Ireland and Scotland—as far away from London as he could get. And even after he so polished his skills that he became an extremely popular performer in the provinces, he seldom was invited to return to the metropolis, except to play at second- or third-rate theaters that wanted to see him do Othello, Aaron the Moor, or his standard repertoire of racial melodramas and farces. Only twice was he called on to personify Shylock in London, once in the trial scene at the Surrey Theatre a few months after his Covent Garden appearance, and a second time twenty-four years later when he performed the whole role at the City of London Theatre. Characteristically, there were no reviews of the Surrey performance, and the single press report of his appearance at the City of London Theatre was patronizing, the critic feeling that

> There is a manifest incongruity in a black *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *Shylock*, etc, though the swarthy complexion of the negro is not unsuited to the *Moor of Venice*, in which part we

> had the pleasure of seeing Mr. Aldridge on Saturday last. The performance was decidedly original, many parts of it being striking and forcible. As a whole it is uneven, and suffers somewhat by comparison with the highest standards. Often we noticed erroneous emphasis and incorrect reading; but Mr. Aldridge is not to be judged by ordinary rules; for, with so much to contend against in the limited extent of his repertory, he has not the same incentives to effort as ordinary actors have. That he generally succeeds in pleasing his auditory is something, and his success must be accepted as a criterion of his merit.[11]

This portrait contrasts sharply with the way Aldridge's Shylock was assessed elsewhere in the British Isles at this period in his career. Two years earlier in Plymouth, for instance, a reviewer wrote of having "seldom seen the part more faithfully depicted. In the trial scene, particularly, Mr. Aldridge exhibited high histrionic talents;—the calm, subdued tone observed was, in our opinion, in strict keeping with the position of the wily Jew in his demands for justice,—which he finally obtained to his utter mortification."[12] And in Belfast a few weeks later, Aldridge's Shylock was called "a masterpiece of acting. The mean, relentless Jew, at the beginning of the trial scene, became, without an effort, the hero at its termination. The dignified scorn of the Israelitish userer was pourtrayed [*sic*] with a dramatic energy and poetry of action we have never seen surpassed."[13] Not long after this, a Dublin critic voiced a similar opinion, finding Aldridge's enactment of Shylock sustained "with much of originality and vigour of manner and expression. In the pathetic passages, where he mourns over the loss of his daughter, his voice was wanting in melody, but then there were broken expressions very significant of emotion, and the passion of revenge was pourtrayed [*sic*] with an earnestness and fierceness that failed not to arrest the attention and secure the repeated plaudits of the house."[14] Aldridge evidently continued to dazzle his Irish and British provincial audiences even while failing to impress the professional theater critics in London.

The coolness of London's critical response in 1857 is more than a little puzzling, inasmuch as it came only a year before Aldridge's first triumphant series of performances in St. Petersburg, where he was lionized and hailed as the greatest interpreter of Othello and Shylock ever seen in Russia. Unlike the brief, dismissive comments in the London press, the critical reactions in St. Petersburg were voluble, excited, and filled with interesting details. For the first time, readers were given a clear of idea of how Aldridge chose to represent Shylock on the stage. Here is one account:

> Other artistes we have seen gave Shylock the character of a soul-less merchant, ridiculous in his demands and his insatiable anger and impudence, presenting him as a caricature. Mr. Aldridge understood this personality otherwise. He presented to us Shylock as tight-fisted and greedy, but at the same time proud and firm in his convictions, filled with revenge, hatred and anger towards the Christians, enemies of his people and race. . . . In his acting are most wonderful effects, both loud and soft; with the first he astounds the listeners, with the last he

makes an even greater impression. And his very silences speak. The last scene before the Court he plays almost without a word, but with intriguing eloquence. One may say he reads Shakespeare between the lines.[15]

Some years later, Aldridge's Russian biographer, S. Durylin, drawing on a medley of opinions expressed at the time of Aldridge's performances in St. Petersburg, offered a fuller exposition that included a detailed description of the stage business Aldridge invented to round off the play at the end of the fourth act:

Aldridge deeply understood the character and so he played it as an exploited, despised Jew whose daughter was kidnapped or spirited away after she was taught to rob her own father and to borrow money from him, and was deprived of the right to revenge for these things. He gave us a character of a Jew who was forced, under threat of death, to renounce the religion of his fathers and to will his riches to his own good daughter. Nevertheless Shylock loves this daughter of his not less than Lear loved his daughters, but with a different type of love. He loves her as if she were an irreplaceable treasure . . . [with] the type of love that increases because of this fear of losing it. The scene in the second act was considered to be one of the best played by Aldridge in the whole play. Here he shows his love towards his daughter. "The way he looks at her, the way her touches her hand, strokes her face, kisses her, gives her as a gift a very valuable ring and looks at her as she leaves the room." "Many thought that this expression of love towards Jessica was probably too much, was probably overplaying and treating too freely the text of the drama as meant by Shakespeare, but through this love first of all Aldridge lays the ground for the expression of his feelings after she runs away. This is in the first scene of the third act. Secondly, this love explains why he is so careful in guarding her when he forbids her to look out of the window, for instance, or to go out into the street, and orders all doors and windows locked. He safeguards her as the apple of his eye from everything that he himself considers evil. He loves her with a most jealous love."

This love towards his daughter, who betrays her father and runs away with her Christian lover, is what sharpens and brings to the culmination of the tragedy of Shylock the tragedy of a Jew. Shylock has much money but he has more insults and abuse. He is the bearer of the sorrow and tragedy of his hunted people and so, when his daughter is kidnapped, Shylock is plunged into a state of hopeless loneliness. Being of a lively, energetic nature, Shylock does not experience anger but he desires revenge for what he considers violated pride as a Jew. In Shylock Aldridge pictures beautifully the type of medieval Jew who is rich, proud, but who is constantly abused and insulted by the surrounding Christian society. He was superb in the scene where he vacillates whether to cut the pound of flesh from the Christian. How his eyes sparkled angrily and jubilantly when, for a moment, he almost decided to take revenge on at least one Christian for everything that he had suffered with his brethren. And the last scene is not less remarkable. Shylock is being read all the punishments that he has to undergo for his attempt on the life of a citizen of Venice, but no matter how unbearable these punishments were, Shylock, while listening to the judges, is not impressed with them, but when he hears that one of the punishments will be his adoption of Christianity, he first begins to shudder and lets out a horrified moan. After that, when one of the men seizes him by his robes, all his

> contempt and revulsion towards the Christian comes to life in the Jew and Aldridge makes a wonderful mute scene out of it. The Jew forgets that he is in a room, he forgets that he belongs to the oppressed, powerless people who are never forgiven anything. He violently jerks his clothes out of . . . the unclean hands of the Christian, then he takes out a handkerchief and very meticulously wipes the place on his garment which was soiled by the unclean touch. After that he looks with repulsion and disgust at his handkerchief which is itself now besmirched, and finally, after having thrown it with indignation at the Christian, he breaks down bitterly, cries and leaves. For this famous ending of the tragedy, by this tremendous mute scene of which we do not find even a hint in Shakespeare, Aldridge was criticized by both enemy and friend, presumably because Shakespeare did not write it that way . . .
>
> But Aldridge knew what he was doing by ending the tragedy that way. He did not have to think up an artificial ending to the fourth act. The ending came naturally since Aldridge was drawing on the experience of his own life for the picture of the tragedy of a Jew who is downtrodden and powerless to take revenge. He did not need words, and at any rate no words would have helped since Shylock was completely surrounded by his enemies. At his trial Shylock is insulted, his riches are taken away and he is condemned to many punishments, but this is not all, this is not enough. They want to take his faith away from him. He is forced to accept Christianity. According to Shakespeare, Shylock leaves while Gratiano throws these despicable words at him, "In christening shalt thou have two godfathers; / Had I been judge, thou shouldst have had ten more, / To bring thee to the gallows, not to the font." Shylock could only answer to this in the way Aldridge answered, with the great anger of silence.[16]

Aldridge's dumb show may not have pleased every Russian critic, but the consensus in St. Petersburg was that it was a highly original and convincing ending to the truncated version of the play that was presented. Aldridge's actions spoke as loudly as Shakespeare's words.

Aldridge's reception in Russia and many other parts of the European continent was so enthusiastic and so financially rewarding that he spent most of the rest of his life performing there rather than in the British Isles. When he did return to Britain, he made his usual rounds, seldom being invited to appear in London despite the many medals, honors, and awards he had won on his Continental tours. On the Continent it was his Shakespearean roles that were in greatest demand, but he also introduced audiences there to Mungo, one of his favorite farcical characters. In Britain he had to offer a wider variety of roles, so he revived some of his melodramatic vehicles, alternating them with his preferred Shakespearean tragedies and slapstick comedies.

On his last extended British tour, from June 1859 to December 1860, Aldridge continued to play Shylock from time to time, and there is evidence that he remained impressive in the role, even though some spectators found his rendering of it startlingly unconventional. A reviewer in Cork in 1860 said that Aldridge's conception of "the very difficult but profoundly interesting character of *Shylock* . . . was in some respects different from what we have been accustomed to, but the interpretation of his idea was admirable. In many passages his acting was telling

in the highest degree, and indeed from the first act to the close was applauded most enthusiastically by the audience."[17] Another commentator on the Channel Island of Jersey was awestruck by Aldridge's performance:

> The delivery of the dialogue was characterised by a calm and deeply impassioned eloquence. He expressed his malignant delight at Antonio's losses with sarcastic energy, contrasted with the sudden reversion of his parental agony for the loss of his daughter, the gentle Jessica. But in his diabolical compassing of his revenge upon Antonio, he rose to a climax of terrific human passion. The trial scene was a masterly representation of the eager expectation of fulfilled vengeance, and the abrupt defeat of the crafty Jew's malicious purposes. The keen disappointment, the haste to repossess his principal, his blank despair at finding his craft defeated, and his bond become his bane, were points that stood forth in majestic relief.[18]

It is clear that in many parts of Britain Aldridge did win the respect of his audiences when he appeared on stage in whiteface. One palpable sign of this is that these audiences evidently found nothing unusual about a black actor playing a white part. Only in London was this remarked upon as "a manifest incongruity." In provincial reviews there was seldom any reference made to Aldridge's race; he seems to have been accepted for what he was: a professional actor who could bring alive well-known Shakespearean characters. It didn't matter that the characters were white and the actor black.

Yet the Russians may have had a keener understanding of the source of Aldridge's power in representing Shylock, seeing it as something deriving from Aldridge's American experience. As one of them said, "Ira Aldridge is a mulatto born in America and feels deeply the insults levelled at people of another colour by people of a white colour in the New World. In Shylock he does not see particularly a Jew, but a human being in general, oppressed by the age-old hatred shown towards people like him, and expressing this feeling with wonderful power and truth."[19] Aldridge, misliked for his complexion in America (and perhaps in London as well), could empathize totally with a Venetian Jew who suffered bitter injustices at the hands of bigoted whites.

Notes

1. Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 17.
2. Bernth Lindfors, "Ira Aldridge's London Début," *Theatre Notebook* 60, no. 1 (2006): 30–44.
3. Bernth Lindfors, "The Signifying Flunkey: Ira Aldridge as Mungo," *Literary Griot* 5, no. 2 (1993): 1–11.
4. Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (London: Rockliff, 1958), 94.
5. Paul Edwards and James Walvin, *Black Personalities in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 149.

6. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge,* 94.
7. *Express* (Dublin), January 15, 1833.
8. *Freeholder* (Cork), March 9, 1834.
9. *Wexford Freeman*, May 2, 1835.
10. *Monmouthshire Merlin* (Newport), March 2, 1844.
11. *Morning Star* (London), October 19, 1857.
12. *Plymouth, Devonport, and Stonehouse Herald*, August 25, 1855.
13. *Belfast Daily Mercury*, October 3, 1855.
14. *Saunders's News-letter, and Daily Advertiser* (Dublin), December 10, 1855.
15. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 234.
16. Herbert Marshall, unpublished "very rough translation" of S. Durylin, *Ira Aldridge* (Moscow-Leningrad: State Publishing House, 1940), chapter 5. This is available in file 3/3 of the "Herbert Marshall Collection of Ira Aldridge, 1831–1977," in Special Collections at the Southern Illinois University Library, Carbondale.
17. *Cork Examiner*, April 27, 1860.
18. *Jersey Independent and Daily Telegraph*, August 25, 1860.
19. Quoted in Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 234.

13

Ira Aldridge as Macbeth and King Lear

Herbert Marshall

One must remember that over the long span of his theatrical life Ira Aldridge had seen and studied such eminent British actors as James and Henry Wallack, who played all the roles he later essayed; Junius Brutus Booth and Edmund Kean, followed by William Charles Macready and Samuel Phelps, with their productions of Shakespeare; and Charles Kean with his lesson of painstaking research. He also witnessed the first growth of the realistic theater of Madame Vestris. There was much in his schooling and environment to influence him in the right direction.

If the star actors with whom Aldridge was surrounded in England were of the highest caliber, the same cannot be said of the theater critics. We have studied everything available that the critics had to say about him in Great Britain for over forty years, and found that none came up to the standard of the Continental critics. Nowhere was there such a quality and quantity of critical writing as in Russia. Indeed, it is to the Russian press more than any other that we are indebted for the most detailed description and analysis of his roles, particularly Macbeth and Lear, which pass elsewhere with scarcely a minor reference. First, he was not given the opportunity to act these plays in London, and second, though he did play them in the provinces over the years, they took second place to the melodramas that were in such demand. There was virtually nothing said about them in the provincial press in Britain. But for Germany and Russia we should have had no details of these unique, pioneering performances.

We shall now attempt to reconstruct the actual production, performance, and interpretation of two of Aldridge's major Shakespearean roles, Macbeth (see figure 13.1) and King Lear. Thanks mainly to the pioneering work of his Russian biographer, Sergej Nikolaevich Durylin (whose method of presentation we have

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Figure 13.1 Photograph of Ira Aldridge as Macbeth (by permission of the McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library).

adopted), and to the All-Russian Theatrical Society of Moscow, we have been able to get at a very large amount of material, which gives us a picture of the whole flow of Aldridge's performances, every facet of which is documented from contemporary sources without any attempt at fictional reconstruction.

The Role of Macbeth

Aldridge first played an act from *Macbeth* in Hull in February 1832, but no reports of it are available. The following quotations are from reviews of his performances in Germany in 1853 and Russia in 1858–62.

In her *Memoirs*, Mrs. Yunge relates that "Aldridge said that his best role was Macbeth; in St. Petersburg he was not allowed to play it, but in the provinces he performed Macbeth and they said he was wonderful. . . . one very educated actress, who played with Aldridge in Odessa, confirmed that in Macbeth he was even better than in Othello."[1]

Confirmation of this judgment is given by a totally independent German critic in 1853:

> On the Macbeth of Ira Aldridge is impressed the stamp of a profound and powerful understanding of his characteristics; it seemed to us that Macbeth surpassed his very Othello in the majesty and plasticity of his movements, at the same time not lagging behind a jot in relation to its stage artistry. From first to last we observed Mr. Aldridge with tense attention and very understandable apprehension that his Macbeth would be lower than his Othello, because in creating the Scottish hero the intentions of the poet penetrated deeply into the secrets of the metaphysical outlook and, as it were, freed itself once more from them, whereas the talent of our artist seemed much closer to neutral, primitive power than to conscious, calm contemplation. I was terrified for Aldridge; however wonderful, however great his artistic sensibility, it seemed nevertheless he would not have the power to adapt himself, still less to create plastically the ideal Macbeth, that northern nature—fantastic, meditative, hazy, particularly in the first two scenes; but each scene convinced me all the more that for this artist of genius there is nothing unattainable.
>
> What profundity, what naturalness, in all the acting of Ira Aldridge, in the poses of his body, in his speeches, in his gestures, at the first appearance of the witches! Hardly had Macbeth opened mouth—and he completely revealed himself:
>
> So foul and fair a day I have not seen.
>
> In that line, as in a mirror, is reflected Macbeth's state of mind, the dusky half-light of his undecided mind. In them also is heard the whine of the witches:
>
> Fair is foul, and foul is fair!

The whole being of Mr. Aldridge was in that mood, the suppressed sound of his voice, the shakiness of his gait, the perplexity on his brow; and worthy of such an opening and completely in agreement with it is Aldridge's entrance; his speaking voice is subdued, preoccupied, brooding with thought, and from his half-opened mouth, like witches the words flew out and disappeared into the oppressive air:

Would they had stayed!

The actor, who in one apparently unimportant scene is able thoughtfully and so profoundly to make us sense the whole genius of the play, vouchsafes for me all of Macbeth.[2]

One is reminded here of Bernard Shaw's comparison of Eleanora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt when he shows how, in playing the same part, Bernhardt felt her way through the play, while Duse nailed her theme to the wall at her very first words.[3] So here, with Macbeth, Aldridge understood and expressed in those first profound lines the whole of the play.

There is, however, some criticism of his acting in the second act. Bazhenov says, "The role of Macbeth particularly . . . where Duncan is murdered induced in me a former painful impression," but he does not say why.[4] The anonymous German critic says, "The walk to the murder in the second act seemed to me strange, because of the unexpected sense of his miming, brush strokes which Mr. Aldridge used to exhaust the ghostliness of the situation."[5]

On the other hand Almazov, another Russian critic, writes:

Aldridge was wonderful in this scene—according to a (secondhand) witness—You saw before you a man fully conscious of all the baseness of the work he has decided to do, and who is terrified. It is devilish and disgusting to carry out the work, but something irritable carries him on, pushes him into the bedroom of the sleeping king. What are the incomprehensible, supernatural powers which make a man, by nature good, soft and noble, a low-down and faint-hearted villain? Surely this isn't resolute decisiveness, the power of a mighty will? No, it is simply a mad, unhappy passion, suddenly overpowering a weak spirit, who cannot withstand it, and cannot cope with it. Macbeth knows very well that the deed he is about to perform is irrational in its consequences, but he will not be able to cope with the situation in which he will be placed, that conscience will tear him and the fear of punishment will not give him a moment's rest; but his reason is already clouded over with passion, he already sees bloody visions, and the powers of darkness confuse him and now gain final victory over him. . . . The thought of becoming king penetrates into his head suddenly, accidentally, and his weak spirit could not stand up before the lure of that dream. . . . The character of Macbeth is understood and represented by Aldridge absolutely truthfully. He goes to commit a murder not like a hero marching to an exploit, but like a man, preparing to become a villain.

The fighting and wrestling of his torturing and driving thoughts, the struggle in the soul of the hero before the deed (to kill the king and gain the throne) fill[ed] the spectators with fear and pity and arrested their very breathing. He did not stamp boldly to the bloody deed

in the night. He crept or prowled in the dark to the king's chamber, which he wanted to change into a murder cave; even at the threshold he stops repeatedly, hesitates. It was as if his good angel wanted to restrain him from becoming the king's murderer. This quiet [entrance] is, of course, not so ostentatious, as if Macbeth, with the cry of the last verse, would throw himself into or rush in, but deep honesty lay in this hesitation and fear between decision and deed. (He portrayed it as a human being and not as an actor). It was as if the colorful hero were to translate the famous monologue of Hamlet "To be or not to be" by his looks, demeanor and actions into "To murder or not to murder."

If one had never seen Aldridge and only heard how he cried out behind the scenes (at the very time Macbeth is committing the murder), "Who's there?" then already by that single cry one would know that he is a great actor. . . .

In the scene where Macbeth, having murdered the king, is asked "Is the King stirring, worthy Thane?" the spectator is already in suspense for Aldridge-Macbeth; for in that flash which makes up the moment between the question of Macduff and the answer of Macbeth, it seems to the spectators that Macbeth cannot find an answer, and any moment now will be exposed.

Then the scene when Macbeth is pretending profound indignation at the treacherous murder of the king, is the summit of artistic perfection, the summit of subtlety in theatrical method. Here Aldridge plays, so to say, a double role, a role within a role, and that is the most difficult thing of all in theatrical art. Watching Aldridge you know and see that he is pretending, but at the same time you find that he is completely natural and if you had not learned from the play that he is lying, you would not have noticed in him a shadow of pretence.

In the scene when Macbeth talked to the murderers, Aldridge expressed in sharp relief the character of Macbeth; he is ashamed and disgusted in front of the murderers; before them he tries to justify himself, he is ingratiating himself with them.

The scene with the ghost of Banquo is particularly difficult. Here the actor must summon up all the strength of his imagination, gather up all his reserves of psychological observation, in order to conjecture how he would speak in actual fact with the ghost of a man he had murdered. A finer performance of this scene is not possible.[6]

But according to the anonymous German critic, where Aldridge's acting and expressiveness reached the highest degree of perfection was in the third act (the banquet scene):

The kingly halo, the imperial bearing, a kind of fantastic warmth, spiritualizing his whole personality, majestic plasticity and thought in every significant movement and word—all this leaves far behind the usual theatrical spectacle. One can boldly say that since the time of the ancient kings of the Athenian stage no one has seen anything like it. The speech of Macbeth to the ghost of Banquo was performed with nobility and at the same time with natural terror. . . .

The two speeches to Banquo's ghost were masterpieces worthy of study of the most noble, and at the same time, most expressive horror. If the attitude of the others had been in accord, and especially if the introduction of Banquo's ghost had not taken away from the effect of

> the scene, this third act would have brought out the most extraordinary impression of which the stage is capable. . . .
>
> Something new (according to the example of the theater in England) was the falling of Macbeth on the stage. Until death Macbeth struggles with Macduff. . . . In the struggle between the two, Macbeth's veins are gradually becoming lax. In the end, like a wounded bear at last, he drags his sword after him. He looks for his dagger and falls, a tall, tragic hero.[7]

To this the Russian critic Zvantsov adds, "Finally his duel with Macduff seemed to me for the first time a necessary and truly Shakespearean ending to the tragedy. Here, for the first time I felt at the end of the tragedy, that the warlike spirit of Shakespeare's hero and the tragic intentions of Shakespeare were in accord; this was not some kind of gladiatorial combat but a heightened expression of struggle, in which Macbeth, worthy of himself, sinks, feeble with wounds and loss of blood, tired of blood and crime."[8]

In his interpretation of Macbeth, it is clear, even from the limited reviews at our disposal, that Aldridge gave to this bloody murderer a humanity often lacking in performance. All agree that "he portrayed him as a human being and not an actor." What a wonderful tribute—particularly as all the critics were at first skeptical that the hot son of Africa could portray this Nordic soul, but Aldridge once again triumphed and revealed his basic theme—the equality of all sons of man under heaven, whether in murder or in nobility.

The Role of King Lear

When Aldridge presented his perfected Othello in Russia, he had been rehearsing and acting it for thirty-three years, but his King Lear (see figure 13.2), equally successful, had been in his repertoire for only five years.

