CLAAS Clack Lecture 2012
Electronic Handout
Tragicomedy Reborn: Plautus and the Making of Shakespeare’s *Othello*
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*Note.* These are works that I’ve found particularly helpful, interesting, provocative, brilliant, or Jupiter forend, useful. If you have any questions, by all means ask at jht@dartmouth.edu.

**Shakespeare Studies**

T. W. Baldwin *William Shakespere’s Small Latine and Lesse Greeke* (Illinois, 1944)
Leo Salingar *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy* (Cambridge, 1974).

T. W. Baldwin’s monumental two-volume work is comparable to a classic such as George Duckworth’s *The Nature of Roman Comedy* (Princeton, 1952), it is still a point of reference for anyone interested in learning about the kind of humanistic education a Tudor grammar school could give. Not that Baldwin’s learning has made any difference to those determined to find another author for Shakespeare’s plays—any other author would do. See James Shapiro’s 2010 book *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare’s Plays?*

Salingar and Snyder are good on Shakespeare and comedy, even when the Shakespeare play in question is nominally a tragedy. Wolfgang Riehle’s study is deeply learned—true to philological standards, he readily chastises and corrects even T. W. Baldwin—and remains an essential place to start; so far as I know thus far, Rielhe was the first Shakespearean to notice the *Othello-Amphitryon* connection. “The parallels to *Othello* which are opened up here are remarkable” (p. 36). They sure are. Robert Miola’s 2000 book on Shakespeare’s reading provides a good introduction both to its subject and to the earlier work of this distinguished and prolific scholar and critic; his most relevant book for this project is from
1995, listed here, and I cite his edited volume of essays on The Comedy of Errors for general information, since that’s the Shakespeare play that has attracted the most interest among classicists, who regularly pair it with the Menæchmi in teaching since it’s a major source for Errors. (And not the only one: Riehle shows that Amphitryon also is important, and I would add, the Greek romances/novels.)

Shakespeare’s era was one of the most notable for its homosocial organization. To learn more about what lies behind the “wedding” of Iago and Othello, for example, Stephen Orgel’s work is fundamental: “Why was England the only country in Europe to maintain an all-male public theater in the Renaissance?”

**Tragicomedy**

David L. Hirst  

Verna A. Foster  
*The Name and Nature of Tragicomedy*. Studies in European Cultural Transition, 18 (2003). Verna Foster’s book is the most comprehensive, enlightening and learned discussion of “tragicomedy” I’ve found anywhere. Hirst’s short book is good to assign students. But Foster’s is indispensable for anyone who wants to learn about a theatrical hybrid that traces its origins back to Plautus, and forward through Shakespeare and Beaumont and Fletcher to Ibsen, Chekhov, Synge, O’Casey, Tennessee Williams, Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter. Wonderfully enlightening.

**Editions and Commentaries on Othello**

E. A. J. Honigman, ed.  

Michael Neill, ed.  
Both should be consulted, well worth having, and Neill’s is especially good on the history of Othello productions.

**Iago Studies**

Bernard Spivak,  

Stanley Edgar Hyman,  

Richard Raatzsch,  
Editions and Commentaries on Plautus


Anne Mahoney, ed. *Plautus: Amphitryo*. (Focus, 2004). This is a good school commentary and it also has the great extra of giving Ermolao Barbaro’s reconstruction in Latin of the lost scenes of the play, together with commentary and notes in Latin. Textual critics today take note of Ermolao’s *scenae suppositiciae*, but don’t give them much credence for reconstructing what Plautus may have actually written. Mahoney’s point is that we should know what some five hundred years of readers of Plautus have known as the text of the play, even though it was not necessarily what Plautus himself may have written. It *was* what Shakespeare read—we think.

