

## Transcript of “The Goodness of the Night: Editing *Othello*”

By Dr. Patricia Akhimie (Director, Folger Institute)

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**PATRICIA AKHIMIE:** Tonight, I want to start by saying a few thank you’s. I want to thank Mike Witmore for a fantastic introduction and for being a great boss, too. I want to thank Owen Williams, Ashley Buchanan, and the whole Folger Institute team for making this possible, with a special thanks to Leah Thomas, who went above and beyond to organize this event. I also want to say thank you to the entire Folger staff for welcoming me in this last year. I joined the team at the Folger a little less than a year ago, and in that time, I’ve learned how committed this staff is in every department, in every corner of this building, to the Folger’s mission and to the communities it serves. And I’m really proud to be a part of this incredible group.

**AKHIMIE:** So, three quick statements. First, I want to recognize Fred Wilson, the visionary artist who created this image that you see behind me on my title slide, which is called *Speak of Me as I Am*, which is a reference to *Othello*. And Fred Wilson also created an incredible installation in our Folger gallery downstairs, which I hope you’ll all get a chance to see. Second, I want to note that I conducted much of the research that I’ll be sharing here tonight here at the Folger Shakespeare Library in our incomparable collection. I want to thank the librarians at the Folger, past and present, for being generally awesome and also for offering the kind of support that I can only describe as also incomparable.

**AKHIMIE:** And lastly, a brief content notice. There are a few images in this presentation of White actors in blackface, and these could be jarring or disturbing, especially for those unfamiliar with the prevalence of this practice in the performance history of *Othello*. I display these images briefly and only in the context of a discussion of the contrasting performance choices of 19th through 20th century stagings.

**AKHIMIE:** So, I’m sharing new work and new thinking about the project that I’m in the midst of, a scholarly addition of Shakespeare’s *Othello* for the Arden Shakespeare Fourth Series. I’m preparing a new version of the play based on the earliest versions but with modernized spelling and punctuation and with an introduction and explanatory notes. This is not a new invention. There have been many editions of Shakespeare’s collected works and of individual plays. My first edition was given to me as a high school student: a Folger edition of *Romeo and Juliet* edited by our own Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine. And I would hazard to guess that many of you have had a similar experience. And of course, there have been many, many editions of *Othello*. Any edition that I create must necessarily be in conversation with any and all of its predecessors and with yet-to-be-created editions that will certainly follow.

**AKHIMIE:** But this is still really new for me. As someone trained in early modern race studies, I spent the first part of my career working under the assumption that early modern race studies and textual editing were two different scholarly worlds inhabited by two different kinds of scholars. But now that I find myself in a period of intense learning, I find

that I'm becoming comfortable with the heady combination of power and uncertainty that I now associate with making editorial decisions. Now, some of these are matters of great delicacy but debatable import, such as comma placement.

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** And how many em dashes is too many em dashes.

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** It's real. Other decisions --

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** Other decisions weigh more heavily, however, and I'll discuss that today.

**AKHIMIE:** The tragedy of *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, exists in several early versions, including the 1622 quarto, a chapbook-sized version of this one, single play, and the First Folio of 1623, in which *Othello* is printed alongside 35 other plays. The Folio version of *Othello* includes 160 lines that do not appear in the quarto version, and the wording of the two versions differs substantially in over 1,000 instances. The edition that I'm preparing reconstructs what would have been an early performance text dating to the period 1604 to 1612, after we know the play was written and during the period it would've been performed on stage, but before it appeared in print.

**AKHIMIE:** There are two levels of commentary: a streamlined set of glosses geared toward student readers, and a more in-depth commentary geared toward researchers and theater practitioners, all available in both print and digital formats in a bookstore near you, sometime soon.

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** My goal is to provide readers not with an impenetrable, finished product, adorned with my own opinions about the play, but to make the play fully available to readers' own interpretative work and to make room for a more diverse array of readers, including and especially those who identify as racially other than a perceived dominant group. As my edition will make clear, I hope, the play argues, at once, that race is nothing more than a social construct, a set of words and concepts enlivened by pre-existing enmity between individuals or groups, and that race is real; that perceived difference is an inescapable determinant of fate.

