

# *Confession; or, the Blind Heart: An Antebellum Othello*

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## Abstract

William Gilmore Simms was a novelist, poet, and literary editor from antebellum Charleston. He was also a Shakespearean enthusiast and editor of the apocryphal plays. Although Simms described himself ironically as scribbling compulsively in the margins of his Shakespeare text, his knowledge of the plays, their plots, and their language was broad and deep. Simms was also active in both the American literary world and Southern politics, defending slavery at the same time as he argued for a national American literature. For all of these reasons, his Shakespearean appropriations offer valuable insights into the American South's understanding of Shakespeare and his cultural function. This essay offers a perspective on Shakespeare in the American South shortly before, during, and after the Civil War through the example of Simms's short story, "Caloya; or, the Loves of the Driver" (1841) and his novel *Confession; or, the Blind Heart* (1841). Both works claim *Othello* as their source, and in different ways, both address contemporary issues of race and color through strategies of displacement and acknowledgment. In these texts, Simms's appropriation of *Othello* examines how "whiteness," as a system of social privilege, is produced.

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Even a quick look at Peter Rawlings's recent edited collection, *Americans on Shakespeare, 1776-1914* (1999), will show that the southern United States plays virtually no role in the anthology's construction of Shakespeare as an American poet. The Northeast dominates this collection, which ranges from Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper to Henry James, by way of Emerson, Thoreau, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The entries are also remarkably free from reference to events and ideologies leading up to the Civil War and their influence on the performance and perception of Shakespeare's plays. A single poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes, entitled "Shakspeare: April 23, 1864," offers Shakespeare as a remedy for the sorrows of war:

War-wasted, haggard, panting from the strife,  
We turn to other days and far-off lands,  
Live o'er in dreams the Poet's faded life,  
Come with fresh lilies in our fevered hands

To wreathe his bust, and scatter  
 purple flowers,—  
 (Holmes 1864, reprinted in Rawlings  
 1999, 242) Not his the need, but ours!

A final excerpt from Ashley Thorndike's "Shakespeare in America," the 1927 Annual Shakespeare Lecture of the British Academy, mentions the Civil War only as a disruption in the forward march of American letters. Thorndike proclaims that Americans have always enjoyed a "close kinship" with the "Elizabethan joy of experience" (Thorndike 1933, 27; reprinted in Rawlings 1999, 626). Now that "we have healed the wounds made by our Lost Cause," he says,

we are inattentive to the laments over others — we are not greatly moved by the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire or even by *Paradise Lost*. We have sought in literature a buoyancy and optimism, for an uplifting beauty, for an enlarged and fortified courage. In Shakespeare, whether in the tortures of Hamlet and Lear or in the triumphs of Rosalind and Prospero, we have found what we sought, a renewing of our faith in man and his works. (27; reprinted in Rawlings 1999, 526)

Such a history tells only part of the story; it elides the South's role in disseminating and refashioning Shakespeare's plots and plays, and it leaves unexamined the ongoing use of "Shakespeare" in that place as a shorthand for or site of debates over personal, regional, and national character.

Despite its evocation of vexed and volatile cultural issues for Americans, *Othello* remained throughout the nineteenth century a popular play on the American stage, and nowhere more so than in the South (Edelstein 1982, 183). Tilden G. Edelstein has argued that for Americans, *Othello* is pre-eminently a drama of racial intermarriage: a site where, historically, a "negative color consciousness" could develop fully into a racist theory of human relations through the trope of marriage (181).<sup>1</sup> While Edelstein traces America's fears of miscegenation through theatrical representations of *Othello*, his essay does not consider the role played by this national discourse of color and race in *appropriations* of *Othello*. Furthermore, because he addresses fear of miscegenation as a national rather than a regional issue, Edelstein describes a continuity of racial and sexual attitudes in both North and South between 1850 and 1880 that perforce overrides changes in attitude that might have occurred in the period immediately before and after the Civil War. Nevertheless, his essay provides a starting point for more local readings, in terms of both time and place, of *Othello*'s cultural role in Shakespearean appropriations for the American South.

This essay offers a perspective on Shakespeare's social and literary function in the American South shortly before, during, and after the Civil War through the example of Charleston writer William Gilmore Simms, a man deeply attached to both Shakespeare and the South. In the *Southern*

*Literary Journal*, Simms writes that "in my desk copy of Shakespeare, I find I have made just as free as a thousand other commentators, and covered the pages of the immortal Bard, with notes of quite as little value as theirs" (1838a, 184). But he was also a serious scholar, editing and introducing Shakespeare's apocryphal plays for a volume that was issued as a *Supplement to the Plays of William Shakespeare* (1848); and Simms's broad and deep knowledge of the Shakespearean texts themselves, which he quoted and alluded to liberally in novels and letters throughout his life, make his appropriations of Shakespeare especially rewarding to study. Simms felt a particularly strong resonance with both Othello and *Othello*, which he used as literary models for the novel *Confession; or, the Blind Heart* (first published in 1841 and reissued in a revised edition several times) and for his controversial short story, "Caloya; or, the Loves of the Driver" (also first published in 1841). In the contradictory perspectives on Othello's character offered by these two texts, we can see an interplay among denial, displacement, and acknowledgment in their construction of literary race and identity at a particularly volatile moment in American history.

### *Othello* on the Nineteenth-Century American Stage

The issue of Othello's racial identity has been vexed ever since Samuel Taylor Coleridge asked this question:

Can we suppose [Shakespeare] so utterly ignorant as to make a barbarous negro plead royal birth? . . . No doubt Desdemona saw Othello's visage in his mind; yet, as we are constituted, and most surely as an English audience was disposed in the beginning of the seventeenth century, it would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro. It would argue a disproportionateness, a want of balance, in Desdemona, which Shakespeare does not appear to have in the least contemplated. (Coleridge 1959, 169)

James Andreas has persuasively traced many deployments of Shakespeare's African character, particularly in America, to the sentiments of this passage and its racist assumptions (1992; 1999). Denial or evasion of Othello's race and color, on the other hand, does not necessarily signify a simple alignment with Coleridge's implied position during the nineteenth century. Fanny Kemble, the English actress, criticized the institution of slavery in her *Journal on a Georgia Plantation in 1838-39* (1863) — a document that was taken up by abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic — but maintained a conviction that Othello was neither African nor black. Lois Potter also comments that Frederick Douglass quotes from *Othello* without linking the character's trajectory to his own life (2002, 111). Finally, and more extremely, as Potter mentions, African American actor Ira Aldridge

developed a Jim Crow performance at exactly the same time that he was playing the Duke to a white Othello (111).

