Article

No Longer Simply Black and White: Adaptation and the Representation of Female Vulnerability in Balzac's *Le Nègre*

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summary

Although never staged, Balzac's 1822 melodrama, *Le Nègre*, merits reconsideration by contemporary scholars interested in race, adaptation, and gender. The work destined for the *Théâtre de la Gaîté* forms part of a corpus of texts exploring cross-racial desire and the impact of colonialism on French society under the Restoration. Analysis of this work, in which the young writer rescripts Othello reveals the startling consequences of the artistic choices he made during the adaptive process. Retracing the modifications introduced to Balzac's source texts—Ducis, Berio di Salsa and Cuvelier's versions rather than Shakespeare's—this article argues that the changes made divert attention away from the injustice of racial prejudice, recentering it on the dangers faced by unprotected women. Without offering a subversive melodrama that seeks to overturn the institutions of patriarchal domination, Balzac explores the double bind of female vulnerability at all levels of society.

keywords : melodrama – race – adaptation – Shakespeare – nineteenth-century – theater – gender – power – Othello – Balzac – *Le Nègre*

On 24 January 1823, Hippolyte Lévesque, the *Secrétaire général* of the *Comité de lecture* for the Théâtre de la Gaîté wrote a letter to Horace de Saint-Aubin[1] explaining to the young playwright

1 For a full discussion of the Saint-Aubin pseudonym used by Balzac, with or without the *particule*, see Joëlle Gleize, "Horace de Saint-Aubin, 'triste héros de préface'", in ed. Claire-Barel Moisan and José-Luis Diaz, *Balzac avant Balzac* (Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Christian Pirot, 2006), 79-93 and Christine Marcandier, "Horace de Saint-Aubin, de la figure à la fiction" in *Balzac avant Balzac*, 95-107. In addition to what these scholars note regarding Balzac's adoption of the name, Henry Dupin, Joseph Adolphe-Ferdinand Langlois, and Claude-Louis-Marie, the marquis de Rochefort-Luçay also wrote under the collaborative pseudonym 'Saint-Aubin *frères*'. Odile Krakovitch notes that they also wrote for the *Gaîté* in the early 1820s. See Odile Krakovitch, *Les Pièces de théâtre soumises à la censure (1800-1830 inventaire des manuscrits (F18581 à 668) et des procès-verbaux des censeurs (F21966 à 995)* (Paris: Archives nationales, 1982), 111, 323. Could the young Balzac have hoped to trade on the celebrity of these three men?

that the selection committee had rejected his manuscript of *Le Nègre*. In this oft reproduced letter,[2] Lévesque cited the unsuitability of the subject matter and the poor quality of the play[3] as the major reasons leading to the difficult collective decision to dismiss it as too risky a venture for the *Gaîté*.[4] The *Secrétaire général* did acknowledge that some members of the committee had underscored the "*vigueur*", "*chaleur*" and "*verve*" found in certain scenes, but he emphasized their worries that the subject, that is to say the dramatic staging of a free Black steward in Paris trying to woo the wife of his white employer, would not meet with public favor. As was customary, the committee returned the manuscript to the author who was none other than Honoré de Balzac.[5]

Long unpublished and then largely ignored, *Le Nègre* holds a curious place in his early work. On the one hand, it stands as the only play he completed in 1822, a period marked by intense creative activity. On the other hand, the ambitious young writer appears to have disavowed it. Balzac did not list this melodrama among the ten theatrical works he intended to complete that year and he chose not to affix his name to it. Instead, he preferred to use the "Saint-Aubin" pseudonym, thus

2 Given the paucity of information regarding the production and reception of *Le Nègre*, Lévesque's letter stands as a key document to help contextualize this play within Balzac's work. Roland Chollet and René Guise cite it verbatim in their 1990 Pléaide edition containing *Le Nègre*, as do Sarah Davies Cordova and Antoinette Sol in their 2011 edition. In our introduction to the English translation of *Le Nègre* forthcoming with Liverpool Online Series, Andrew Watts and I attempt to resituate this document within the rhetoric found in a wide range of archival sources that include correspondence and *procès-verbaux* from the government censors under the Restoration. The language used in Lévesque's missive is not atypical. The criticism regarding the stylistic weaknesses speaks for themselves. What may be harder for the modern reader to parse is the rejection of the play on the basis of the risk to the theater. While *Le Nègre* does stage a variety of shocking topics (cross-racial desire, dueling, adultery, unwed mothers, illegitimate children, betrayal, murder, and suicide), these were often dramatized on stage. Crises, excitement, and gore found an eager public in the boulevard audiences and the majority of these subjects held the potential for attracting audiences. Analysis of ballots cast by member of reading committees for various theaters suggests that the sticking point was the subject of race. The wording used to justify a committee member's position on a proposed work staging an African or mulatto character often pointed to the risk the theater would run if they chose to stage this type of play, arguing either that it would be to great or that it would be acceptable. We must not forget that certain dramatic works with colonial themes did generate significant revenue. The perennially successful ballet of *Paul et Virginie* is a case in point. See Honoré de Balzac, ed. Sarah Davies Cordova and Antoinette Sol, *Le Nègre*, Autrement mêmes (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011) and Honoré de Balzac, ed. and trans. Michelle S. Cheyne and Andrew J. Watts, *Le Nègre (The Negro)*, (Liverpool: Liverpool Online Series, forthcoming).