**AKHIMIE:** I foreground this contradictory reality, familiar to minoritized subjects as a reality but not always understood to be as a problem for Shakespeare and his audience, both in his day and in the present. This edition will provide extensive background whenever the text utilizes potentially racializing language. The rationale for this aim is twofold: first, without flagging and fully contextualizing such moments, the text has the potential to be damaging and/or to perpetuate damaging stereotypes, and second, for the many readers turning to this text as a key document in the history of race and racism, the commentary will signal

areas in need to further study. And a comparison between the commentary on Act one, scene one, line 65, “What a full fortune does the thick lips owe in this,” and other recent editions will demonstrate why such an approach is needed.

**AKHIMIE:** This is the moment when Roderigo laments the fact that with Othello’s marriage to Desdemona, a senator’s daughter, a non-Venetian interloper has managed a coup: raising his social standing, influence, and perhaps his fortune, by winning the hand of a highly desirable woman. His comment is bitter and sarcastic. He employs the phrase “thick lips” as a derogatory description for Othello, who is identified in the play as a Moor and described as having dark skin.

**AKHIMIE:** Here’s the commentary note from one of the most recent, major editions originally published in 1984 and revised and reprinted in 2018. “This is the first piece of evidence that Othello is conceived as being Negroid rather than Arab.” This is exemplary of commentary on this line, which has tended to focus on what was a fervent debate in Shakespeare studies and in classical theater, over the color of Othello’s skin. The character had long been played by White actors in blackface until quite recently in the late 20th century, and it would now be rare and newsworthy to find a production in which Othello was not cast with a Black actor.

**AKHIMIE:** But before this turn in casting practices, actors and directors had to decide how dark or light the blackface make-up would be. Theatre practitioners and scholars both debated the significance of the term “Moor” in the play and whether Othello was intended to have come from North Africa or West Africa or elsewhere, and how to signal these origins with color and costuming. But for students and for researchers now, and this is my working draft of the commentary note, which is too long.

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** And I am working on that.

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** “It seems important to signal, first and foremost, that this phrase, which appears in both the quarto and the Folio, and which editors have noted seems to be a Shakespearean coinage, at least in this specific noun form, is intended as a derogatory and racist epithet, and that the adjectival form ‘thick-lipped’ is used as such in other contemporaneous texts. And it is an epithet informed not only by reports about the sematic features of people from particular regions of the world, but also by a wide-ranging discourse about the relationship between outward physical features and inward characteristics, morals, and capabilities.” My aim here is to open up the text to new avenues for research by asking more questions and to prompt more questions about, for example, terms like “thick lips.”

**AKHIMIE:** And more broadly, about the play’s handling of Othello’s body or Desdemona’s, and their significance for early modern audiences and for contemporary ones.

**AKHIMIE:** Today, I'll focus on another moment in Act one, and it's one that I've been working through. This is the moment in Act one, scene two when, after having eloped with Desdemona, Othello stands with his duplicitous ensign Iago, and his lieutenant Cassio, recently promoted instead of Iago, outside the Sagittary. They are approached by an angry group led by Roderigo, secretly in league with Iago, and Brabantio, Desdemona's father, who is irate. In Oscar Zarate's intriguing 1983 graphic novel adaptation, the moment plays out over a carefully constructed layout of four tiers, each the full width of a page, framed by the images and the bared teeth and red eyes of Brabantio's leashed hound at the top and his own angry face at the bottom, as his mob of angry men hunt for Othello in the dark, in the glow of their torchlight.

**AKHIMIE:** At this moment, violence is imminent, and accusations fly. And as readers and audiences, we hold our breath waiting for the first blow. But this moment in the text, or rather the texts, of *Othello* is riddled with omissions. Brabantio's group is armed with some kind of weapon, probably swords, but the text doesn't say. Othello, Iago, and Cassio may be armed, too, but the text doesn't say that either. We don't know how many people are on stage and involved in this about-to-be brawl. Brabantio and Roderigo arrive with unnamed Others in the quarto with Officers in the Folio, though Officers representing what civic or military authority, we don't know for sure. And they are either carrying torches, or they are accompanied by additional stagehands carrying torches.