For his performance of Lear with the German Company in St. Petersburg in 1858, the text used was translated from the Nahum Tate version of 1681, which was in turn revised by Garrick in 1756. Zvantsov, highly incensed about it, wrote,

> Some years ago I happened to dine with an acquaintance of mine . . . whose cook, taking advantage of the good nature of his employer . . . prepared a pie in which . . . there was some badly cooked rice and above all, not the slightest trace of salt. . . . This came into my head when I read a German poster of the first performance of *King Lear* last Tuesday in which, instead of the Fool and the King of France, appear some nonexistent robbers; and all this was based on an English edition of the play! . . . Even worse—for after the complete victory of Edmund, Lear once again sat on the throne of Britain, which was returned to him by Cordelia! All the melodramatic history of her love for the exiled Edgar was practically the invention of Garrick, and reminded me of the half-boiled rice in the landlord's pie . . . whereas the absence of Lear's Fool can only compare to the complete absence of salt in the pie.

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Figure 13.2 Photograph of Ira Aldridge as King Lear (by permission of the Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations).

The cause for this English disarrangement can be explained by no other reason than that no man is a hero to his valet and that with Shakespeare the English do not stand on ceremony, but should we imitate them? Let us forget the doughy pie, the plebian rice, the forgetfulness of the cook in not putting in salt, and let us enjoy the wonderful ingredient—Aldridge himself. Happy is that artist who, with his personality alone, is able to support Shakespeare on his original, mighty, unattainable pedestal.[9]

Let us see how Aldridge dealt with the very knot of contention in the first scene: the whole tragedy has its source in Lear's decision to divide his kingdom amongst his daughters during his lifetime. Why did he do it? Some think it was because he was already in his dotage, others because he was tired of the throne, and still others, that it was the beginning of mental derangement. Aldridge conceived that it was out of love for his daughters. With this same conception he heightened the character of Shylock by developing his love for his daughter, which some criticized him for "exaggerating." Bazhenov, in a developed criticism of this characterization, said, "Aldridge here performed two fathers, Shylock and Lear. In both these roles the fathers are insulted, the first as a Jew, hated by the Christians, and the second, as a King. But Aldridge succeeded in showing them as fathers and, in this respect, he could not have improved Shakespeare's own tone, divining brilliantly in his works the two attitudes of fathers to their children. . . . With Aldridge, Lear, in the power of his love for his daughters, wishes them to become equal with him, which above all explains the scene of the division of his kingdom, a scene which Goethe declared senseless. . . . [Some] will no doubt ask, 'Is this how Shakespeare is to be performed?' I answer them in advance—yes, I repeat, yes; and truly no one need be ashamed to learn much from Aldridge."[10]

Zvantsov goes on to say:

On the opening of the curtain, one's imagination was presented with a distant picture of the legendary, primitive, patriarchal West; on the throne the aged Lear, surrounded by his family, his faithful guards and soldiers; and the whole of the scene that followed was a development of that wonderful picture, which Mr. Aldridge presented to us in perfection, despite the inappropriate aforementioned alterations. In the lean figure of the self-willed Lear on the eve of dotage, it was impossible to recognize our Othello. Morale, spirit, mannerisms, movements—everything was different. All sides of his character seemed to be incarnated in the creation of Ira Aldridge. As in our summary of his previous roles, so here it would be out of place to speak of separate episodes and details; everything was good.[11]

N. S. Nazarov agrees that the opening of the play was striking:

In the beginning of the first act, during the generous large-hearted division of his kingdom between his older daughters, he showed exceptional good nature, even somewhat at the expense of his kingly dignity; one had but to see with what love he ran his fingers over the maps indicating the boundaries of the kingdom of the two older sisters; one had to see how he rebuked Cordelia for her seeming unfeelingness and how obviously ready he was to forgive her, and raise her to the level of the others at her very first words, which would, during his

> present mood, have shown him that she loved him no less than her sisters proved to. At the beginning of the scene how good-naturedly and lovingly he looked at his court, at its brilliance and pomp! This was shown in every word, in every movement of the king, accustomed to honor and luxury, liable often to make mistakes, but always good-naturedly and with the best intentions. He is sure that everyone is sincerely and unquestionably loyal to him, and he is accustomed to hear expressions of that loyalty. . . . Wearied with age and power, he willingly gives to his daughters, hands over to them the reins of office, and he profoundly believes that in return for his nobleness, for his long, just and humble rule, he would be surrounded to the end of his days by honor and love, due to him not only because of his kingly throne, not only as an aged father, but as a form of requital of his love, of his goodness. This good-natured blindness, by means of which he snares himself in his own net, becomes in the acting of Aldridge completely clear and at the same time to the highest degree astonishing by its artistic execution.[12]

The scene with Goneril (act 1, scene 4) reveals the first bitter disappointment of the unhappy king:

> [W]ith Aldridge this scene emerged as almost the best in the whole play. This is what astonished Lear and brought him eventually to madness. Aldridge carried the scene through with superlative artistry. At first he expressed complete incredibility; he just could not understand what was said or done around him; he did not believe that that which took place before his very eyes could actually happen. But afterwards, when everything became completely apparent, he could not speak; he groaned, was beside himself, threw himself at everybody, seeking to avenge his wounded feelings and shattered sense of justice. Those around him cannot understand this; some are glad of his downfall, others pity him, and those loyal to him consider his unhappiness a natural corollary of his own foolishness. Lear appeals to the highest powers of nature:
>
> Hear, Nature, hear! dear goddess, hear!
> Suspend thy purpose, if thou did'st intend
> To make this creature fruitful!
> Into her womb convey sterility!
>
> This monologue—a monologue of curses—Aldridge pronounces on his knees, and it is impossible to convey the shattering effect which his words, his voice, his mimicry and gestures had on his audience. A senile old man suddenly overcome with sorrow, drops onto one knee, having cast off from himself his kingly ties and his imperial crown, with a terrifying voice that tears the heart, more with groans than words, invokes onto the heads of his daughters all the unbearably heavy sufferings which he experiences himself. He cries aloud, he screams, he overflows with words, he sighs, it is seen that suddenly inside him everything has shattered and filled his soul with chaos and suffering.
>
> Here the art of the actor inevitably passed over into actual feelings, and Aldridge, as it were, merged with Lear. It is impossible to forget that aged, broken, despairing voice, that look

> filled with the torture of frenzied indignation. The mimicry of the artist was astonishing, despite the fact that the play of muscles on the lower half of the face was hidden by a bushy white beard.[13]

Aldridge's treatment of this scene is a cause of disagreement among his critics. While Nazarov in Odessa praises it, the leading Moscow critic, Bazhenov, says:

> Even in Shylock and Lear one can point out certain places, though mind you, very few, which also tend to be weakened because of a too careful working out of details and underlining of them. Thus, for example, in act 1 scene 4, Aldridge, wishing to give particular significance to his curse and to bring it well to the fore, performs the scene in this way: having tried to persuade Goneril far too much, he suddenly breaks off his angry speech and makes his way to the exit, but arriving at the door, he stops, turns round, bares his head, throws down his staff, sinks onto his knees and begins to curse his daughter. This is more like a curse of Oedipus than Lear. If Oedipus prepares to curse with a long, stubborn silence, if he is too restrained and too much master of himself during his cursing, one must not forget that Oedipus revenges himself on Polyneices not only for a personal insult, but for an insult to him as a representative of patriarchal power in general. Oedipus is after all a weapon of the Gods and he is conscious of that role.
>
> On the other hand, Lear calls down all the punishments on the head of his daughter in revenge only for himself personally; consequently his anger extends to the very extremes and he has no power to restrain them; with him all his bursts of passion and curses are the last terrible words of parental and royal anger—words which are torn from his lips in exactly the same way as in the judgment of Cordelia and the banishment of Kent.
>
> And yet, despite all this, apart from words of sincere gratitude, we must say we are indebted to Aldridge for such performances, so thought out to the tiniest detail, and for his unusually living and full-blooded creation of Shakespeare's characters.[14]

Nazarov, meanwhile, goes on to argue that

> In the second act the situation of the first is partly repeated, but here, too, in the role of Lear is a very characteristic nuance: the defense of Kent (scene 4). During the whole scene, as before, what predominates in Lear is not the powerful and terrible anger of a man with a big, but far from soft, heart, but particularly the indignation of a good man, beside himself and almost unconscious of his actions. Thanks to the acting of Aldridge we clearly saw that such a man must inevitably end in madness. But the very madness of Lear at the same time presents a unity of goodness and madness amidst the thunder and the tempest, under the very darkest despair and the half-sane, half-mad thoughts on life, where from time to time he already recognizes his errors and his guilt before Cordelia. When Lear meets Edgar, masquerading as poor Tom, the king sees in him, as it were, his very own brother, a man like him, thrown out of the everyday run of things, crushed by sorrow, poverty; he suddenly feels towards him an unusual sympathy and with infinite goodness squats on the earth alongside

> him to sort straws. The powerful old man turns into a little child. The evil and injustice of the world has brought together two opposite poles. . . . king and idiot. Filled with spiritual suffering, Lear is alien to the whole world and finds a common tie only in the idiot Tom, for Tom, too, suffers and is also alien to the world. We know that before Lear is not the genuine Tom, but Edgar, who has adopted his guise, but Edgar, too, is thrown out by the world and by his father. He also is a victim of injustice and ingratitude. One could not watch Aldridge without tears, how he embraces Edgar in his rage, having first torn his own clothes before him and sorted straws.[15]

The key to Aldridge's interpretation is to be found in the following lines:

> Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these? Oh! I have ta'en
> Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel;
> That thou may'st shake the superflux to them,
> And show the heavens more just. (act 3, scene 4)

Lear, the king, has become Lear, the man, and nothing that is human is alien to him.

It may not be realized that these famous words, *Nihil alienum humanum mihi*, were written by Terence, not the *Roman* dramatist, but Publius the African slave of a senator of Rome, Terence!

Zvantsov said it would be out of place to speak of separate scenes—everything was good in Aldridge's performance:

> The exiling of Kent and Cordelia; the gradual disillusionment of Lear in the loyalty of Goneril and Regan; the parental curses he hurled at them; the terrible scene during the storm in act 3 (more and more suffering from the absence of the Fool); finally, the scene of complete madness in the fourth act—all were a delight! The history of the blinding of Gloucester, who is led over the heath by the honest, unjustly cast-out son, was presented to us most carefully in its proper form, and without doubt prepares us for the powerful impression produced by the sight of the unhappy, ragged Lear with a crown of straw, with a straw scepter in his shaking hand, with the stately imperturbability in the clouded eye of madness, which no longer has the power to recognize friends and faithful followers. A magic effect was produced by the words of Lear, when the blind Gloucester, recognizing him by his voice, asks, "Is't not the king?"
>
> Aye, every inch a king!
> When I do stare, see how the subject quakes. . . .

> The famous scene of the awakening of the exhausted king in the tent of the good Cordelia was performed as one would expect from a great artist; the only ones who did not weep "were indeed the men of stones!" It is impossible to imagine to oneself the tender feelings of love, that unique concentrated bliss on the eve of death, that aged, half-unconscious shame which Aldridge expressed in his playing of such phrases as the following:
>
> Pray, do not mock me.
> I am a very foolish fond old man,
> Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less,
> And, to deal plainly,
> I fear I am not in my perfect mind. . . .[16]

According to Nazarov,

> Before us is a half-dead Lear, who holds on to life by one single thread, love for Cordelia, love which is expressed all the more powerfully, because it was felt all the more deeply in the years of suffering and madness. After his reason has somewhat returned to Lear and he recognizes Cordelia, he cannot exist in any other way than with her alone; he searches for her only, everywhere, he does not let go of her, he cannot take a step without her, without his Cordelia.[17]

Yunge adds:

> Above all was his last scene when, with wide open eyes, with tortured face he runs onto the scene carrying the dead Cordelia in his arms. It seemed as if he was about to throw her on the ground and tear to pieces everyone around him, but then his eyes fell on her face and the face of the old man softens, he seats himself on the earth, hugs his daughter to his bosom, smoothes her hair, caresses her, and his whole being becomes transformed into love and sorrow.[18]

And Nazarov concludes:

> One already sees on his brow the mark of death. The astonishing mind of Shakespeare in the artistic fulfillment of the artist amazes one more and more. Here clearly Lear is not an inhabitant of this world; it is only a question of minutes now. Death is already suffocating him . . . but to the last minute he still hopes that his Cordelia will regain consciousness. . . . it seems to him that she is still alive; that her lips quiver, and he asks others to confirm this:
>
> Look on her! Look! her lips!
> Look there, look there! (*He dies*.)
>
> Aldridge presented the death of the king simply and amazingly; quietly and with just the shadow of a smile on his lips he whispers these last words, convulsively crosses his fingers, then lightly falls into the arms of those around him and his eyes close; no writhing, no shud-

> dering, nothing. Those around him still cannot believe that Lear is dead in their arms, but one already fears, and breathing is stifled in one's breast; before one lies a real corpse where but a minute ago was a living man.[19]

Summing up the effect of Aldridge's acting on Russian actors and the audience, Durylin says, "If in the beginning of the tragedy Aldridge-Lear could repeat the words, 'Aye, every inch a king,' then at the end of the tragedy they would have to be changed into 'A man, aye, every inch a man.' "[20]

Once more Ira Aldridge, descendant of a royal line and son of a poor straw-vendor, was able to synthesize these contrasting opposites in one character, and give it the justification and the humanity it so often lacks.

Notes

1. E. F. Yunge, *Memoirs (1843–1860)* (St. Petersburg: Sphinx, 1913), 172. In Russian; translated by Herbert Marshall.
2. Quoted in Anon., *Leben und Künstler-Laufbahn des Negers Ira Aldridge* (Berlin: Allgemeine Deutsche Verlags-Unstalt, 1853), 41–43.
3. Bernard Shaw, "Duse and Bernhardt," *Dramatic Opinions and Essays* (New York: Brentano's, 1907), 139–40.
4. A. N. Bazhenov, "Aldridge in the Moscow Theater," *Moskovskie Vedomosti* (Moscow Official Gazette), October 27, 1862, 1876–77.
5. Quoted in Anon., *Leben und Künstler-Laufban*, 43.
6. S. Almazov, "Aldridge in the Moscow Theater," *Ruskii Vestnik: Sovremennaya Letopis'* (Russian Bulletin: Contemporary Chronicle) 40 (1962): 12–13; 41 (1962): 11–13.
7. Quoted in *Leben und Künstler-Laufban*, 35–37, 43–44.
8. K. I. Zvantsov, "Ira Aldridge," *Teatral'ny i muzikal'ny Vestnik* (Theatrical and Musical Bulletin) December 7, 1858, 565–67.
9. K. I. Zvantsov, *Ira Aldridge: Acherk evo Zhizin y Predstavlenie* (Ira Aldridge: Essay on His Life and Performances) (St. Petersburg: Ionson, 1858), 23–24.
10. Bazhenov, "Aldridge in the Moscow Theater," 1876–77.
11. Zvantsov, *Ira Aldridge*, 24–25.
12. [N. S. Nazarov], "Aldridge in *King Lear*," *Ruskii Vestnik: Sovremennaya Letopis'* (Russian Bulletin: Contemporary Chronicle) 42 (1862): 24–27. Signed: N. N.
13. Ibid.
14. Bazhenov, "Aldridge in the Moscow Theater," 1876–77.
15. [Nazarov], "Aldridge in *King Lear*," 24–25.
16. Zvantsov, *Ira Aldridge*, 25–26.
17. [Nazarov], "Aldridge in *King Lear*," 26–27.
18. Yunge, *Memoirs*, 170.
19. [Nazarov], "Aldridge in *King Lear*," 27.
20. S. Durylin, *Ira Aldridge* (Moscow and Leningrad: State Publishing House, 1940), 53.

14

Creating the Black Hero

Ira Aldridge's The Black Doctor

Keith Byerman

One of Ira Aldridge's short-term theatrical successes in the late 1840s was *The Black Doctor*, a melodrama originally written as *Le Docteur Noir* by Auguste Anicét-Bourgeois and Philippe François Pinel Dumanoir and first acted at the Porte-Saint-Martin Theater in Paris on July 30, 1846.[1] Translated into English by John Vilon Bridgeman, it opened in London at the Royal Victoria Theatre on November 13, 1846, having been adapted for the British stage by Thomas Hailes Lacy, who subsequently published his adaptation. Another version, adapted by Thomas Archer, had been staged at the City of London Theatre a few days earlier, on November 9, 1846. The play, in one or both of these forms, and in at least one other theater (St. James), ran successfully in London for upwards of eighty nights. Aldridge started performing the Archer version in Bath (see figure 14.1), Bristol, and Dublin in February–March 1847, but according to a competing publisher, John Dicks, he made further alterations to the text. When *The Black Doctor* appeared as no. 460 in Dicks' Standard Plays years later, Dicks stated that it had been "adapted to the English stage, by Ira Aldridge."[2] While much of the Aldridge version reads as a paraphrase of the Lacy text, there are significant differences, which I want to argue reveal a work that gives particular emphasis to race and class issues in creating a Romantic hero and that ultimately, I believe, comments on Aldridge's treatment by the London theatrical establishment.

The plot can be easily summarized, despite the complications, as is often the case with melodrama. Fabian, once a slave on the Isle of Bourbon, gained his freedom by saving the lives of the master's family, through both his courage and his medical skills. One of those he saved was the Marquis de la Reynerie's daughter Pauline; when her mother, now a widow, apparently perishes at sea, Fabian once again comes to her aid. He falls in love with her, but knowing the rules of his society, he isolates himself rather than admit his feelings to anyone. When Pauline comes to his cabin to thank him and to seek his help for another of her servants,

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Figure 14.1 Playbill from the Theatre-Royal, Bath, February 13, 1847 (by permission of the British Library).

he arranges to meet her at an isolated cove. In the meantime he also manages to save the Chevalier de St. Luce, who turns out to be the man her mother had designated as her betrothed. At the cove, with the sea rising, he confesses his love and says that they will die together. Believing this to be true, she admits her love for him. They are, in fact, saved and married by a local priest, offstage.

The scene then moves to Paris, where the mother, who in fact did not die, is arranging the marriage to the chevalier. Pauline refuses and finally reveals the truth about her relationship to Fabian; recognizing the mother's racism, Fabian renounces the marriage in order to save his beloved. The marchioness then betrays them by sending Pauline to a nunnery and Fabian to a dungeon in the Bastille. The villain dies, the Bastille is stormed, but Fabian has lost his sanity in the meantime. Released, he goes to Brittany with the man who freed him and is reunited with Pauline momentarily. She is threatened by the mob as an aristocrat, but can be saved by her marriage certificate, which Fabian initially fails to produce, thinking that he is saving her by keeping it a secret. When one of the mob fires a shot at her, Fabian takes the bullet and, in a dying gesture, produces the paper and declares his love.

While the elements of coincidence, overwrought emotion, and dramatic effects identify this as melodrama, it is also the case, as Barbara Cooper has pointed out in her analysis of *Le Docteur Noir*, that Fabian is very much in the tradition of Romantic heroes of the French stage. He is a character on the margins of society who challenges its conventions and shows a high level of integrity and courage. I want to suggest that it is this aspect of the protagonist that Aldridge emphasizes in his version of the play. As Cooper indicates, the qualities associated with the Romantic hero include "political opposition, social illegitimacy, and economic exclusion."[3] Race can be added to the grouping in this case, but Aldridge does something different with that category. The French Fabian was designed to be played by a white actor (specifically Frédérick Lemaître) in blackface and the Bridgeman-Lacy character is explicitly said to be "very dark brown, with glossy, straight black hair."[4] In contrast, Aldridge describes Fabian as "not a black man, but a handsome Mulatto, yellow and brown."[5] While this change can be explained in a variety of ways (including the fact that it more nearly matches Aldridge's complexion), one reason could be that it shifts the emphasis from a racial absolute of black representation to something more like the symbolic "swarthiness" of the Romantic hero, a figure often aligned with the "dark" side of passion and marginality. This would explain how Aldridge could present the melodramatic aspects of emotional intensity and madness without reverting to racial caricatures of the irrational black or the unstable mulatto. Fabian can be a strong, heroic figure rather than a weak, racial one if there are resonances for the audience of a different theatrical tradition, one associated with Romanticism.

Other revisions reinforce this different conceptualization of the protagonist. The most significant structural change comes in the first scene of the play.

Aldridge creates a family, the Grimauds, that does not exist in either of the original versions. While the opening scene serves in all versions the purpose of providing background information on the central characters, it is done not only with different characters but with a different category of characters. In both the Anicét-Bourgeois and Bridgeman versions, aristocratic characters tell the story of Fabian's role in saving members of the Reynerie family, but in the process reveal their racial attitudes. In Bridgeman, for example, while describing how Fabian saved Pauline during the epidemic, Monsieur Barbantane tells the story of his own cousin, who preferred dying to being treated by the mulatto. Her behavior, he says, was "heroic."[6] Repeatedly in this and later scenes, comments are made about how things might be different in Paris, but that on the island, racial attitudes are very much fixed.

By using the Grimauds to provide the background, Aldridge offers another perspective. Hannibal Grimaud, a former soldier, keeps a wine shop, where he works with his wife and daughter. The scene provides humor that contrasts with the intense seriousness of the immediately upcoming scenes. Part of the humor is Grimaud's social pretension; he believes that none of the young shopkeepers are good enough for his daughter. His banter with his own family and with the two young men who seek her hand reveals his desire to control her future. At one point, there is this exchange:

> *Susanne*: And I'm sure men are scarce enough in the colony, unless you'd have me marry a blackamoor.
> *Grimaud*: You shall marry whom I please, you jade, and he shall be as black as I like.[7]

"Blackamoor" is, among other things, a reference to Othello, a character Aldridge was famous for playing. But the exchange also reveals a racial attitude among the white populace of the island very different from that present in the other versions. Grimaud can entertain the notion of a black son-in-law, so long as he has the appropriate status and is acceptable to the father. That he can be so casual in his comment reveals a tolerance not apparent in the other texts. I would also suggest that it reflects a different perspective on social class. This is evident in the discussion of Fabian:

> *Lizette*: Only to think, now, that a mulatto, and a slave, should have become the most eminent physician in all the island!
> *Grimaud*: The Black Doctor isn't a slave.
> *Lizette*: Well, but he was before he was free.
> *Grimaud*: Don't you run down people, wife of mine. Remember what you were before I married you. . . . Well, everybody likes the Black Doctor, and so they should, if it were only for the services he has rendered Mademoiselle de la Reynerie.[8]

Near the end of the scene, Grimaud asks the others to send along any news they hear of Fabian.

While "slave" status has negative connotations, at least in the view of Grimaud, it is not particularly worse than the status of some whites; more importantly, it is not a fixed category for those of darker skin. Since Fabian has been freed, it is an insult to designate him by his former status. Moreover, given his care for those, such as Pauline Reynerie, that are respected, he deserves special consideration. He is to be judged by his actions, not by his status or color. But even those who err in their naming, such as Lizette, are perfectly willing to grant Fabian preeminence in his medical skills. Thus, Aldridge is insistent that, at least among the middling classes of whites on the island, racism is not a strong factor.