3 In particular, the letter specifies that the committee found the style overly pretentious ("*trop souvent prétentieux*") and the third act weak ("*un 3e acte bien faible*").

4 The precise wording used, "*la donnée était trop hasardée, trop dangereuse même pour qu'il lui fût possible d'accepter ce mélodrame*," underscored the notion of risk.

5 The letter, like Balzac's manuscript is housed in the *Fonds Lovenjoul* at the *Bibliothèque de l'Institut*. Andrew Watts and I remain grateful to the *Institut* for allowing us to consult these documents.

abandoning the play to its fate as the unwanted—and perhaps embarrassing—issue of his youthful plume. Although this unacknowledged work was never staged, *Le Nègre* merits reconsideration by contemporary scholars.[6] Despite the paradoxes it presents as a hybrid and derivative text, *Le Nègre* provides valuable insights in areas of research as diverse as in race, adaptation, gender, and Balzac's creative process.

Destined for the *Gaîté*, a boulevard theater known for its popular—read low-brow—melodramas and comedies, this work forms part of a corpus of texts exploring cross-racial desire and the impact of colonialism on French society under the Restoration.[7] Closer analysis of this three-act melodrama, in which the young writer rescripts *Othello* forces us to grapple with the startling implications and consequences of the artistic choices made during the process of adaptation. These tend to problematize the very image the play presents of itself. Indeed, in a play specifically entitled "*Le Nègre*" the modifications Balzac introduced to his source texts—more probably Ducis, Berio di Salsa, or Cuvelier's versions of the Othello story rather than Shakespeare's original—deflect attention away from the injustice of racial prejudice, training it instead on the issue of female vulnerability. On a structural level, these modifications shed light on a fundamental shift in aesthetics and poetics underway about to occur in the genre of melodrama. At the same time, studying the transformations and their consequences on a structural level helps demonstrate that in his melodrama, without offering a subversive work that challenges or seeks to overturn the institutions of patriarchal domination, Balzac does illustrate with exemplary thoroughness the double bind of female vulnerability at all levels of society.

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6 See Isabelle Michelot, "De l'essai à l'échec: les errances d'un rêveur de théâtre" and Olivier Bara, "Le champ théâtral sous la Restauration: essais dramatiques et stratégies de conquête du jeune Balzac", in *Balzac avant Balzac,* 109-21 and 123-38; and Honoré de Balzac, ed. Sarah Davies Cordova and Antoinette Sol, *Le Nègre*.

7 The popularity of the theme of race in literature in the 1820s reflects a resurgence in abolitionist activity on the one hand and on the other, conservative reactions to decolonization in Haiti—the payment of the *indemnités* to colonists who had to flee Saint-Domingue and French recognition of the Haiti as a republic. It should be stressed that whether sympathetic to the abolitionist cause or not, the vast majority of fiction grappling with skin color, prejudice, and privilege promoted racial segregation and condemned *mixité*. Think, for example of *Ourika*, the verse and stage adaptations of *Ourika*, *Sarah*, *Bug-Jargal*, *Pyracmond, ou Les Créoles*, *L'Habitation de Saint-Domingue*, *Le Nègre et la Créole*, *Le Nègre et l'Africaine*. Claire de Lechal de Kersaint de Duras, *Ourika*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Ladvocat, 1824); Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, "Sarah" in *Les Veillées des Antilles*, t. 1 (Paris: F. Louis, 1821); Victor Hugo, *Bug-Jargal* (Paris: U. Canel, 1826); [Jacques]-Louis Lacour, ed. Michelle S. Cheyne, *Pyracmond, ou Les Créoles: drame lyrique en trois actes texte et documents inédits*, Autrement mêmes (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012); Charles de Rémusat, ed. by the Équipe de recherches associée 447 of l'Université de Lyon II, dir. by J.R. Derré, *L'Habitation de Saint-Domingue* (Paris: Éditions du C.N.R.S., 1977); and Gabrielle de Paban, ed. and trans. by Marshall Olds, *Le Nègre et la créole, ou mémoires d'Eulalie D****, Autrement mêmes (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008). For a lengthier discussion of the portrayal of race in *Le Nègre* and how these images correspond to those found in these other plays, see Honoré de Balzac, ed. and trans. Michelle S. Cheyne and Andrew J. Watts, *Le Nègre (The Negro)*.