**AKHIMIE:** Cassio, arriving earlier, has also entered with torches in the Folio; lights, officers, and torches in the quarto, all also unidentified. We know the setting is night because Brabantio's group arrives with lights in the quarto or torches in the Folio, though again, it's not clear whether these are stage properties carried by named characters or merely stage lighting carried by stagehands. And we are somewhere in Venice, outside or inside or on the threshold of an inn called The Sagittary. At least we think it's an inn. This isn't explained either, and some have suggested the location is a military facility or even a ship. In a moment, Othello will take control of this scene with his commanding line, which has made many a lead actor famous: "Put up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them."

**AKHIMIE:** And this suggests that someone or everyone has drawn their weapons, but we don't know who or when, or who has drawn first, or who specifically they have threatened with that drawn weapon. Added to this already shaky ground is the lack of clear information about what exactly has happened, and why and how, leading up to this point. Brabantio will hurl accusations about Othello having used witchcraft or drugs to violate Desdemona and voice his ugly theories about the undesirability of Othello's "sooty bosom" and about the impaired will cognitive ability of women, a failing linked with Desdemona's desirability and fairness. In Act one, scene one, Iago and Roderigo have shared their lurid fantasies about the elopement.

**AKHIMIE:** And in Act one, scene three, Othello will weave his own charming narrative before Desdemona speaks for herself. In this case of he said/he said, he said/he said, he said, and she said --

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** -- uncertainties abound. And these uncertainties have long posed problems for editors of the play. In *Shakespeare and the Rise of the Editor*, Sonia Massai tells the story of how Ernst Honigmann, my immediate predecessor, as editor of *Othello* for the Arden series three, who, as a textual scholar, had long been a proponent of bold editorial interventions. But when he took on the role of editor himself and was faced with the endless variants of quarto and folio *Othello*, called those impossible choices an editorial witching brew. And with this feeling, I can relate, and not simply because I, too, am editing *Othello*.

**AKHIMIE:** With regard to meticulous work on shifting sands, and the fundamental indeterminacy of the object, textual editing and early modern race studies have a great deal in common. Uncertainty in the meanings of terms, as well as bodily signifiers is one of the most reliable features of race thinking in the pre-modern era or any other and aids in its persistence. It is the uncertainties in this scene that enable race thinking because it relies on audiences to co-create race. Here, audiences are made to intuit the added danger of the nighttime setting, the frightful import of the weapons and the torches, the incensed kinsman, and the nameless officers of the law, the blackness of the body they seek, and the vulnerability of that flesh.

**AKHIMIE:** The title of this talk comes from Othello's greeting to the first group of Venetians who seek him out in the dark on his wedding night. "The goodness of the night upon you, friends." It's a phrase that, for me, evokes the dreadful elegance of the scene, which is the beginning of Othello's inevitable tragic end, and which he seems almost to welcome here. If we think of this as a scene of a modern crime or an almost crime of the kind we have all seen and all too frequently in the news, in which Black bodies are subject to the violent anger of citizens or officers, the significance of these omissions is immediately clear. We notice how little information is available about the most crucial aspects in determining fault, guilt or innocence, or understanding the rationale for violence.

**AKHIMIE:** In the absence of a complete account of what happened or, to be more accurate, is happening, since this scene plays out again and again on stage and page and in our contemporary moment as well. Without the who, where, and what of the encounter, violence against Black bodies is redoubled. Hypervisibility and vulnerability is underscored. Examining the scene through the lens of recent attention to racial inequity in the use of lethal force by law enforcement, or the long history of anti-Black racist violence, may lead us as modern readers to pay closer attention to the work that editorial emendation, omission does in producing *Othello* as suspect. To me, this moment in Act one, scene two is a crucial one for readers invested in understanding the literary history of race and racism, though it's one that has received little attention and criticism, unless in editorial commentary.

