

The Don, the Moor, and the Betrayer: The "Kiss of Death" in Several Films of *Othello*

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Abstract

In the final act of *Othello*, the hero tells the lifeless Desdemona, "I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee" (5.2.359), a moment before taking his own life. The line constitutes one of the play's two indirect allusions to the "kiss of Judas," which is described in three of the four gospels (Luke 22.48; Matthew 26.48-49; Mark 14.44-45). In this essay, I consider the cinema's treatment of Othello's Judas kisses in about ten significant adaptations and/or appropriations of the tragedy produced between the years 1922 and 2006. My goal is to show how each particular film's treatment of the kisses speaks directly to the particular ways directors wish their audiences to relate to the character Othello by story's end — whether primarily as possessed victim, as savage murderer, as both, or as a figure so complex as to defy any such dualistic categorization. I believe that, for filmmakers, the kiss serves as a kind of "ocular proof" of each film's ethical hermeneutic priorities, especially regarding the gender dynamics of the play's narrative.

In two key moments of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather 2* (1974), Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) kisses his brother Fredo (John Cazale) as a kind of "ocular proof" of his unspoken decision to murder him. In a now-legendary scene, Michael clutches his brother's head with both hands, stares directly into his eyes, kisses him roughly on the mouth, and declares, "I know it was you, Fredo. You broke my heart." (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Especially in the context of the Cuban revolution, whose celebratory origin serves as the occasion for the scene, the kiss renders explicit themes of love and violence which define not only the brothers' relationship but also the internal battle being fought over Michael's soul.¹ Coppola stages the kiss as perhaps the pivotal moment in the saga, for in choosing to kill Fredo rather than forgive him, Michael will seal his own fate. Later in the film, during the brothers' funeral for their mother, Michael kisses Fredo a second time, signaling to hit man Neri (Richard Bright) that, because their mother is dead, the hit can finally occur. Thus Coppola alludes to two crucial biblical passages —

the archetypal first murder of Abel by his brother Cain, and the betrayal of Jesus by his beloved disciple Judas — to dramatize Michael's damnation.

Both Coppola and screenwriter-novelist Mario Puzo have spoken about their nervousness in screening Michael's murder of Fredo. As Puzo explains, "We had a disagreement. . . . I didn't want Fredo to be killed . . . Psychologically, I felt that if Michael killed his brother while his mother was still alive, the audience would never forgive him" ("Coppola and Puzo" 2001). Together, the writers settled on two focused strategies for handling the murder. The obvious one was to delay the actual murder of Fredo until after the death of his mother. The more interesting strategy, I think, involved their attempt to aestheticize or render "poetic" the murder and the two kisses leading up to it, a move that, Eric S. Christianson says, succeeds by "shifting interest from consequence and realism to aesthetics" (2005, 118). Coppola thus manages a visual language capable of redeeming the tragic protagonist at precisely the same moments that his damnation is most glaringly self-evident.

Long before *The Godfather*, Shakespeare's *Othello* appropriated the biblical "kiss of death" for what may have been quite similar purposes. In two separate, highly aestheticized kisses, Othello seals his own fate, the first one prefacing his murder of Desdemona, the second his self-murder. Both after and before Othello "puts out the light" in the play's final scene, he kisses his sleeping wife, exclaiming "'One more, one more. / Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee / And love thee after. One more, and that's the last.' *He kisses her.*" (*Othello*, 5.2.17-19); then he smothers her. Moments later, after Iago's treachery is exposed and the horrified Othello has stabbed himself, he falls upon Desdemona, speaking his final words, "I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this: / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss" (5.2.368-69).² The words suggest one reason why the "base Indian" referred to in Q1 likely is a "base Judean" (5.2.356), since the play's final allusion to the "kiss of death" is the culmination of a longer series of complex references to Judas which — as Peter Milward (1989) has shown — begin as early as the play's first scene. John Vyvyan argues in *The Shakespearean Ethic* that *all* of Shakespeare's tragedies are constructed around a "dreadful conception, the rejection of the heavenly and consequent invasion of the hellish," which, he believes, derives from the story of Judas (1959, 102). Speaking of Othello's possession by Iago, Vyvyan says of Judas "that when he betrayed Christ, the devil entered into him. And the life of Judas," he goes on, "might have been Shakespeare's paradigm of tragedy" (102).

In light of the Judas narrative's influence on Shakespeare and, more specifically, the thematic centrality of the two Judas kisses in *Othello*, this essay considers the myriad ways in which the "kiss of death" has been adapted in major film and television adaptations and appropriations of the play. In spite of the fact that the meaning of the biblical allusions will be lost on a majority of

modern viewers, most filmmakers have managed to reinvent them in creative, often highly self-conscious ways that shed light on their own aesthetic and political priorities as adaptors of the play. After explaining in greater detail the meaningfulness of Shakespeare's allusions to Judas within *Othello*, I analyze how multiple cinematic appropriations of them reveal the shifting racial and gender politics of the play's reception throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. For many filmmakers, I would argue, the Judas kisses offer unique opportunities for clarifying how their adaptations are interpreting and attempting to negotiate the complex ethical and ideological questions the play raises.