Whitewashing Othello: From Foreign Tragedy to Domestic Melodrama

Le Nègre proves one of the earlier texts in the corpus of fiction staging cross-racial desire written during the French Restoration. Still, for years it remained comparatively little studied in these terms. Undoubtedly, the unsavory nature of this racist melodrama and its status as an aborted theatrical venture both played into the relative lack of scholarly interest. Yet, from the perspective of cultural history, this might surprise. When considered among the colonial and post-colonial texts written in the 1820s, *Le Nègre* and its main character, Georges, stand out, even if only for the paradoxes they reveal. Written a year after Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's *Sarah,* this melodrama predates the publication of Duras' wildly successful *Ourika* by several months.[8] In addition, *Le Nègre* contrasts starkly with the majority of the other representations of Africans or colonials from the time because the story it stages appears so Parisian. Only Duras' *Ourika* proposes another story of interracial desire set in France's capital.[9] Moreover, virtually all of the other texts from the Restoration period, including *Ourika*,[10] revolve around the problems and consequences of colonialism and post-colonialism. *Le Nègre* does not. It focuses on the intensely domestic issue of adultery in

8 Establishing dates for these texts is a delicate business. In all likelihood, Balzac penned his melodrama at the end of 1822. The *Gaîté* read the manuscript and voted to reject around the third week of January 1823. Duras first published her novel anonymously in a small private printing run in 1823. Subsequent editions with more ambitiously sized print runs followed in 1823 and 1824, in part as a response to the rapid appearance of pirated editions on the market. While this may give the impression that Balzac scripted his play first, literary history contends that Duras wrote *Ourika* at the urging of friends after the success of her oral version of the story shared in her *salon*. Logically, this places the creation of the two stories at roughly the same time. Although they still postdate Desbordes-Valmore's novel *Sarah*, Balzac and Duras' texts both focus on the challenges faced by an African in metropolitan France.

9 Duras' *Ourika* captured its audience's imagination, but not its Parisian setting. The theater industry and poets quickly seized what they saw as a golden opportunity and attempted to capitalize on the popularity of the story. Three theaters produced dramatic adaptations and reportedly, two other adaptations were in the works when the disappointing public reception and financial failure of the first three plays convinced the other venues to halt work on their own versions. Sylvie Chalaye offers a description frenzy of adaptation and modern editions of the three plays staged in ed. Sylvie Chalaye, *Les "Ourika" du Boulevard*, Autrement mêmes (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2003). Four poems offer versions of Duras' story: Delphine Gay, *Œuvres complètes de Madame Emilie de Girardin*, t. 1 (Paris, Henri Plon, 1861); Ulric Guttinguer, *Mélanges poétiques*, 2nd ed. (Paris, Auguste Udron, 1832); Mme P. V. de L. B, [Pierre-Ange Vieillard], *Ourika, stances élégiaques*, 2nd ed. (Paris, Pillet, 1824); and Gaspard de Pons "Ourika, l'Africaine." None of these adaptations use Paris as the setting when they recast *Ourika* in a different genre.

10 Although Duras set her novella in Paris, the three stage adaptations of it situate the action elsewhere. Ferdinand Villeneuve and Charles Dupeuty's *Ourika ou la Négresse* takes place in Marseille, Merle and Frédéric de Courcy's *Ourika, ou l'Orpheline africaine* in Saint-Germain, and Mélesville and Pierre Frédéric Adolphe Carmouche's *Ourika, ou la Petite négresse* outside of Bordeaux.

