

Another Discussion/Keith and Stephanie Continued...

Dear Keith,

I now have multiple incomplete essays started to you that I will attempt to haphazardly amalgamate here for the sake of not sitting on my words and thoughts any longer.

I held off on reading your responses until I'd finished my latest pass through act ii. It was my incentive to do my work; but having finally spent time with your words, I'm not sure that it's serving either of us for me to keep at it the way I have been. I've been waffling, hoping for some divine inspiration to guide my process. Hasn't happened yet.

In light of your letter, many of my responses to the text feel...irrelevant at best and incompatible to the story we aim toward, at worst.

No, nothing is irrelevant...though it is useful to recognize that you are seeing things, as we all very well may be, through a distorted lens. At the end of the day, should you find yourself tasked with playing the role, you will be doing far more acting, that is to say finding an authentic, playable humanity, than intellectualizing. Much of what you currently intellectualize about won't matter...

I don't know, Keith. I've been indoctrinated so thoroughly in the "text is gospel and I must justify it at all cost" school of thought that I admit, I'm not quite sure where to start outside of these pointed inquiries.

Yup. They lied to you. It's okay...they lie to everybody and most often don't even know they're lying. It's part in parcel with implicit bias, and you are raised not to know that you have any. It's insidious.

I "believe" that the received text *is* what Shakespeare wrote and intended, until I find reason to dismiss it. Problem that we run into is that there's actually reason to dismiss much of it because most of this play (and others) is thoroughly ass-backwards.

Perhaps it is "ass-backwards" in many respects. I tend to think it is not so much that as written with very different faculties looking at a very different world through a very different lens, and then handed to a very different audience that accepted all manner of very different dramatic and theatrical conventions and practices. But even if all that is true, I still have no assurance whatever that this [Arden Third Series edition](#) text that we are reading, having begun with some 16th century playwright and wound its way through copiers, editors, printers, revisionists, scholars, is anything but something substantially removed from what we would read if his non-extant papers suddenly appeared to us. And who cares? It's public domain. No one can indict you in any way that should matter to you at all for whatever torture you choose to inflict upon it. The play is now yours to interpret, and thinking that you are somehow going to find some more salient truth by adhering to pedantic rules regarding text will avail you nothing but what has been done and seen endlessly already.

So when you go about your work, where do you draw the line of what to keep and what to toss? (Enter the mission of this project?)

It should be most Shakespeare projects that have something other than recycling as their goal...

I've been telling myself that at least, should I find the answers provided by the text to be insufficient, I've found an entry point into the play to begin an interrogation. But I wonder if by being intrinsically tied to the received text, as it were, I'm still not thinking... expansively enough, about the liberties we might take to make a world inhabited by people like you or I.

That sounds right...

Forgive me for asking this - you've probably given me an answer many times, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around it: How does a man as sociopathic, pathetic as the Iago that you envision (and surely does exist in the world) shake someone as confident and honorable as your Othello?

Confident and honorable does NOT mean unbroken. Why isn't he allowed to be emotionally and psychologically damaged (read compromised) when we meet him. If I had been fighting wars since I was 7 years old, I would be. Neither does Iago's sociopathy need to appear in constant and obvious ways. Most sociopaths do not manifest their pathology outwardly. But when they kill a person and show no remorse, or even acquiesce to the blame, you know it's there. Why can't both Iago and Othello be dealing with deep, unhealed wounds that, when triggered, can manifest in cataclysmic consequences?

I had the immediate desire to apologize for my readiness to believe Othello contains self-loathing to justify Shakespeare's story. But being apologetic to you is probably less helpful than asking myself *why*? I want to believe that the only reason I could so easily explain a magnificent person's downfall away from the strengths of his character with an inherent sense of inferiority is because I have ready access to my own wellspring of self-loathing. It sits pretty close to the surface of my psyche.