But it is also the case that he makes a distinction between the provinces and the metropole in defining racial views. All the scenes on the island that involve aristocrats also include the lower or middling classes, either black or white. In every instance, acknowledgment is made of the value of Fabian and others. So Pauline seeks out Fabian in his cabin to thank him and seek help for Lia, a mulatto female servant she calls her "foster-sister." Shortly afterward, Fabian saves the Chevalier de St. Luce, who is so grateful that he invites the doctor to his wedding with Pauline, though he knows that this will cause some stir among the aristocrats. It is only later, in Paris, that these and other characters adopt more negative attitudes. At the same time, they express the view that the capital is more liberal and egalitarian in its views. In the Aldridge text, such comments must be taken as ironic, since they conflict with the realities presented.

Just as this version creates textual variations to establish the protagonist as an esteemed outsider, at least in his home territory, it also uses aspects of the earlier versions to accomplish this purpose. In all the versions, Fabian refuses to accept any reward for his actions; any money that is offered to him is redirected for assistance to the poor. Moreover, he aids those in need, regardless of their social status. In all the different versions, the first act describes how he has saved Monsieur de la Reynerie, Christian (his self-appointed servant), Pauline, Lia (Pauline's servant), and St. Luce. On the island, then, he is a kind of saint, though clearly on the boundaries of society, in part apparently by choice.

The reason for his self-isolation, typical of the Romantic hero, is a love unacceptable to society. It is one thing for Fabian to be admired for his generosity, skill, and courage; it is quite another for him, a former slave, to desire Pauline de la Reynerie. Aldridge, more than the other authors/adapters, is vague about whether the obstacle is race or class. It is here that it is possible to see a thematic purpose for the Grimaud scene. Hannibal Grimaud can at least imagine a "blackamoor" acceptable to him as a son-in-law; but he is clear that an ordinary white tradesman is not a good choice. What is important is a socially advantageous marriage by which status can be improved.

Like Grimaud, Fabian imagines a cross-racial relationship, but considers it impossible:

> Can this little relic [from his mother], so powerful against evil, avail nothing to my sufferings? in vain I place it on my burning heart; it cannot quench the passion that consumes it. To it alone I breathe my fearful secret; that I, a mulatto, and late a slave, dare to love the daughter of a white man—the daughter of him who was my master! it is madness—madness![9]

By adding "slave" to "mulatto" and "master" to "white man," the text complicates the source of the madness. While in an American context the terms would be considered synonymous, the European nature of both the play and the audience would suggest that a distinction is being made. In a hierarchical order, social rank would have priority over race in determining relationships, as the Grimaud scene suggests. In this sense, Fabian considers himself doubly negated; even if he were white, he would still be rejected by Pauline's family as a man without an acceptable bloodline. He can think of himself as a worthy and admirable individual, but his personal qualities count as nothing in a class-oriented, racialized society.

This point is important, because it is essential to understand that Fabian does not consider himself to be inferior to anyone, and this is part of his frustration and "madness." While not showing the pride or arrogance of French Romantic heroes, he cannot accept his situation as natural or normal. In fact, he gains through his passion a special insight into himself and his world. This point is made clear in the encounter with Lia, Pauline's servant. She is brought to him because she is "spirit-broken," and Pauline fears that she will die of her sorrows.[10] As Fabian immediately recognizes, she suffers from an affair of the heart, one that has racial implications. But even to speak of it is frightening to her; she begs him to remain silent and says that she would rather die than have her feeling known, even though it is shared by the young man. The dilemma is caused by racial difference:

> *Fabian*: And this love, pure and chaste, you would hide from all, as if it were a shame for you to love one whom you have no right to love, and who despises you.
> *Pauline*: Oh, no! 'tis impossible.
> *Fabian*: Because he is not of your accursed race; because he is a European.
> *Pauline*: What do I hear?
> *Fabian*: And yet is Monsieur Bertrand a good and worthy young man.
> *Lia*: Do not mention that name.
> *Pauline*: Bertrand, the young Frenchman? Mr. Barbantine's clerk?
> *Fabian*: Yes, mademoiselle, yes! He is a good and worthy young man; but his skin is white (*To Lia*), and yours is dark as mine; therefore you have not the right to love him. Suffer, poor sister, suffer, and despair, for yours is a malady for which there is no remedy.[11]

Aldridge makes some striking revisions in this scene compared with the earlier versions. As in the original, but unlike Lacy, he specifies "your" rather than "our accursed race,"[12] even though a moment later Fabian, in all versions, refers to the

sameness of their skin color. I would suggest that the distinction is not one of racial denial but of emphasis on the hero's rationality. He is engaged here in analyzing a problem, even though it clearly has implications for himself. This point is reinforced by Aldridge's deletion of references to Fabian's rising emotion in the scene; in both the Lacy and Anicét-Bourgeois versions, he becomes so moved by his own observations that he starts weeping. Aldridge also excises several lines from the speech above in which Fabian describes Lia's private thoughts and feelings when she is alone. This section is clearly used to reveal to the audience his own frustrated love for Pauline. By excluding it, Aldridge makes his character less openly emotional and thus less stereotypically black. It is only when he is alone, after Pauline has declared that she will use her wealth and power to bring the young lovers together, that he expresses his love and his hope for himself.

It is also essential to consider two phrases that Aldridge brings in from the other texts, but which would appear to have a different sense in his adaptation. The first is "accursed race." Since the words are given to a black character and not a white one, we could assume that Fabian accepts this racist designation as valid and this could be one reason that he speaks to Lia of "your accursed race." He distances himself momentarily from the self-hatred implicit in the usage. But given his identification with her (he refers to her shortly after as "poor sister"), it makes more sense that he is commenting on the racist attitudes that compel people like them to suffer because they cannot love whom they choose. They are condemned to emotional pain because someone else considers their race to be a mark of inferiority and has the power to enforce that view on society. It is also apparent that the curse is not absolute or "natural," since Pauline can use her status to override it.

The second phrase, though it appears in all the versions, seems in context to be a non sequitur or even nonsense. Lacy (whom Aldridge apparently follows) has it thus:

> *Fabian*: You would have hidden this chaste and pure passion as you would a deed for which you ought to blush, for you love a man whom you have no right to love—a man who despises you.[13]

Since this is a reference to a character who immediately thereafter is said to be "worthy" and who, Lia acknowledges, loves her, it is difficult to make sense of "despises." Aldridge's version appears to salvage sense to some extent by making the phrasing conditional: "And this love, pure and chaste, you would hide from all, as if it were a shame for you to love one whom you have no right to love, and who despises you." In this variation, the love itself is not implicated as shameful; rather, the problem would seem to be Lia's acceptance of society's valuation of that love as shameful. While the syntax does not allow for an unambiguous reading, it would seem to be the case that it is the society that insists that a white man has to "despise" a black woman who dares to love him. Since it is Fabian

speaking the line, such an interpretation would seem reasonable, given that Aldridge himself would be speaking it and thus would want it to be consistent with his presentation of the character.

These readings, with their emphasis on the rationality and insight of Aldridge's Fabian, are not meant to suggest that the character lacks passion and even, eventually, madness. Rather, they are to show that passion to be within the grand tradition of reason and emotion gone to extremes; the representation avoids, not strong feeling, but the racial stereotype of black irrationality. Instead, Fabian reveals both the insight and the great passion of an Othello or of French Romantic heroes. His flaw is not his race or his anger at mistreatment; like other protagonists in the tradition, it is jealousy. Having learned that St. Luce is to marry Pauline and having heard her say that race is no barrier to love, Fabian determines that he will confess his own love and then they will both die. If he is prevented by society from having the woman he loves, he will prevent her from having any other man.

It is important to note that Fabian plans this murder-suicide. Hazel Waters is wrong in implying that he decides their fate while on the dangerous path.[14] Such a reading reinforces a notion of impetuosity that is not consistent with the character that Aldridge creates. Fabian explains his choice of spot to Pauline: "Look, Pauline, before we should reach the rocks which we but now descended together, the sea would dash us to atoms against their rugged points! I feared my own weakness, and closed every avenue to the road of repentance or pity; death surrounds us, but we shall perish together!"[15] Knowing his own limitations, he precludes retreat. Knowing the deep truth of his love, he must speak. But also knowing the realities of his society, he understands that her honor and his dignity cannot be preserved in that world. He cannot openly have her as his wife by the rules of race and class; their situation is profoundly different from that of Lia and Bertrand, who belong to the lower classes. But he refuses either to suffer in silence or to die alone. He obviously considers himself to be worthy of Pauline, or he would not speak. In true Romantic fashion, he would bring them together in death.

He also chooses the spot because it is a site of Romantic narrative. Known as the Mulatto's Grotto, it is where, according to legend, an emancipated black man took the daughter of his master because he thought she had betrayed his love, though she had never loved him. He held her in "hands of iron," confessed his feeling, and then let the tide carry them out to sea. She submits because "death has less of horror for the young girl than the mulatto's love."[16] Interestingly, unlike the other versions, in this one, Fabian labels the man a fool rather than a madman. Clearly, he believes that he is following the narrative and that Pauline in some sense deserves her fate. Earlier in the scene, he had noted, sarcastically, "Did you not desire me to take the most retired route? Mademoiselle de la Reynerie wished to avoid any one whilst walking beside the mulatto Fabian. 'Twas otherwise in your childhood; then you did not disdain to lean on my arm."[17] Pauline at this moment reasserts her superior status by requesting her fan from Fabian and shortly thereafter reminds him that they must go so that she can meet

her social obligations. Though she also refers to Lia and Bertrand, she also causes him to remember that she is to marry the chevalier. Thus, he could be expected to see her in the role of the untrustworthy woman and to proceed with his plan.

What he has not taken in to account is the possibility that she might actually share his feeling. The point of the double death is to take her out of this world, even if she does not love him. But once she understands his trap and knows that she will die, she too confesses her love: "[N]ow I am sure of death, I may acknowledge, without shame or remorse, that I understand you, Fabian, and I forgive you, for I have long, long loved you!"[18] Aldridge adds the "long, long" to the text, with its suggestion that Pauline too has had to suppress her passion in order to obey the rules of society and that she too has been sacrificing her true feeling. But precisely because of her love, Fabian no longer wishes her to die. The mulatto's narrative is not his, and so he seeks rescue, which miraculously comes. As a result, they are secretly married.

The tale of powerful passion and Romantic death has been aborted. The play might be said to take on a modern quality through this revised structure. What happens if the star-crossed lovers do not die, especially if their love is forbidden? How do they behave in the everyday world of social obligations, power, and manipulation? To strengthen this sense of the modern, the setting is moved to Paris, and Pauline's mother is (again miraculously) restored to the story. She becomes the central figure in a racial and class hierarchy that will not tolerate any other arrangements. Using treatment of Fabian as the moral measure, each of the characters who on the island treated him with some degree of consideration is shown to use him as a means to establish superiority. Briquet, one of Grimaud's associates and now the chevalier's personal servant, refers to him as a "curiosity." St. Luce, whose life had been saved by Fabian and who had invited him to his wedding, repeats the offer, but now with the clear intent of humiliating the black man. Driven by suspicion of a relationship, he seeks to provoke the man he now sees as an adversary:

> *St. Luce*: [H]e does not like to own himself so bad a prophet. Fabian has declared all marriage impossible for Mademoiselle de la Reynerie.
>
> *Mme. Reynerie*: He!
>
> *St. Luce*: Yes, my dear aunt; doubtless he was afraid of losing so profitable and unexpected a source of patronage and favour. (*Looks at Pauline.*) What other motive could there be? I am afraid our cousin's protection has been thoughtless, and perhaps may be fatal to our Doctor.
>
> *Mme. Reynerie*: How?
>
> *St. Luce*: No doubt, in Bourbon 'twill be necessary to doff these trappings of a gentleman, which appear rather strange; here 'tis only laughed at, but in Bourbon 'twould be otherwise; there this insolence would be chastised, particularly the sword, which sits but ill on a mulatto, who could not dare to raise it even to ward off the planter's whip![19]

In this world, as opposed to the colony, gratitude means nothing, and the pressure is great to maintain one's status. But such public assertion is necessary precisely because the order is threatened. It is only because he imagines the possibility of a relationship between Pauline and Fabian that St. Luce must demonstrate his power. The existing order can be defied, as he understands, through desire if not through force. But because he cannot show moral superiority, he must claim the primacy of race and class.

Even Pauline is caught within the net of power. She refuses to allow Fabian to speak in any way that would reveal their relationship, because she fears the authority of her mother. The claims of blood and rank are greater than those of love. This is the woman who on Bourbon was willing to face death, but in Paris cannot confront her mother with the truth and allows her husband to be humiliated. Fabian links this repeatedly to status and to the continued presence of St. Luce. Meanwhile, Fabian is constantly referred to as a lackey of the household who can be treated much like a slave. Only the working people of the city have respect for him, as he gives them medical treatment and refuses payment.

When Pauline, confronted by her mother's demand that she marry the chevalier, confesses the truth, the marchioness secretly arranges for Fabian to be taken to the dungeon of the Bastille. The reason is seen to be obvious when he points out to her that by the laws of her own society, there is nothing she can do about the marriage. He then renounces the relationship in order to save Pauline yet again. But because he has demonstrated what can be done to the existing order, he must be removed. His renunciation is itself a claim of authority over Pauline and over the fate of the family, a foreshadowing of the coming revolution. The slave has become the master, and this situation cannot be accepted by the marchioness.

At the prison, we are again shown the differences in class as, according to the stage directions, Fabian's cell is directly below the elegant rooms where St. Luce is held. The aristocrat receives the finest food and wine and has his innocent servant imprisoned with him so that he can be properly cared for. In contrast, the instructions are that Fabian is to be "forgotten." As Barbara Cooper has pointed out, the scene appears to be designed to reinforce the connection between slavery in the colonies and class hierarchy in the metropole.[20]

With the storming of the Bastille, Fabian is freed by the people. But the treachery of Madame de la Reynerie has been successful in that his reason is gone. The nature of his madness is that he drifts in and out of the present and, significantly, cannot distinguish between actual people and their images. He is taken to Brittany by Andre, whose mother he had earlier saved. Here also is the estate of St. Luce, who, with his sister, has rescued Pauline from the convent to which she has been sent, in part because she is threatened by the revolutionaries. Moreover, having left the capital, St. Luce and his sister have now reverted to the tolerant characters they were on Bourbon. St. Luce has seemingly accepted the relationship of Pauline and Fabian and has actively sought to learn the fate of the black doctor, in part because the documentation of the marriage can save Pauline's life.

When the reunion of husband and wife takes place, Fabian moves in and out of recognition of her and believes that the portrait of the marchioness is in fact the actual woman. In addition, the presence of the chevalier revives his jealousy. When the mob arrives in the grand finale, he initially denies the marriage, thinking that he is protecting Pauline from her mother. But when one of the rebels fires at her, Fabian takes the bullet, saving her yet again. In his dying gesture, he reveals the marriage certificate, cementing his protection of her. The true Romantic hero, he dies for love and at the same time asserts the power of the oppressed. He has in fact succeeded in what he had intended all along: Pauline is now publicly recognized as his beloved, and his value as a person is acknowledged by all. The fact that this outcome requires his death is not a claim of black sacrifice for whiteness but rather of the nature of Romantic tragedy. That the hero is black only suggests the universality of the drama.

This universality, I believe, is one of the reasons that Aldridge was attracted to the play. Here was a character whose race is never in question and yet never shows any of the traces of stereotypes of black figures, including some that Aldridge performed. Moreover, by making changes in the text, he moved Fabian even further away from the notion of the erratic, impulsive, unthinking black caricature so popular in the theater and literature of the nineteenth century.

But I would argue that there is another reason for Aldridge's attraction to *The Black Doctor*. Aldridge's struggles to work on the major stages of London have been well documented by Marshall and Stock in their biography of him. Race seems to have been too great an obstacle for him to overcome, regardless of his reputation and success elsewhere. Because this play divides its setting between the center and the margins and points to the moral significance of those geographies, it fits nicely the actor's experience of British theater. Some of his revisions, as noted above, strengthen the distinction. While the capital is disdainful of the ignorance and prejudices of the provinces, it is these margins that allow both the actor and the character, despite their race, to gain a substantial reputation. The people on the margins recognize talent and reward it. It is the so-called sophisticates of the metropole who feel so threatened by difference that they will do anything to prevent public acknowledgment of the skills of a black man. Even the discredited story of Aldridge as James Wallack's valet, which was constantly repeated,[21] is mirrored by repeated reference to Fabian as a "lackey."

It is unfortunate that Aldridge could not have a better vehicle for articulating a positive image of the black hero. As melodrama, *The Black Doctor* had limited and temporary appeal to audiences. The actor kept it in his repertoire until 1860, performing it occasionally as he made his rounds of the British Isles, but, as Waters has pointed out, there appear to be few reviews of it.[22] Nevertheless, it clearly served useful purposes for him as an alternative to his Shakespearean and comic roles, as a means of connecting a black character to the tradition of the Romantic hero, and more subtly, as his critique of the racist treatment he received from the London establishment.

Notes

1. Auguste Anicét-Bourgeois and Philippe Dumanoir, *Le Docteur Noir* (Brussels: J. Lelong, 1846).
2. Ira Aldridge, ed., *The Black Doctor*, Dicks' Standard Plays, 460 (London: John Dicks, n.d.), cover.
3. Barbara T. Cooper, "*Le Docteur noir*: A French Romantic Drama in Blackface," *French Forum* 28, no. 1 (2003): 76.
4. I. [John] V. Bridgeman, *The Black Doctor*, Lacy's Acting Edition, 23 (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, n.d.), 4.
5. Aldridge, *The Black Doctor*, 2.
6. Bridgeman, *The Black Doctor*, 6.
7. Aldridge, *The Black Doctor*, 3.
8. Ibid., 3–4.
9. Ibid., 4.
10. Ibid., 5.
11. Ibid.
12. Bridgeman, *The Black Doctor*, 11.
13. Ibid., 10.
14. Hazel Waters, "Ira Aldridge and the Battlefield of Race," *Race and Class* 45, no. 1 (2003): 16.
15. Aldridge, *The Black Doctor*, 8.
16. Ibid. 8.
17. Ibid., 7.
18. Ibid., 8.
19. Ibid., 11.
20. Cooper, "*Le Docteur noir*," 78.
21. Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (London: Rockliff, 1958), 45–46.
22. Waters, "Ira Aldridge and the Battlefield of Race," 18.

15

The First American on the Zagreb Stage

Nikola Batušić

From the beginning of April to the end of December 1853, Karl Folness was the head of a German theater troupe that came to Zagreb from Košice. In those days, Croatian plays were rarely staged, and on the boards of the old building on St. Mark's Square, one could often see only Austrian and German theater troupes, performing mainly musical comedies, with an occasional showing of good plays. Folness's troupe's stay in Zagreb did not leave a large impact in terms of important plays. However, during the time of their performances, Ira Aldridge, the first person to perform in English on Croatian boards, decided to visit Zagreb. If we add to that the fact that Aldridge was an African American who came to Zagreb as a famous interpreter of Shakespeare, one can understand the excitement aroused among the audience and critics before they encountered this unusual guest.

The Big European Tour

Famous for his authentic and almost uncontrollable acting temperament on the London boards, Ira Aldridge was invited to many Continental theaters as a sort of attraction. Nobody minded that he performed in English, and in ensembles whose language was different than his. To give his interpretations of classic roles an even larger impact, he formed a small theater troupe with two other members, in which the actor Karl Remay (later found to be of Hungarian heritage) performed in German. In 1852, "The African Roscius," as Aldridge was called by

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the press, began his first big continental tour, which would bring him to all the great stages of Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, to major Polish cities, and even to the Russian czar's palace. In European cities, and especially in Russia, he was so popular that theater agents were fighting each other to book his performances by offering him huge sums of money, because they knew that the reputation of Aldridge would fill cash registers and theaters.

The Zagreb Performance

German newspapers, which regularly informed the residents of Zagreb of the approach of distinguished guests, announced on November 8, 1853, that "Ira Aldridge, an actor from Senegal in Africa" had arrived in town. He was accompanied by actors Karl Remay and Persitt, and they arrived from Maribor (in present-day Slovenia). They obviously had an agreement with Folness's troupe to come and perform Aldridge's standard repertoire: Shakespeare's *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Merchant of Venice*. This was an occasion for the Zagreb audience to see Aldridge as a jealous African, a cruel loan shark from Venice (see figure 15.1), and a Scottish nobleman who, incited by his wife, killed a king in order to claim the crown.

From November 9 to 12, Aldridge performed in English, while accompanied by Karl Remay and Folness's actors in German, but that odd language combination did not confuse this unusual troupe at all. Judging by critics' reports, the plays were extraordinary, mainly due to Aldridge's acting and moving interpretations, previously unseen in Zagreb. The English language did not seem to bother anyone; people were going to the theater both to see an intriguing guest and to enjoy classic masterpieces that were not included among the bland theater offerings staged by local Viennese directors.

The *Agramer Zeitung* on November 10, 1853, reported after the Othello performance that "Aldridge is undoubtedly a great artist, who must have learned his unusual method of performance and unique expression of emotions from his role models in England. The effect of his mimicry, even to people not understanding English, was profound. Not paying much attention to doubled ticket prices and bad weather, the majority of the audience accepted the great, and in his own way, perfect, creation of Mr. Aldridge, with lively approval, and summoned him before the curtain with loud applause at the end of each act, and several times at the end of the play." Aldridge's performance in Zagreb apparently not only amazed but also dangerously aroused the viewers. The *Luna* magazine of November 26, 1853, wrote about some of the audiences' reactions after he left Zagreb by reprinting an article written by the Zagreb correspondent for the *Leibacher Zeitung*, who tried to conjure up to the residents of Ljubljana the strong effect of Aldridge's interpretation of Shakespeare by reporting that "the English artist acted so impressively in the scene of the choking of Desdemona, that many female viewers suffered

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Figure 15.1 Playbill for a production of *Merchant of Venice* at the National Theater in Agram (now Zagreb), November 10, 1853 (by courtesy of the Zagreb City Museum).

serious nervous breakdowns, and that his partner, the wife of the German director Folness, had to be carried home unconscious."