Paris and an outlying village.[11] The play stages interactions between rich Parisians, their servants, and residents of a neighboring village. From a cultural perspective, the remarkable originality in Balzac's melodrama lies how this seemingly banal story of jealousy and misunderstanding imagines – and portrays – Paris as a multi-racial society.[12]

While provocatively unusual, this image raises questions. Replete with caricatural stereotypes, *Le Nègre* offers a Parisian tale of illicit desire. Balzac does not, however, propose a scenario that uses a historical subtext in order to express subversive political or social views. Even a cursory reading of *Le Nègre* underscores how difficult—if not impossible—it would be to argue that Balzac sought to engage in the debate over abolition or the evils of racial prejudice. His plotline simply does not support such a conclusion. Indeed, the modern reader may find the explicit racism in the play disturbing precisely because there is no attempt made to cast it as reprehensible. Given that the play does not fit within an agenda of political or social commentary linked to abolitionist leanings, the choice of subject matter might surprise. Why would Balzac write a melodrama staging an interracial love triangle set in modern Paris? Financial considerations rather than ethical beliefs provide the answer to this question.

In fact, Balzac's play looks to English drama rather than the Caribbean as a source of inspiration. P.J. Tremewan pointed this out in the late 1960s, arguing that *Le Nègre* is "*une imitation*

11 The figure of Georges allows readers to consider variations in representations of non-whites, as well as the domestication of what is often an exotic element. The extent to which *Le Nègre* remains outside of abolitionist literature of the time proves consistent with Balzac's future scripting of the colonies and Africa into his cartography of French experience. Despite the obvious anxieties it betrays, his play invites readers to reassess the historical *idée reçue* of France as homogeneous white space and to recognize that the *métropole* could only exist in a globalized heterogeneous space conceived of as including its colonies and the sites of its various commercial enterprises.

12 See Jennifer Heuer, "The One-Drop Rule in Reverse? Interracial Marriages in Napoleonic and Restoration France," *Law and History Review* 27.3 (2009): 515-548; Sue Peabody, *"There are no slaves in France": The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Dwayne C. Pruitt, "'The Opposition of the Law to the Law': Race, Slavery, and the Law in Nantes, 1715-1778," *French Historical Studies* 30.2 (2007): 147-174. Sue Peabody and Dwayne Pruitt's respective works begin to map France as a racially-mixed space. Jennifer Heuer's work further refines our understanding of the country's racial heterogeneity in the nineteenth century, particularly in of the regulation of interracial desire. As Heuer's study of the shift in laws concerning interracial marriage under Napoleon and Louis XVIII demonstrates, the question of interracial marriage was not devoid of interest during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. While the number of petitions requesting permission for an interracial union is exceedingly small in comparison with the number for marriages that did not cross racial lines, the number is significant. Heuer's study of 50 couples fighting to have their relationships legitimized through legal matrimony in France points to a reality that Balzac's melodrama both describes and denies. *Le Nègre* represents Paris as multi-racial. It also underscores the pressures and prejudices that discouraged cross-racial unions. At the same time, the play appears to turn a blind eye to the existence of interracial marriage in the *métropole* rendered possible as of 1818.

*consciente d'*Othello."[13] Although Shakespeare's play itself warns of the dangers of a diverse society by scripting the consequences of interracial marriage and interracial rivalry as tragedy, as suggested above, analysis of Balzac's version strongly suggests the French playwright did not choose *Othello* as his source in order to comment on the presence of Africans in Paris. Instead, given the relative popularity of Shakespeare's plotline, it seems more likely that Balzac chose to domesticate *Othello* as a Parisian melodrama because he believed could complete the adaptation quickly and sell it to the *Gaîté*.

Certainly, *Othello* was a reliable standard on the French stage at this time. The prestigious *Théâtre de la République*[14] staged Ducis' French translation in 1792 with Talma starring in the title role.[15] Almost immediately, the *Théâtre du Vaudeville* responded with *Arlequin Cruello*,[16] a two-act parody. Cuvelier de Trie produced a pantomime of the story, *Le More de Venise, ou Othello*[17] that played in Paris from 1818 onwards. Rossini's opera, *Otello*, set Berio di Salsa's libretto to music. Beginning in 1821, this was staged in Paris and continued through 1822.[18] The summer of 1822

13 P. J. Tremewan, "Balzac et Shakespeare," *L'Année Balzacienne* (1968): 259-303, 296. Scholars remind us that Shakespeare himself turned outward rather than inward for inspiration when writing *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* in approximately 1603. For his play, as Michael Neill reminds us in his edition of *Othello* for the Oxford University Press, the English Bard chose to adapt "Un Capitano Moro", the seventh story in the massive story cycle *Gli Hecatommithi* written in 1565 by Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio. William Shakespeare, ed. Michael Neill, *The Oxford Shakespeare: Othello: The Moor of Venice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 20-24 and Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio, *De gli Hectatommithi di Giovanbattista Giraldi Cinthio*, 2 tomes, 3 vol. (Nel Monte Regalo: appresso L. Torrentino, 1565).