Allusions to Judas in *Othello*

In each of the three Synoptic Gospels, Judas Iscariot is said to have warmly kissed, or attempted to kiss, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane to inform the soldiers who is the man to be arrested. In Mark, the kiss is described in considerable detail:

Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. (*New Oxford Annotated Bible* 2001, 14.43-46)

Both Luke and Matthew repeat this basic scenario with significant variations (see below), but the Gospel of John says nothing about the kiss. From a practical perspective, the kiss may seem somewhat bizarre or superfluous, since, presumably, Judas can just as easily say to the guards, "That's Jesus, right there." The kiss of Judas should be understood, therefore, in largely symbolic terms that speak to the larger themes of hypocrisy, betrayal, love, and violence raised across the differing Gospel accounts of the arrest and Passion of Jesus. The power of the kiss as a focal point for the convergence of such complex themes also explains why it has, for so many centuries, been a key subject for visual artists.

Why did Shakespeare choose to make *Othello*'s second "Judas kiss," along with the words accompanying it, his final gesture, rather than the, arguably, more thematically- appropriate smiting of the "turbaned Turk" (5.2.362)? Although *Othello*'s last words seem simple enough on the surface, even with their allusion to Judas Iscariot, they are quite complex, both in terms of their literal meaning and the staging challenges they present. To begin, *Othello*'s dying words and kiss make him something of a liar because he had claimed in the earlier part of the scene that *those*

kisses would be the "last" he would ever give Desdemona. Although such a lie may not seem very problematic in the context of murder and suicide, it should remind us that Desdemona also died lying when she denied Othello's guilt and claimed her death a suicide: when Emilia asks "Who hath done this deed?," Desdemona responds, "Nobody, I myself" (5.2.132-33). Her lie prompts Othello to remark, "She's like a liar gone to burning hell. / 'Twas I that killed her" (5.2.138-39). Whereas Othello's simile can do nothing to dissuade the audience from believing in the sinless nature of Desdemona's death, his own trivial dying lie reinforces the inevitability of his damnation. Thus, the two juxtaposed lying deaths validate what Karl S. Guthke points out in his cultural history of "Last Words": in *Othello*, "the conceptual framework of holy and unholy dying is introduced *expressis verbis*, and it is thrown in doubt more challengingly than elsewhere in Shakespeare" (1992, 43).

Othello's last words, like the final kiss, seem intended to redeem Othello partly, by rendering him pathetic, a broken victim of Iago rather than the strong warrior he successfully resurrects in his "turbaned Turk" speech. Although the pathos achieved through Othello's dying kiss likely results from Shakespeare's Coppola-like attempt to preserve the audience's sympathy for his hero even as he is being dragged down to hell, the passage is undeniably fraught with dangers and contradictions, especially for a modern audience. "I kissed thee ere I killed thee" both states a literal fact and serves as an admission that had Othello never loved Desdemona, she would have lived. It therefore alludes to that most problematic of lines in the previous speech, where Othello claims the crime of having loved "too well" (5.2.353). Even as Othello embraces his own guilt, then, he shifts attention away from his unforgivable crime of murder, which allies him with Judas, and onto the loving nature that allies him with the Christ he's already rejected. The following line, "No way but this, / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss," essentially means "I had no choice other than to kill my *self* before kissing you again, in order to undo what I have done." Of course, Othello's crime cannot be undone, a fact which underscores the problematic nature of the chiasmus which would manipulatively shift our attention away from Othello's damnation to his redemption.

A modern audience may struggle especially with the gender implications of this attempted shift, since Othello's final use of Desdemona's dead body for his own purposes merely reinforces the actual violence of the murder. One might argue that *Othello* the play commits the same crimes against women that Othello commits within it. Indeed, this possibility reminds me of Barbara Hodgdon's useful discussion of how, as a result of traditional stagings of *Othello*'s final scene, the "playtext, like Desdemona herself, becomes a textual body which is signified upon in order to legitimate or resist strategic, shared cultural assumptions, fantasies, and obsessions concerning male subjectivity and female objectification" (1991, 217). Such a contradiction, that a certain type of redemption might be achieved through the symbolic re-enactment of the very crime that