There is another interesting detail relating to Aldridge's time in Zagreb. In the archives of the correspondence of the viceroy, Josip Jelačić, there is a handwritten letter from Aldridge, sent to Zagreb from Reichenberg on December 3, 1853. In it, Aldridge, who signed himself the "African Tragedian," thanks the Croatian viceroy for a gift, or even possibly a medal of honor, that he received through Folness, the German director in Zagreb. The unconventional nature of the letter suggests that the famous actor probably left Zagreb in a hurry. Here is what it said:

> To his Excellency, The Banus of Croatia
>
> My Lord,
>
> Through the neglect of a domestic, a letter which was intrusted to him to post, thanking your Excellency for your extreme kindness, was neglected, and which circumstance has just come to my knowledge, and will I hope plead in excuse, I should have deemed myself deficient in respect as well as thankfulness did I leave Austria without expressing how deeply I feel the complimentary and liberal acknowledgement of my humble abilities received through the hands of Director Fölnes. That your Excellency and your amiable Lady may long live to adorn the very exalted position in society in which Providence has placed you, shall ever be the sincere prayer of
>
> Your Excellency's
> Most Obedient and
> Very Humble Servant
> Ira Aldridge
> African Tragedian
>
> Reichenberg
> 30th Dec
> 1853

We would have believed Aldridge's story about the forgetful servant had the reasons for his hasty departure not had an interesting political background.

Aldridge's Partner—A Participant in the Hungarian Revolution

In the Vienna State Archives there exist special files of the so-called "Information Bureau," containing reports of the Austrian secret police, which received, examined and neatly sorted all written confidential information delivered by special informants to their main office. In one Vienna file from November 5, 1853 (just before Aldridge and Remay's trip to Zagreb!), which, according to police instructions, was to be distributed to all precincts of the intelligence service from "Venice to Sedmogradska," it states that "Karl Remay, 33 years old, and former actor of a German theater in Budapest, was convicted for taking part in the Hungarian

revolution of 1848, and sentenced to ten years in prison in chains. However, he was pardoned in 1850, and he then joined a German theater in Brno [now in the Czech Republic].” The police file further stresses that Remay had lately been seen in the company of a negro, Ira Aldridge, and that it was thought strange for a black Englishman to be moving around these areas so much, “so maybe he has some spying intentions.” The police report ordered all police stations that might come in contact with these actors to pay special attention to them, and immediately send a written report about their movements.

Remay was regarded as suspicious for his past revolutionary activity. In fact, he wrote—as stated on the copy of the verdict attached to the file—“an open letter to the peoples of Hungary and Austria,” calling for revolt and denunciation of the existing state structures.

Suspicious Walks around Zagreb

Twenty days had passed since Aldridge and Remay had arrived in Zagreb. Their performances in Shakespeare’s tragedies were still fresh in the memory of theatergoers when Underviceroy Benko Lentulaj sent a note on November 30, 1853, to the highest police authority of the Monarchy, in which he reported on the movements and behavior of the suspicious actors. Lentulaj stressed that as soon as he received the confidential order from Vienna, he had ordered police surveillance of Aldridge and Remay, and officers inconspicuously followed them from their boardinghouse to the theater, and also during their private walks around Zagreb. Writing about Aldridge’s performances, Lentulaj noted that his police agents did not mention any suspicious meetings or conversations of the three actors with anyone from their surroundings, and instead reported that the performances were peaceful and that Aldridge had left Zagreb for Ljubljana.

The only suspicious movement of the three exotic actors occurred on November 10, 1853, when they went during the “afternoon to a tavern far outside the city, near the Sava River Bridge.” Lentulaj’s spy was apparently very meticulous, and noted in detail the behavior of the three suspects. He followed them, as he said, in plain clothes, and inconspicuously entered the tavern with them. There he heard that Remay, speaking in Hungarian (which was noted with an exclamation point in the report), was putting people up to something and inviting them to his table, paying for their wine. The policeman found it suspicious that Remay was talking to the residents of Zagreb in Hungarian, when, not knowing Croatian, he could have talked to them in German! Believing that this invitation for drinks was just the beginning of further political conversation, the policeman carefully eavesdropped on the company. He was apparently very disappointed, because he wrote to Underviceroy Lentulaj that the conversations were not interesting to the police. Returning to Zagreb (where Aldridge was about to play Shylock in *Merchant of Venice*), Remay and the “African tragedian” were singing Hungarian songs.

However, the police officer concluded, regretfully, that the songs had no dangerous content. So this ordinary afternoon trip of the three actors around Zagreb gave a lot of trouble to the police. And all the "political suspects" wanted to do was to drink a couple of glasses of Croatian wine in good company.

It is not known what happened to Aldridge in Ljubljana. However, the Viennese police continued to monitor his travel and even his private life. At the beginning of December 1853, a note arrived in Vienna from Brno, warning that from now on, Aldridge and Remay were banned, due to their connections with the Hungarian rebels, from visiting Vojvodina (now in the Republic of Serbia), Sedmogradska (now in Transylvania, Romania), and the whole of Hungary. Apart from that, the central intelligence service received information that recently a suspicious female person had been traveling with Aldridge, probably his mistress, who had been signing in at boardinghouses under the name of either Fredericka or Augusta Louise Hammer, and sometimes Manuela Priedberg. The Brno police said they would investigate further what kind of woman she was. These were the last reports from the secret police archives mentioning Aldridge and his little company, who in 1853 traveled though this part of the Monarchy followed everywhere by spies.

Not many traces have been left from Ira Aldridge's visit to Zagreb—just one private letter to Viceroy Jelačić and several critiques in the German newspapers. Maybe, judging from his letter, he actually left Zagreb early, sensing danger from the police. However, as an actor, he really impressed Zagreb audiences. His interpretation of Shakespeare's heroes astonished the viewers (the critics who wrote about his *Macbeth* said that they had never seen better fencing skills!), so the memory of Aldridge became the bait that director Folness used to fill seats at his theater. At the beginning of December, Folness announced Meisl's parody, "Little Othello, Viennese Negro," under a totally different name, "Der falsche Aldridge." Although at that time it was common practice to localize plays and change their titles, this example shows that the memory of the great actor was used to attract the Zagreb audience to the theater. And much later, in September 1855, when an insignificant actor from Graz was visiting Zagreb, the critics scolded him for trying to imitate the acting of the great Aldridge. Aldridge was one of a kind, and mimicking him was not considered proper.

And so Zagreb entered the circle of European cities visited by Aldridge, whose acting talent excited both spectators and critics. It is an undeniable fact that he was the first actor who spoke in English on the Croatian stage, as well as the first African actor seen in European theater circles. However, it will probably never be known if his visit to Zagreb had a deeper political significance.

16

A Heartwarming, Radiant Othello in the Netherlands, 1855

Joost Groeneboer

With one exception, Othello has always been played in the Netherlands by white Dutch actors. Their makeup has ranged from light brown to dark black according to their conception of the role. The first black Dutch actor, Otto Sterman (1919–97) from Curaçao, was very upset with this. That there was supposed to be no black talent in the Netherlands was, for him, no excuse. Personally he had sworn to master the difficult role. At the invitation of choreographer Yvonne Georgi, Sterman played Othello in a ballet by Erika Hanka that was presented in the Landestheater in Hannover, Germany, in 1956. The emphasis clearly was on acting, because dancing was not Sterman's strong point. To give his role form, he performed as if he were part of a wheel; he was the middle point and all the dancers revolved around him. It was a successful formula. He was personally disappointed when attempts to take the ballet to the Netherlands ultimately failed.

Sterman began acting in 1935 as a West Indian servant in a dramatic interpretation of the novel *Camera Obscura*, by Hildebrand (pseudonym of Nicolaas Beets). In Groningen, a reviewer praised the use of living theater props: "A real dog, a real parrot, and an authentic servant from Surinam."[1] Thereafter he played a fakir, a Turkish masseur, and a leader of a jazz band. After twenty years of acting, playing barkeepers and taxicab drivers, Sterman had had enough of performing stereotypical roles. He wanted a chance to stand before a Dutch audience as Othello. He admired the African American actor Paul Robeson, who on the other side of the Atlantic interpreted Shakespeare to great acclaim.[2] Did Sterman know that in the middle of the nineteenth century another accomplished black actor had preceded Robeson? Beginning in 1855, Ira Aldridge was the talk of the Netherlands. Aldridge played not only Othello but also a few white roles

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such as Shylock and Macbeth. His interpretation of Shakespeare was new, and his arrival on stage breathed new life into the discussion of slavery.

Around 1800, slavery was a popular theme in Western European literature, especially in drama. August von Kotzebue's *De Negers* (The Negroes) and *De Amerikanen in Peru, of De Dood van Rolla* (The Americans in Peru, or The Death of Rolla) were performed repeatedly in the Netherlands. Earlier still, in 1774, Nicolaas Simon van Winter had written a tragedy titled *Monzongo, of de Koningklyke slaaf* (Monzongo, or the Royal Slave). Ninety years before the end of slavery in the Dutch colonies, van Winter tried to present the situation of slavery to his countrymen. In the preface to his play, van Winter wrote, "I tried to show them the impropriety of slavery; I tried to let them hear the voice of humanity and of simple nature, and awaken their sympathies."[3]

It was not only the theme of slavery that enticed audiences to the theater. The exotic character of the presentations also was an important factor. Two years before Aldridge's arrival—in March 1853—at the premiere of *De Negerhut van Oom Tom* (Uncle Tom's Cabin), large crowds gathered at the Amsterdam City Theater (Stadsschouwburg van Amsterdam). The newspaper *De Telegrafist* declared, "Everyone took wild delight in the faces of the negro men and women."[4] Critics of the day also chimed in, identifying problems in the drama, but also writing extensively about the makeup of the lead actors. For example, the makeup of Johannes Tjasink was said to be too dark to suggest a mulatto; with his blond curls he was an unusual case. Interestingly, the use of makeup also caused a slight incident when, after Tjasink embraced Mathilde Kiehl, the actress suddenly had a black mustache.[5]

That whites portrayed black characters on stage was then completely normal, for there simply were no black actors. In the United States, however, the situation was worse. There, the black population was not even allowed in the theater—either in the audience or onstage. For this reason a number of black actors organized their own theater troupe and established an African Theatre in New York City in 1821. It is thought that Ira Aldridge débuted with this company.

Ira Aldridge was born in New York City as the son of preacher Daniel Aldridge. Daniel hoped his son would follow in his footsteps, but young Ira had other plans because he preferred to become an actor. In Chatham Garden Theater, Ira found a job as assistant to Henry Wallack, an English actor. After the demise of the African Theatre in 1823, he no longer had a stage available to him. Since his chances of acting in a white theater in America were zero, Ira decided to emigrate to England in search of professional opportunities to perform.

His timing was perfect. At that time, the abolition of the slave trade was a frequent topic of discussion, and Aldridge represented living evidence that a freed slave (although that was not what he was), with proper guidance, could climb to the top of the social ladder. Initially, he found it difficult to secure regular employment, but after the popular Edmund Kean acknowledged his talent, his fortunes improved and he went on to become one of England's greatest interpreters of Shakespeare. Eventually, with white makeup, Aldridge played Shylock,

Macbeth, Richard III, and King Lear. Of course, he also played Othello, the role for which in 1833 he brought the audience at Covent Garden Theatre to their feet. That same year, slavery was brought to an end in the British colonies.

In 1852, Aldridge traveled to the Continent to try his luck. In Belgium he appeared as Othello, and from there he journeyed to Germany, Prussia, Austria, Hungary, Croatia, Switzerland, and parts of Europe known today as Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Wherever he went, Aldridge drew large crowds. Slowly his fame also grew in the Netherlands, and the prominent Dutch periodical, *Onze Tijd*, published his life history.[6] After Pierre Boas, the dramatic actor, saw

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Figure 16.1 Ira Aldridge as Othello, lithograph by S. Bühler from a photograph by J. Chailloux (by permission of the Theater Museum, Cologne).

Aldridge in Germany, he offered him a contract as a visiting actor in a new theater company in Amsterdam.[7]

On February 15, 1855, the Neues Hochdeutches Theater (New High German Theater, now the Kleine Komedie) at Erwtenmarkt (Peas Market) was completely full. That evening the famous "African Tragedian" Ira Aldridge, known as "the Black Actor," gave his first performance. On the program was *Othello, the Moor of Venice* (see the announcement of a subsequent performance in figure 16.2). The public had already seen black people before, at a circus or in a variety show, but a black actor who played Shakespeare, that truly was something special! Some

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Figure 16.2 Playbill from the Neues Hochdeutsches Theater in Amsterdam, March 1, 1855 (by permission of the Collection Theater Instituut Nederland).

viewers feared Aldridge's manner of acting. The Dutch public had had bad experiences with the English acting style, which differed significantly from that of Dutch performers. British actors quite frequently advanced the pace of the play, and the Dutch audience had a difficult time adjusting to their sudden outbursts. A second difficulty was that the drama was presented in two languages. Aldridge spoke in English, while the other actors spoke in German. To deal with this problem, the directors of the theater produced a summary in Dutch.[8]

As soon as Aldridge stepped on stage, the entire audience held its breath. Othello had never been played this way! In the past Othello had been portrayed as a wild madman who killed his beloved out of pure anger. Just two months earlier, the well-known Dutch actor Anton Peters had appeared as Othello, and that performance was still fresh in their memory. Anton's Othello had produced horror and fear, but little understanding. But with Aldridge's performance, Othello ceased to be a stereotype. In the thirty years during which Aldridge had performed that role, he had added various nuances. The family periodical *Lectuur voor de Huiskamer* wrote: "Othello, through his birth, upbringing, change of residence, through the position given him, through the clash of his jealousy with his love for Desdemona, is a person in whom qualities of an entirely different nature unite. Aldridge shaped all these different, almost contradictory characteristics of Othello into an admirable whole."[9] Aldridge played a "heartwarming and radiant Othello."[10] According to the *Nieuwe Amsterdamsche Courant*, Aldridge evoked a deep sympathy for the Moor: "Never have we seen a more moving drama of one man's suffering soul for the sake of a woman."[11] Another newspaper, the *'s Gravenhaagsche Nieuwsbode*, wrote, "When the deed finally is done, as we shudder before the atrocity, with his heart-rending cries over the loss of his wife, still convinced she is guilty, Othello evokes our pity, and the words he speaks, 'my wife, what wife, I have no wife,' unsettle everyone in the audience; the way he spoke those words is impossible to convey; Mr. Aldridge spoke from heart to heart. . . . . The threefold repetition of the word: 'Misery,' was understood by everyone, felt by everyone, and was answered with thunderous applause and requests to come back on stage."[12]

Aldridge's interpretation of Shakespeare was praised unanimously in the press, and many asked themselves if the role of Othello was not written for him. "Jealousy and angry outbursts were the passionate African and natural man's own," said *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*.[13] Just one week later, Aldridge's reputation as a tragedian was further established when he played Macbeth with equal success. That same evening he gave evidence of his talent as a comic actor in a one-act play, *The Padlock* by Isaac Bickerstaffe, in which he, with the German actress Fraulein Wendt, sang the song "Dear heart, what a terrible life am I led."

After six productions of *Othello*, two of *The Padlock*, and one of *Macbeth*, Aldridge continued his tour in Rotterdam, The Hague, Leiden, Haarlem, and Utrecht. In all these places he played Othello, but in some of them he also performed a piece that, possibly for anti-Semitic reasons, had not been produced

in Amsterdam.[14] Audiences in The Hague, Rotterdam, and Leiden were treated to a production of *Shylock, the Merchant of Venice*. This Shakespearean play had been performed in the Netherlands before, but never with Shylock as the central figure. The press was amazed, even at the very title: the "merchant" of Venice was Antonio, not Shylock! This was hardly a role through which Aldridge could win the sympathy and support of the audience. Previously, actors who played the Jew were usually hooted out of the theater. Why then this role? Like Othello, Shylock also represented a minority in Venice, and that point certainly fascinated Aldridge. Additionally, perhaps Aldridge identified with Shylock's bitterness over the neglect of his people and the injustices done to him personally.

Aldridge's interpretation again was well received. "Shylock doesn't appear so hateful anymore; the natural acting style of the artist elucidates his character and provides motives for the sharp traits."[15] The Dutch press did not make a point of it, but it is well known that when Aldridge played Shylock, he left his hands black. In this way he emphasized the universal character of his role: "Aldridge shows how each person, regardless of color, insulted and teased in this manner, unlucky and seeking revenge, can be driven to an extreme."[16]

In the Netherlands, Louis Bouwmeester made famous Shylock's memorable words "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?" From 1878 onward, he played the role more than a thousand times. Was Bouwmeester aware of the work of his predecessor? Perhaps. It is also possible that he had seen Aldridge play Shylock in 1855. When he was thirteen, Louis lived in Rotterdam where he acted with his father's drama company.

Aldridge traveled through Europe as an ambassador of his people. In each city he closed the performance with a farewell address he had written, in which he pleaded the rights of all people regardless of their skin color. For his efforts he was rewarded several times; in Austria and Germany he was recognized by royalty. But in the Netherlands Aldridge was not rewarded at all. The royal family attended his performance in The Hague in complete silence. Due to a period of court mourning, no hint of their visit was given.[17] Also, the abolition of slavery was still a sensitive issue.

Aldridge gladly accepted invitations for readings, for example in Leiden, where on two occasions he spoke to students at the university. Balthasar Breedé and Daan van Ollefen Sr., actors and directors of the Royal Dutch Theater (Koninklijke-Hollandsche Schouwburg) at The Hague, were present and offered Aldridge signed portraits of the ten best-known Dutch dramatic actors.[18] Who the top ten actually were was not stated, but undoubtedly the names Breedé and van Ollefen were high on the list.

The German periodical *Allgemeine Theater-Chronik* announced on March 23, 1855, that Aldridge had received great applause in Amsterdam but had nevertheless left empty coffers behind.[19] This is difficult to believe. With his arrival in a town, theater owners doubled their prices, half of which went to Aldridge. And

in Utrecht and Haarlem, additional shows had been organized. In their biography of Aldridge, authors Marshall and Stock describe the actor as an able businessman who took care of his own publicity and knew how to gain the best terms from theater directors.[20] With the money he received, however, he also cared for others. A portion of his earnings went to support the black community in his homeland. And when the Netherlands was flooded in March 1855, Aldridge contributed financially to help those whose lives had been disrupted.[21]

The demands of travel and frequent performance took their toll. The repetition of such demands was especially heavy at times. In each venue the repertoire had to be reviewed and rehearsed, and time was always in short supply. With the actors of the Neues Hochdeutsches Theater Aldridge prepared *Othello* in less than two weeks. One week later a performance of *Macbeth* was scheduled, and three weeks after that, *Shylock*. Aldridge knew his roles well enough, but the short practice periods were evident in the performances of the other actors.

Upon his arrival in Leiden, Aldridge was visibly fatigued. A couple of waiting students took him directly to his hotel. Student and dramatist Adriaan van der Hoop Jr. reported that "Having entered the port at Rhineburg, Ira Aldridge apologized for not being able to dedicate the hours before the performance of *Othello* to us; he felt it was necessary, as exhausted as he was from all the travel and repeated performances, to spend a few hours in quiet isolation."[22]

In April 1855, Aldridge returned to England. From there the forty-eight-year-old actor tried to arrange a tour in France. Samuel Kapper, one of the two directors of the Neues Hochdeutsches Theater, was asked to assist Aldridge. It was Kapper who arranged for the black actor's biography to be translated into French, and for this purpose he sent a letter of recommendation along with Dutch reviews of Aldridge's performances. But it was not to be. "I am very sick," Aldridge wrote back to Kapper.[23] He was told to get plenty of undisturbed rest, and the trip to France was postponed indefinitely. This postponement disappointed Ernestine Schneider, his High German Desdemona, who clearly had wanted to tour with Aldridge a second time.[24]

Both letters have been included in the biography of Aldridge by Marshall and Stock. The authors believe that these letters very likely were written to the German theater director, Dr. Victor Koelbel of Leipzig. They apparently did not know that a High German theater in Amsterdam also existed. Other names in the letters include Schneider and Magfuhrt, actors of the High German company with whom Aldridge had performed. The name "Madame Belifante" in the letters probably refers to the wife or the daughter of the publisher, A. Belinfante, who published Aldridge's life story.[25] Finally, "Mad. Toussaint" stands for Anna Louisa Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint, one of the most respected and popular female Dutch writers of the nineteenth century.

On March 16, 1855, Anna Bosboom-Toussaint saw Aldridge as Shylock at the Royal Dutch Theater in The Hague. According to Anna's husband, the painter

Johannes Bosboom, Aldridge's performance made such an impression on Anna that for "two days she was bedridden."[26] Deeply moved, Anna sent Aldridge a copy of her most recent book, *Het Huis Lauernesse* (The House of Lauernesse), with an explanatory letter. In the library at the University of Leiden, one can read Aldridge's reply:

> London, 22 Judd Place, Euston Square, 29th May/55
>
> Sir,—I fear you have thought me exceedingly uncourteous by delaying so long to acknowledge your very elegant present consisting of the two Vols: entitled "Het Huis Lauernesse." My time was so fully occupied during the last days I was in Holland, and the serious illness of Mrs Aldridge and myself after our arrival here must plead as excuse. I am but now enabled to leave my bed and the first and most pleasing duty is to thank you sincerely for your sympathy and complimentary approval of my humble abilities. My great ambition has been to prove that my fellow countrymen are not deficient in intellectual ability but that the circumstances and prejudice have been almost insurmountable obstacles. Oh that the time may hasten on when all distinctions may cease, when man may be estimated by his individual worth, and not by consideration of taste or colour.
>
> Once more sincerely thanking you, and with kindest regards to the dear friends the Ballanfante family individually and collectively.
>
> I remain your very much obliged servant Ira Aldridge[27]

According to her biographer, Hans Reeser, Anna Bosboom-Toussaint kept Aldridge's letter along with the program of *Shylock* carefully tucked in a red velvet folder that Queen Sophie had given her. In one of his articles, Bernth Lindfors identified the black actor as a womanizer who, when he traveled, left broken hearts behind.[28] Was Anna one of these? Is she possibly the Anna who on April 7, 1855, in a dramatic letter declares her lifelong love for Ira and calls upon God to return the ailing actor to health?

> My Dearest Ira,—The news of your severe illness makes me wretched. I am beside myself with pain and heartrending. My foreboding has not vanished; you are ill, my dear Ira, and must suffer so much and I cannot be with you. While here I am twiddling my thumbs day and night and not able to do anything for you except to pray for you with my whole soul. When I read your last lines to me, my heart almost breaks with sorrow and anguish, because I cannot be by your side to help you; it makes one most unhappy. Who will take care of you, since your wife is also ill. God alone can help you, my true friend. He will not forsake you. He will hear my prayers and restore your health. We will count upon His aid.
>
> Do not worry on my account, my Ira, though I am far away, my heart and thoughts are ever with you. My love grows daily deeper and more tender, the longer I do not see you the more clearly I see that you are everything to me, and that my love will only end with my death. I have never believed what those who despised you have said. I do not ask what the world says; if you love me, nothing else matters, and you are my world. . . .