14 During the Revolution, the *Comédie-Française* was rebaptized the *Théâtre de la République*. Beginning in 1782, the troupe performed provisionally on the stage of the *Théâtre de l'Odéon* until disbanded in 1793 by the *Comité de Salut Public*. Thus, Ducis' *Othello* appeared on stage at the *Odéon*, but as a production of the *Comédie-Française*.

15 Jean-François Ducis, *Othello, ou Le More de Venise, tragédie par le Citoyen Ducis* (Paris, chez André, an VIII). Ducis (1733-1817) was a poet, playwright, and academician (1798). In his ambitious efforts to translate Shakespeare's work into French, Ducis sought to impose the constraints of French classicism on the English plays.

16 Pierre-Yves Barré, François-Georges Desfontaines, Jean-Baptiste Radet, *Arlequin Cruello, parodie d' "Othello", en deux actes, et en prose mêlée de vaudevilles* (Paris: chez le libraire au théâtre du Vaudeville, an III). Songwriter and lawyer with the *Parlement de Paris*, Barré (1749-1832) was one of the co-founders and the director of the *Theâtre du Vaudeville*. He collaborated on a number of works with fellow vaudevilliste, Desfontaines (1733-1825), and the playwright Radet (1752-1830).

17 Jean-Guillaume-Antoine Cuvelier, *Le More de Venise, ou Othello, pantomime entremêlée de dialogues, en 3 actes, imitée de la tragédie anglaise, par M. Cuvelier, musique par M. Darondeau, divertissements par M. Chap, décors par MM. Justin Lays et Demay* (Paris: Chez Fages, 1818). Cuvelier (also Cuvelier de Trie or Trye, 1766-1824) was a writer and lawyer. He held positions in the *Garde nationale* and the government during the Revolution. He created a number of *mimodrames*.

18 This edition with facing page translations offers the distribution for the Parisian premier of Rossini's opera in which Madame Pasta (Giuditta Pasta, 1797-1865) sang the role of Desdemona.

also saw the arrival of Penley's English actors who gave a performance of Shakespeare's untranslated original at the *Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin* on 31 July 1822. New versions throughout the 1820s attest to the continued popularity of *Othello* during the Restoration. Castil-Blaze offered audiences an alternative libretto for a production that opened in Lyon in December 1823[19] and Vigny wrote his own version as a five-act tragedy that the *Comédie-Française* staged in late October 1829.[20] The notoriety of the source for Parisian audiences, especially in the wake of Rossini's popular opera and the infamous violence that greeted the English troupe's *Othello* [21] would have rendered it a tempting choice for an author in search of rapid and sure gains.

Although Balzac's numerous references to Shakespeare's play have long supported Tremewan's conclusion that Balzac followed Ducis' lead in imitating Shakespeare, Isabelle Michelot has argued for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between *Le Nègre* and the Bard's

19 By early December 1823, Castil-Blaze offered a libretto in French to accompany Rossini's music. Singier directed the début in Lyon of this version of the opera. The 1823 self-published edition of the Castil-Blaze libretto offered staging and costuming advice for provincial companies. It also provides an important note regarding the improvised addition of an aria for Edelmone (Desdemona) in the first act that Madame Pasta introduced in Paris. The librettist for the Lyonnais production indicates that he proposed a different aria since Pasta had chosen to add one from *La Dame du lac* that would show off her own talents. ("Consignes", 4). Castil-Blaze, *Otello, ou le More de Venise, opéra en trois actes, d'après les drames anglais, français et italien, paroles de Castil-Blaze, musique de Rossini* (Paris: chez Castil-Blaze, 1823).

20 Shakespeare, trans. Alfred de Vigny, *Le More de Venise, tragédie en cinq actes traduite de Shakespeare, en vers français, par le Cte Alfred de Vigny* (Paris: Le Vavasseur, 1830).