made Othello's *actual* redemption impossible, might remind us of another contradictory dynamic involving Judas: that is, the Christian religion's dependence on his betrayal of Jesus to bring about the salvation of all believers. Both the Gospel of John and the recently discovered Gospel of Judas claim, in fact, that Judas's betrayal was not merely foreseen by Jesus, but actually demanded by him. Of the four authorized gospels, only Mark, who authors the original Judas narrative, and Matthew claim that Judas betrayed Jesus entirely of his own volition — that is, unprompted either by Jesus or his enemies. In both narratives, Judas is at least partly motivated by greed, as the chief priests promise him a reward for his betrayal (see Mark 14.11 and Matthew 26.14-15). Both Luke and John famously argue, however, that *Satan* actually possessed Judas's body prior to the kiss (see Luke 22.3 and John 13.2 and 13.27). Whereas John suggests that Satan is able to enter Judas's body only because Jesus allows it, Luke offers no comment on the matter. The Gospel of Judas makes no mention of Satan, suggesting quite explicitly that Jesus tells Judas to betray him (9.27-30). Regardless of which text we read or how we interpret Judas's relationship to Jesus, however, the central contradictions remain; and because of Othello's repeated allusions to Judas Iscariot, all of these competing readings will enrich the moral crises we undergo in the theater, the cinema, or favorite reading chair.

Cinema, as the most versatile of visual art forms, is of particular interest, in part because of the act of the kiss itself, which best communicates *visually* the implications of *Othello's* Judas allusions. All of the major films maintain what I would describe as the theater's obsessive focus on Othello's two kisses of death. The famous nineteenth-century American actor Edwin Booth, for example, explained his own approach to staging the final scene thus: "I prefer the bed at the side of the stage, with the head towards the audience; it is of more importance that Othello's face should be seen than Desdemona's dead body, and the killing is partly hidden at the same time" (quoted in Furness 1886, 292n). The quotation emphasizes the importance of the kiss in establishing the pathos of Othello's death specifically; the fact that he is a murderer of an innocent woman can be under-emphasized if Desdemona's face is buried in shadow and if the audience can see Othello's face. Another question actors regularly asked had to do with whether or not Othello actually manages to kiss Desdemona before dying. While the term "this" in "no way but this" certainly suggests that he does so, we know from numerous accounts that it has also been common for Othello to die "attempting to reach the bed, or just after reaching it" (Sprague 1963, 221). Arthur Colby Sprague tells us that "Macready, from quite early in his career, had made much of Othello's attempt to reach the bed, staggering, or dragging himself, toward it," and that Samuel Phelps, James William Wallack, and Booth all died in the process of similar staggerings and draggings (1963, 220). We can only evaluate the impact of this interpretation in relation to each individual production, of course,

but a few generalizations seem feasible: on the one hand, it's possible to speculate that omitting the actual kiss could diminish the pathos of Othello's death; this has to do with the fact that the kiss could be played to humanize Othello, both by exhibiting his culpability and emphasizing his passions rather than the cold stoicism some observers attribute to him. On the other hand, if Othello dies before, or just after, reaching the bed, attention will be on his action, his body in motion, and not on Desdemona's lifeless body; in such a reading, the failure of Othello's powerful body to work any longer might symbolize his downfall in dramatic terms, functioning in a similar way as the moment when Montano, that "puny whipster," manages to disarm the hero (5.2.241). Even when the intended "kiss of death" is not performed, then, Othello's tragedy can be said to be emphasized precisely at the expense of Desdemona's tragedy.

Moreover, we might say that our ethical response to the play, and to the protagonist, hinges very often on how individual performances elect to stage the final kiss. If the "kiss of death" is omitted, the link between Judas and Othello surely will be less explicit. We should remember, though, that whereas Mark and Matthew say that Judas actually kisses Jesus, thereby signaling to the guards that he is the one to be arrested, the Gospel of Luke says that Jesus averts the kiss, asking "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" (22.48). As mentioned earlier, Luke also introduces the idea that Satan literally possesses Judas prior to the last supper (22.3). Luke's addition of this crucial detail to the story explains Judas's betrayal of Jesus in supernatural terms which, Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King argue, clarified to believers "that nothing that happened was out of God's control" (2007, 21). Luke's omission of the actual kiss, then, might be regarded as functional in two senses: first, it suggests that Judas is at the mercy of events larger than himself; though he appears to be in control, an agent whose deceptive kiss will lead to Jesus's capture, he is in fact a pawn who has been tricked; and there may be a secondary suggestion that, because Judas is possessed by Satan, his kiss would violate Jesus's purity. That Othello is possessed by Iago over the course of the play has been argued persuasively by numerous critics other than Vyvyan,³ but the possession theme is especially interesting in terms of how it relates to that final kiss. If staging issues speak mainly to the question of how demonstratively Othello's guiltiness is to be displayed in his final moments, then how one reads the possession metaphor is quite important: is the emphasis to be placed more on Othello as the betrayer of Christ, or as the pawn of Satan? To sum up the issue, since the manner in which the final kiss is "staged" engages *Othello's* central possession metaphor, the kiss speaks directly to what, I would argue, is the major ethical conflict experienced by the play's modern readers: competing outrage over the methodical destruction of a racially oppressed individual, and that same individual's methodically rationalized violence against women.