**AKHIMIE:** In focusing on this scene then, I raise a textual problem, an editorial problem, a problem of editorial ethics or overreach and a question about the impact of editorial silences. At the same time, I offer a set of observations about the utility of scholarly editions. Who needs *Othello*, and what do they need it for? And how do we help? This matter is particularly urgent since editions are embedded in the historical and political moments of their production, even as they work to elucidate the historical matrix from which the work itself has emerged. Since editorial work is political work, and since the

audiences for scholarly editions continue to change in terms of their demographics and in terms of their particular needs and expectations.

**AKHIMIE:** In the case of Othello, there is little doubt that the play has resonance for modern audiences, has import for the study of race and racism, misogyny, and more, and has pervasive power as a cultural object both for good and ill. And thus, a new scholarly edition or editions can and should be made to meet the demands of the moment. As Ian Smith has said, “We are the Othello,” and the scholarly edition marks this moment of our communal interest in the work. Despite delivering us an Othello who embodies the valiant Moor praised by others in the play for his honesty, loyalty, bravery, and charismatic leadership, this moment in Act one, scene two depends upon the operations of a racist heuristic that renders Othello suspect, dangerous, and exposes him to assault and arrest and threatens him with prosecution and incarceration.

**AKHIMIE:** He nimbly sidesteps and escapes this noose, but in this tragedy, Othello’s triumphs in Act one merely heighten the tension, preparing us to watch his fall from grace. What interests me most here is that the choices of editors can assist in creating an enhancing Othello as both alluring as threatening, and what’s more, by privileging the perspective of White readers and audiences, imagining them as somehow similar to Shakespeare’s original audience for whom Othello may have seemed a definitive outsider, editors’ choices may enhance rather than critique the appeal of Othello’s ultimate subjugation. At the end of Act one, scene two, Brabantio will succeed in arresting Othello with force. “Subdue him at his peril,” he says as he commands his others or officers. Lead Othello to the senate, where he will be made to stand for a kind of impromptu trial.

**AKHIMIE:** Othello is, again, a key document in the history of race and racism. It is instructive and not necessarily in a positive sense. There are those who have argued that the play should be studied but no longer performed because of its damaging potential. The verbal and physical abuses of Othello, of his character and his body, are a spectacle that audiences may accidentally be encouraged to enjoy. Thus, editorial work is key in allowing layers of text and omission to do a more careful and constructive kind of performative work in creating space for alternative readings and well as for anti-racist ends.

**AKHIMIE:** In the chapter version of this talk, I dig deeper into the work of textual and editorial additions and omissions with a focus on several key aspects including the setting, the stage properties, the lights and torches, the weapons, the number of players on stage, the potent references to arrest, trial, and prison, which, together, signal a biblical allusion to the betrayal in the garden of John 18, and the stage directions or the lack thereof. And I can talk about any of those in the Q and A, but for now, I’m going to focus on the missing stage direction at the moment in Act one, scene two where violence is about to break out before Othello stops it cold.

**AKHIMIE:** Okay. I’m showing you images of the quarto and the Folio side by side, so we could do this together. These images are from Folger First Folio number 19, now on display in our gallery downstairs, and Folger copy number one of the 1622 quarto. This is a moment that lasts just a few seconds in performance. Iago asks Othello if he’s ready to leave for the senate to answer the duke’s call for his assistance with military matters. They believe an Ottoman attack on Cyprus is imminent. Just as Othello answers, “Have with you,” Cassio

sees and announces the arrival of another group. Iago confirms that it is Brabantio. Othello calls out to them to stop, but Roderigo and Brabantio are intent. Roderigo identifies Othello as “the Moor,” and Brabantio calls him “thief.”

**AKHIMIE:** Poised for a violent interaction, Iago seems to threaten Roderigo, who is in fact, his co-conspirator, and at this moment in both texts, Othello speaks, de-escalating the situation with his charismatic brand of forceful but fair authority and saying to whomever it is has drawn, “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.” Or in the quarto, “rust ‘em.” It’s a little folksier.