> My dearest friend, I am so miserable and sad that I could die with crying. I shall not be happy until I have news of you. May God bless you, heal your pains, strengthen you, soothe your sufferings, and send you support. He can uphold you. Nothing else can.
> Farewell, my dearest Ira. My love will always await you.
>
> Your true,
>
> Anna.
>
> P.S.—I received your letter yesterday 6th April.[29]

The date, combined with Aldridge's distant wording, "Sir," several weeks later, makes it appear unlikely that Anna Bosboom-Toussaint was the sender of that dramatic letter. On the other hand, her deep religious feelings do match those in the letter. Inspired by Aldridge's interpretation of Shylock, Anna Bosboom-Toussaint did begin to make plans for a historical novel about Willem II and the Portuguese Jews. Because of her own ill health during this period, however, this book was never completed.

Aldridge left the Netherlands having made a formidable impression. The *'s Gravenhaagsche Nieuwsbode* declared him a fine example for his race: "The appearance of Mr. Aldridge is . . . powerful evidence of ungrounded prejudice, as if color contributes to the development of heart and soul." According to the paper, "it is important to negroes themselves" that necessary care be taken: negroes can achieve the same as whites, but they must be trained in the proper [read: white] way.[30]

In The Hague, the publisher Ch. van Lier brought out a curious booklet in Dutch and English entitled *Gesprek tusschen den heer Ira Aldridge, den beroemden Afrikaan, en Een Staatsman, over de slavernij* (Discussion between Mr. Ira Aldridge, a Famous African, and a Statesman, about Slavery). In this book Aldridge asks a certain "P" to clarify why he never brought an end to "that horrible scandal about the poor Negro-slaves, our fellow-countrymen, in your West-Indian possessions."[31] The person referred to here as "P" was Minister of Colonies Charles Ferdinand Pahud, who on March 3, 1855, was asked by the government, because of serious misdeeds in the colonies, to review the regulations for dealing with slaves. In response to the Governor of Surinam, R. F. van Raders, Pahud had, at the time of his appointment in 1853, urged that the children of slaves be declared free at birth. However, with no official means to compensate slave holders, the government put his advice aside without taking action.[32]

In the exchange with Aldridge mentioned above, Pahud responded by noting that an official commission had been established to explore the slavery question. For Aldridge, that response was insufficient; Aldridge wanted action, not words. Did Pahud want to experience in person what it means to be whipped every day? The book concludes with the following words:

> And now, sir, are you a true patriot? Are you a Christian? Do you believe there exists a God? And can you shut your eyes in the night and sleep calmly? Or is it but a restless slumber, disturbed by the shades of the poor negroes; fathers, mothers and children, beseeching your

> protection and compassion, with a tenderness able to alarm the feelings of the most selfish man, who banished the last spark of humanity out of his heart? O might it be so! You cannot, sir, you may not, you shall not sleep calmly, before you have entirely settled this wholy [*sic*] matter.
>
> Now, sir, I take my leave, and beseech you to do, what may give you peace with yourself, and a hopefull [*sic*] prospect in the terrible moment of your soul returning to its Creator into Eternity. May Ira Aldridge not be obliged to return to you once more, and to implore you again for his brothers.[33]

Nothing came of this. After regaining his health, Ira Aldridge made two additional tours through Europe. However, in spite of the ongoing slave trade in the Dutch colonies, the Netherlands were not part of the tours. Four years after the abolition of slavery in the Dutch overseas territories in 1863, Aldridge died in Poland en route to Russia. In the press of the day, his death was announced in a few brief lines. Aldridge enjoyed enormous fame as a tragic actor during his lifetime, but after his death, he was soon forgotten. In theater history, his name is seldom mentioned. Only in the last fifty years has his name again become part of the historical narrative; the biography by Marshall and Stock was published in 1958, and in the Shakespeare Theatre at Stratford-on-Avon, his name has been engraved among the names of the most famous interpreters of Shakespeare of his time. In African American circles, Aldridge is a legendary figure. Many black actors view him as an inspirational model. Paul Robeson took voice lessons from Aldridge's daughter Amanda. Also, the African American author, Lonne Elder III, wrote a play about Aldridge, *Splendid Mummer*, which was performed in 1991 at the Fusion Festival in Amsterdam. It is astonishing, then, that John Gross, in his study of interpreters of Shylock, still dismisses him as a curiosity.[34]

Ira Aldridge's Performances in the Netherlands

February 15, 1855, Neues Hochdeutsches Theater, Amsterdam: *Othello*
February 17, 1855, Neues Hochdeutsches Theater, Amsterdam: *Othello*
February 19, 1855, Neues Hochdeutsches Theater, Amsterdam: *Othello*
February 22, 1855, Neues Hochdeutsches Theater, Amsterdam: *Macbeth* and *The Padlock*
February 24, 1855, Neues Hochdeutsches Theater, Amsterdam: *Othello*
February 26, 1855, Neues Hochdeutsches Theater, Amsterdam: *Othello* (3rd, 4th and 5th acts) and *The Padlock*
March 1, 1855, Neue Hochdeutsches Theater, Amsterdam: *Othello* and a *Farewell Address*
March 3, 1855, Neue Hochdeutsches Theater, Amsterdam: *The Padlock*
March 5, 1855, Rotterdamsche Schouwburg: *Othello*
March 9, 1855, Koninklijke-Hollandsche Schouwburg, The Hague: *Othello*
March 15, 1855, Leydsche Schouwburg: *Othello*

March 16, 1855, Koninklijke-Hollandsche Schouwburg, The Hague: *Shylock, Merchant of Venice*, and *The Padlock*
March 19, 1855, Rotterdamsche Schouwburg: *Shylock, Merchant of Venice*, and *The Padlock*
March 22, 1855, Nieuwe Schouwburg, Haarlem: *Othello*
March 24, 1855, Utrechtsche Schouwburg: *Othello*
March 26, 1855, Leydsche Schouwburg: *Shylock, Merchant of Venice*, and *The Padlock*

Notes

1. Clipping in scrapbook 1935–51, Otto Sterman archive, held by his widow in Amsterdam.
2. For more information on Sterman, see Joost Groeneboer, "3 maart 1952. Otto Sterman draagt vor het eerst 'Ik ben een neger' voor. De ommezwaai van een zwarte acteur op het Nederlands toneel," *Cultuur en migratie in Nederland: Kunsten in beweging 1900–1980*, ed. Rosemarie Buikema and Maaike Meijer, 223–42 (The Hague: Sdu Uitgevers, 2003).
3. Nicolaas Simon van Winter, *Monzongo, of de Koningklyke slaaf* (Amsterdam: Pieter Meijer, 1774).
4. *De Telegrafist,* April 2, 1853.
5. Ibid.
6. "Ira Aldridge," *De Tijd* (1852): 289–91.
7. In their book, *175 jaar Koninklijke Schouwburg 1804–1979* ('s Gravenhage: Kruseman, 1974), 54, C. H. Slechte, Guus Verstraete, and L. van der Zalm incorrectly claim that Aldridge was asked to perform in the Netherlands by Abraham van Lier, not Pierre Boas.
8. *Ira Aldridge's Othello. Het Engelsch van Shakspeare en Hoogduitsche vertaling van von Schlegel en Tieck, vereenigd en gevolgd* ('s Gravenhage: Museum Willem Twee/A. J. van Tetroode, March 1955). See also *Ira Aldridge's Shylock* ('s Gravenhage: Museum Willem Twee/A. J. Tetroode, March 1855).
9. A. van der Hoop Jr., "Ira Aldridge, eene vriendschapsherinnering den grooten kunstenaar toegewijd," *Lectuur voor de Huiskamer* 3 (1856): 89–96.
10. *Dagblad van Zuid-Holland en 's Gravenhage*, March 2, 1855.
11. "Kunstnieuws. Ira Aldridge als Othello," *Nieuwe Amsterdamsche Courant*, February 17, 1855.
12. *De 's Gravenhaagsche Nieuwsbode*, March 11, 1855.
13. *Algemeen Handelsblad*, February 17, 1855.
14. Joost Groeneboer, "Joodse personages op het Nederlands toneel: Joodse stereotypen en hun aantrekkingskracht op het publiek," in *Dat is de kleine man: 100 jaar joden in het Amsterdamse amusement, 1840–1940*, ed. Joost Groeneboer and Hetty Berg, 117–42 (Zwolle, Netherlands: Waanders, 1995).
15. *De 's Gravenhaagsche Nieuwsbode*, March 25, 1855.
16. Ibid.
17. *Düsseldorfer Zeitung*, March 20, 1855: "Im Haag war die Königl. Familie bei der Hoftrauer im Stillen ohne Etiquette im Theater."
18. Van der Hoop, "Ira Aldridge," 93.
19. *Allgemeine Theater-Chronik*, March 23, 1855: "Ira Aldridge hat im Amsterdam grossen Beifall aber leere Kassen erzielt."
20. Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (London: Rockliff, 1958).

21. Twenty-five percent of the profit from sales of the Shylock booklet were meant for the victims of the flood disaster. See the title page of *Ira Aldridge's Shylock*.
22. Van der Hoop, "Ira Aldridge," 91.
23. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 200–201.
24. Ibid., 201–2.
25. *Beknopte levensbeschrijving van den wereldberoemden Afrikaanschen treurspelspeler Ira Aldridge, genaamd: de neger-akteur* ('s Gravenhage: A. Belinfante, 1855).
26. See note 171 in Hans Reeser, *De huwelijksjaren van A.L.G. Bosboom-Toussaint, 1851–1886* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff/Bouma's Boekhuis, 1985), 410. There Reeser errs in referring to note 970b in H. F. W. Jeltes, *Uit het leven van een kunstenaarsechtpaar: Brieven van Johannes Bosboom verz. en toegelicht* (Amsterdam: S. L. van Looy, 1910), 153–54, where the quotation mentioned by Reeser does not appear.
27. Letter from Ira Aldridge to Anna Toussaint, dated May 29, 1855, in the Library of the University of Leiden (UBL Ltk 1798).
28. Bernth Lindfors, "'Nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice': New Biographical Information on Ira Aldridge," *African American Review* 28 (1994): 469–71.
29. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 185–86. The letter is translated (by the authors?) from German.
30. *De 's Gravenhaagsche Nieuwsbode*, March 25, 1855.
31. *Gesprek tusschen den heer Ira Aldridge, den beroemden Afrikaan, en Een Staatsman, over de slavernij* ('s Gravenhage: Ch. van Lier, 1855), 3. The bad grammar in this dialogue suggests that it was not written by Aldridge himself, as he had an excellent command of English.
32. M. Kuitenbrouwer, "Nederlandse afschaffing van de slavernij in vergelijkend perspectief," *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 93, no. 1 (1978): 77–79.
33. *Gesprek tusschen den heer Ira Aldridge*, 11–12.
34. John Gross, *Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 226.

17

Ira Aldridge's Performances in Meiningen

Ann Marie Koller

In four command performances at the Hoftheater in Potsdam in January 1853, the black American actor Ira Aldridge elicited praise from distinguished Prussian audiences and marked recognition from the King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, who bestowed on him the Prussian Gold Medal First Class. In the same audience was one spectator who saw in Aldridge's performance far more than an evening's entertainment. That person was Georg, crown prince of the little duchy of Saxe-Meiningen, who for some years had concerned himself with improving stagecraft on the Meiningen stage. Although many years would elapse before Georg created in Meiningen the model company that revolutionized the European theater and earned him the title of the "First Modern Stage Director,"[1] he had already developed a clear understanding of the changes that were needed. He recognized in Aldridge's performance distinctive gifts that, properly adapted, would contribute to enriching the German stage.

The twenty-six-year-old prince, at that time serving in the Guards Regiment at the court of Friedrich Wilhelm IV, had arrived at his notions of theater reform via a long artistic education. The only child of the ruling duke of Meiningen until he was seventeen, Georg enjoyed an education that embraced all the arts. His first teachers, a theologian and a court artist, fixed in the child a love of all art and an appreciation of its spiritual values, values emphasized by Moritz Seebeck, his second teacher. Georg early showed considerable talent for drawing, leading the deeply religious Seebeck to believe that such gifts should be carefully cultivated. When the artist Wilhelm Lindenschmit was engaged to paint historically correct murals on the castle walls, Georg studied the artist's subject matter and methods carefully. Composition and movement especially commanded his attention. Under Lindenschmit's instruction, Georg began a large historical painting that was to occupy him for years. The sketches for this work as well as the completed painting show how skillful the prince already was in composing groups and showing men and horses in action.

At the same time Georg tried his hand at translating and adapting Shakespeare's *Macbeth* for his class. He cast himself in the leading role, but whether the drama was actually presented is unknown. Sent to the University of Bonn three years later to study law and church architecture, Georg took time to throw himself into a study of Shakespeare and asked his professor of medieval history to give a series of lectures on Shakespeare's histories. Other Shakespearean plays followed; he was thrilled when given a part in a reading of *Coriolanus*, although, as he wrote to his mother, the character "hardly opens his trap."[2] Long discussions on German music, architecture, and painting helped him to sort out his ideas on aesthetics and questions of art. As had been true in his earlier efforts, composition and movement without vivid colors proved a model for him.

Visits to Paris, the artistic and intellectual center of the world, filled Georg's head with newly acquired notions of literature and music. He spent his days in art institutions and his evenings in the theater. He was dazzled, but he retained enough critical judgment to analyze the integration of spectacle and music in letters to his mother. Visits to England increased his love of the theater and intensified his near obsession with the works of Shakespeare. Three semesters at the University of Leipzig, where he lived in the household of the composer Felix Mendelssohn, ended his university studies. He took up his duties as a first lieutenant in the Guards Regiment at the court of Friedrich Wilhelm IV in Berlin.

The following years were important for the prince. He and Princess Charlotte, niece of the king of Prussia, married after a short engagement. Charlotte was as ardent a theatergoer as Georg and acted with him in amateur court theatricals. But whether they went to plays in these years, Georg's letters do not say. He does mention that on January 16, 1853, he saw the first of four performances by the African American tragedian Ira Aldridge. He had visited great theaters, observed acclaimed productions, admired celebrated actors, and immersed himself in art and music, so he felt confident that he could judge "the African Roscius," as Aldridge was called. The curtain rose on *Othello*. Playing in English with British actors, Aldridge's powerful performance astonished the audience. Georg was impressed enough to invite the actor to appear in Meiningen, which Aldridge did five years later.

When Aldridge arrived in Meiningen in January 1858, he came into a theatrical environment prepared to appreciate his gifts. Although the duchy was a small state lying far outside the influence of the great European art centers, it had a longstanding and vibrant theatrical and musical culture. The ruling dukes had fostered theatrical activity since at least the end of the sixteenth century by building playhouses and supporting entertainers. When Georg's grandfather, Georg I, became duke in 1782, he assumed the direction of plays that he and his brother had been performing in the ballroom of the castle. Descriptions of the careful use of decoration and costume by Georg I, who was said to "talk theater"[3] constantly, give credence to the assertion that his grandson's theatrical interests were "truly

atavistic."[4] In 1785, the introduction of the first professional company garnered more support from the middle classes than from the court, but Georg never lost interest in the theater.

Prince Georg's father, Duke Bernhard Freund, the ruler who succeeded Georg I, supported the theater, although he had neither his father's nor his son's love for it. He did not care for tragedies unless some virtuoso appeared as a featured guest. In fact, he had moved theatrical activity out of the castle and encouraged the town to erect a theater. A sale of stock in the undertaking was successful, so Meiningen acquired a modern theater. Troupes came and went during the following years. A few companies were good, but most were so bad they were not invited back for a second season. Still, the faltering venture gradually transformed itself into a vigorous artistic achievement. When asked how this had been accomplished, Baron von Stein, the manager of the company, answered that "the crown prince was the *spiritus rector* of the new enterprise and was breathing his inspiration into it."[5] Without daring to step in openly, the prince found the manager ready to put into practice his credo that "art must aspire to what is higher and more impressive than the ordinary."[6] Georg accepted for himself the obligation such a truth imposes. He had been profoundly moved by the understanding, the truthfulness, and the power he saw in Aldridge's performances in Berlin. Georg's own work on the stage of the Meiningen theater strengthened his conviction that these were among the qualities necessary to raise the standard of the German theater.

On Saturday, January 23, 1858, a long article in the *Meininger Tageblatt* introduced Aldridge to the public. The article reported that his success in London, Paris, and Vienna was epochal, his characterization of Shakespeare's heroes unsurpassed, his mimicry unexcelled. The dreadful fate he had suffered in childhood was no less unusual than his talent. His story was detailed: the son of a prince of Senegal in Africa, taken to the United States by an American missionary, enrolled in an American college, later embroiled in revolutions in Africa, suffering the loss of his family, then achieving extraordinary success in the theater! The article concluded with a theatrical plug:

> For several years Ira Aldridge has occasionally toured the continent, celebrating incontestable triumphs in the theaters of Paris, Brussels, Vienna, etc., with his natural nobility, his dignified expressiveness, the intelligent nuances and the passionate ardor of his acting. Next week we will have the opportunity to admire this great actor on our stage in the role of Othello. Aldridge is now 34 years old.[7]

The people of Meiningen were entranced. They were acquainted with guest stars. Noted players from Berlin and Vienna appeared regularly on their stage, and stars from Paris and St. Petersburg were not unknown. They had seen the celebrated Adelaide Ristori in Schiller's *Maria Stuart*; and just a year previously, the

incomparable Rachel had broken her journey from Vienna to Berlin to give two performances in Meiningen. Yet never had a guest been introduced so extravagantly. Aldridge would find an expectant audience.

Aldridge arrived with his wife on Tuesday, January 26. Meiningen was suffering a typical, piercingly cold winter's day. Snow lay heavy in the streets and on the rooftops. Usually actors were left to find their own way to the Hotel Saechsicher-Hof, where they had special rooms and dined at a table reserved for them, but Aldridge, as the son of an African prince and an internationally celebrated artist, could not be expected to take commercial lodgings. He and his wife were invited to occupy rooms on the first floor of the Meiningen castle. A court attendant waited to escort them. At the theater the company stood ready to rehearse with the guest, but Aldridge found that unnecessary. He had brought his own costumes and hand properties, so there was no need for a dress rehearsal. A walk-through on Wednesday morning was all the rehearsal he needed. Such confidence frightened the Meiningen actors, accustomed to long, carefully crafted rehearsals.

The prince was in residence, but personal tragedy had altered his life since he had seen Aldridge in Berlin. In January 1855 his second son, Georg, died suddenly. When three months later Charlotte died in childbirth, her infant son dying with her, Georg was inconsolable. For the next two years he took leave from his military duties and moved restlessly about. He did not return to Meiningen until early 1857, when he came to attend a gala performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, performed for his thirty-first birthday. Grief had deepened his understanding of the tragedies, and he was ready to absorb Aldridge's insights into Shakespeare's masterpieces.

Aldridge opened his four-play program with *Othello*, on Wednesday evening, January 27 (see figures 17.1 and 17.2). Although season tickets had been suspended and admission prices raised, the theater was so full that the members of the orchestra were turned out of the pit and seats installed there for those determined to see the performance. When the audience was seated, with the ducal family and members of the court settled in the center loge, the curtain rose on a brilliantly lighted street in Venice.

More than two decades would intervene before the scenery for a Meininger production would be greeted by applause from the audience and appreciation from the critics, but in 1858 Georg was still learning. In this case the interval between Aldridge's agreement to appear in Meiningen and his arrival was too short for Georg to follow his usual method of preparing historically researched sketches for construction by artists in Weimar. In two weeks, three tragedies and a farce had to be learned and productions mounted into which the guest would fit. Old sets were repainted, costumes refurbished, and rehearsal time doubled.

Othello was not new to the Meiningen audience, but the novelty of seeing a black actor—and a prince's son, at that—in the title role intensified all expectations.

Appareled in an exotic costume and a high headdress, Aldridge entered the doge's chambers, dignified, honorable, courageous in the face of accusations that he had seduced Desdemona. Speaking in a subdued, measured voice, he began his defense. By the time he had finished the moving lines

> She loved me for the dangers I had passed
> And I loved her that she did pity them. . . .

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Figure 17.1 Playbill from the Theater in Meiningen, January 27, 1858 (by permission of the Meininger Theater, Südthüringisches Staatstheater, Meiningen).

he had taken possession of the play. Concern that his speaking in English while others in the cast spoke in German would make him inaccessible vanished. His deep bronze African face, reflecting feelings of passion and nobility such as no white actor's face with layers of thick black paint ever could, spoke directly to the viewers. The audience left the theater convinced they had experienced an extraordinary event. And there were three more performances yet to see.

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Figure 17.2 Photograph of Ira Aldridge as Othello (by permission of the McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library).

On February 6, the *Meininger Tageblatt* reported on Aldridge's performances in depth because, as was stated, "the appearance of this master of acting at Meiningen's theater must be seen as an event in our theater history":[8]

> With his artistic achievements in serious drama, Ira Aldridge is comparable to a meteor which crosses Europe's theatrical sky, fiery and radiant; one hardly knows whether one should rejoice in its brilliant beauty or tremble inwardly at its overwhelming power. His acting causes both in turn. This is especially true in his portrayal of Othello.
>
> This "Moor of Venice" is one of Shakespeare's most remarkable creations. Despite his undeniable trait of noble good nature, passions slumber within him, wild and glowing hot as the land where he was born, passions which Iago's diabolic art fans to a conflagration which devastates everything, finally leading to the most horrible catastrophe after overpowering the hero's better, nobler self.
>
> The "Moor of Senegal" has grasped this character with profound understanding of the human heart and human life, and shows it to our souls painted in such terribly true and convincing colors that we might be tempted to consider it exaggerated—if we were to take the pale, insipid acting style of superficial actors as our yardstick—namely in those parts in which the artist intentionally displays truth to nature without transfiguring it and mitigating it with artistic means.
>
> Supported with a sonorous voice, clear enunciation, a powerful figure and an expressive play of facial expressions and gestures, he shows us the alternation of feelings and emotions in the most masterful fashion and with the finest nuances. The most ardent tenderness of his love for Desdemona is contrasted with his dignified power when confronting the doge and his officers. A self-control which forces him to appear calm is contrasted with the passion which rapidly, like an avalanche, develops from the first budding suspicion to untamed raging.

The artist's performance was awaited with great expectations, and these expectations were surpassed. Especially remarkable were the gripping sounds of pain, rage, and despair, which the son of the desert had learned by listening to nature in his fatherland. The strange impression of the English acting style and language was quickly overcome, giving way to general enthusiastic recognition of a mighty talent.

Aldridge's second performance, that of Shylock in *Merchant of Venice*, was also acclaimed both by the audience and by the reviewer in the *Meininger Tageblatt*:

> He found no less recognition last Sunday—January 31—in his performance of Shylock. At first the two main features of the true Jewish character emerged most vividly, the oriental ardor with which he clings to his religion and his not unmotivated hatred of Christians. Then, however, his greed, his slyness, his remarkable cultivation emerged. The rapid transformation of feelings, from deep pain at the defection of his daughter to joy at the prospect of quick bloody revenge upon Antonio in the first scene of the third act, and the bloodthirstiness in the first scene of the fourth act were portrayed incomparably.