Filming Othello's Kisses of Death

In what follows, I'll turn to the treatment of Othello's Judas kisses in nine significant adaptations and/or appropriations of the tragedy produced between the years 1922 and 2006. My goal here is to show how each particular film's treatment of the kiss speaks directly to the particular ways that directors wish their audiences to relate to Othello by story's end — whether primarily as possessed victim, as savage murderer, as both, or as a figure so complex as to defy any such dualistic categorization. I believe the kiss serves as a kind of "ocular proof" of each film's ethical hermeneutic priorities, especially regarding the gender dynamics of the play's narrative.

Of the major film productions of *Othello*, only the 1952 Welles version omits reference to a final kiss, as well as the lines that accompany it. The film does feature one of the most memorable murder scenes of them all, though, with Othello (Welles) kissing Desdemona (Suzanne Cloutier) through the sheer white handkerchief that, he believes, proves her guilt. In this case, the kiss does not register clearly as a biblical allusion, mainly because it is not retrospectively contextualized by the later kiss that follows Othello's admission of having betrayed Desdemona. It does register Welles's own view of the kiss's centrality in the actual act of betrayal, however, as it becomes there a literal "kiss of death." The omission of Othello's final lines and kiss also are consistent with the stoical character that Welles portrays in the final scene — cold, unemotional, even detached.

Interestingly, of all filmic appropriations of *Othello*, it is George Cukor's near-contemporaneous *A Double Life* (1947) that offers the most thorough commentary on the play's second "kiss of death." The film focuses on the demise of method actor Tony John, played by Ronald Coleman, who so immerses himself into the role of Othello during a 300-performance theatrical run that he winds up killing one innocent woman and nearly killing his ex-wife, Brita (Signe Hasso), whom he still loves and wishes to remarry. Because Tony has lost himself in roles before, he is reluctant to take the part of the Moor, but he is baited into doing it by a producer who feels confident that Tony's gimmick for murdering Desdemona will be a huge success. This gimmick, which a producer calls "brilliant" and "believable," is a creative reworking of the murder scene: "Remember that thing you figured out for the ending? Where you strangle Desdemona with a kiss?" Claiming that the idea "sounds ridiculous" to him now, Tony is nonetheless flattered enough by the producer's praise that he finally agrees to put on *Othello*. Sure enough, the theater audience loves the climactic scene and the show is a hit, but as Tony begins to lose control, he unconsciously kisses to death one of his lovers, Pat (Shelley Winters), believing in the moment that he really is Othello and that she has betrayed him. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) The newspapermen reporting on the crime, not suspecting Tony at all,

nonetheless see the obvious links between the murder and the finale of the smash-hit Broadway show. One sleazy reporter (Millard Mitchell), who coins the term "kiss of death" in order to sell more papers, convinces Tony's agent Bill (Edmond O'Brien) that they both will profit from playing up the parallels. He asks Bill to imagine the story in the next morning's paper: "The department's medical examiner said the attractive young waitress was a victim of what he termed a 'kiss of death.' He likened the crime to the murder of Desdemona in the current Broadway production of *Othello*." Bill agrees to milk the coincidence for all it's worth, but he also begins to suspect that the increasingly unstable Tony may have been the murderer of the poor girl. In the film's last scene, which takes place on the stage, Tony/Othello nearly strangles Brita/Desdemona in their final performance of the play, but he comes to his senses just in time to turn his wrath upon himself, using Othello's final knife-thrust to perform his own suicide. Tony's final words are not "smote him thus," however, as he dies pleading with Bill not to "let them say I was a bad actor," and muttering Brita's name over and over. He closes his eyes in a close-up while Brita weeps over him. Our memory of Pat's murder is distant.

A Double Life offers a reading of the *Othello* "kiss of death" that just barely keeps the Judas themes of betrayal in focus, arguing that the kiss's real value has more to do with the profitability of the spectacle, particularly the intersection between sex and violence. Is it not interesting, though, that only a few years after *A Double Life*, Welles — hardly the most capitalist of American directors — would depict an Othello who actually murders Desdemona with a kiss? Like the Welles film, most *Othello* films aren't all that interested in manipulating the kiss for the purposes of mere spectacle. Rather, they seize on the importance of the kiss as an opportunity for thematic, ethical, even ideological reflection and clarification.