Amphitryon Translations

James H. Martinband and Charles E. Passage *Amphitryon: Three Plays in Translation, Together with a Comprehensive Account of the Evolution of the Legend and its Subsequent History on the Stage*. (North Carolina, 1974). A cross reading and translation of the three greatest Amphitryon plays, a project that has as of this date no equals or successors. Although Plautus’ original is here, it would be Molière’s that almost everyone knew better and wanted to imitate: Dryden, Kleist, and Giraudoux.

Paul Nixon *Plautus: Vol. I.1, Amphitruo, or Amphitryon*. Loeb Classical Library (Heinemann and Harvard 1916), pp. 1-121. The Latin text has been superseded by De Melo’s edition, but Nixon’s translations haven’t been. Erich Segal once pointed out that Nixon did a better job at getting Plautus into English prose than anybody, himself included. Theft is the highest compliment one translator can pay a predecessor, and you can find the *disiecta membra* of Nixon in just about every English translation of Plautus since him. Definitely not obsolete.

Wolfgang De Melo *Plautus: Vol. I.1, Amphitruo, or Amphitryon*. Loeb Classical Library (Harvard, 2011, pp.1-131. All the above praise of Nixon aside, this is of course the version of Plautus that you should turn to if you are
given to glancing to the left. The Latin text isn’t bad, either.


Performance Theory and Criticism


I cite both these books because Slater’s inaugurated performance-based criticism of Plautus and is still of fundamental importance, and Marshall’s is a state-of-the-art book for anyone interested in the translation and performance of Roman comedy, whether in the original Latin or in translation.

Othello Movies

Othello (1952), Starring Orson Welles (Othello), Micheál MacLiammóir (Iago), Suzanne Cloutier (Desdemona). Directed by Orson Welles. Runtime 91 minutes. See also Micheál MacLiammóir, Put Money in Thy Purse: the diary of the film of ‘Othello.’ With a preface by Orson Welles (Methuen, 1952). Not for the literal–minded, but great insights into the play, boiled down to an hour and a half.

BBC Shakespeare: Othello (1981). Starring Anthony Hopkins (Othello) and Bob Hoskins (Iago). Directed by Jonathan Miller. Runtime: 3 hours 24 minutes. Hopkins isn’t at his best—terribly underplaying and veddy British—but Bob Hoskins gives a genius performance as Iago. His background in playing criminals and sociopaths of every kind is what led Jonathan Miller to choose him. Miller also has an excellent grasp of the comedic side of Othello. His direction of the opening scene with Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio is filled from start to finish with vis comica.

Othello. Warner Home Video of the Film of 1965, starring Laurence Olivier (Othello), Frank Finlay (Iago), Maggie Smith (Desdemona), Joyce Redman (Bianca), and Derek Jacobi (Cassio). Directed by Stuart Burge. Runtime 2 hours
and 45 minutes. See also Kenneth Tynan, Profiles. (Harper Perennial, 1989), 204-214, where Tynan gives a fascinating account of how Olivier put this famous production together.

**Amphitryon Movies**


*Hélas pour moi.* An adaptation of Giraudoux’s *Amphitryon 38*, with Gérard Depardieu, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, 1993. (Lionsgate Video, 2008)

These are slim pickin’s. There’s no DVD of Plautus, the French version is widely available, and there are German films based on Kleist but I didn’t see the point of surfing the internet for them. The Godard film is a lot of fun and about as close to Giraudoux’ *Amphitryon 38* as we can presently get.

**From Slavery to Service**

David Schalkwyk  *Shakespeare, Love and Service* (Cambridge, 2008).


Iago’s conception of “service” is important to understand, closer to “slavery” than our present usage of the word “service.” [As noted in our performance, by the end of the play Iago’s imagined slavish identity has become reality, when Lodovico refers to him as “a damned slave.”]

Schalwyk’s book is very good on this and related points, and I pass along three first-rate books from classicists who will give you plenty to work with if you want to complement your understanding of Early Modern conceptions of “service” with its Roman predecessor *servitium* and the way it is treated in Roman comedy.