The *Meininger Tageblatt* then praised Aldridge's performance of Macbeth:

> Yesterday Ira Aldridge, in his third and last guest role, performed Macbeth, this incredibly great Shakespearean figure. . . . The terrible battle of noble-mindedness with the demon of ambition, in which the latter, backed up by a demon in woman's form, finally emerges victorious (Act 1, Scene 7), the torments of a sorely burdened conscience (Act 2, Scene 1) as well as the resulting self-loathing, the horror when Banquo's ghost rises up from the grave, and the final despair in which he goes to ruin under the burden of the consciousness of his unspeakable guilt, all that was shown to us in masterly strokes.

Aldridge followed the tragedy with *The Padlock*, a one-act farce with music. This was his only offering not generally applauded. Indeed, there arose such a furor against it that some members of the audience left before the performance ended. For a great tragedian to lower himself to play nonsense was, in the opinion of many, reprehensible. Those who left early did not hear a graceful farewell, written and spoken by Aldridge to express his gratitude for his reception in Meiningen. The success he had enjoyed did not belong to him alone, he pointed out, but to the culture of his race, an artistic and musical culture often denigrated by Western critics.

Prince Georg was particularly interested in Macbeth's character and Aldridge's conception of it. He found it especially revealing that Aldridge was able to convey the depth of a personality so foreign to his own. He and Aldridge discussed the tragedy, and Aldridge gave the prince a little notebook he kept on the play. Aldridge's engagement in Meiningen opened up a wealth of ideas for the future of the Meiningen stage. Although Georg disagreed strongly with Aldridge's revisions of texts, he recognized a profound truth in the actor's interpretation of the roles.

Duke Bernard was pleased by the engagement. Notices in London's *Theatrical Observer* and *Court Journal* recorded that Aldridge had received from His Serene Highness the Reigning Sovereign of Saxe-Meiningen a gold medal and elevation to the ranks of the nobility.[9] The *Illustrated London News* picked up this story a few months later and provided more details:

> At Saxe-Meiningen, last January, after his performance of Shylock, Baron von Tillich, the General Manager, by command of the reigning Sovereign, presented Mr. Aldridge with the Royal Saxon House Order, with the medal in gold; and the month following he was introduced, kissed hands, and received his diploma from his Royal Highness. What enhances this great distinction is, that Mr. Aldridge is the only actor, native or foreign, so decorated. It is, moreover, expressly stated in his diploma that he is permitted to wear the medal next in order to the members of the Royal house of Saxony, and it is accompanied by a beautiful decoration in the shape of a Maltese Cross in gold. The best proof, therefore, that can be given of the appreciation of his merits as an actor and a gentleman by those foreign Potentates is to be found in the fact that he has been presented with those costly medals and the authentic credentials by which they are accompanied.[10]

Thereafter, the actor could proudly call himself the Chevalier Ira Aldridge, Knight of Saxony.

Aldridge's success in Meiningen and the honors he received there did not go unnoticed in other parts of Europe. Accounts of the performances and their reception were carried by newspapers in Berlin, Vienna, and Hamburg. Nor was Aldridge forgotten in Meiningen in the years that followed. Georg had held long conversations with the actor discussing his approach to Shakespeare's roles, and he had also received from him an autographed notebook on Macbeth and acting.

In 1866, Georg became the ruling duke of Meiningen and began in earnest the reforms that revolutionized the European theater. By 1880 the Meiningen theater company had been seen in the great cities of Europe. In 1878 they had performed in Berlin, Frankfurt, Dresden, and Breslau. With all their sets, costumes, and properties they traveled to London in 1881 and to St. Petersburg three years later. Embedded in the reforms effected by Georg's company were ideas introduced by Aldridge. Passion, beauty, judgment, understanding, and above all, a search for truth in the poet's words were the foundation on which Georg built his theater. Aldridge was an important influence on Georg's artistic vision, so much so that in 1908, a generation later, the Austrian theater historian Robert F. Arnold credited Ira Aldridge as one of the founders of the modern European theater.[11]

Notes

1. Lee Simonson, "Royal Innovations: George II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen," *The Stage Is Set* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company [1932]), 272–308.
2. Georg's letter to his mother, October 31, 1844, held in the Handschriftenabteilung, Nachlass Georg II. Von Sachen-Meiningen, German State Library, Berlin (K7, MB B8).
3. Max Grube, *The Story of the Meininger*, trans. Ann Marie Koller, ed. Wendell Cole, Books of the Theatre Series, 4 (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, [1970]), 13.
4. Ibid.
5. Carl Freiherr von Stein, *Die Kunst in Meiningen unter Georg II* (Meiningen: Keyssner, 1909), 6.
6. Georg's letter to his mother, January 11, 1846, held in the Handschriftenabteilung, Nachlass Georg II. Von Sachen-Meiningen, German State Library, Berlin (M21, B1).
7. *Meininger Tageblatt*, January 23, 1858, 2. The newspaper erred in reporting Aldridge's age as thirty-four. He was fifty years old at this time.
8. *Meininger Tageblatt*, February 6, 1858, 1–3.
9. *The Theatrical Observer; and Musical Review, with Daily Bills of the Play*, February 26, 1858; *Court Journal*, February 27, 1858.
10. *Illustrated London News*, July 3, 1858: 4, quoted in Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (London: Rockliff, 1958), 210.
11. Robert F. Arnold, *Das Moderne Drama* (1908; Strasbourg: Trübner, 1912), 23.

18

"Othello's Occupation's Gone!"

The African Roscius in Poland, 1853–67

Krzysztof Sawala

An official statement of the chief of police in the city of Łódź, dated August 7, 1867, carried the following message: "I have the honor to inform the Court that at 5 p.m. today an American citizen, actor Ira Aldridge died of illness in the house of Michał Kunkiel in the 'Paradyz.'"[1] The sudden death of the world-famous Negro actor caused a sensation that turned the burial ceremony into a great spectacle. A detailed report of this event was given several days later by all newspapers of renown throughout Poland. One of the Warsaw dailies, *Kurier Warszawski*, wrote:

> On 9 August the body of Ira Aldridge, a Negro dramatic artist who died several days before, was buried in the Evangelical Cemetery in Łódź. His body had been earlier displayed in one of the ground floor rooms of Hentschel's hotel, in which he parted with his life. The room was beautifully decorated and turned into a chapel. The features of the artist did not change much after his death. On the day before the funeral the local singing society comprised of more than one hundred people sang a mourning hymn, while on the day of the funeral, after the hymn was sung again, Father Ronthaler said the prayers. The funeral procession consisted of a military orchestra, which performed Haydn's *Oratorium*, the singing society, the orchestra of a shooting society and the society of dramatic artists under the direction of Mr. Hentschel. On a cushion in front of the casket lay medals which the late actor had received, as well as a laurel wreath. The caravan was followed by the President of the city of Łódź, the shooting society in uniforms, representatives of the city guilds with banners, and a carriage in which the widow rode. At the gravesite Father Ronthaler delivered a speech for the numerous citizens who participated.[2]

This essay is a revised version of an article previously published in *Polish Anglosaxon Studies* 2 (1991): 7–30.

At the time Rev. Ronthaler was saying his prayer, some of the assembled citizens were already spreading gossip about the "mysterious death" of the Negro actor. According to some, he was poisoned; others claimed he had been killed in a fight with a waiter at a restaurant where he allegedly had offended a waitress. The most popular version, though still hearsay, spoke of a police conspiracy to murder Aldridge—a spy and participant in the revolutionary movement of contemporary Europe. The actor's connections with Chernyshevsky, Hertzen, Shevchenko, and other Russian revolutionaries were well known, while police files held in the Vienna Archives suggest that the international police followed him to every city of partitioned Poland that he visited. On top of that, the vague statement of a Dr. Olszewicz, who reportedly treated Aldridge and later pronounced him dead and signed the medical certificate aroused suspicion.

Gossip of that kind may seem quite natural from a historical perspective: the death in the provincial city of Łódź of a famous Negro actor, awarded medals and other honors by many of the European royalty, must have appeared suspicious and mysterious to outsiders. There is, however, no evidence to support any of these suppositions, and indeed nothing seems to indicate that Aldridge died an unnatural death. On several occasions in the years prior to his arrival in Łódź, Aldridge had complained of failing health.

If the death of Aldridge in the capital of the Polish textile industry was the only mysterious detail of his sojourn in Poland, his biographers would be more than happy. There are, however, many more questions that need to be addressed, as the actor's arrival in Łódź was the last of his repeated visits to Poland, at that time partitioned by the Russian, German, and Austrian empires. The Negro tragedian had come to Poland so frequently that we may speak of a Polish period in his life, which, encompassing concurrent appearances in Russia, was one of the most intriguing in his career. It is significant that these visits took place between 1853 and 1867. The revolutionary movements of the 1840s, culminating in the Spring of Nations (1848), resulted in a mild loosening of the partitioning powers' grip over Poland's rudimentary independence, as well as in the renewal of patriotic feelings among the Poles, for which the performances of a Negro actor—himself a representative of an oppressed class with whom Poles could empathize—provided splendid nourishment.

The first performances of Ira Aldridge in Poland were part of the actor's earliest Continental tour, which began in July 1852. We learn about them from C. H. Stephenson, a member of the English troupe that Aldridge had taken with him:

> On the 3rd of Jan., 1853, Aldridge and his troupe, much reduced in numbers, appeared at the Italian Opera-House, Berlin. On the Sunday, Jan. 16th, they appeared by royal command at the Court Theatre, Potsdam. They then travelled to Stettin, Posen, Frankfurt-on-Oder, Breslau, Vienna, Presburg, Pesth, &c. In the latter city the African Roscius was *fêted* and lionized to his heart's content, and from that time we may safely date his Continental success.[3]

Stephenson does not specify the exact dates of the performances in Szczecin (Stettin), Poznań (Posen), and Wrocław (Breslau)—Polish cities, then under German rule. We know from his account, however, that they must have taken place after January 16, probably after the performances at the Court Theater, Potsdam. Unfortunately, there is no mention of the Potsdam appearances of Aldridge in the Polish press. We do find, however, accounts of his Berlin performances, written by the Berlin correspondent of Cracow's daily, *Czas*. The issue of January 8 mentions that "Yesterday, a Negro named Aldridge performed here in the theater of English actors. He acted Othello. I could not go to see it, so I am leaving the description until the next correspondence."

What follows is a version of the actor's biography as presented in the *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius*, a small booklet originally published around 1848 in London by J. Onwhyn and later translated into several languages. The most popular was the 1852 German translation, published as *Leben und Künstler-Laufbahn des Negers Ira Aldridge*, which was sold before the actor's performances in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and so on. Parts of the *Memoir* were also translated into Polish and published in newspapers wherever Aldridge appeared in Poland. *Czas*'s translation, which was printed on the front page of the newspaper under the title "Życiorys" (Life Story), was the first of these. The story spoke of Aldridge's ancestors, who were members of the royal family of the Fulahs, a Senegalese ethnic group inhabiting the western coast of Africa. At one point, the Fulahs happened to be visited by an American missionary, who—having discovered that Ira's grandfather, a chief, was a man of wisdom—made an effort to put his people on the road to Christian civilization, which was to be manifested by exchanging war prisoners in defiance of a centuries-old tradition of selling them as slaves. Violating local concepts and interests, this brought about a fierce civil war, which forced the missionary out of the country. He did, however, manage to take with him Ira's father, Daniel, then a "promising youth," who, on arriving in America, was sent to Schenectady College near New York and educated according to Christian doctrine. Later he graduated from the college, became a minister, and got married. Taking his young black wife with him, he returned to his homeland to spread the newly acquired faith, thus continuing the godly work once started by the missionary. Soon, however, another civil war broke out and Rev. Daniel Aldridge was beaten in battle. With the help of his supporters, who provided shelter, he managed to save his life and after a month little Ira was born. The family remained in hiding for nine years, suffering discomforts and constantly being threatened by their enemies. Ultimately, a friend in the community helped them get on board a ship going to America.

In New York, Daniel Aldridge resumed his priestly duties at one of the black parishes in New York, where he continued to work until his death in 1840. His wife—Ira's mother—had died in 1818, "leaving but two surviving children out of a numerous family" (Ira and Joshua, supposedly Ira's older brother, though we know nothing of when or where he was born). Ira was meant to follow in his

father's footsteps and also become a minister, and so with help from Bishops Milner and Brenton he was sent to Schenectady College, where he embarked upon theological studies. His interests were different, however, and soon he started frequenting the New York theaters. When Brown's Theater opened in 1821, Ira decided to take his chances and "having studied the part of Rolla, in the play of *Pizarro*, he made his appearance in that character." Later, he even managed to find his way backstage in the Chatham Garden Theater, where he got himself a job as Henry Wallack's personal attendant. When Daniel Aldridge discovered his son's predilection for the acting profession, he decided to send him to Europe, so that he could attend a university and continue his theological studies. And so in 1825, Ira boarded a ship sailing to England.

The evidence collected by Aldridge's biographers, Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, authors of *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian*, indicates that much of the *Memoir's* account—particularly the romantic story of Ira's birth and his miraculous deliverance—is fictitious and may have been contrived by the actor himself.[4] Determined to start a theatrical career and knowing how difficult it might be for a Negro to be accepted on the all-white British stage, he needed to maintain the image of a royal African—a "noble savage" resembling the type so plentiful and popular in English drama of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The audience liked that image, which looked quite sensational on playbills. So the actor adopted it and, as time passed, the story was spread and accepted as if it had actually happened. After it had appeared in print, nobody questioned its obvious omissions.[5]

After his performances at the Coburg Theatre in London in the fall of 1825, Aldridge toured the British Isles for twenty-seven years, gradually building up his repertoire (which eventually included a number of white roles). He was occasionally invited to perform in playhouses in and around London, but he spent most of his time in the provinces, for he never managed to get a permanent position in the capital. He was a versatile actor, equally adept in both tragedy and comedy, and over the course of his career he appeared in some forty-nine plays, among which we find several dramas by Shakespeare (*Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *King Richard III*, *Merchant of Venice, Titus Andronicus*) as well as many of the popular melodramas and farces that constituted the bulk of the English dramatic literature of the time.

Disappointed with his less than complete success in England, where he often met with racial prejudice, and convinced of his value as an actor, he put together his own acting company and in 1852 set out to conquer Europe. It was during this initial European tour that he first came to Poland.

That Aldridge intended to visit Poland was reported in some of the biographical articles and reviews of his performances in Germany that appeared in *Czas* and were reprinted by the major Polish newspaper in Poznań, *Gazeta Wielkiego Xięstwa Poznańskiego*. The latter announced his acting company's presence in Poznań on January 25, 1852, in its daily section on fashionable arrivals in the city,

although the troupe did not come—as the column implies—from London. Having concluded their performances in Berlin and Potsdam, they went to Szczecin and began performing there on January 18. The repertoire included *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *The Padlock*, a two-act farce by Irish playwright Isaac Bickerstaffe, in which Aldridge portrayed a funny Negro servant called Mungo. The performances created quite a sensation and were reviewed even in London's *Sunday Times*. A lengthy review appeared in the local Szczecin paper, *Ost See Zeitung*, whose theatrical correspondent described Aldridge in mostly eulogistic terms. However, he also criticized the actor for something that had already been generally recognized as one of his great assets. This was his remarkably passionate, slightly violent acting, particularly in the role of Othello. Aldridge's interpretation leaned in the direction of a clear juxtaposition of the characters of Othello and Iago, stressing the passionate, tender, though somewhat primitive nature of the former, and the cold, sordid, and treacherous nature of the latter. The German critics, familiar with the orderly and temperate acting of Othello by their own artists, considered his wild outbursts of rage at Desdemona's alleged infidelity as indications of Aldridge's weakness and racial inferiority. His inability to control himself was also one of the reasons why they stressed the Moorish, non-Negro background of Othello. Nevertheless, the success of these performances (staged at a German theater, but witnessed also by Poles) was unquestionable, so when Aldridge and his company came to perform in Poznań, it was hardly possible to get a seat.

Had it not been in 1853, but some seventeen years later, Aldridge could have performed in Poznań in a Polish theater. However, in 1853 this was not possible, for Poznań did not yet have a permanent Polish stage. Despite that, the performances there must be considered the most important of those given in Poland during Aldridge's first visit, for they were connected with the important role this city played in preserving the Polish national character during the era of partition. Incorporated into Prussia after the second partition, in 1793, Poznań regained independence for some nine years, becoming part of the Duchy of Warsaw that was established by Napoleon in 1806. After the Congress of Vienna, Poznań was returned to Prussia as the capital of the Grand Duchy of Poznań and for over 120 years of Poland's occupation by foreign powers, it was the bulwark of Polish statehood. The resistance of its Polish majority to intensive germanization was demonstrated through efforts aimed at improving the Polish economy and preparing for military combat. Also, Poznań's intellectuals sought to develop a national culture and preserve the notion of a free and independent Poland. One of the most spectacular areas in which such ideas found their expression was the theater, which—despite limitations imposed by the German authorities—remained an important center of Polish culture. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that when Ira Aldridge, a famous Shakespearean tragedian, came to perform there, everyone was talking about him.

The company remained in Poznań for three days and, according to the playbills, gave five performances. On January 25, *Othello* was acted, followed by

Macbeth and *The Padlock* on January 26, and another presentation of *Othello* on January 27. The performance on January 26 ended with Aldridge's declamation of an epilogue, which the actor had written himself and had performed for the first time only several weeks earlier in Berlin. In the epilogue, he spoke of his pilgrimage from "the land of the burning sun" and thanked the audience for giving him a warm welcome.

The most detailed review of the Poznań performances was written by Napoleon Kamieński, a publisher and editor of *Gazeta Wielkiego Xięstwa Poznańskiego*, as well as a great theater lover. In the Saturday, January 29 issue, he wrote:

> Poznań 28 January: Today *Macbeth* and *Othello* are on every tongue, in every private and public place in Poznań. The English dramatic artists and their leader, Ira Aldridge, gave us a live portrait of what *Macbeth* and *Othello* are for the English. We were able to see these masterpieces of the immortal Shakespeare on the stage of our theater. Ira Aldridge, a first-class actor, has completely fulfilled our expectations after what we had heard about him. His acting is like a stream: it begins easily and gently, and then—together with a thunderstorm and pouring rain—it bulges, roars, and knocks everything down, spreading chaos all around. There is a great force of nature in the powerful body of Mr. Aldridge; his shoulders, breast, and entire stature are those of an athlete, a Hercules. Thus the powerful spirit and tremendous experience that accompany every movement of that genial artist have a good base to rest upon. What a combination of a great masterpiece and a great performer! Othello, the general of the Venetian Republic Army, is a man of dignity, with a pure and spotless nature, his idealism fighting against the materialism of Iago, who—having insinuated himself into his master's favor—betrayed him and killed his purest feelings. So great a challenge was met by Mr. Aldridge with the greatness of his spirit. Noble movements of his body, easy declamation, and calm eyes conveyed the harmony of feelings at the beginning of the play. When that harmony was violated by Iago's insinuations, his feelings acquired more vivid colors. The face, the eyes, the lips first carried the thought and only then pronounced the word. Each flicker and blink of his eye betrayed the feelings that overwhelmed the heart of a man like Othello, even if someone did not understand the words. To say nothing about the moment when that loftiness reached its zenith! How much pain was in his sobs, what fire glowed in his eyes when the stifled breast produced the first outburst of despair. It was a volcano that announced a thunderstorm with a voice coming from underground, thrusting the lava of his feelings with a roar of thunder. The impression was overpowering; though the majority of spectators did not speak English, they did, however, understand the feelings portrayed on the artist's face, eyes, lips, in the tones of his voice, in the entire body—or generally speaking—in those guides of the soul. Everything proved that Mr. Ira Aldridge possesses that combination of a genial and powerful spirit in a well-shaped and powerful body. We also liked very much the silent figures of the artists accompanying Mr. Aldridge. Having nothing to do and being forced to stand on the stage, they were—nevertheless—able to become integrated, so that we had in front of us something like moving pictures taken from famous paintings or statues. We may say the same about Macbeth because in that role Mr. Aldridge was also a great master in portraying feelings. He perfectly understood the great challenge which is invested in that role and

> performed it as befits a first-class actor. But still this was not all! Mr. Aldridge also showed us another side of his talent, this time in comedy. He performed in Bickerstaffe's farce entitled *The Padlock*. We had the figure of an underprivileged Negro, many of whom can be found among the slaves in America. Whether it was happiness or fear, or courage, everything was portrayed somehow in a animal style, and we certainly dislike any presentation of a deprived human nature. However, even that image did not lack merit because it showed us a poor enslaved Negro in the condition in which he exists in America. Today the English artists go to Frankfurt-on-Oder and to Wrocław, from whence they intend to travel to Vienna to perform. Finally, we must add that the plays were performed without a prompter and yet memory failed none of the artists. The declamation went slowly and smoothly, with great consideration. The voice was sound and not as hissing as we thought to be characteristic of the English.

An interesting part of this review concerns the cooperation between the actors, who "were able to become integrated," creating "something like moving pictures taken from famous paintings or statues." This may indicate that in his interpretation of Othello, Aldridge followed the tradition of a dumb show, which had been introduced to Poland by English comedians coming to perform in Gdańsk (Danzig), Elbląg (Elbing), Królewiec (Königsberg), Warsaw, and other cities as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century. Combining the pathetic style of Macready and Kemble with the vigorous, violent acting of Kean, it created a tremendous impression, particularly in highly emotional plays like *Othello* or *Macbeth*, which require not only a true and deep understanding of the psychological dynamite of their poetry by the main actor, but also the perfect cooperation of the supporting actors.

The performances in Szczecin, in Poznań, and later in Wrocław were actually first-night performances of the original English versions of Shakespeare's plays in these cities. Until then, Shakespeare had been known there only from pseudo-classical German adaptations, which—like those of the French dramatist Jean François Ducis—remained far from the spirit of the original. It is worth observing that the language "which the artists spoke"—though foreign to a portion of the audience—was not incomprehensible to most of the spectators. Among the Polish population of Poznań, there were quite a few devout Anglophiles who maintained permanent contacts with the British Isles, where they were seeking support for the Polish national cause, and with British culture in general, which they considered to be in many areas a model that Polish institutions should follow once Poland regained its independence. For many Poles, English was a second language, and a Shakespearean play performed in the original must have been for them a real spiritual feast.