Dmitri Buchowetski's 1922 *Othello*, the first great feature-length film of the play, presents the kisses in a fairly conservative manner, using the second shot as a deliberate visual echo of the first. In both, the physically imposing Othello (Emil Jannings in blackface) looms over Desdemona (Ica von Lenkeffy) in a tight medium shot whose claustrophobic quality is heightened by the considerably dark background. This background is especially pronounced as a result of the strong key lighting on the virginally white Desdemona, resulting in a thematically rich clash of whiteness and blackness that Othello's bizarre shirt complements and draws out. Prior to the first kiss, a dialogue intertitle reads "One kiss and this the last — I do love thee!" before an awkward — but highly symbolic — overhead shot of the kiss shows Othello's head and shoulders eclipsing Desdemona's entire person. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) It is a haunting, if all too brief, moment in the film. Unfortunately, the closeness with which the shot of the second kiss mimics the first works to erase the brutality of the murder, both by reestablishing

the characters' earlier positions in the frame — as if no violence has occurred — and by presenting the dead Desdemona as exactly the same beautiful, placid character she was prior to being killed. In Buchowetski as in Welles, Desdemona is presented as a prop through which the audience can measure Othello's suffering. Though an intertitle accompanying the final kiss quotes verbatim the "I kissed thee ere I killed thee" lines (5.2.354-55), the scene emphasizes Othello as a character more betrayed than betraying.

A more recent production essentially employing the same strategy, and to the same end, is Oliver Parker's film (1995), starring Laurence Fishburne. Parker's approach to the two kisses appears designed merely to exacerbate the pathos of Othello's own tragic demise. As in Buchowetski, the two scenes clearly reference one another: primarily centering Othello's face in dignifying close-ups; employing low fill lighting (the room is candle-lit) so as to envelop the pair in soothing, rather than particularly ominous, shadows; and being backed by Charlie Mole's emotionally manipulative Hollywood score. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Though in the first shot Parker's direction of Desdemona (Irène Jacob) waking during the kiss, and returning it with some passion, renders her momentarily more than a lifeless doll, it winds up serving little purpose, other than to suggest to the viewer how difficult Othello's task will be in having to kill her. As he reluctantly wrests himself from her grasp, a viewer might even logically ascribe a certain heroic quality to his will power and strength. In the second kiss scene, Desdemona remains entirely outside the frame until Othello kisses her; for no more than five seconds, the camera shows Desdemona's face, and then Othello collapses on the bed beside her, his body blocking our view of her entirely. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Along with the Buchowetski film, Parker's *Othello* might be said to come closest to Edwin Booth's nineteenth-century vision of the kiss in its unembarrassed and un-ironic heroizing of Othello and relegation of Desdemona to the shadows.

Fortunately, most recent films of *Othello* tend to reflect more critically on the gender implications of the "kiss of death" scene, using particular strategies, as *The Godfather 2* did, to manage audience identifications and comment on the moral positions of the major characters. Though Nikolai Serebriakov's production of *Othello* (1994), for *Shakespeare: The Animated Tales*, chooses to make Othello die before he can reach the bed, it displays Desdemona's corpse prominently in two opposed-angle shots. The first shot is from behind the hulking Othello, who kneels before her limp, ghostly-white body, which stretches diagonally across the frame. The more powerful second shot, from behind and above her head, emphasizes her lifeless body, splayed out endlessly upon the bed like a corpse by Mantegna, and results in the highly atypical banishment of the male hero into the distant background shadows. He looks small, even insignificant. His

final words are the two lines beginning with "I kissed thee," the inclusion of which calls attention to the elision of the actual kiss. I would argue that the animators' desire to illustrate Othello's diminished stature — in both senses of the term — requires the "long shot" effect they achieve here. Furthermore, the fact that Othello is filmed *through* Desdemona's body, rather than alongside it or alone, suggests the ideological deliberateness of the elision.

A yet more deliberate approach is that taken by Vishal Bhardwaj in his 2006 Hindi crime thriller *Omkara* (2006), where the brutality of the murder, and the murderer, is very much on display. In the climactic final scene, the couple is positioned on their bedroom swing bed, which is used as a site of intimacy throughout the film. As Dolly's (Kareena Kapoor) awareness of Omkara's (Ajay Devgn) intention to hurt her grows more acute, he kisses her hands several times and embraces her gently. A close-up shot/reverse-shot alternates between Dolly's and Omkara's faces — one terrified, one coldly stoical — giving each equal time and attention. Omkara then thrusts Dolly downward onto the swing and hovers menacingly above her. For a moment, the camera lingers in the space between them, with both of their heads slightly out of the frame until Omkara's face gradually forces its way to the center. He inches his mouth towards hers, clearly intending to kiss her, until a look of confusion, or perhaps disgust, crosses his face, and he stops himself just before kissing her. He then smothers her with the pillow as she gasps and clutches at his shoulders. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) After she is dead, Omkara never kisses Dolly again, and, after he shoots himself, he collapses onto the floor just under the swing that still holds her body. An overhead shot peers down at their two bodies in what may be an homage to the memorable crane shot of Romeo and Juliet's corpses in Baz Lurhmann's film (1996). Due to the camera position, the rocking swing containing Dolly's body repeatedly erases Omkara's body, calling attention to the lovers' separateness and allowing the innocent Desdemona character, at least momentarily, to dominate the frame.