21 The début performance of Penley's troupe for their Parisian tour proved memorable. The French public was less than hospitable. In *Racine et Shakespeare*, Stendhal describes the tensions as the *libéraux* in the audience rejected the performance in English, the subject of *Othello*, and the English Bard. *Othello* opened at the *Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin* on 31 July 1822. The account of the evening made the front page of the 3 August 1823 issue of the *Journal des débats*. Their account noted that a number of interesting details beginning with the fact that the theater had not raised its prices for the show. This made tickets for Penley's production much cheaper than those for the *grands théâtres*. As a result, the theater was packed. The performance itself was completely in English. The journalist made special mention praising the secondary couple of Yago and Emilia. He pointed out that Penley moved the Willow Song ("*la romance de la Saule*"), which used music from Grétry, from the fourth act to the fifth in order to increase its emotional impact. He further noted that the scene in which Othello smothers Desdemona was poorly received. The journalist insisted, "*Jamais impression ne fut plus terrible. Tout l'assemblée se leva à la fois, et ne poussa qu'un cri. Plusieurs femmes s'évanouirent. On eût dit que le poignard dont Othello venoit de frapper son amante, était entré dans tous les cœurs*." Despite the disapproval expressed, the audiences returned for several more performances. Still, the journalist cautioned that a playwright "*est donc obligé de se conformer au caractère de la nation devant laquelle il fait représenter ses ouvrages*" and underscores the option available to choose a happy ending for this play provided by Ducis in his translation. See Stendhal, *Racine et Shakespeare* (Paris: Bossange, 1823) and *Journal des débats* (1 août 1822): 1.

tragedy in "*De l'essai à l'échec: les errances d'un rêveur de théâtre*."[22] She points to the modifications and reversals that Balzac imposed on the prestigious source text, recasting the African male as the manipulative underling rather than as the more powerful but jealous husband, for example. While even a cursory reading of Balzac's play reveals that the structure and convoluted plotline of *Le Nègre* differ significantly from Shakespeare's *Othello*, the links between the two remain clear. The differences observed, however, raise questions regarding Balzac's precise sources for his own melodrama.

Historical and biographical data suggests that in 1822, Balzac would not have had the language skills, nor the opportunity needed to work directly with Shakespeare's text. Furthermore, while Balzac did increasingly attend the theater in the early 1820s,[23] no evidence exists to indicate that he attended the ill-fated opening of Shakespeare's *Othello* in English in late July of 1822. Margaret Gilman's careful history of adaptations and translations of *Othello* in France points to alternative versions from the time period.[24] Theatrical almanacs, censors' records, and the periodical press provide further clues. They establish proof that *Othello* was not unknown to Parisian audiences in the 1820s. They show that Penley's troupe was not the only one performing *Othello* in Paris during the summer of 1822. The press chronicles the performances and reception of Rossini's *Otello* staged at the *Théâtre des Italiens* on 4, 18, and 20 July 1822.[25] No specific evidence documents that Balzac saw these productions, but the similarities *Le Nègre* shares with Ducis' 1792 translation and Berio di Salsa's libretto suggests the young writer's familiarity with them, at least via theatre reviews.[26] Similarities with Cuvelier's popular pantomime suggest that Balzac may also have seen a performance of *Le More de Venise, ou Othello* at the *Cirque Olympique*.

Comparison of Shakespeare's original, these adaptations, and *Le Nègre* offers strong evidence to support the argument that Balzac took an intermediary version of *Othello* as a source text. Analysis of the characters and plotlines in the Ducis and Berio di Salsa adaptations indicates that these share similarly simplified plotlines with respect to Shakespeare. Balzac follows most of these and pushes them further. Ducis and Berio di Salsa made five notable changes. First, they concentrated the plot around the Desdemona character, increasing the presence of this character on stage.

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22 Isabelle Michelot, "De l'essai à l'échec: les errances d'un rêveur de théâtre" in *Balzac avant Balzac*, 109-121. In this same collection of essays from the *Groupe international de recherches balzaciennes*, Olivier Bara offers a second study devoted to Balzac and his early theater, "Le Champ théâtral sous la Restauration: essais dramatiques et stratégies de conquête du jeune Balzac," *Balzac avant Balzac*, 123-138.

23 For a discussion of Balzac's connections to the theatrical world and the opportunities he had to attend theatrical performances before and after the summer of 1820, see René Guise's introduction to Balzac, ed. René Guise, *Théâtre, I, Œuvres complètes de M. de Balzac*, vol. XXI, Bibliophiles de l'Originale (Paris: Editions du Delta, 1969), x-xv. See also Jean-Claude Yon, "Balzac et Scribe: 'Scènes de la vie théâtrale,'" *L'Année balzacienne* 1 (1999): (439-459).