Another complicating factor is the portrayal of Othello on the nineteenth-century stage generally and on southern American stages in particular. Ruth Cowhig (1979; 1985) has suggested that Othello's race had not been much of an issue before the end of the eighteenth century (although Edelstein offers examples of "color consciousness" in the 1780s); but after that, racial politics influenced heavily the portrayal of both character and play, even as few black actors (except for Ira Aldridge and possibly Ignatius Sancho) were awarded or took on the role until the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> A further complication involves what the audience actually "saw" in Othello's countenance. Charles Lower (1983) has argued, for instance, against the assumption that southern audiences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would not tolerate a black Othello; like most audiences, he suggests, they expected to see in Othello a black man of African heritage. Against a European tradition of tawny Othellos, Lower suggests, the audience brought a common-sense understanding of Shakespeare's plot that overrides local ideologies and racial politics.<sup>3</sup>

What Simms saw when he attended performances of *Othello* is an even more complex question. Charleston, Simms's home town, often played host to the same performers and performances that were seen in New York City and welcomed, as well, distinguished actors from England.<sup>4</sup> In Charleston between 1800 through the closing of the theaters in 1860, *Othello* was performed more times than any Shakespearean play except *Hamlet* (Holbein 1983, 89) and performed more frequently than in any other southern city (Edelstein 1982, 183; Dormon 1967, 276; Grimsted 1987, 252). *Othello* also played at theaters in Natchez, New Orleans, Mobile, and smaller locales such as Macon, Georgia. Simms himself not only attended, but also reviewed Shakespearean performances by such actors as Charles Kean, Thomas Cooper, and Edwin Forrest. On a trip to New Orleans in 1831, he saw Charles Kean in the role of Othello (Watson 1985, 15; Simms 1952-56, 1: 34-38); Kean also played Othello opposite James Hackett's Iago in Charleston in 1832 (Shillingsburg 1971, 131, n.13). William Gilmore Simms was particularly interested in Edwin Forrest, referring to his performances and extracurricular exploits in letters to James Lawson that span a decade, and is generally aware of theatrical events in New York and abroad.<sup>5</sup> A satiric portrait of a would-be Shakespearean actor from *Border Beagles* (1840) — he "gave imitations of Kean, excelling in the spasmodic hoarseness of his utterance," then modulated into "the lugubrious whinings of Cooper" and the "guttural growl of Forrest" — shows that Simms shared with many nineteenth-century spectators an interest in the fine points of different actors' deliveries and, presumably, in their general ethos (Simms 1996, 64).

The Othellos that Simms saw on stage in America, including those of Charles Kean and Edwin Forrest, undoubtedly would have been whitened somewhat by stage tradition, which by the 1830s and 1840s definitely favored Othellos of lighter skin color. Charles's father Edmund, the first of the "tawny" Othellos, appears in a widely disseminated image with curly hair and bare arms, sporting exotic plumed headgear, a decorated toga of vaguely Roman sort, arm bracelets, rope, chains, and a curved sword like a scimitar (Shattuck, p. 41, illustration 26; for a similar image, see Robin O. Warren's essay in this issue). Colored versions of this image, in particular, paint Kean's skin as glossy black, possibly to contrast with his gold-leaf ornaments. While the actor's hair is curled, his exoticism and military presence, rather than color or racial identity, give the portrait its distinctive look. Othello's color seems almost ornamental rather than intrinsic. In another representation, the actor is swarthy rather than black, with dark, brooding brows, and something of a hook nose. This Othello wears a turban, a loose tunic adorned by some kind of star ornament, and sandals; he carries a sharp dagger and a "light" straight out of the *Arabian Nights*. Even more so than the previous image of Kean, this Othello is orientalized. Edwin Forrest's Othello is even more thoroughly oriental. Sporting Forrest's trademark mustache, plus a goatee, he wears a cone-shaped cap like that of Kean, is wrapped in flowing robes, and holds in front of him a menacing sword, apparently left over from the Crusades (Shattuck, p. 74, illustration 52).

Another feature of Kean's and Forrest's American personae that may bear on Simms's grasp of *Othello* in 1841 was an overlap between the oriental ethos that they projected onto Shakespeare's Moor and their alignment with Native Americans in the public imagination. In Canada during one of his North American tours, Edmund Kean was "made an honorary chieftain in the Huron tribe of Indians. His Indian name was Alanienouidet" (Shattuck 43, illustration 27). For his part, Forrest solicited, relished, and was closely associated with the role of *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags*, the hero of the play by American playwright John Augustus Stone (figure 4; Shattuck 71).<sup>6</sup> Both a general tendency towards ethnic slippage and the opposition between blacks and Indians are relevant to Simms's fictionalizations of *Othello*.

### "Caloya" ; or, a Polyracial *Othello*

That William Gilmore Simms was capable of seeing Othello as a person of color — if not exactly as a black man — is suggested by his story "Caloya; or, the Loves of the Driver," which is contemporaneous with *Confession*. Here the Othello and Desdemona are Native American, the Iago a black slave, and the *deus ex machina* a young, just, intelligent, white plantation master. A closer look at the story, however, complicates this neat allegory, as the narratological complex governing human relations in Simms's story renders impossible any clear racial valuations. The

principal characters are a young Catawba wife (Caloya), who is married to an old, ridiculous, degraded, and alcoholic Catawba chief whom the narrator identifies by his Englished name as "Richard Knuckles"; and the black "driver" Mingo, who by profession functions on the plantation "as a sort of sergeant to the overseer": "He gets the troops in line, divides them into squads, sees to their equipments, and prepares them for the management and command of the superiors" (Simms 1856, 366). Mingo's public role, however, belies his truly anarchic and "irresponsible" nature. A wayward dandy by avocation, Mingo is moved to seduce Caloya. Knuckles, fueled by a "native" or racially determined anti-feminism and weakness for alcohol, is hoodwinked by Mingo until the driver insults Knuckles by confidently offering to buy what the Indian carelessly calls his "dog" — that is, his wife. Simms portrays Caloya as Desdemona, a paragon of wifely obedience: "Caloya, it may be added, yielded, without a murmur, to the caprices of her lord, to whom she had been given by her father. She was as dutiful as if she had loved him; and, if conduct alone could be suffered to test the quality of virtue, her affection for him was quite as earnest, pure and eager, as that of the most devoted woman" (Simms 1856, 379).