Surprisingly, one of the most radical modern renderings of the Judas kisses comes in Tim Blake Nelson's teen *Othello* film, *O*. Prior to the murder, Odin (Mekhi Phifer) and Desi (Julia Stiles) are seated on her bed in a close-up two shot, but interestingly, it is Desi who is in focus, not Odin. Odin's face eventually comes into focus — through the subtle rack-focus technique Nelson often uses in the film — only as he apologizes and begins to kiss her. His body gradually engulfs and then erases hers, though, as he rolls on top of her, his kiss imperceptibly metamorphosing before our eyes into the act of strangulation. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Later, after the otherwise unfortunately-reduced Emilia character, Emily (Rain Phoenix), sees what Odin has done to Desi, she erupts in a furious verbal attack on Odin. When the distraught teen tries to embrace or kiss the body, Emily shoves him off, repeating "Get off of her!", suggesting in the

clearest terms that Odin is no longer worthy to touch Desi, and that his touch is contaminating. Though Nelson reverses the order of the would-be final kiss and Odin's "turbaned Turk" speech, the body of Desi is prominently displayed in the film's closing montage, when her father Dean Brabble (John Heard) breaks down sobbing over the gurney on which she is being carted away. Like Bhardwaj's *Omkara*, then, *O* resists the erasure of Desdemona, manipulating the final "kiss of death" to highlight the Othello character as betrayer, *as well as* victim.

Richard Eyre's 2004 film *Stage Beauty* confronts, on a metatheatrical level, the politics of performing Desdemona's death scene. The story imagines Restoration actor Edward Kynaston's (Billy Crudup) final days as one of London's great "boy actors," particularly the sexual confusion he experiences as a result of his declining fame due to the rise of actresses in women's parts. One of these actresses, Kynaston's former dresser, Maria (Claire Danes), eventually replaces him in the role of Desdemona and, in the film's final scene, plays opposite his Othello. The film's gender politics, it must be admitted, are somewhat hard to nail down, which may be a virtue: on the one hand, it ends problematically, with both Kynaston and Maria discovering naturalistic acting two centuries early by assuming their "proper" roles, with the man playing Othello and the woman Desdemona; on the other hand, few mainstream films explore so openly the personal suffering that culturally-constructed gender roles can cause. The film is careful to point out the arbitrariness of these roles right on up through the seemingly conventional ending in which boy gets girl (or is it here the case that girl gets boy?). More important for our purposes is the film's exploration of human identity and sexuality through its creative re-imagining of a crucial moment in English theater history. How do male actors' portrayals of women's actions serve to define the codes, ideals, and limitations of a socially acceptable femininity? More important, how do women *really* act? Within the film, Shakespeare's *Othello* is the testing ground for the rehearsal of such fascinating questions.

The *Othello* scene which Eyre and screenplay writer Jeffrey Hatcher choose to highlight, interestingly and predictably, is the beginning of act 5, scene 2, Othello's first last-kiss, and his murder of Desdemona. The scene is played over again and again, staged by Kynaston's theater company at the beginning and ending of the film, and rehearsed by Kynaston and Maria at several points in between. Less predictable is the omission of the actual kiss from all such scenes. Invariably the different versions of the scene start with "It is the cause" (5.2.1) but, after "thy light relume" (5.2.13), the scene skips ahead to Desdemona awakening and then skips Othello and Desdemona's exchange until the moment he begins to smother her (5.2.83). Through such deliberate omissions and the film's running commentary on the irreconcilability of love and violence, *Stage Beauty* suggests that Othello's kisses of death can only be conceived as pandering

to male fantasies of women as mere objects. In a film determined to show how real women might really *act* in response to male attempts to control them — whether we mean by this Othello's murder of Desdemona or male actors' usurpation of female roles — the kisses of death must be rejected as the exhausted tropes of a bygone age. Poetical femininity is replaced by natural femininity.

Early in the film, as Maria and Kynaston are confusedly exploring their attraction to one another, the couple begins playfully to rehearse the murder scene with Maria in the role of Othello. After she booms, "It is too late" (5.2.83), she thrusts Kynaston/Desdemona downward and climbs on top of him. At this point, their physical closeness awakens them both out of their role-playing. They stare into one another's eyes as their mouths draw closer together, until Maria mutters, "She doesn't kiss him," before climbing off and awkwardly pretending that nothing has happened. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Later on, when they finally do kiss, it happens in Maria's bed, where Kynaston has been allowed to rest in the midst of his social downfall. The camera lingers on their passionate kissing, careful to film them in alternating positions, first with her on top and then with him on top. At the point when it seems inevitable that they will make love, Kynaston kisses her neck and whispers "Tell me something." "Anything," she replies, and he asks "How do you die," revealing his curiosity about how she plays the death scene in her own production of *Othello*. As happened earlier, she pushes him away from her and flees from his embrace. Whereas in the earlier scene, Maria cannot bring herself to kiss Kynaston because they are enacting the murder of Desdemona, in this scene their kissing and lovemaking is interrupted by his talk of dying. For the attentive audience member, the pun on "die" cannot be missed, suggesting further the problematic links between violence and love. Maria will have none of it: "Your old tutor . . . never taught you how to suffer like a woman. Or love like a woman . . . I always hated you as Desdemona. You never fought! You just died beautifully. No woman would — would die like that, no matter how much she loved him. A woman would fight!" At last the film clarifies its refusal to correlate "dying" with pleasure, of any sort, or to allow Othello to describe his abuse of Desdemona as loving "too well."