One should also not underestimate the importance of the presentation of Bickerstaffe's *The Padlock*, which—though definitely not a dramatic masterpiece—aroused great interest because of the ideas incorporated by Aldridge into the main character, Mungo. A simple-minded, slightly ridiculous character, this Negro

servant became—through Aldridge's acting—a rebel against slavery. The problem of slavery and racial discrimination in America was daily commented upon by the Polish press, eager to associate it with the ideals of the oppressed Polish nation. The Poles perfectly understood and fully identified themselves with the hardships of the enslaved American Negroes, of whom Aldridge was a representative, albeit symbolically rather than literally, and for whom he spoke on stage. As a legendary African prince brought up among oppressed American slaves, Aldridge was for the Poles the embodiment of their own national consciousness and their fight for liberation. Each play attacking slavery, even if artistically inferior, was enthusiastically welcomed by the Polish audience and so the success of the African Roscius in Poland can hardly be viewed as a surprise.

After leaving Poznań, the company went to Germany, only to return to Poland at the beginning of February. This we learn from Ludwig Sittenfeld's *Geschichte des Breslauer Theaters*:

> The year 1853 was marked by sensational guest performances in all areas of the theatrical arts. As early as the beginning of February there was the appearance of Ira Aldridge, called the African Roscius, an English-speaking Negro from Senegal, whose arrival was preceded by reports of his great fame. He performed with an inferior troupe and offered an incredibly realistic portrayal of Othello in a version adapted for his virtuoso acting. The wild ardor of his being, the uncanny play of facial expressions and gestures, the secret seething of passion was strangely stirring, especially when the bestial nature of the man engendered in the hot sun burst through. . . . The sold-out house, initially astonished, rewarded him with vigorous applause. After Macbeth, he also played Shylock and in that role achieved a true artistic success as well. He surprised everybody with his calmness and simplicity of presentation. "Being himself a representative of a despised race, he could strongly and truly portray the feelings of wronged Jews." Kurnik says that it was the most perfect presentation of this Shakespearean character he had ever seen.[6]

The performances in Breslau (Wrocław) were not reviewed by the Polish press. In 1853, there were no major Polish newspapers in Wrocław, a predominantly German city, then part of the same country to which the province of Great Poland with its capital at Poznań belonged. However, it remained in the shadow of Poznań, despite the fact that—due to the lack of a university center in Poznań—many Poles studied at the Wrocław Prussian Royal University, a splendid institution of higher learning in both the humanities and the sciences. Aldridge's company performed at the new theater, which was opened only in 1841 and today houses the Wrocław Opera. One of several sources commenting on these performances was an article in the German *Neue Oder-Zeitung*, which was reprinted in London's *Sunday Times*. It speaks very highly of Aldridge and makes it possible to establish his company's repertoire, which—besides the plays presented in Szczecin and Poznań (except for *The Padlock*)—included also *Merchant of Venice*, performed by Aldridge for the first time in Poland.[7]

When Aldridge returned to Poland a year later, he came alone, having abandoned his "carefully selected company" several months earlier. From then on he acted with local troupes, offering bilingual performances, of which he was one of the pioneers. He started giving them in Poland in January 1854, when he arrived in Gdańsk, and later followed the old theatrical route of the English comedians, who had performed in Royal Prussia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The route included Gdańsk, (Danzig), Elbląg (Elbing), and Królewiec (Königsberg, modern-day Kaliningrad), which had once been busy ports and important centers of trade between Poland and England. We learn about Aldridge's performances there from a brief account in the February 5, 1854, issue of the *Sunday Times*, based on a similar one in the actor's memoir:

> The African Roscius—Mr. Ira Aldridge, the African tragedian, continues his successful performances on the Continent. At Dantzic [*sic*] and Elbing, where he has been recently playing, the theatres have been crowded to that extent that the orchestras in both towns were thrown into stalls on the nights of his appearance. He was to have commenced an engagement of six nights in Konigsberg on last Thursday.

Another important cycle of Aldridge's performances in Poland took place later in 1854 in Cracow, where the situation was completely different from that in Gdańsk, and other cities of Royal Prussia. A former capital of Poland, Cracow had enjoyed considerable political independence even under Austro-Hungarian rule. Incorporated into Austria after the third partition, the city had belonged to the Duchy of Warsaw from 1809 onward, and had become the capital of the so-called Cracow Republic in 1815. After the suppression of the 1846 revolution, it was again taken over by Austria and remained, together with Lemberg (now Lvov), the most important political and cultural center of Austrian-occupied Poland.

The theater in Cracow had a long tradition, which began with the liturgical theater of the thirteenth century and then the royal theater (mostly for opera) of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first Polish professional theater operated here in 1781–85, and from 1809 it operated permanently. In 1843—that is, when Cracow enjoyed the status of a free city—the Polish authorities expanded the theater building and adapted it to new purposes, thus establishing Teatr Stary (the Old Theater), which survives until today. When Cracow was again incorporated into Galicia (1846), the German authorities opened a permanent German theater (1853), at which Aldridge came to perform in November 1854.

The situation of the German theater in Cracow at the time of Aldridge's arrival was difficult. The management had just been given to Karl Gaudelius, who replaced an incompetent speculator and constant bankrupt named Megerle, who was chiefly responsible for closing down the Polish theater, which operated concurrently in the same building as the German theater. Gaudelius's only chance to survive depended on two factors: reopening the Polish theater and thus regaining the confidence of the Poles who boycotted German-sponsored

theatrical events; and at the same time bringing star attractions to Cracow. The first was soon satisfied, when a contract with Juliusz Pfeiffer, a Polish entrepreneur and stage manager, was signed, while the latter was much more difficult to satisfy. And so the telegram from Aldridge confirming his arrival in Cracow made Gaudelius extremely happy.

The advertising that preceded and later accompanied Aldridge's guest performances in Cracow was truly astounding. On November 3, the "Local and Foreign" column in *Czas* carried the first announcement of Aldridge's appearances; this was repeated in the issues of November 4 and 5, while the entire literary section of the November 4 issue included an abbreviated Polish version of the *Memoir*. The translation was most probably made from the German edition and was entitled *Ira Aldridge–życiorys*.

After the opening performance, which took place on November 7, no review appeared. Instead, *Czas* printed a story that had earlier been published in Berlin's *Theater-Vereins-Zeitung*, describing Aldridge as an active antislavery activist. "Since Ira Aldridge is performing on the Cracow stage," it said, "it seems reasonable to mention what others say about him not as artist, but as a man." What follows is an excerpt from this story:

> The artistic triumphs enjoyed by Ira Aldridge in the whole of civilized Europe are known to everybody so it would be pointless to enumerate them. Less known, however, is how nobly and unselfishly he uses the material gains from these triumphs. The point is that this artist has resolved to show Europe that his race is equally capable of becoming educated, and he speaks in favor of emancipating the Negroes not only through his appearances on stage, but also through other actions undertaken in that spirit. Not long ago the journals reported on a beautiful feature of his character, which causes his name to be circulated from one person to another and compels us to repeat the story here. A Negro family named Wilson, comprised of a father, mother, son, and two daughters, escaped from Baltimore and reached New York. Yet, by the power of the runaway slaves act the family was captured and was soon to pay a high price for their desire for liberty in the land of freedom. Each member of the family was offered for sale separately. The mother and father were sold to the highlands of Georgia, while the fate of both daughters was to be the same as that of the more beautiful slave girls. Since a New York society for redeeming slaves did not have enough cash at that time, Mr. Aldridge—who was staying in Austria and learnt from English newspapers about the circumstance—immediately sent to New York the sum necessary to free the family. This is the way in which he uses his income.[8]

The publication of this article during Aldridge's stay in Cracow was obviously meant to encourage Poles to attend the performances and thus pay tribute to the noble actor, even though he performed on the German stage and with German actors. The Polish newspaper rightly thought that in the person of Aldridge—an advocate for equality and justice—the Poles had a sympathizer to whom they ought to show their support and respect in the best way possible for an actor—by being present at his performances.

Aldridge was originally scheduled to perform for three nights, but—having done *Othello* on November 7 and *Merchant of Venice* and *The Padlock* on November 9—he suddenly canceled the third performance. This, we are told by the newspapers, was due to a telegram that "summoned him to report immediately in Brunswick."[9] Aldridge had been performing in Brunswick before coming to Cracow and from there he corresponded with some French managers, trying to arrange for a tour of France. The message that was awaiting him in Brunswick could have included recent developments on that matter. This seems to be the most likely reason why the last Cracow performance was canceled, even though the review that appeared in *Czas* after Aldridge's presentation of *The Padlock* suggests that Brunswick may have been only a pretext to leave Cracow earlier. After the initial part of the review, in which the critic comments insightfully on the meaning of *Merchant of Venice*, he departs from his enthusiastic tone and says:

> In *The Padlock* (Kłódka) Mr. Aldridge wanted to give us a picture of the life of Negro slaves in the West Indies—quite different and certainly truer than the one in the sentimental work of Mrs. Beecher Stowe. Although this side of his talent was new to us, we must admit that we were sorry to watch that contradiction of Othello, and even that contradiction of Aldridge himself! One of the philosophers has recently written of *the aesthetics of ugliness* because what is ugly can also be beautiful. Quasimodo may have been hideous, but Mungo was artistically tasteless.[10]

These critical remarks on Aldridge's acting in the part of Mungo are surprising, for once he started to perform *The Padlock*, it remained his favorite piece. It was useful for Aldridge for a number of reasons. First, it provided convenient comic relief from the tragic play in which he opened on a given evening. Second, it offered Aldridge an opportunity to demonstrate his unusual talent in comedy, as well as the deep, beautiful voice with which he sang several popular Negro ditties that he skillfully incorporated into the text. Finally, it allowed him to express his strong antislavery sentiments, particularly in the scenes in which Mungo revolts against his master's severity. The half-witted but good-natured character of Mungo, singing popular Negro songs, instantly won the sympathy of audiences all over Europe. Almost all the reviews stressed the comicality of the piece and praised Aldridge for his handling of it. The reactions to the piece in other Polish cities in which Aldridge performed it were also spontaneous and warm, even though most of the spectators were unable to appreciate the simple Negro dialect spoken by Mungo throughout the play. Why would the reviewer for *Czas* frown at the "artistically tasteless" acting of Aldridge as Mungo? It seems that the ludicrous behavior of Aldridge on stage may not have satisfied the artistic taste of some members of the Cracow audience, who evaluated the piece strictly in aesthetic terms, rather than from the point of view of the ideas it contained. The negative reaction may also have been caused to some extent by the language barrier. We do find several enthusiastic eyewitness reports, however. Karol Estreicher, a well known Polish historian of the theater, wrote that

> A tremendous success was enjoyed by a famous Negro, Ira Aldridge, who performed twice in *Othello*, *Merchant of Venice* and in a one-act comedy *The Padlock*. Though audiences rated his tragic acting highly, we have to say that his comic antics in the role of the black Mungo in *The Padlock* may have been even better or at least more original. To conceive of a comic character of that type was indeed something extraordinary. The price of tickets was doubled and despite the enthusiastic reception, there were more than ten boxes empty at the second performance because the English guest performed at the German theater.[11]

This suggests that *Czas*'s review was not representative and may have been prompted by an attempt to play down the success that Aldridge achieved in the German, not the Polish, theater.

Between 1855 and his next European tour, Aldridge remained in England, recovering his health and, later, performing in the provinces. His only excursion abroad was his visit to Sweden, which took place in June 1857, after which he returned to England and performed in a minor theater in London. In November 1857 he set out for the Continent again and—according to *Czas*—on January 4, 1858, he arrived in Cracow.[12] The information available on this second sojourn in Cracow is scanty, even though in respect of the repertoire Aldridge presented this time, it should be considered as more significant than the first visit. During his brief stay, Aldridge performed *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Merchant of Venice*, *King Richard III*, and—despite the critical remarks of *Czas* in 1854—*The Padlock*. His reception was different than that of four years before, particularly among the Polish audience. This was due to a tenser political situation in the city, whose Austrian authorities were becoming more and more determined to use stricter methods of enforcing their policy. A clear demonstration of this was the founding in 1857 of a German newspaper, *Krakauer Zeitung*, which was meant to increase the German influence in the city and as such disappointed the Poles, increasing their hostility toward any German-sponsored enterprises. To protest against the founding of *Krakauer Zeitung*, the Polish daily *Czas* ceased to review plays staged at the German theater, so the only local reports concerning Aldridge's performances were those published by the German newspaper.[13]

The two reviews that *Krakauer Zeitung* printed seem to have been written by different critics. The first one is extremely enthusiastic and even calls Aldridge "the greatest tragedian in the world," while the latter is more critical, though at the same time includes more details regarding Aldridge's acting style. In one respect they contradict each other. The first one expresses satisfaction with the fact that—in contrast to Aldridge's first stay in Cracow in 1854—the actor managed to eliminate a certain mannerism in declamation (something he had also been charged with earlier, in England), while the other claims the opposite.[14] It is difficult to determine which of them was accurate, though we have to remember that on many occasions such charges were made by audiences and critics who had a poor command of English and misinterpreted a certain style of declamation common in England as an individual mannerism. In any case, the reviews of

Aldridge's performances in England at that time did not criticize him for his style of declamation.

Having concluded his performances in Cracow, the actor went next to Poznań, arriving there on January 14. The political situation in the Grand Duchy of Poznań was similar to that in Galicia. The Poles, preoccupied with attempts to preserve their nationality and restore economic balance, took less interest in the theater in general, and the German stage in particular, even though the season of 1857/58 was one of the longest and probably the best in that era. The Polish press in the Grand Duchy also remained silent and did not comment on Aldridge's performances, except for publishing two short announcements written by the manager of the German stage, Joseph Keller. On the basis of these announcements, as well as the playbills printed by the German Stadt-Theater in Poznań, it is possible to reconstruct Aldridge's repertoire, which included *Othello*, *The Padlock*, and *Merchant of Venice*, the last-mentioned being performed instead of *Macbeth*, which had been staged five years earlier. The lack of newspaper reviews can hardly be offset by a short account of these performances by theater historian Dr. Hans Knudsen, who wrote, "Also a greatly applauded Negro actor, Ira Aldridge, was admired in Poznań as Othello and Shylock (January 1858, May 1861)."[15] Yet this short and apparently insignificant comment does mention a further arrival of Aldridge in Poznań, in May 1861. This was also noted in the Polish press by both *Gazeta Wielkiego Xięstwa Poznańskiego* (May 7, 1861) and a new daily, *Dziennik Poznański* (May 8, 1861), in their regular section on notable arrivals. Playbills from the Stadt-Theater indicate that Aldridge performed as Othello on May 7 and as Shylock and Mungo on May 8.

The following week he was in Lemberg (the capital of Austrian Poland, now Lvov in Ukraine) where he enacted four roles: Othello, Shylock, Mungo, and Macbeth. The *Era*, a British entertainment weekly, reported that

> His well-earned reputation on the Continent had preceded him, and accordingly the large and handsome Theatre was crowded in every part. The display of beauty in the boxes was such as few towns of the limited size of Lemberg could furnish. It is stated in a Polish journal that the Poles, contrary to their usual practice of keeping aloof from the German theatre, attended on this occasion in great numbers. The reception of Mr. Aldridge throughout was enthusiastic. . . . The applause was "stormlike" (*Sturmischer*) and the success immense.[16]

Another report two weeks later stated that "A young Polish sculptor, Mr. Godweski [Cyprian Godebski], who is employed in decorating the magnificent Invaliden Hof, of Lemberg—an edifice intended for decayed soldiers—was also desirous of doing honour to Mr. Aldridge, and has executed an admirable bust of the celebrated African, which is destined for the Great Exhibition of next year."[17]

It seems that Aldridge's visits to Poznań and Lemberg in 1861 were but brief stops on his way to Russia, where in 1861 to 1866 he made several long tours, one of them lasting eight months. It was in the middle of such a tour that the African

Roscius came to visit Warsaw in May 1862. Aldridge had been planning to visit Warsaw on several occasions; yet, something always stood in the way. Now, when his visit finally materialized, the timing proved to be most unfortunate. His arrival took place in the period immediately preceding the outbreak of an uprising, which began on January 22, 1863. "Throughout 1861 and 1862," says one theater historian, "Polish society demonstrated its attitude towards the partitioning government. As an answer to the bloody repressions of the Russian authorities, the Poles began a period of 'national mourning,' represented—among other things—by the general policy of not attending theatrical performances. Theater halls remained half-empty and the Polish artists, being members of troupes sponsored by the Russian authorities, had to perform in front of a handful of Russians."[18]

The entire Polish press remained silent and did not review theatrical performances, printing only advertisements of the daily repertoire. Therefore, efforts to find reviews of Aldridge's performances in Warsaw in the Polish press have been in vain. Even *Dziennik Powszechny*, which represented the ideas of Count A. Wielopolski, the head of the Polish civilian government, and therefore often took a stand against the policy of boycotting the theaters, preferring peaceful coexistence with Russia, did not review the performances of the famous tragedian.

The importance of Aldridge's performances in Warsaw cannot be overestimated. Aldridge performed with Polish actors in a Polish theater in the Polish capital in a play directed by a Polish director and only recently translated into Polish. In fact, this translation, by J. Paszkowski, was at this time used on stage for the first time ever. The play was *Othello*, as the Russian authorities would not allow the actor to perform either *Macbeth* or *Merchant of Venice*. That Aldridge desired to stage both can be concluded from one of the issues of the German *Warschauer Zeitung*, which informed its readers of his plans to stage several of Shakespeare's masterpieces. However, taking into account the politically unstable situation in the city, the authorities allowed him to present only *Othello*, which was produced three times: on May 23, 24, and 26. *Warschauer Zeitung* wrote:

> The evening we had an opportunity to experience at the Grand Theater last night (Friday) was a solemn one and will remain in everybody's memory forever. We watched Mr. Ira Aldridge, one of the greatest mimes who have ever performed on the Warsaw stage, in one of the greatest literary masterpieces of all times and all nations—in Shakespeare's *Othello*.
>
> We do not intend here to undertake the task of saying something novel about the tragedies of the immortal Englishman, their deep meaning, power, and loftiness that have already been universally described by critics and that remain in the consciousness of the entire educated world. Neither do we feel worthy of adding even one leaf to the laurel wreath carried by the famous artist, whose life is well known to be parallel in many honorable ways to his favorite role and whose exceptional abilities could not have been predicted by Shakespeare, while their realization can be enjoyed by us today as a symptom of true progress in the history of the development of mankind. We shall fulfill our desire in this respect by providing a simple assurance that Mr. Aldridge truly extended our experience of a stage

presentation of the psychological process and—without any impression of artificiality, unreality, or deformation—presented us with a picture of a feverish anger, annihilating madness, and passion of jealousy which far exceeds everything magnificent and moving that we have seen in this respect so far. He has also caused the bravest imaginings of our fantasy to become real and he has done so with such a terrifying power and realism that we have almost been frightened by that picture, as if it were real life, and we have totally yielded to the illusion, intended as the highest purpose of his acting.

. . . Yet, we do have some negative comments. The main male role besides that of Othello—the role of Iago—was given to Mr. Trapszo. This talented, hard-working, and eager artist was clearly burdened with much too heavy a load—a role that does not suit him. We believe that this role should have been offered to the principal tragedian on the local stage.

On the other hand, it seems that Mr. Aldridge would never be able to find a more dignified Desdemona than Miss Palińska. Even if we dared to wish certain details to be changed by the great mime himself, we must openly declare that we have heard no word or sound from Miss Palińska, neither have we seen a single movement or gesture of hers that did not seem perfect to us. Particularly, we have to stress that this splendid actress showed a true mastery in complementing the character of Othello, who—before Aldridge—used to be performed in a different spirit. Despite linguistic differences and minor inconsistencies, she cooperated with him through a performance whose sweet harmony in the early scenes and painful dissonance in the later ones left a charming impression upon the spectators. We hope that this jewel of the local stage will give us many pleasurable moments acting in tragedy in the future, as she did in the role of Desdemona and, earlier, in the Virgin of Orleans.[19]

The absence of Polish reviews does not suggest that the Polish press remained indifferent to Aldridge's performances. Determined not to break the boycott, it tried to show its respect for the great artist in other ways. Throughout his stay in Warsaw, the Polish press printed biographical articles on him and gave details concerning his stay in Warsaw, while one weekly, *Kurier Niedzielny*, published a special appendix offering a visual review of Aldridge's presentation of *Othello* in the form of a series of caricatures of Aldridge in that role (see figure 18.1). The caricatures were prepared by a well-known cartoonist, Napoleon Dębicki, who excelled in humorous scenes, to which he usually added his own comments.

In the existing political situation," says theater historian Mieczysław Rulikowski, "even the performances of a famous artist like Aldridge were doomed in advance. At best, they had a chance to be 'not successful enough.' "[20] It is impossible today to determine how many Poles attended these performances, although some newspaper comments indicate that very few did, while the majority went along with the boycott. The situation was difficult and awkward for both the Polish press and the Polish audience. Yet, while the newspapers could at least find a compromise solution by showing the great artist as much interest and respect as possible without actually reviewing the performances, the audience did not have any such option.