Caloya, however, also has other talents that are linked to her racial identity. More resourceful by cultural training and much luckier than Desdemona, she steals away to petition in person the young master, who perceives the virtue beneath Caloya's beauty and, reluctantly abandoning his loyalty to the driver whom he has trusted, vows to make all right. In a vaudeville showdown, Knuckles — whose jealousy has been rekindled but by now is hiccuping uncontrollably from excess liquor — attacks Mingo with a hatchet. Mingo, nearly blinded by blood from his surface wound, takes down his ancient foe, but then Caloya, who has been cowering in a corner hoping that both men would overlook her, comes loyally to her husband's rescue. At this moment, in rushes Mingo's "lawfully-wedded" wife, the ironically named Diana. A large, raucous, and violently jealous Bianca, Diana flays her "rival"'s face and, without the timely intervention of the young master, might have plucked out her eyes. He sends Knuckles home to die, returns Caloya to her people with generous gifts, and demotes the driver. In the tale's postlude, the Catawba nation returns to the plantation to take up their peaceful tradition of producing pots for sale. At this time, Caloya pays a courtesy visit to the young master, introducing him to her new husband Chickawaw, who had been the original object of Knuckles's incorrigible jealousy, and demonstrating manifestly her health and new-found happiness.

Regarded as an act of Shakespearean appropriation, "Caloya" works by multiple character assignments. The elderly husband Knuckles is, quite clearly, the Othello figure in this short story. Mingo is Iago, replicating the Shakespearean villain's moral "blackness" with the hue of his skin. Mingo is, additionally, the overseer's "ancient." But at some level Mingo is also Cassio, since

he dresses well and has a way with the ladies. In Caloya's world, apparently, no higher being exists to fulfill the role of Cassio (unless it be the late-appearing Chickawaw, a man much better suited to Caloya than either Knuckles or Mingo in terms of age and moral fiber). At the same time Knuckles, with his weakness for drink, is also Cassio. We are told (but not exactly shown) that Negro slaves also succumb readily to alcohol, so that Mingo can be analogous to Cassio in a second way. The white planter, however, has no real counterpart in Shakespeare's play. Is he a more savvy Brabantio, the patriarch of his moated grange? Montano, the rational deputy from Venice? Or is young Gillison, the planter, another sleek, protected, and successful Cassio, he who brings Venice from chaos to order once again? "Caloya; or, the Loves of the Driver" undermines any sense of a stable racial hierarchy by virtue of the fact that most characters can fill several roles within the Shakespearean master plot. In "Caloya," we experience a polyracial *Othello* and a polyvocal appropriation of Shakespeare's play.

"Caloya; or, the Loves of the Driver" met with a cool reception. In a "Letter to the Editor" of the *Magnolia* from "the Author of 'The Loves of the Driver,'" Simms defends the story from charges of immorality by its kinship with Shakespeare and his universal themes. The story, because it represents Indians and black slaves, admittedly deals with "low life" (Simms 2001, 249), Simms says, but the passions depicted there and the moral are "very much the same" as those of "Shakespeare's *Othello*; one of the most noble of all dramatic moralities. The passions are in exercise precisely — the same pursuit of lust; — passions the most demoniac; lusts the least qualified and scrupulous" (Simms 1856, 249). Caloya, however, is perfection personified:

a pattern of natural and human morality, her carriage and conduct might well be studied with respect and sympathy, by the purest daughter in the land. She is true to duty — the highest idea of virtue that we have — as if she had been taught in the temple; and she fulfills all its requisitions in spite of scorn, and wrong, and ill-treatment, with a spirit as unyielding and patient as if Earth had never known sorrow, and the peace of Eden, with all its privileges, was yet within her allotment. She bears her burden without faltering and complaint, endures the buffets and abuse of the very person to whom she had a right to look for love, honor, and protection; scorns the artifices of the seducer; spurns his temptations; and in the most trying event in her life, manages her conduct in such a manner as, finally, while maintaining her virtue, to prevent strife and murder. I am incapable, I confess, of conceiving a higher idea of morality apart from manners, and intellect, than I have embodied in this Indian woman. (Simms 2001, 251)

But while Simms paints Caloya as the noble Indian, she is the exception that proves the rule in Simms's racial hierarchy.

In the manner of Shakespeare's comic heroines, Caloya escapes the senex without any help from a romantic lead.<sup>7</sup> Her rival Diana, by way of insult, thinks of Indian women as "dingy squaws," "whose colour, neither white nor black, was of that sort, which, according to Diana in her jealous mood, neither gods nor men ought to endure" (Simms 1856, 415). By demonstrating a degree of feminine guile — a characteristic Iago associates falsely with Desdemona — Caloya demonstrates that although she is morally superior to Knuckles and Mingo, she is not exactly "white." The truly honorable figure in Simms's fugue on themes from *Othello* is the shadowy figure of the young planter. An unmarried orphan, Col. Gillison achieves the status of patriarch at the expense of the Indian woman's characterological integrity; he blesses her second union with Chickawaw, which absolves him from the outrages done to her character and sanity under his regime when she was married to Knuckles and besieged by Mingo. Furthermore, the young planter, in aiding Caloya, prevents his Desdemona from being forced into a miscegenistic sexual union.