The film ends with a kiss, as romantic comedies must always do, but only after Desdemona (i.e., Maria) has fought back against Othello, erasing the Desdemona of an earlier tradition. After Maria-Desdemona and Kynaston-Othello finish bowing to the "Bravos" and roars of the theater crowd, which they've blown away with their naturalistic performance of the murder scene, Maria reminds the audience, "Please, we still have one more scene." But the scene we are given is not of Othello's final speech, or his final kiss of Desdemona; instead, the scene cuts to the couple backstage, *after* the play. They are overjoyed by what they've achieved. Maria shouts "You almost killed me," and Kynaston replies, "I did kill you. You just didn't die." Maria smiles at his mature

separation of the literal and figurative meanings of "kill" and "die," and now it is her turn to play. "Why didn't you finish me off," she asks. "I finally got the death scene right," is his response, and then she runs to him, and a kiss of life follows their mutual embrace. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) *Stage Beauty* not only rejects the "kiss of death" that concludes *Othello* but also offers what is perhaps the most extensive commentary on it in cinema. That iconic kiss is systematically replaced by yet another equally iconic one (for modern audiences): that is, the obligatory kiss marking the conclusion of Rom-Coms.

Stage Beauty is by no means the only production to think about cinematic opportunities for translating *Othello*'s biblical "kiss of death." After more than a century of kissing on film, one wonders whether Shakespeare's allusions to Judas actually resonate for typical audience members at all or even, in some cases, for the adaptors and appropriators of *Othello*, who will have other famous kisses to draw on. This will depend, of course, on the particular audience member or adaptor, but I would argue that, either way, most of the same themes established in the Judas story can be preserved through allusions to iconic cinematic kisses, especially the cinematic "kiss of death" re-invented by such influential films as *The Godfather 2*.

The case in point, and the natural culmination of this essay's film survey, is Andrew Davies's 2001 televised film *Othello*, directed by Geoffrey Sax. A modern-language adaptation set in early twenty-first-century London, the story focuses on the rise and fall of John Othello (Eamonn Walker) as Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Service. Narrated by the Iago figure, Ben Jago (Christopher Eccleston), a corrupt policeman and John's best friend, the film effectively reworks *Othello* for the television crime drama genre. Absorbing fairly easily the usual themes of that genre — corruption, betrayal, male rivalry, and so forth — this *Othello* also accrues new meanings through its absorption of the genre's commonly employed visual motifs, including the "kiss of death."

In a crucial scene that explicitly announces itself as the film's turning point, the moment when John convinces himself of Dessie's (Keeley Hawes) guilt once and for all and decides to kill her, two kisses symbolically capture the protagonist's narrative predicament and moral fate. John and Jago are out to dinner with Dessie and the Emilia character Lulu (Rachael Stirling), when a tipsy John lays bare his anxieties and feelings of anger and sadness about Britain's racist past and present, erecting a boundary line between what he has experienced as a black man and what the others are capable of understanding: "I can't explain that [the experience of his painful past] to you. I don't really expect you to understand." John's aloneness is dramatically highlighted at this moment, just as Michael Cass (Richard Coyle) surprises the table in an attempt to explain to John that his suspicions about Dessie are unjust. John is outraged. When Dessie tells him he's "being idiotic," he