One of the benefits of the Warsaw performances was to become clear several years later. It was in Warsaw that Aldridge met and befriended the young Polish

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Figure 18.1 Cartoon of "Scenes from *Othello*" by Napoleon Dębicki (published in a supplement to *Kurier Niedzielny* [Warsaw], May 27, 1862). The captions read: "Shakespeare studied in the Negro manner," "A Negro imitates a Negro," "Black Jealousy," and "An angry Negro's terrible leap."

actor Anastazy Trapszo, who in 1866 became director of the theater in Lublin and invited Aldridge to perform there with his newly formed company. Aldridge was at the time touring the Russian provinces; in August he was in Żytomierz, a Polish town incorporated into Russia, where J. I. Kraszewski, a famous Polish novelist, had once been manager of the local theater. In 1866, the theater in Żytomierz was in Russian hands, and at the beginning of August of that year the local manager sent the following telegram to Trapszo, which was published in *Kurier Lubelski*:

> I inform you on behalf of Mr. Aldridge, who has asked me to do it, that his appearances in Zytomierz will terminate on August 13th . He will arrive in Lublin on August 18th and 20th and will give only a few performances. Please, have the cast ready and the dramas in which he is to perform well prepared. The enthusiasm with which the audience in Zytomierz and Kiev welcomes this artist is difficult to describe. Despite doubled prices, each representation is overcrowded and after each performance the audience drowns the actor in a flood of flowers and wreaths. Even though he performs his role in English, his acting is so clear that everybody understands it. I doubt not that the Lublin audience will be grateful to you for this new attraction.[21]

Trapszo, who took over the management of the Lublin theater after Paweł Ratajewicz and began his productions on June 19, discharged his duties well. He prepared a good troupe of both young and experienced actors, taught them their roles, and awaited the coming of Aldridge. The Negro actor arrived as early as August 15, and on that very day performed *Othello*. The performances continued until August 23, and during that time he presented *Othello* (August 15, 19, 22), *Merchant of Venice* (August 18, 19), and—as *Kurier Lubelski* announced—a comedy entitled *Pustoty Hiszpańskie* (Spanish Frivolities), which was a translation of *The Padlock* (August 22, 23). The performances aroused tremendous enthusiasm among the local audience. One critic reported:

> This beast of a man, exasperated in the holiest of his feelings, would turn into a panther let loose from his cage to snatch at his prey. Shaken by his fury, he would torment his victim like a tiger. And yet, his rage exercised its power in one giant leap, while the tormenting and strangling of the victim was more than monstrous: it was the vindictiveness of an ambushed hyena. Oh, Lublin! When will you experience a second moment like that![22]

On Aldridge's impersonation of Shylock, the critic wrote:

> After two performances of *Othello*, on Saturday we saw Mr. Aldridge in the role of Shylock in *Merchant of Venice*. It is a completely different character from that of the savage son of hot scalding Africa. One would think that only fury, wildness, and fanaticism exist for this famous tragedian and that all other feelings are totally strange to him. But the character of Shylock was not at all associated with savagery and thereby Mr. Aldridge has shown us that he has not developed his talent in one direction only.[23]

The third role the African Roscius acted in Lublin was Mungo, in a Polish translation of *The Padlock* made by A. Żółkowski from a French adaptation by Jacques Benjamin Maximilien Bins Saint-Victor. It proved to be extremely successful, *Kurier Lubelski* reporting that

> In the previous issue we announced Mr. Aldridge's final performance and we did not exaggerate in expressing our opinion. In the role of a Negro named Mungo in *Pustoty Hiszpańskie*, Mr. Aldridge is unrivaled. The great contrast between Othello and Mungo did not necessarily dispose us favorably toward him and, having been so greatly impressed by the tragic role of Othello, we thought that a comedy would profane all of its greatness and the spell under which we wished to remain. Yet, despite the great difference between these two characters, the highly experienced acting of Mr. Aldridge made us forget the nature of the role and admire the actor's talent instead. Repeated again on Thursday, this comedy ended a series of performances by Mr. Aldridge, whom the audience thanked in their kindest way for so many pleasant moments.[24]

There appears to be some confusion over another role that Aldridge was said to have performed in Lublin. In its issue of August 22, *Kurier Lubelski* announced that "Mr. Aldridge . . . will also present . . . an excerpt from a tragedy, *The Robbers*." Yet, in its next report, on August 25, the newspaper said merely that "the excerpt from *The Robbers* performed by Mr. Trapszo did not lack anything." Whether Aldridge acted in Schiller's *Die Raube* remains unknown.

By and large, the very successful performances in Lublin earned Aldridge the gratitude of the local audience. The members of Trapszo's company were so happy to have performed with the great artist that they threw a farewell dinner for him:

> After the guest performances of Mr. Aldridge, the dramatic company under the direction of Mr. Trapszo, in order to pay tribute to his true talent, honored Mr. Aldridge with a farewell dinner. Expressing his thanks for their friendliness and sympathy, Mr. Aldridge spoke in most favorable terms of the pleasant feelings with which he would be leaving the city, feelings which would remain in his memory for a long time. On behalf of the entire company, Mr. Trapszo thanked Mr. Aldridge for his hard work, and the entire company expressed their gratitude to the Lublin audience for its active and kind support for the efforts of the management, promising that such efforts would continue. We are obliged to report these grateful words and, in return, on behalf of the audience, we thank the management, assuring it that its work will never lack true and kind recognition from Lublin's audience.[25]

Having concluded his performances in Lublin, Aldridge went to Warsaw, but he left immediately. This hasty departure was prompted by an invitation that arrived, asking him to come and perform in France. His French tour began in October 1866, and his performances were witnessed by many French celebrities, including Alexandre Dumas and François Guizot (for a photograph of Aldridge from about this time, see figure 18.2). His success at Versailles was immense, and Aldridge

was asked to return to France soon and tour the provinces, which indeed he did, for the next four months. In April 1867, he went back home to England to prepare for another tour—initially of Poland.

This was by no means unplanned, as some have implied. Aldridge had made some arrangements with Trapszo a year earlier, and the performances in Poland in 1867 were very convenient for him, for he was hoping to get permission to perform in St. Petersburg after concluding the performances with Trapszo. He was also planning to go to the United States, and arrangements were being made with a New York theater agency. This may have been one of the reasons why throughout his last stay in Poland he seemed irritated and restless, complaining about everything. His trip to Poland indicates that he indeed wanted to fulfill his obligation to Trapszo.

Several theatrical announcements and playbills signed by Deputy-Governor Tolochanov and now kept in the Radom Archives, approximately seventy miles southeast of Warsaw, indicate that Aldridge arrived in Poland during the week of June 20–26. The first performance (*Othello*) appears to have taken place on June 27, and on the following day *Merchant of Venice* was performed. According to Aldridge's personal diary, excerpts from which were published by Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock in their 1958 biography of the actor, he did not give the third performance until July 6, when the company repeated *Merchant of Venice* and also acted *The Padlock* (presented in Polish under the title of *Pustoty Hiszpańskie, czyli Murzyn Sluga*).[26] On July 7, *Merchant of Venice* and *The Padlock* were repeated together with a Polish play, *Stara Romantyczka*, acted in the interval between them. It is difficult to determine why there was a gap of several days between the performances. A possible explanation is that Aldridge arrived later than the dates given on the playbills indicate, the playbills having been prepared earlier, but why then were the dates on the bills not changed? There were no Polish newspapers printed in Radom at that time, which could have confirmed the dates of these performances, nor can any specific dates be found in other newspapers in the Russian-ruled part of Poland. We do know that, while he was in Radom, Aldridge met with the headmaster and the secretary of the local post office, Józef Koźmiński and Karol Piotrowski, and attended a concert given by Antoni Katski, a famous Polish pianist and composer who spent most of his life abroad (in Spain, Portugal, Austria, Germany, St. Petersburg, and London) and finally settled permanently in the United States. During this period he also met with Gustav Lazzarini, professor of music and singing at the Women's Gymnasium in Radom.

Having left Radom on July 12, Trapszo's company went to Piotrków, where they remained until August 21. Aldridge gave several performances with Trapszo there between July 17 and 25, although the lack of playbills and newspaper announcements makes it impossible to establish the repertoire. On July 27, Aldridge was already in Łowicz, which is indicated by a letter written by him to an unknown addressee, while on July 30, the German newspaper of Łódź, *Lodzer Zeitung*, carried the following announcement:

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Figure 18.2 Photograph of Ira Aldridge by Legé and Bergeron, Paris, ca. 1866–67 (by permission of the Theater Museum, Cologne).

> A famous European tragedian, Chevalier Ira Aldridge—a Negro, the son of the King of a powerful African tribe, born on the banks of the Senegal. An artist of the courts of: His Royal Highness the Russian Emperor, Her Royal Highness the Queen of England, His Royal Highness the Emperor of Austria. Awarded many orders of foreign royal courts, of whom all foreign newspapers say that he was the only actor to portray accurately the difficult role of *Othello, The Moor of Venice* and other masterpieces of the great Shakespeare, for which he received from His Royal Highness the King of Prussia and His Royal Highness the Emperor of Austria medals that in ancient Germany were given only to the greatest talents, intends to let himself be known in our city, being en route from Paris to St. Petersburg. A. Hentschel.

According to another announcement in *Lodzer Zeitung*, the first of the three scheduled performances by Aldridge in Łódź was to take place on August 6. For several days Aldridge rehearsed with the local German actors who formed a newly combined troupe. But the opening performance could not take place, due to Aldridge's sudden indisposition, so it was rescheduled for August 8. However, on August 7 at 5 p.m., the actor died in the house of Michał Kunkiel, near the theater that belonged to August Hentschel. Despite great efforts by skillful doctors, it was not possible to save his life. The official death certificate reads as follows:

> No. 309. Łódź.
> In Łódź on the eighth of August in the year eighteen hundred and sixty-seven at ten o'clock in the morning, there came August Hentschel, a thirty-three-year-old hotel owner, and August Michel, forty-nine-year-old sexton, both of Łódź, to report that Ira Fryderyk [*sic*] Aldridge, a dramatic artist temporally living in Łódź, had died at five o'clock on the previous day. He was born in New York and at the time of his death was fifty-nine years old. His late parents were Daniel and Lurona [*sic*]Aldridge. He left a wife, Amanda, maiden name Brandt, and four children. After the death of Ira Fryderyk [*sic*] Aldridge had been personally verified and the certificate made out, it was read and signed by the Priest of the Parish [signature illegible], August Hentschel, and August Michel.[27]

The exact cause of the actor's death is unknown. Several sources spoke of the bursting of a tumor on the actor's breast, while others said it was a tumor on his lungs. It could have been pneumonia or some other lung disease, but most sources positively deny the sensational rumors of wounds allegedly inflicted on the actor as a result of a fight with a restaurant waiter.

The commotion stirred by the tragic news was tremendous. Some newspapers waited several days before printing their obituaries, trying to obtain a confirmation from more sources. Finally, articles appeared in almost all newspapers of renown in Poland, giving once more a short biographical sketch and providing details of the actor's death and funeral. The burial ceremonies, which took place on August 9 at the Evangelical Cemetery,[28] were attended by large crowds and displayed a splendor unprecedented in the city's history.[29]

The interest taken by the Polish press in Aldridge throughout his visits to Poland (1853–67) is hardly surprising. The actor's performances in various cities in all sections of partitioned Poland had an important influence on Polish theater and Polish cultural traditions. We may speak of the inspiration they provided for Polish actors, the direct impact they had on the staging of Shakespeare's plays in Poland, and the power of their political overtones. These performances coincided with a significant increase in popular interest in Shakespeare's drama. Even though Shakespeare had been introduced in Poland as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century, his Polish reception until the middle of the nineteenth century was limited, while the staging of Shakespeare's plays in Polish was infrequent and consisted almost exclusively of re-adaptations of French and German pseudoclassical versions that were "bowdlerized" in various ways. The sheer number of performances given by Aldridge speaks for itself, for it exceeds the number of all Polish productions of *Othello*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Macbeth*, and *King Richard III* until 1853; indeed, in many cities they had never been performed at all prior to Aldridge's arrival.

The impact of Aldridge's performances on the method of staging Shakespeare in Poland is indicated by the traces they left. It is the role of Othello that made Aldridge famous on the European stage, his interpretation being—according to many critics—one of the best in theater history. It was fully appreciated by Bolesław Leszczyński, a beginner in the acting profession at the time of Aldridge's arrival in Lublin in 1866, when the two first met (Leszczyński playing Cassio while Aldridge played Othello). When Leszczyński started acting the role of Othello several years later, it soon became one of his favorite roles and numerous reviews indicate that he modeled it entirely after Aldridge. Ryszard Górski, the author of Leszczyński's biography, says:

> As can be gathered from various reviews, he [Leszczyński] stressed the violence of the reactions and passions of the main character; showed with tremendous power his pain, anger, and frenzy; and portrayed with perception the murder scene. In Leszczyński's interpretation, Othello was a primitive nature, not to say "a black savage." He took from Aldridge the very expressive presentation of Othello's emotions, as well as certain details and elements of his style of acting and makeup, which showed very strongly in his early attempts in that role. On the other hand, it is impossible to reduce Leszczyński's impersonation to a mere imitation, for it included new elements from the very beginning. These elements were later developed.[30]

Another theater historian, Mieczysław Rulikowski, adds that "Leszczyński kept acting Othello in an unchanged style, i.e., modeled strictly after Aldridge."[31] Except for the role of Lear, in which, according to Wincenty Rapacki, another famous actor of that period, Leszczyński slightly imitated Ernsto Rossi, this was the only imitation in his entire career. Rulikowski stresses that other elements in the Polish productions of *Othello* until the end of the nineteenth century were also

modeled after Aldridge. "Desdemona's bed was usually placed at the back of the stage, against the background scenery, on a slight elevation. Othello-Leszczyński, having mounted that elevation, drew the curtain with one violent move and from then on only his voice could be heard: powerful, sound, and full of passions—a voice of a man who controls his acts no more."[32]

Finally, we must note the political significance of Aldridge's performances, which is clearly indicated by the circumstances attending the actor's visits to various Polish cities. Some of these—for example, the speculations concerning the actor's death—have already been discussed. Among others, an important matter is the introduction of Isaac Bickerstaffe's *The Padlock*, a play that—through Aldridge's performance of Mungo—carried an important political message with which Poles, particularly in the era of partitions, could easily identify. A similar significance must be attributed to several presentations of *Macbeth*, even though they took place only on German stages. Aldridge could not perform *Macbeth* either in Warsaw or in any other city under Russian rule because of the ban on that play, a circumstance that inspired David Pownall, a contemporary English playwright, to construct a play based on Aldridge's stay in the Russian section of Poland.[33] Yet, whether it was *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Merchant of Venice*, *King Richard III*, or *The Padlock*, the essential thing was that these were high quality productions presented by an outstanding Negro actor in a country where the theater has performed a very important role in preserving national culture. It is that contribution of Ira Frederick Aldridge, the African Roscius, that won him a permanent place in the history of the Polish theater.

Notes

1. Acts of the Head of Police of the City of Łódź, Registrar's Office, Łódź, no. 309/23/1867.
2. *Kurier Warszawski*, August 17, 1867.
3. C. H. Stephenson, "'Titus Andronicus': Ira Aldridge," *Notes and Queries*, 4th series, no. 10 (November 9, 1872): 373. Stephenson was also quoted in *Kurier Warszawski*, August 17, 1867.
4. Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (London: Rockliff, 1958), 18.
5. Among these omissions are the date and place of birth of both Ira and his older brother, Joshua; Joshua's mysterious death by murder; the origin of the name Aldridge; and several other confusing biographical "facts."
6. Ludwig Sittenfeld, *Geschichte des Breslauer Theaters von 1841 bis 1900* (Breslau: Preuss & Jünger, 1909), 56.
7. See *Neue Oder-Zeitung*, February 4, 1853; and *Sunday Times* (London), February 13, 1853. Aldridge's performances were covered with equal enthusiasm in February issues of the *Breslauer Zeitung*, but the *Schlesische Zeitung* expressed dissatisfaction with Aldridge's British acting style.
8. *Czas*, November 8, 1854, 3; *Theater-Vereins-Zeitung*, January 14, 1854, 22–23.
9. *Czas*, November 9, 1854, 3.
10. *Czas*, November 11, 1854, 3.
11. Karol Estreicher, *Teatra w Polsce* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1953), 2:512.
12. *Czas*, January 6, 1858.

13. Leipzig's *Allgemeine Theater-Chronik*, January 23, 1858, also carried a lengthy and very positive review of Aldridge's performance of Othello in Cracow.
14. See *Krakauer Zeitung*, January 8 and 14, 1858.
15. Hans Knudsen, *Die Hauptepochen der Geschichte des deutschen Theaters in Posen* (Posen: Ostdeutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1912), 11.
16. *Era*, May 26, 1861, 6.
17. *Era*, June 9, 1861, 12.
18. Mieczysław Rulikowski, "Ira Aldridge w Polsce," unpublished paper in the collection of the Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, mss. 1067, 1946, 4.
19. *Warschauer Zeitung*, May 12 [24], 1862.
20. Rulikowski, "Ira Aldridge w Polsce," 5.
21. *Kurier Lubelski*, July 23, 1866, 300.
22. *Kurier Lubelski*, August 18, 1866, 318.
23. *Kurier Lubelski*, August 22, 1866, 321–22.
24. *Kurier Lubelski*, August 13 [25], 1866, 325–26.
25. Ibid.
26. Marshall and Stock, *Ira Aldridge*, 327.
27. From the collection in the Łódź Archives.
28. His grave remains there up to the present day. In 1890, Aldridge's daughter, the famous singer Luranah, came to Łódź to participate in a concert, the proceeds of which were to be spent on erecting a monument over her father's grave. However, she demanded such high pay for her participation in the concert that no money was actually left for the monument. A small tombstone was later erected on Aldridge's grave, thanks to Polish and German actors who donated the proceeds from one of their benefit performances.
29. *Kurier Warszawski*, August 17, 1867, 1146.
30. Ryszard Górski, *Boleslaw Leszczyński* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1958), 26–27.
31. Rulikowski, "Ira Aldridge w Polsce," 12–13.
32. Ibid., 14.
33. D. Pownall, *The Black Star*, an unpublished play in two acts performed in England in 1987. The action takes place in a small town in Eastern Poland called "Mubelski" (probably a reference to Lublin), where Aldridge arrives with his wife. He is banned by the authorities from performing *Macbeth*, but he yields to the request of the Poles and mixes the lines of *Macbeth* with those of *Othello*. The performance turns into a political demonstration, and Aldridge's Polish host, Karail, a patriot and political activist, is killed by the secret police, while the Negro actor is asked to leave town.

Notes on Contributors

Cyril Bruyn Andrews was a friend of Aldridge's daughter, Amanda Ira Aldridge, who gave him access to family letters when he expressed a desire to write a biography of her father. That biography, originally entitled "Black Ebony" and later called "Victorian Ebony: The Story of Ira Aldridge (Known as The African Roscius)," was never published, but a copy of the typescript can be found in the Ira Aldridge collection at the McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University Library, Evanston, IL. Most of the letters Andrews quotes in his essay were written in the last years of Aldridge's life, when he was touring extensively in Eastern Europe, Russia, and France.

Nikola Batušić, professor emeritus of the history of theater at the Academy of Dramatic Art in Zagreb and a full member of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, has written many books about the history of Croatian theater.

Philip A. Bell, one of Aldridge's schoolmates at the African Free School, was a journalist and militant abolitionist who moved to California in 1849. In 1865 he founded in San Francisco a weekly newspaper for blacks, the *Elevator,* which was the official organ of the executive committee of the State Convention of Colored Citizens.

Keith Byerman, professor of English and women's studies at Indiana State University, Terre Haute, is the author of books on W.E.B. Du Bois, Alice Walker, John Edgar Wideman, and African American fiction, including the recently published *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Narrative* (2005). An associate editor of *African American Review,* he has received grants to promote research collaboration between Japanese and American scholars in African American Studies.

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JOOST GROENEBOER, a dramaturge, journalist, and critic of theater, dance, and film, has mounted exhibitions on the history of theatrical photography (Theater Instituut Nederland) and on the history of social dance (Amsterdam Historisch Museum) and has contributed to standard works on the history of Dutch theater and music: for example, *Een Nederlandse theatergeschiedenis* and *Een Nederlandse muziekgeschiedenis*. Currently project leader at the Dutch National Institute of Amateur Dance (Landelijk Centrum voor Amateurdans; LCA), he also serves as editor in chief of a magazine on international folkloric dance.

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HERBERT MARSHALL, coauthor with Mildred Stock of *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (1958), had a long career as a theater director and filmmaker. From 1966 to 1979, he taught at and directed the Center for Soviet and East European Studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

JAMES J. NAPIER is professor emeritus of humanities at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, Newark.

KRZYSZTOF SAWALA, who teaches at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland, wrote his doctoral dissertation on “Ira Aldridge—the Black Tragedian: A Review of the Actor’s Biography and Polish Performances 1853–1867.”

Gunner Sjögren, a scholar in Lund, Sweden, has done pioneering research on Ira Aldridge's second wife, Amanda Paulina Brandt.

James McCune Smith, a medical doctor and radical abolitionist, was one of Aldridge's friends from childhood. They had attended African Free School No. 2 in New York City at the same time but were not in the same class. Aldridge was a few years older than his schoolmate so he graduated earlier. They met again in March 1833 when Aldridge was performing in Glasgow and McCune Smith was studying medicine at the University of Glasgow.

Hazel Waters, a coeditor of *Race & Class*, wrote her doctoral dissertation on "How Oroonoko Became Jim Crow: The Black Presence on the English Stage from the late Eighteenth to the Mid-Nineteenth Century." This study has recently been published by Cambridge University Press under the title *Racism on the Victorian Stage: Representation of Slavery and the Black Character* (2007).

Stanley B. Winters is distinguished professor emeritus of history at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, Newark. He was awarded a medal by the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences for his publications and for his service to the profession of history.

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Ira Aldridge: The African Roscius
Edited by Bernth Lindfors

Ira Aldridge, a black New Yorker, was one of the greatest actors in nineteenth-century Europe. He performed there for forty-three years, first touring throughout the British Isles and later on the Continent of Europe, where he won more awards, honors, and official decorations than any of his professional peers. Billed as the "African Roscius," he developed a repertoire that initially consisted of Shakespeare's *Othello*, melodramas about slavery, and farces that drew upon his ability to sing and dance, but in mid-career he started experimenting with a variety of white roles. By the time he began touring the Continent he was principally a Shakespearean actor, playing such classic characters as Shylock, Macbeth, Richard III, and King Lear, as well as Othello and Aaron the Moor (in *Titus Andronicus*). He traveled widely, performing in theaters large and small in more than two dozen countries, many of them in Eastern Europe. His frequent public appearances made him the most visible black man in the world in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Yet today he tends to be a forgotten figure, seldom mentioned in histories of British and European theater. Since he was on the road for his entire career, he never stayed long enough in one spot to make a lasting reputation for himself in any of the major theaters of a capital city. As a luminary, he was more a comet than a fixed star, and as a consequence he shines less brightly now, lost amidst more familiar exemplars of theatrical brilliance.

One purpose of this collection of essays on his life and career is to restore some luster to his name by reminding people of what he managed to achieve, against all odds, in his day. The early essays bring back into circulation what was known about him when he was alive. The later pieces reveal how he was received by audiences who saw him perform in different parts of the world. The collection also includes analytical studies, examining how Aldridge enacted some of his most famous roles, and there is surprising new information on aspects of his private life. Taken together, these diverse approaches to Ira Aldridge offer us a fuller understanding and heightened appreciation of a remarkable man who had both an exceptionally interesting life and a spectacular career.

Bernth Lindfors, professor emeritus of English and African literatures at The University of Texas at Austin, is the author of several books on African literatures and the editor of *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business* (1999).

Praise for *Ira Aldridge: The African Roscius*

"Simply remarkable. An extraordinary conjunction of contemporary accounts and recent reflections that brings Aldridge alive for his time and ours."

—James Gibbs, University of the West
of England, Bristol

"This is a truly comprehensive coverage of the life and career of Ira Aldridge, a true pioneer who blazed a trail for African American artists to seek in Europe the fame and acceptance that eluded them in their own country. It deserves to be widely read, especially by anyone interested in African American transatlantic migrations and the history of race relations in Europe."

—Oyekan Owomoyela,
Ryan Professor of African Literature,
University of Nebraska

"I will value this book most for its inclusion of three very scarce nineteenth-century memoirs of Aldridge, and for its newly translated versions of twentieth century critical articles. Scholars of mid-nineteenth-century British and European social history will also value this collection, for the story of Aldridge's acceptance—and the limitations on that acceptance—in England and Europe, is very revealing."

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