Simms's identity politics within this story are mercurial, just as the characters enjoy multiple alignments with their Shakespearean counterparts. Both Indians and negroes are shift and degraded, poaching chickens from the master's plantation. Knuckles, Mingo, and Diana also speak in thick dialect. Simms dramatizes Mingo's more totalizing cupidity — he talks incessantly of "my horse, my land, my ox, and my ass, and all that is *mine*", — with unexpected echoes from *The Taming of the Shrew* (Simms 1856, 368 (mis)quoting *The Taming of the Shrew*, 4.1.103). Within this racial economy, however, Indians generally have more nobility than negroes. In a jarring editorial digression, Simms contrasts "negro slaves" unfavorably with both the "North American Indian" and poor whites. Unlike these two groups, "a negro slave not only has his own dwelling, but he keeps a plentiful fire within it for which he pays no taxes. That he lives upon the fat of the land you may readily believe, since he is proverbially much fatter himself than the people of any other class." And unlike the Indian, in particular, the negro's "race is prolific," spreading "sin" throughout the land as its original inhabitants dwindle (1856, 411).<sup>8</sup>

This long aside, although consistent with the short story's satiric tone, also resonates with Simms's public stance on slavery. In 1838, Simms had published *Slavery in America*, a rebuttal of Harriet Martineau's critique of life in the South, and she is named again in the digression from "Caloya." In *Slavery in America* and in general, Simms's political philosophy rests on a combination of paternalism and populist democracy that reflects his own double position as dispossessed outsider (by birth and self-conception) and gentleman planter (by virtue of his second marriage;



see Gray 1986, 46-47). Perhaps not incidentally, Simms's defense of slavery draws authority from Ulysses's speech on degree from *Troilus and Cressida* (Simms 1838b, 62-63). Democracy should reign and merit rewarded, but only within the bounds of a moral and intellectual hierarchy. Because African Americans are at the bottom of that great chain of being, the institution of slavery is justified by the moral imperatives of white stewardship:

The slaveholders of the South, having the moral and animal guardianship of an ignorant and irresponsible people under their control, are the great moral conservators, in one powerful interest, of the entire world. Assuming slavery to be a denial of justice to the negro, there is no sort of propriety in the application of the name of slave to the servile of the south. He is under no despotic power. There are laws which protect him, *in his place*, as inflexible as those which his proprietor is required to obey, *in his place*. *Providence has placed him in our hands, for his good, and has paid us from his labor for our guardianship.* (Simms 1838b, 82-83; excerpt reprinted in Simms 2001, 246-47, italics in original).<sup>9</sup>

Within this paternalistic logic, however, the Native American occupies a pivotal place that allies her "naturally" with the white slaveholders as their honorary ancestor.

Caloya's tribe is on the wane, having been displaced from the land to white imagination to become what Renée Bergland terms the "national uncanny" (2000). The narrator places the tale during his boyhood, when the Catawbas had been "reduced to a pitiful remnant of some four hundred persons" (Simms 1856, 361). By the late 1830s, furthermore, their numbers had dwindled to twelve men, thirty-six women, and forty children (Hudson 1966, 64). Simms was finishing "Caloya" in the summer of 1840; earlier that year, the Treaty of Nation Ford had been signed, in which the state of South Carolina offered the tribe money for their land and the Catawba moved temporarily to North Carolina. They returned to a much smaller parcel of South Carolina lands only in 1850.<sup>10</sup> Absent, depleted, relegated to the past, the Catawba become symbolic ancestors for the young planter and the narrator, the whites who by order or nature succeed them; Caloya's presence in the story justifies the social structure as it currently exists, with the negro slave supposedly living off the fat of the land while being justly relegated to slavery. According to the story's logic, Caloya, as a Native American woman, is the ghost whose shadowy virtues prove that whatever is, is right.

### *Confession; or, the Blind Heart as an Antebellum Othello*

As Shakespearean appropriation, *Confession* is more loosely constructed and more parsimonious in direct citation than is "Caloya; or, the Loves of the Driver." While Simms's short story declared its Shakespearean pretensions on the very first page, *Confession* really does not

bring its references to the foreground until the novel is nearly one-third over. Simms himself likens the novel and its hero to William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*; the influence of Goethe and Sir Walter Scott can also be seen. Within the novel as well, Simms makes equally self-conscious allusions to *Paradise Lost*, the plot that Ashley Thorndyke claimed no longer fascinated Americans after the Civil War. *Confession's* events and characters, finally, resonate occasionally with other Shakespearean plays.

The introduction to *Confession* alludes to Othello's famous stories, but only to deny that this "domestic novel" will offer conventional adventures: "It has its 'disastrous chances'; but with few of those 'moving accidents by flood and field' — those 'hair-breadth 'scapes i' the imminent deadly breach' — which so richly garnish in general the tales of" popular writers (Simms 1970, 8, citing *Othello*, 1.3.153-55 and *passim*). Instead, Simms's novel concerns the hero's domestic trials, which are caused by "diseased sensibilities" — where the "passions, exciting and erring, develop themselves in faults, vices, and weaknesses, rather than in crimes; and where, even when crime occurs motiveless as crime, and purposed not as crime, but under a blind judgment, as justice simply" (8-9).

*Confession* starts out quite unlike *Othello*. Its hero, Edward Clifford, begins life more as a Heathcliff in a shabby Dickensian world: "I was not merely an orphan. I was poor, and was felt as burdensome by those connections whom a dread of public opinion, rather than a sense of duty and affection, persuaded to take me to their homes" (Simms 1970, 12). There is an almost embarrassingly autobiographical cast to Clifford's characterization. Simms's mother came from a substantial family that had moved from Virginia to Charleston (Guilds 1992, 5). His father was an Irish immigrant who, after the death of his wife in childbirth, consigned young Simms to the care of his maternal grandmother and left Charleston for the Southwest. In a letter to James Lawson, Simms refers to himself as an "orphan," although technically his father not only lived, but later sought unsuccessfully to regain custody of his son (Guilds 1992, 6; Simms 1952-56, 1: 164). Edward Clifford, like Simms himself, has to fight to become educated but eventually achieves a degree in law. (For the fictional Clifford, the struggle is much more dramatic; denied any aid from his parsimonious and sneering uncle, Edward has to study law on his own while supporting himself with a day job.) Edward Clifford, like Simms himself, was also ambivalent toward Charleston and its citizens and eventually Clifford — as Simms had done in youth when visiting his father — heads for the Western frontier.