So I've been sitting with that... but not to any satisfaction. I still struggled to feel my way through how I might tell a story about myself tearing apart my life out of an inner turmoil rooted in self-loathing...because in reality, the disdain I hold for myself is in the balance with a great degree of self-love and hard-cultivated forgiveness and generosity, too.

Ah! So, if Othello is at all like you, he too is allowed to have self-love that keeps his self-loathing in balance. I'm not sure that Shakespeare could have imagined such a thing as it relates to the dark-skinned man, whom he must have viewed through the Elizabethan lens as obviously inferior to white humanity, if as humanity at all, in so many ways making his white counterparts the objects of his private and public desires... Then again, I sell the Poet short. I'm sure he is concerned with more here, but it was too long ago and I have no fuckin' idea what it is. My only job is to interpret through MY lens.

So no matter how I go about it, yep, Shakespeare's version of the story can't be justified. I'm sitting at the intersection of it and me and I'm lost.

You are not remotely lost. You're being melodramatic rather, which is probably appropriate. It is standing and feeling and speaking and listening, behaving and responding to behavior that will compel you through the exploration and into any fully realized manifestation of the character. The work we're doing is meant to give you nothing but time

to wrangle with this. And there will come a point where it will snatch your tools to intellectualize away from you. In that moment you will simply have to DO something. And then you'll have to explain why you did it. Where did it come from? And sometimes you might not know, but your colleagues will be watching and the lot of you will decide if it is what we see human beings do or not. And if it's not, we'll begin to examine that. You'll be working. Eventually, what we find to DO will make more sense than anything that's there written. You're anything but lost.

[Which leads me back to the heart of this whole letter, I guess. How exactly does this tragedy come to pass?](#)

How did January 6th, 2020 come to pass? How did the Holocaust come to pass? The ultimately self-serving efforts of masses of very fragile and frightened animals working sometimes in tandem, other times at cross-purposes, most often not knowing when they were doing either, with limited spiritual height and endless emotional depth... It seems to me that's pretty much how everything comes to pass. I know it has to be somewhat more nuanced than that, Steph, but jeez, you really don't need to look far to see the human specimen in its natural state, behaving in purely reactionary ways to its environment with intended ends not much different than those of a fly on dog shit. It wants what it wants for reasons that, even to it, are wholly inexplicable. I don't speak as one who is outside the terrarium looking in. I just really don't understand why we keep expecting to find some other, somehow justifiable reason for the perpetual horrors of the species that have occurred and re-occur since time could be recorded. It's what we are.

[I was going to attach my act ii thoughts - and might still as I work forward, we'll see - but this request for advice / a better guiding principle takes precedence.](#)

The guiding principle, if there is one, Steph, is to dive deep into the embarrassing depth of your humanity. I think, perhaps, what you are afraid you'll find there is what fuels your self-loathing, so, better to keep it buried. *The work with movement and energy that Jessica Burr does with her company at Blessed Unrest will help us with this, I think.* Meanwhile, I suspect Desdemona, while not culpable in **all** that occurs, is not blameless either. From an acting standpoint, all you really need to do is figure out what makes **her** humanity. It really isn't all that different from yours.

Have you read [Toni Morrison's Desdemona](#)¹? You should. That might open some pathways of thought for you. In it, Morrison, is musing on how the characters of Shakespeare's play are human.

Another *Othello* you might also watch is the [1989 RSC version directed for television by Trevor Nunn and starring Willard White](#). He does some interesting things with regard to how he considers all the new data that Iago is feeding him and how his madness overtakes him. Still not great. The Desdemona is nothing special. Ian McKellen, the purported master, mumbles and twirls his mustache a lot, but Zoe Wanamaker is really interesting as Emilia...as interesting as I've seen her, so that might not be saying much. The point is, there is a lot of recycling, but also some refreshing touches of humanity. *I should add some abject oddity too...like the American Civil War motif with Othello being a Union general... Just shoot me...*

¹ Desdemona, Toni Morrison, Oberon Modern Plays, 2012