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** So, if we do a quick comparison of these two versions of the passages, a few things are apparent. One is that an error in the quarto’s speech prefix for “down with him, thief” turns “Brabantio” into the more sinister sounding “Grabantio.”

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** But more to the point is that there is only one printed stage direction, the entrance stage direction, which comes earlier in the quarto than in the Folio as Brabantio and Roderigo enter with those unnamed Others and their lights and weapons, or officers and torches in the Folio. In the quarto, the entrance precedes Iago’s question to Othello, “Will you go?” so that Othello’s response reads as sarcastic. “Ha! With who?” as in which group of nosy Venetians come to interrupt my wedding night should I accompany first? And there are no other stage directions.

**AKHIMIE:** But many would argue that this passage contains what has been called an implicit stage direction, indicating that one or more players should draw a weapon, most likely a sword. The implicit stage direction emerges from the dialogue. From Iago’s cryptic question, “You, Roderigo?” in the Folio or statement “You, Roderigo” in the quarto and his invitation, perhaps, to cross swords with Roderigo or someone else. “Come, sir, I am for you.” And also from Othello’s command, “Keep up your bright swords,” which suggests that at least two swords or possibly more have been drawn. Editors have sought to formalize this implicit stage direction by adding it to the text, often set off in the margins or enclosed in square brackets to indicate that the stage direction is not drawn from the base text of the Folio or the quarto.

**AKHIMIE:** This tradition begins with the dramatist Nicholas Rowe, his 1709 edition of the complete works. Rowe adds, “They draw on both sides” in the right-hand margin after Brabantio’s “down with him, thief.” Yet, adding stage directions, with or without brackets, is an interpretive act. As M.J. Kidnie argues, quote, “The level of interpretation will increase proportionately the more thoroughly an editor sets out to translate, in effect, early modern stage directions into a form more readily recognized by modern readers,” end quote. In translating an implicit stage direction into an explicit one, editions show a wide variation in the wording and placement of the stage direction and in the specificity with which they assign the telling action of drawing a weapon.

**AKHIMIE:** I need hardly remind anyone that the question of whether a weapon is drawn and when and by whom is a pointed on in an episode involving a late-night confrontation between armed law enforcement, incensed kinsman, and off-duty soldiers. Neither do I need to articulate the ways in which the treatment of Othello's blackness animates this confrontation and suggests its possible outcomes because you are already aware. The current consensus among textual critics is that editors should be as unobtrusive as possible. A review of editorial emendations across the centuries nevertheless reveals some clear attempts to influence the way the scene plays out, and thus where aggression originates, and where fault lies.

**AKHIMIE:** The vast majority of editors from the 1700s through the 20th century follow Rowe's lead by printing "They draw on both sides" in the margin or in the dialogue under Brabantio's outburst. And this includes the great Shakespearean editors of the 18th and 19th centuries like Pope, Johnson, Malone, and Collier and the 20th century editors of Arden's Shakespeare First, Second, and Third Series: Hart, Ridley, and my predecessor, Ernst Honigmann. Similarly, Louis Wright and Virginia Lamar's 1957 Folger edition specifies the weapon with a stage direction "both parties draw swords," and Michael Neill's more recent Oxford edition gives "both sides draw their swords" and notes that the stage direction is a paraphrase or substitution for Rowe's and does not appear in quarto or Folio.

**AKHIMIE:** These choices emphasize opposition and evoke a violent free-for-all between two factions. And here's an example. This a ground plan from the prompt book of the 1930 production of Othello at the Savoy in London, Paul Robeson's debut in the lead role. One side is Cassio's and Iago's, and the other side is Brabantio and Roderigo, and the two groups are also staged opposite one another, stage left and stage right; Jets, Sharks.