In the novel, Edward becomes a kind of illegitimate brother to the sickly heir Edgar Clifford who, failing to live up to his Shakespearean name, dies and so draws down on Edward even more enmity from his psychologically abusive foster parents. According to Edward's self-assessment,

he is plagued from the beginning with a "nameless jealousy" that "rose unbidden to his heart" at times, "when, in truth, there was no obvious cause" (Simms 1970, 19). This is the condition that Edward Clifford identifies mysteriously as his "blind heart": pathological jealousy, a spiritual corruption that springs from love, or sometimes merely self-interest, and that leads inevitably to tragedy and death. Yet, despite his material situation and the "blind heart" that lurks within him, our hero achieves several close friends, plus a patron and substitute father who provides moral and material support, financial success at law, and access to community respect.

At this point, the structural counterpoint with *Othello* finally takes hold. Edward Clifford has fallen in love with his pure but delicate cousin, Julia, with whom he was raised and who shares none of her family's crudity and unworthy sentiments. While the aunt and uncle work hard to keep the two separated, despite the fact that Julia fades away before their eyes, Julia finally confesses her love to Edward. Her mother, in the meantime, has been engineering a marriage to Perkins, an unsuitable fop. Perkins's credo, a pastiche of Iago's favorite key words, is "make money — honestly, if you can, but — make money!" (Simms 1970, 76, quoting *Othello*, 1.4.33-39, 345-46, 354). The grotesque mother — one of those "miserably silly women" who are "born, according to Iago," to "suckle fools and chronicle small beer" (Simms 1970, 75, quoting *Othello*, 2.1.162) — attempts to force through abruptly Julia's marriage to Perkins. Julia, with an uncharacteristic passion borrowed from Shakespeare's Juliet, tells Mr. Perkins that she would "sooner marry the grave and the winding-sheet than be your wife!" (Simms 1970, 102; with allusions to *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.1.132; 3.5.140). When Mrs. Clifford sets the nuptials for Thursday next — the same day chosen by Juliet's father — Edward and Julia elope, with the help of Julia's doctor and a female relative, who stand in for *Romeo and Juliet's* Friar and Nurse. (A negro named "Peter" also plays a role, his name alluding to the Nurse's servant in Shakespeare's play.)

Shakespearean criticism has worried the question of whether Desdemona and Othello ever consummate their marriage. Simms's domestic tragedy, by contrast, insists on the fact that they have done so. Edward spirits away Julia to the house of the sympathetic aunt, while Edward's bluff friend Kingsley distracts her mother under the pretense that he is a Kentucky trader who has come to buy slaves. Mrs. Clifford finds the couple, "[but] she came too late for anything but abuse. Julia was irrevocably mine" (Simms 1970, 114). In a most un-Shakespearean sequel, the grotesque mother, along with her increasingly imbecile and destitute husband, storm the bridal chamber and are beaten back by the victorious husband. The fair bride faints, but awakes to beg her exasperated spouse to admit Mrs. Clifford to the chamber, appalled that any dutiful daughter would make her mother wait out-of-doors. What can one make of this scene? It is not a rape in the manner of Rhett

Butler and Scarlett. It is not the absent primal scene of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Nor does Simms conform completely to the decorum of romance. In effect, the scene becomes low comedy.

At this very moment, paradoxically, Simms evokes his tragic Shakespearean model. Although the bride's father dies (after a long physical and mental decline), the happy couple retires to a cottage, where Edward returns to marital bliss after hard days at law and Julia enjoys sketching and painting; here, the two enjoy "brief Eden moments of security and peace" (Simms 1970, 126). Poised as he is finally on the brink of happiness, in a most self-conscious manner our hero Edward nevertheless digresses about the "evil principle" that poisons his heart and will soon destroy his marital bliss — "the serpent in the garden which is to spoil Eden. Wo, beyond all other woes, that this serpent should be engendered in one's own heart, producing its blindness, and finally working its bane" (130). Here he takes on fully and solemnly the role of Othello. His nature, says Edward, was "ardent" and "impetuous," just as the Romantics said of Othello. Frustrated by circumstance, the lack of parents and fortune, Edward becomes both suspicious and shy. Julia's love temporarily allows his feelings, "like a mountain-stream long pent up" (133), to pour forth all in one direction — presumably like the Hellespont to the Pontic sea (*Othello*, 3.3.356-59). The imagery, authentic to Shakespeare's play, segues into a Romantic apologia for Othello, in contrast to the narrator:

Mine was eminently a jealous heart! On this subject of jealousy, men rarely judge correctly. They speak of Othello as jealous — Othello, one of the least jealous of all human natures! Jealously is a quality that needs no cause. It makes its own cause. It will find or make occasion for its exercise, in the most innocent circumstances. The proofs that made Othello wretched and revengeful, were sufficient to have deceived any jury under the sun. . . . [N]ever was human character less marked by a jealous mood than that of Othello. His great self-esteem was, of itself, a sufficient security against jealousy. Mine might have been, had it not been so terribly diseased by ill-training. (Simms 1970, 135-36)

In a subtle maneuver, Edward Clifford depicts himself as both more passionate and less logical than Othello; for this reason, he is also at once more and less culpable than Othello, a detail that will figure strongly in the novel's upbeat, un-Shakespearean denouement.

The remainder of the novel details what might have happened had Othello acted less decisively when faced with the specter of Desdemona's infidelity, or, from Clifford's own perspective, had he been faced with less damning proofs. William Edgerton, Edward's childhood friend and son to his patron, develops a mad passion for Julia, inspired apparently by her virtue and their mutual love of painting. As Edward grows colder, more disaffected, and absent from his home, and Julia simply suffers, Edgerton haunts their house and her studio beyond the bounds of propriety.