24 Margaret Gilman, *"Othello" in French* (Paris: E. Champion, 1925).

25 "Spectacles" *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* (1 juin–31 août 1822).

26 In *"Othello" in French*, Gilman provides a thorough treatment detailing the adaptations and versions of *Othello* in France. Her research helps provide context for a close reading of the manuscript in search of its potential sources. It confirms and even extends Tremewan's conclusions, even though her research was done decades prior to his.

Second, they emphasized the role of destiny in the outcome, portraying human passions less as fatal flaws and more as predictable traits determined by ethnic origin. Third, Ducis modified Othello's identity, changing his skin color, making the African a mulatto. He added a preface to the published play in which he justified at length his choice to make the hero a mulatto rather than a black man.[27] Fourth, these playwrights altered the murder weapon, replacing the pillow with a dagger. Fifth, and most significantly, they proposed an alternative, happy ending.[28] These two last changes must be understood in connection to highly negative public reaction from the 1790s onward to theatrical representations of violence committed by blacks or people of color against whites.[29] The murder of

27 Understanding the implications of such a choice is not easy. While at certain moments the notion of purity rendered the African more positive than Creole or mulatto, at others the contrary was true. At the same time, such a choice cannot be totally disassociated from views and legislation concerning interracial marriage. Heuer's research on changes in laws restricting and permitting interracial marriage between 1803 and 1819 prove instrumental in establishing a historical context that shapes our understanding of the choices made regarding the racial identity of the Othello character in these plays. The playwright's decisions had a bearing on the plausibility of the work for the audience. While the *Othello* adaptations were set an exotic locale—Venice or Cyprus—audiences would still have measured the mores presented in the play against French values and laws. Thus, the identity constructed for Othello presented a statement—intentional or not—on the question of civil rights for non-whites and on whether France would—or should—acknowledge itself as a racially diverse society. Ducis produced his translation in 1792 when the status and civil rights of non-whites was the subject of bitter debate. He felt the need to justify his artistic decisions publicly in his preface. The very notion of interracial marriage remained in question—and a source of anxiety—throughout this period that saw several adaptations of *Othello*. For instance, at this time, was a 1778 royal edict barring all interracial marriage until such time as the status of non-whites in France was legally determined still considered binding? To what extent was this edict publicized given that the *Parlement de Paris*, contrary to certain other parliaments in the kingdom, had refused to ratify and publish other royal edicts seeking to limit the possibility of Africans to sue for freedom in France? Two years later, in 1794, slavery was abolished and nominal equality of all men was declared. Nine years after that, Napoleon stipulated that interracial marriages were permissible on French soil only when the non-white individual could prove at least one white ancestor. In 1818 and 1819, law would first tacitly and then publicly permit interracial marriage. See Jennifer Heuer, "The One-Drop Rule in Reverse? Interracial Marriages in Napoleonic Restoration France."

28 The ending in *Le Nègre* proves highly ambiguous in a way that recalls the two alternative scenarios Ducis proposed. Balzac's manuscript leaves readers caught struggling to understand the conclusion he envisioned. For a full discussion of the difficulty in deciphering the last two scenes of the play, see Honoré de Balzac, ed. and trans. Michelle S. Cheyne and Andrew J. Watts, *Le Nègre (The Negro)* and Honoré de Balzac, ed. Sarah Davies Cordova and Antoinette Sol, *Le Nègre*.

29 Uprisings and violent reprisals in the colonies were a reality in the eighteenth century. Fears and memories of the violence linked to the abolition of slavery and decolonization in the Caribbean were rooted in experience. When anti-abolitionists in France mounted their virulent publicity campaigns arguing against freedom and civil rights for non-whites, they fanned fears and anxiety by circulating gruesome stories of whites murdered by non-whites. In these, they emphasized the ingratitude, savagery, barbary, and brutality of non-whites. Needless to say, these

a white woman in her bed perpetrated by an African man while she slept would have been particularly incendiary.[30] Smothering, rather than stabbing, played into public fears, perhaps because the theatricality of the latter made it appear more artificial.