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**PATRICIA:** Okay. In performance, this allows Othello to step center stage and into the spotlight for his showy line, "Keep up your bright swords," and extant prompt books reveal the popularity of this blocking over the centuries. A few editors follow the base text by adding no stage directions at all including Norman Sanders' 1984 Cambridge edition and the 2018 revised version and Kenneth Muir's 1968 Penguin edition. Some editors eschew the use of brackets. Stanley Wells, as general editor of the Oxford Shakespeare called them, quote, "an irritating distraction," and declared, "We shall not print square brackets --"

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** "-- to signal alterations when we believe that they are indisputable." This stance requires confidence in the authority of editors --

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** -- to determine when added stage directions are indisputable. But, as I've been endeavoring to demonstrate, indisputability is not so easily determined and particularly not when racializing language and behaviors are a factor in the performative logic of the scene or of the play. One of my favorites, Edward Capell, is perhaps the most intrusive of all,



adding the incendiary stage direction, “Brabantio and his party set upon the others” and attributing the violence and its sudden start to Brabantio and his group, and giving Othello and his supporters a clear claim to something like self-defense in any ensuing melee.

**AKHIMIE:** More recently, the 2016 Norton Shakespeare edition gives “Iago drawing, ‘You, Roderigo.’” And the 2017 New Oxford Shakespeare gives “Iago drawing his sword, ‘You, Roderigo?’” These lay the blame squarely on Iago. He alone draws a weapon, and he calls out Roderigo. This move also reflects a popular performance choice. It’s economical, requiring fewer players on stage and fewer props to manage with just one sword out. It also makes logical sense, reinforcing the fact that Iago has engineered this encounter by earlier coaching Roderigo to stoke Brabantio’s anger and lead him to the Sagittary with the express purpose of causing Othello harm.

**AKHIMIE:** Gary Taylor, in the New Oxford edition tempers this bolder choice with an explanatory performance note in the right margin, quote, “Although all the men on stage are presumably armed, Brabantio’s group sometimes enters with their swords already out of their scabbards, or they might draw them at line 58. Or everyone but Othello might draw at that point.” The longer performance note is also reflective of the fact that, as Tiffany Stern has said, “Stage directions are more than any other part of a play book written by theatre practitioners or at least with them in mind.” Horace Howard Furness’ 1886 Variorum edition includes the personal notes of his friend, the actor, Edwin Booth, seen here in full Shakespearean pantyhose --

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** -- whose vision of the scene is fully wrought and unquestioned based on his own experience of the play in performance. Booth says of the line, “Othello’s party, Cassio, Iago, and others should motion to draw. Brabantio and his friends enter with swords drawn.”

**AKHIMIE:** A generation of feminist editors have worked to undo the editorial interventions that created the familiar but sometimes inaccurate versions of many of Shakespeare’s plays. Barbara Hodgdon, in her essay “Shrewing Around” reminds us that it was Rowe who first re-wrote the ending of the Taming of the Shrew by having Kate and Petruchio exit together at the end of act five in apparent wedded bliss when, in fact, no exit stage direction for Kate is extant, leaving the possibility that the tamed shrew remains on stage alone.

**AKHIMIE:** Suzanne Gossett, in her essay “Feminist Inflections in Editing Pericles” points out that a major edition adds the stage direction for Pericles to hand his infant daughter to a midwife because it would be, quote, “Awkward to hold the baby during his emotional speech.”

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** Gossett writes with consternation, “Do they assume a man cannot emote with a baby in his arms?”

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** “Dramatic pathos is increased if he clutches the baby while speaking.” Following this work, Brandi K. Adams has explored the origin and the impact of the relative demographic and ideological homogeneity that has persisted in the craft of editing, while Leah Marcus and Jeffrey Masten have examined Othello’s lurid language of sex and race in detail, attending to the ways in which editorial work shapes meaning with his highly charged semiotic terrain. Hodgson, Kidnie, Masten and others have lobbied for an approach that is at once less intrusive and more generative, arguing that this style of editing invites participation by presenting the text as one that is not simply mediated but rather prepared to enable readers to engage in interpretive work.