In an bathetic reversal of *Othello's* plot, the widowed mother of Julia then marries a younger man, a drunk and abusive, if at times charming, Irishman. Matters come to a crisis at their wedding. Taking on the role of Iago with unbecoming relish — she actually believes that her daughter could be unchaste — Mrs. Clifford orchestrates a scene in which Edgerton dances a racy waltz with Julia. Employing one of Iago's most powerful arguments, Mrs. Clifford gloats to Edward, "I know where the shoe pinches, but what did you expect? Were you simple enough to imagine that a woman would true to her husband, who was false to her own mother?" (Simms 1970, 19, alluding to *Othello*, 1.3.291-92 and 3.3.210-12). "Fiend!" is Clifford's reply. After Edward leaves in a jealous rage, Mrs. Clifford arranges for Edgerton to take home the abandoned Julia; in the carriage, he assaults her. Edward, meanwhile, wanders the streets of Charleston and in a diversionary subplot, helps his friend Kingsley, the same man who had participated in the elopement, to foil card sharks who have cheated Kingsley out of his wealth. ("Put money in thy purse, Clifford," is Kingsley's command to Edward.) The card shark is exposed, grapples with Kingsley, and narrowly escapes out of a window. Despite this bracing infusion of male violence, however, things go from bad to worse. Julia, left alone by her husband, suffers a miscarriage from her mistreatment at Edgerton's hands and nearly dies. In a bedside colloquy with her husband, Julia's language is replete with haunting echoes of *Othello's* murder scene: "Do not look so harshly upon me. What have I done?" she asks. "Do not kill me with cruel looks; with words, that, if cruel from you, would sooner kill than the knife in savage hands. Tell me in what I have offended? What is it you think? For what am I to blame? What do you doubt — suspect?" (Simms 1970, 245, echoing *Othello*, 5.2.21, 262-63).

In desperation, Edward removes Julia to the frontier state of Alabama, where temporarily their happiness is restored and their marriage flourishes. But Edgerton follows them, and bound by an oath to the father, Edward Clifford again tolerates his presence until Edgerton commits an even worse outrage on Julia's person while she is nursing him, at her husband's request, in their home. Unable to take any more, Clifford challenges Edgerton to a duel and poisons Julia with prussic acid, making the crime look like an accidental overdose. In an ironic fulfillment of *Othello's* fractured muttering, "First to be hanged, and then to confess" (*Othello*, 4.1.37), Edgerton commits suicide, absolving Julia from all blame with a letter that confesses his own misdeeds. Too late, Edward also finds the long missive left behind by his wife, explaining all of Edgerton's behavior and confirming her abiding love for Edward. As in *Othello's* case, the "confession" that Clifford receives from his wife is a justification that brings him little psychic relief.

Although officially Julia's death is blamed on "apoplexy," Edward vows to give himself up to justice. But Kingsley, who has not played an altogether constructive role in the episode, convinces Edward that he acted justly and that he must live to atone for his crime or sin — the

novel is not quite sure which term applies to a context where Othello's crime has been defined as a wild kind of "justice" as well as a character fault. Accordingly, Edward banishes himself to Texas, lighting out for this new territory in order to cultivate that rich but neglected paradise. It is here that Edward achieves "atonement" (Simms 1970, 398). As one who loved not wisely but too well, Edward Clifford suffers exile rather than suicide; and the potential richness of his new abode makes it clear that Eden has not been completely lost to him.

### On Whiteness

In the all-European context of *Confession*, Edward Clifford is shielded from the paradoxes of race and color that haunt the polyracial domestic drama of "Caloya." The racial composition of Othello in Simms's novel is more complex, however, than the novel's studied avoidance of the subject might suggest. Edward is more passionate, and therefore more Shakespearean, than Othello himself. To this extent, his character is "whitened." At the same time, he has less motive and rationale for his jealousy and therefore demonstrates a certain kinship with Iago that "blackens" his character. Edward's kinship with Heathcliff suggests another "coloring" for this hero's trajectory that moves outside the (African) black / (European) white binary. He becomes the Irish other. Edward Clifford and Heathcliff, like Simms himself, can be characterized as "black" Irish.<sup>11</sup> Clifford, following the narrative path of Heathcliff before him and perhaps Rhett Butler after him, is an orphan who never finds comfort in his adoptive family, although Simms's hero insists on his status as a blood relation rather than a gypsy. Julia Clifford accepts him as a proper husband and, with a romantic gesture of self-immolation, crosses the class barrier that, according to her parents, makes Edward unworthy of her. But while Edward's self-identification with Othello disrupts the black / white binary of southern identity, it does not release him altogether from racial and color hierarchies.

Like Heathcliff and some other "dark" nineteenth-century English heroes, Edward is moved by passions beyond the ken of European manhood, but these passions are oriental and perhaps also Native American. As Elsie Michie points out, in *Shirley* Charlotte Brontë depicts the Irish character Malone as having a "high-featured, North-American-Indian sort of visage, which belongs to a certain class of Irish gentry, and has a petrified and proud look, better suited to the owner of an estate of slaves, than to the landlord of a free peasantry" (quoted on p.128). As in the case of Brontë's character, in Simms's imaginary America the Irish / Indian Edward Clifford is transformed into a beneficent (white) landlord whose freely dependent (white) wife absolves him from charges of slavish appetite and makes him the "landlord of a free peasantry."

Imagine Edward Clifford dressed in the oriental costume of Edwin Forrest's Othello, as he might have appeared on the Charleston stage. Shift the perspective a little, and imagine Edward as Metamora, a Native American alter ego for the Englished-oriental Othello. And beneath both costumes, imagine the transatlantic actor, whose whiteness reconciles these multiple identities in the stable gentility of Anglo-Saxon racial purity. It is ironic that only the actor, whose color changes with the stage and his makeup, becomes finally the paradigm for and guarantor of white racial privilege. The actor's position as this paradigm indicates finally how fragile, mutable, and "murky" the identity of whiteness is within the ideological matrix of *Confession*.

Within Simms's novel, of course, we never see Edward Clifford either take on or remove the symbolic trappings that constitute his changing identity. Instead, *Confession* addresses issues of race through strategies of displacement.<sup>12</sup> The novel's relationship to *Othello*, like that of "Caloya," is on one level de-stabilized by the free circulation of Shakespearean quotations and vocabulary; virtually anyone can speak in Iago's proverbial vein, and good as well as bad characters voice his sentiments about making money. On another level, it is complicated by multiple character identifications. Mrs. Clifford, for instance, is at once Brabantio the thwarted father figure and Iago the tempter. Iago, furthermore, exists first and finally within the breast of Edward Clifford. And, on the broadest structural level, the hero evades racial classification by the contrast between him and stock characters who appear at key points in the novel. He cannot be black because, unlike the slave Peter, Clifford is noble, well-spoken, industrious, and by Peter's own admission, naturally superior. (As they plot the elopement, Peter asks Clifford if he would buy him, appealing to the lawyer's sense of "stewardship.") If Edward is not African American, neither is he completely Irish when viewed against the stereotyped figure of Mr. Delaney, the young bon vivant — charming, lazy, drunk, and physically abusive — whom Mrs. Clifford marries after the death of Julia's father.<sup>13</sup> Clifford finally becomes white by virtue of who he is *not*.