thrusts her towards him, stares directly into her eyes, and threatens, "Don't you ever speak to me like that again," in a moment clearly intended to remind us of Othello striking Desdemona in the play (4.1.240). Dessie is terrified and apologizes. John then grabs her and shoves her from him before lunging at Michael and is only stopped by Jago, who forces himself between the two men. Michael departs, but Jago continues to embrace John, staring into his eyes, and then he kisses him on the cheek. John then seems composed again, *acting* as if everything is alright. "Let's all be friends," he says, holding up his wine and offering a toast to "my friends" and "my beautiful wife," at whom he stares ominously, and then kisses on the shoulder and embraces. The meanings communicated in the distance between those two kisses are multiple: Jago's loving kiss is a promise to John that an appropriate time for vengeance is coming; it therefore serves simultaneously to comfort John and to seal his fate as a duped murderer of his innocent beloved. John's kiss of Dessie appropriates and transfers Jago's lies, comforting her by suggesting that all will be fine, yet announces to the audience that her death is now inevitable. Somewhat unnecessarily, a bell tolls as the camera shifts from the embracing couple to a close-up of Jago. He confirms the messages conveyed by the two kisses, characteristically speaking through the fourth wall, asking us to understand what has just transpired: "So what do you think? I know, I feel it too. I'm almost sorry I started this. Too late now. He's up and running. It's beyond my control." (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) As in *Othello*, the deceived husband will kiss Desdemona once more, after she is dead, and realize the terrible mistake he has made. Interestingly, the film ends with a nearly identical repetition of its opening shot — of John kissing Dessie in their bed, their bodies bathed in soothing violet shadows, a voiceover about love and race and politics (also from the opening) reminding us that this is a story framed by two kisses, the first one mutual, the final one imposed. As in so many filmed versions of *Othello*, the kiss remains a central motif, but here crime films such as *The Valachi Papers*, *A Double Life*, or *The Godfather 2* seem more likely to resonate for audience members than do the Gospels. The archetypal "kiss of death" is trumped, in other words, by a cinematic kiss of death.

Due in part to the gradual diminishment of biblical literacy since the late nineteenth century, filmmakers have always faced the question of what to do with the play's Judas allusions. Although the specific meanings and significance of those allusions have become less clear to audiences over time, their value for individual productions has arguably increased as the play has continued to evolve throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. One major traceable change between eighteenth- and twenty-first-century productions is, as we've seen, a lessened interest in *Othello* as the tragic tale of one man's woe and a greater interest in it as a meditation on the costs of systemic racism and misogyny.

Thus there is a greater pressure on modern productions to interrogate Othello as a moral being and, more important, to interrogate the underlying social pressures that facilitate his demise. Is Othello primarily the victim, the victimizer, or both? Is he merely a pawn of that "devil" Iago, a complicit agent in the oppressive system that destroys him, or is he the sacrificial lamb, the scapegoat upon which the crimes of power and patriarchy must necessarily be cast? Since the range of questions his narrative provokes remains strikingly similar to those provoked by the competing Judas narratives within the bible, filmmakers of all political persuasions typically benefit more from adapting the biblical allusions than simply eliminating them. As we've seen, the unique contours of the filmmakers' hermeneutic and ideological priorities can be determined in part according to *how* they adapt the two Judas kisses.

On the conservative end of the scale, usually period films, directors continue to play the Judas scenes less as markers of Othello's betrayal of Desdemona and more as markers of his self-betrayal and dignity in the face of death. In Parker's film, for example, the lighting, the mise-en-scène, and the soundtrack all conspire to emphasize the fall of a great man. On the other end of the scale, usually modernizations and more free-ranging appropriations of *Othello*, directors show great willingness to rethink the scenes entirely without surrendering their complex meanings, usually in order to bring Desdemona's tragedy more into the light. In the most interesting cases, films such as the Davies/Sax *Othello*, biblical hypotexts are consciously replaced by cinematic ones; film history is replete, after all, with numerous well-known kisses of death whose complex moral implications require of audiences no biblical knowledge whatsoever.

Coda: The Triumph of the Cinematic Kiss of Death

The climactic scene of Martin Scorsese's controversial film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) offers a final example of how thoroughly the cinematic "kiss of death" has come to compete with the biblical one. In the scene, an elderly Jesus (Willem Dafoe) lies on his deathbed, drawing his final, heavy breaths while outside the first Jewish-Roman war (the "Great Revolt") rages. In this context of a hopeful, violent revolution to which he has not contributed, Jesus is visited by his most loyal former disciples, including his closest friend, Judas. Disgusted by Jesus's decision to live the life of a man rather than embrace his role as the redeemer of mankind, his best friend Judas shouts "Traitor!" as he approaches the sickbed: "Your place was on the cross. That's where God put you. When death got too close, you got scared and you ran away and hid yourself in the life of some man. We did what we were supposed to do! You didn't! You're a coward!" More solemnly, then, Judas says, "Rabbi, you broke my heart." (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Judas's words prompt Jesus to see the mistake he has made. Interestingly, it is Harvey

Keitel of *Mean Streets* in the role of Judas, cast by his own loyal friend Scorsese, that *other* famous 1970s New York Italian-American director. And is it all that surprising that our post-modern, post-secular gangster-Judas would help to bring about the salvation of humankind, not with a kiss, but with its omission and an allusion to *The Godfather 2*?

Notes

1. The "kiss of death" scene is usefully discussed in similar terms in Larke-Walsh (2010), 75-76.
2. The Norton follows these lines with the stage direction "*He [kisses Desdemona and] dies.*" I discuss in what follows some of the reasons why the bracketed editorial imposition is reductive and unfortunate.
3. See especially Milward 1989, but also Klein 2012; Morris 2013; Poole 2011; and Scragg 1968.

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