**AKHIMIE:** But so far, only a handful of editors have opted for the maximum indeterminacy in Othello, Act one, scene two, offering vague statements like, “They draw swords,” “they draw their swords,” or in the brevity-is-the-soul-of-wit camp --

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** -- “they draw” --

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** -- set off in the right-hand margin. This choice welcomes the reader to participate in the decision-making process, or rather in the exploration of the range of textual and performance options that are possible. In *Shakespeare and the Rise of the Editor*, Sonia Massai argues that “The text preserved in early modern printed playbooks was, in fact, regarded as positively fluid and always in the process of being perfected.” The process is one that involves both authorial and non-authorial agents like plotters, scribes, actors, and of course, readers themselves. If we see this moment in Act one, scene two as “always in the process of being perfected,” it allows us to reflect on the import of the variety of possibilities in the implied stage direction that is and is not on the page, depending on the edition and the annotation.

**AKHIMIE:** This variation is a potent probability, with consequences that may be violent or lethal, a decision point at which the text and its performance possibilities are continually in conversation with the lived experience of readers, audiences, and others. This moment in Act one, scene two is, to me, first and foremost a fantasy about a world in which a valiant Othello or his real-world analog can put a stop to racist violence with a commanding word and a simple gesture. A long line of tragedian stars of the stage have been praised for their delivery of Othello’s line, “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.”

**AKHIMIE:** According to John Keats, in 1817, Edmund Kean spoke the line as if “ -- his voice had commanded where swords were thick as reeds. From eternal risk, he speaks as though his body were unassailable.” In 1889, the famed Italian actor Tommaso Salvini spoke the first half of the line in a loud tone of command and the second half with a smile and a laugh. And then, at “hold your hands,” he restrained the opposing parties by an imperious gesture: extending his arms at first one and then the other. This is a side note: there’s a lot of unfortunate facial hair in performances of Othello over the centuries.

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** But I found it interesting that that is just actually Salvini's everyday mustache.

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** Kudos.

**AUDIENCE:** [laughs]

**AKHIMIE:** Here's Laurence Olivier, still in blackface in 1964 at the National Theater, and he spoke the second half of the line with a hint of sarcastic condescension. And Anthony Hopkins, also still in blackface, in 1981 in Jonathan Miller's production for the BBC. He pushed aside the blades with a fingertip. They each seem to lean into the fantasy of a powerful and invulnerable Black commander, making him more outrageously confident, more carelessly confrontational, knowing that this valiant posture makes Othello's fall that much more spectacular. In productions with Black actors cast in the role, the moment is carefully recalibrated.

**AKHIMIE:** Paul Robeson, who captured attention in the US and the UK as the, quote, "Negro Othello," the first Black actor to play the part in London since Ira Aldridge, was criticized when he played the part, as he said, "Too high," that is with too much emotion and was described in 1930 as delivering the line "with a casualness that amounted almost to meaninglessness." In his own words, he said, "The way I play it, I'm calm. I'm quiet through all the early part. I don't make an unnecessary move, and I think that's right." Janet Suzman, directing the play in apartheid South Africa in 1987 with John Kani as Othello, the first Black South African in the title role, cut the moment altogether.

**AKHIMIE:** Studying this moment in Act one, scene two is about recognizing it as fantasy, for the scene invites us to imagine a safety that does not exist, and which the play, through Iago's machinations and our knowledge of and complicity in them, will steadily erode. Examining the textual stage directions that we supply, whether as readers or editors, we see that Othello is again and again subject to our desire to see post-racial possibility as ironic and to savor the pain of this by watching prejudice and hate unravel someone in real time. The edited texts of Othello reveal the limits of even the most anti-racist imaginary. As I noted earlier, however, ultimately this work, for me, has not been about selecting finally an appropriate editorial approach, but rather about thinking through the import of an unsolvable editorial problem.

**AKHIMIE:** And moreover, it's about what we do with the knowledge that that editorial problem bears uncanny resemblance to an ongoing real-world problem of recognition, of profiling, of prejudice, of lack of evidence, lack of witness, of incomplete and untrustworthy accounts, of documents, and deep fears about the significance that one incident bearing these features has on others with like elements. In his final speech, Othello will recall, before his self-annihilation, just another such incident in Aleppo once, and again, omit key information about what happened, to whom, and why, and how Othello's blackness, made to be the symbol of his outsider status and his inevitable fall, functions either here or there, then, or now. Thank you.