In *Whiteness Visible*, Valerie Babb proposes that "whiteness is more than an appearance; it is a system of privileges accorded to those with white skin" (1998, 9). In *Confession*, this system of privileges is at first denied, then granted to Edward Clifford as he takes Julia / Desdemona for his bride. But in appropriating Othello as his model, Edward / Simms not only achieves an elevation in class for himself, but also looks both backward to past confections of skin and race, and forward to confections of skin, race, and class within the local American culture — Charleston — in which both author and character lived. To cast Edward Clifford as Irish (in the English tradition of Brontë and Scott) and as Othello (in both the English and American contexts) is to put into play the relation of whiteness to other categories of privilege. In a place and century when whiteness was

being produced rather than reproduced, Simms shows that southern writers who — it is assumed — entered the literary field with fixed notions of racial identity, were actually exploring, through Shakespearean allusions, whiteness as a category that constructs identity.<sup>14</sup> Edward, like Othello, finds that in following his passion, he loses his "occupation" and therefore the "whiteness" that he was at such pains to achieve. His own "confession" of jealousy and murder — the sins of a black race — reveals the hidden miscegenation in Clifford's marriage to Julia. He can regain the privilege of whiteness only by heading for Texas, a new Eden where Edward can reconstruct himself, in *Shirley's* phrase, as the "landlord of a free peasantry."

### Coda: 1856 and 1864

Having successfully disentangled both his hero and Shakespeare's from the color and race nexus that links the figures of the black African, the American negro slave, the Native American, and the Irish immigrant, Simms nevertheless would continue to question Edward Clifford's identity. 1856 saw the publication of *Confession's* second edition; among the additions and structural changes that Simms made to his novel appears a digressive footnote. Simms is prone to scholarly asides, even when they interrupt the climax of his action. In 1856, Simms marks the discovery of Julia's body with such a note. Unlike Shakespeare's Othello, Clifford poisons his victim, using prussic acid as his weapon of choice. When used in proper amounts, prussic acid is medicinal, but an overdose can be fatal. The doctor, however, determines that Julia Clifford died from apoplexy: "She must have had several fits. It was evident that she was conscious after the first, for she appears to have endeavored to reach the door. She was found at the entrance, lying upon the floor. When I saw her, she must have been lifeless a good hour" (Simms 1970, 381). To this, Simms the author adds: "The reader will be reminded of the melancholy details of Miss Landon — L.E.L. — whose fate is still a mystery" (381n).

In 1838, the poetess Letitia Elizabeth Landon married and moved with her husband to the Gold Coast of Africa, where within the year she had died under mysterious circumstances, probably from an overdose of prussic acid. Her husband George Maclean, it was rumored, kept a black mistress (with whom he may have had children) or even a harem of African women; either he or the mistress might have murdered Landon, or the infidelity of her husband might have pushed L.E.L. to commit suicide (Blanchard 1841, 1: 119, 176-81; Madden 1855, 2: 72-73 and 39-73, *passim*; Metcalfe 1962, 236-42).<sup>15</sup> Landon's biographer Laman Blanchard explicitly links L.E.L.'s marriage to that of Desdemona; during their wooing, she "seriously inclines" to Maclean's stories "as the 'gentle lady' afterwards 'married to the Moor,' might hearken to the travel's history that charmed her, and to tales of antres vast and deserts idle" (Blanchard 1841, 1: 116; see also Lootens



1999, 244-45). By 1855, when R. R. Madden's memoir was published, L.E.L.'s death had become associated with the disintegration of the English colonial project in Africa (Madden 1855, 2: 64, 49, and *passim*; see also Forbes 1874). For the English, Africa, with its disease, strife, and slavery, killed L.E.L.

When he added the footnote concerning L.E.L., Simms had himself experienced much death and some alienation. Between 1841 and 1856, Simms was living at Woodlands, the estate of his father-in-law. While he wrote steadily, he also worried about the farm's productivity and his family's well-being; by 1854 Simms's second wife had borne him ten children, five of whom had died (Guilds 1992, 258-59). In 1856, in what was one of Simms's most politically disastrous moves, the novelist made a lecture tour of the North in which he defended the state of South Carolina against Senator Charles Sumner's derogatory remarks about the state's role in the Revolutionary War (Guilds 1992, 124-27; Shillingsburg 1988). Whether or not the death of L.E.L. resonated with Simms's personal and political life, the sentiments about Africa, her people, and slavery that became attached to the legend of L.E.L. probably would have seemed just to the man who had written, in *Slavery in America*, that "murder awaits the missionary and the traveller who penetrates" Africa, where "civilization seems to be as far remote as ever from their attainment" (Simms 1838b, 74). *Othello's* preoccupation with race, color, and slavery — so conspicuously absent from *Confession* in 1841 — re-enters the novel in 1856 from the world of English letters, by way of Africa.

The 1864 edition of *Confession* adds a second, even darker footnote. In Chapter 28, entitled "Morals of Enterprise," Clifford's adventurous friend Kingsley envisions an American expansion into Canada, Texas, Cuba — perhaps even the West Indies — and urges Edward to pack up and join him in this pursuit of wealth and power (Simms 1970, 205-07). The movement of people and labor into Texas to grow cotton, he predicts, will also lead to changes in South Carolina and Georgia. Although the word "slavery" is not mentioned once, it is everywhere the subtext for this disquisition on America's manifest destiny. At the conclusion of Kingsley's peroration, in the 1864 edition there appears the following note: "All these speculations were written in 1840-41. I need not remark upon which have since been verified" (207). By virtue of this covert political frame, Simms's American *Othello* becomes finally a tale of race and slavery.

By 1864, Simms had experienced the wounding of his eldest son in the war, the death of his wife, the sack of Columbia, and the destruction of Woodlands, along with his extensive library, at the hands of stragglers from Sherman's army (Guilds 1992, 271-303). While *Othello's* blackness was still a taboo subject in public discourse, in his private letters Simms takes on for himself the identity of *Othello* and repeats, almost as a mantra, the sentiment that "*Othello's* occupation's

gone."<sup>16</sup> The phrase had always been a favorite of Simms. But while previously he had referred straightforwardly to the soldier's occupation in relation to characters from his Revolutionary War romances, in 1864 the Othello with no occupation is the author himself.<sup>17</sup> In some places, the loss of "occupation" refers to the confiscation of Simms's copyrights and loss of that income during the war, but in others the term refers more broadly to southern life and culture. With this act of literary appropriation, the assumption of Othello's identity, Simms reclaims the Shakespearean tragic hero as a white man who stands for not the African or the Moor, but for the American Southerner in defeat. But Simms, unlike his character Edward Clifford from *Confession*, cannot rediscover paradise in the bracing frontier of an imaginary Texas, where he can leave behind guilt, slavery, and racial strife. Not only does Simms lack the opportunity and means to light out for this new territory in 1864, but as the footnote to his novel sadly concedes, such a place did not and never had existed. Without the system of privileges that produce and reproduce whiteness, the southern Othello's occupation was truly gone.

### Notes

1. Edelstein (1982) takes the term "color consciousness" from Winthrop Jordan (1968, 4-11).
2. On the history of black Shakespearean actors in the U.S., see Hill (1984). On the politics of race surrounding the color of Othello in production, see Iyengar (2002).
3. Although this point is not directly relevant to Simms's *Confession*, Virginia Mason Vaughan notes that, after the Civil War, *Othello*'s popularity diminished, and the play's hero was whitened (1994, 160). Orientalism in the portrayal of Othello, according to Vaughan, was widespread when Salvini performed the role in the 1870s.
4. Woodrow Holbein (1983), for instance, cites appearances by a range of American and English actors, including: Thomas Abthorpe Cooper, Ellen Tree and Charles Kean, William Macready, Edwin Forrest, Edwin Booth, and Junius Brutus Booth. Performances of *Othello*, and some of the regional and racial politics attending them in the early 1800s, are discussed in Holbein 1983, 98-101.
5. See Simms 1952-56, 1: 117; 1: 428; 2: 186. On 15 May, 1846, Simms comments on reports about the rivalry between Macready and Forrest, which had culminated recently in a bout of hostile hissing in London and Edinburgh (Simms 1952-56, 162; and 162, note 122). The rivalry and rudeness that characterized Macready and Forrest's relations, and the hissing bouts in particular, are discussed in Moody 1950, 212-34. Finally, Simms offered to Forrest a play of his own invention, entitled *Norman Maurice, a Man of the People* (Simms 1952-56, 2: 346), although nothing developed from the gesture.

6. Richard Moody writes that, during Forrest's tour of Edinburgh in 1846, one reviewer complained that the actor's makeup made him look "more like a Shawnee or Mohican than a Moor" (Moody 1960, quoted in Edelstein 1982, 184).
7. Another Shakespeare comedy to which Simms refers directly in this story is *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In his "Letter to the Editor," Simms aligns Mingo with the old, fat, degraded, unsuccessful wooer Falstaff, who is baffled by two middle-class women, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page. The analogy compliments Caloya without really elevating her class status (Simms 2001, 254-55).
8. The biblical language here probably alludes to the narrative of Noah's son Cham, whose children are punished with blackness for the father's disobedience against God and his own father Noah (see MacDonald 1991, 58-59).
9. On Simms's Whiggish concept of history and the balance between freedom and hierarchy within his world view, see Gray 1986.
10. The Treaty of Nation Ford was signed on 13 March, 1840 (Hudson 1966, 64). In a *Memorial* sent to the South Carolina legislature on 31 July, 1840, the (white) citizens who had leased Indian lands from the Catawba agreed to the treaty (Brown 1966, 307). Simms finished his story during the summer of 1840, giving the manuscript to James Lawson for placement. After being rejected by the *Knickerbocker*, "Caloya" was published by P. C. Pendleton in the Savannah literary journal *Magnolia: or Southern Monthly*, in three installments from May-July, 1841 (Notes on "Caloya," Simms 2000, 394).
11. On Heathcliff and other figures of the "simianized Irish," see Michie 1992. On Simms's identification with the Irish and their fight for independence, see Kibler 2001. I am also indebted to Celia Daileader's discussion of Othello, Heathcliff, and Rhett Butler from her forthcoming book, *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth: Interracial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee* (Cambridge University Press).
12. A similar strategy of displacement, replacing blackness with Celtic identity, can be seen in Diana Henderson's (2003) analysis of Walter Scott's *Kenilworth* as an appropriation of *Othello*.
13. Perhaps complicating the racial equations further, *Othello* parodies sometimes refashioned the Moor as an Irish character. See, for instance, "General O'Thello; Or, the Wipe and the Wiper," an English parody of an Irish *Othello*, in which the general's name is Christy O'Thello (Jacobs and Johnson, no. 150, p. 55).
14. Noel Ignatiev (1995) explores how the Irish became "white" in nineteenth-century America, although he focuses largely on the urban North and stresses the ways in which violence

exacerbated the breach between Irish and African Americans in the cities generally and in organized labor in particular.

15. Whether Simms had in mind L.E.L.'s death when he killed off Julia Clifford with prussic acid cannot be known. The detail of death by an overdose of prussic acid, which was much discussed in L.E.L.'s case, suggests a direct connection, but is not conclusive. In an *Othello* travesty by comic actor Charles Mathew (1833) that precedes both L.E.L.'s demise and *Confession's* publication, for instance, the drunken Othello figure threatens his wife with prussic acid: "It is the shortest method of divorce — / Drink, false one, drink, and hold your peace!" (Mathew 1993, Scene 7, 57-60).
16. In an essay presented at the 2004 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, Nan Morrison examines the Charleston theater reviews of Francis Warrington Dawson, an English sympathizer of the South, during Reconstruction, and finds that, despite his strong political views, Dawson remains silent on the issue of Othello's race.
17. See, for instance, Simms to James Lawson, 20 August, 1837 (Simms 1952-56, 1:113); Simms to James Henry Hammond, 14 June, 1861 (Simms 1952-56, 4: 366); Simms to William Porcher Miles, 31 January, 1862 (Simms 1952-56, 4: 396); Simms to Richard Yeadon, 27 March, 1862 (Simms 1952-56, 4: 399); Simms to William Porcher Miles, 10 April 1862 (Simms 1952-56, 4: 401).

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