An overview of Balzac's play shows clearly that the young writer took one or more of these truncated versions and moved even further away from the original, refashioning it into a stereotypical French melodrama. While Ducis and Berio di Salsa had changed Othello's skin color in an attempt to make the story more palatable to audiences hostile to the idea of racial integration, they maintained the basic dual plot of a married interracial couple and a racially diverse community that would destroyed by jealousy and racial prejudice. Cuvelier's pantomime did not focus on skin tone, choosing instead to expand rather than simplify the intrigue to normalize the interracial couple. Cuvelier normalizes this by developing backstories.[31] In Act I, his Iago gives two reasons to explain why Desdemona loves the "*farouche Africain*" who is the "*héros de Venise*" (4). For the first, Cuvelier looks to Shakespeare's original and Iago notes that Othello "*avait fixé l'attention de Desdemona par le récit de ses exploits guerriers et de ses voyages périlleux en Afrique*" (5-6). After, he has Iago add a second more compelling reason, namely that "l*'amour de Desdemona pour Othello date plus*

highly partisan accounts did not address the ingratitude, savagery, barbary, and brutality inflicted by whites on non-whites. These publicity campaigns were highly effective as Florence Gauthier demonstrates in her account of the struggle of Julien Raimond to have civil rights of free non-whites in Saint-Domingue reiterated and recognized in the 1780s and 1790s. The *Club Massiac* lobbied successfully against this, using scare tactics and fanning public fears. See Florence Gauthier, *L'Aristocratie de l'épiderme. Le combat de la Société des citoyens de couleur 1789-1791* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2007).

30 Stendhal refers specifically to this danger in his 1823 pamphlet on Racine et Shakespeare. In Chapter 1 of the first part, when the *Romantique* and the the *Académicien* try and thrash out the nature of the "illusion théâtrale," the former offers an anecdote to illustrate his definition of theatrical illusion "*L'année dernière (août 1822), le soldat qui était en faction dans l'intérieur du théâtre de Baltimore, voyant Othello qui, au cinquième acte de la tragédie de ce nom, allait tuer Desdemona, s'écria : "Il ne sera jamais dit qu'en ma présence un maudit nègre aurait tué une femme blanche." Au même moment le soldat tire son coup de fusil, et casse un bras à l'acteur qui faisait Othello. Il ne se passe pas d'année sans que les journaux rapportent des faits semblables. Eh bien ! ce soldat avait de l'illusion, croyait vraie l'action qui se passait sur scène*"(19). While the *Romantique* decries the lack of critical distance shown by the spectator dazzled by a perfect illusion, the example chosen is telling. The journalist presents the public outcry sparked by the Othello story, by the staging of the violence it portrays—not of a husband against his wife, but of a black man against a white woman—as a visceral reaction found the world over, and not merely in France. The anxiety cultivated by the *Club Massiac* proved remarkably efficient and future generations of journalists and writers continued to feed it, rendering it a rhetorical commonplace so tired that even the *Académicien* points this out in the dialogue. Stendhal, *Racine et Shakespeare*, 19-20.

31 While nineteenth-century pantomimes relied on the use of physical gestures and imitative action to stage a story and while they were limited in terms of the spoken dialogue allowed, they were not silent, nor were their plotlines rudimentary. Cuvelier's three-act *Le More de Venise ou Othello* provides a telling example to the contrary. It develops several back stories to produce a complex and convoluted version that includes narration, dialogue, song, and mime.

particulièrement de l'époque à laquelle il lui sauva la vie, en l'arrachant de cette galère incendiée, où elle s'était placée pour être témoin de la cérémonie de l'union du Doge avec la mer Adriatique" (6). Cuvelier offers the French audience a heroic rescue as the true source of this white woman's love for a man of a different race. In these cases, Othello remains the hero, even if these adaptations develop the role of the Desdemona character.

The changes Balzac made move far beyond those found in the previous adaptations.[32] Like his shift of setting, the other changes he made domesticate the plot. More importantly, they serve to marginalize and trivialize the black protagonist, emphasizing his subordinate role. Balzac went further than Ducis and Berio di Salsa in lightening the skin color of the female lead's husband. He makes Gerval a white banker. This proves to have serious dramatic consequences. Othello virtually disappears as the absent white husband. All that remains of Shakespeare's heroic African in Gerval is his jealousy. Balzac chooses to make the Iago character, Georges, a free black. In doing so, he reverses the original paradigm of a powerful hero of color manipulated by a jealous and unscrupulous white underling. In Balzac's melodrama, the conniving African servant victimizes his white employers, thus reinforcing negative racial stereotypes.

Marginalizing Le Nègre

Altering the color paradigm proposed by Shakespeare and maintained in other adaptations

32 Set in Paris and the infamous outlying village of Sèvres, Le Nègre stages the story of Émilie, a petite bourgeoise married to a wealthy banker, Gerval. Alone their Paris townhouse while her husband conducts business abroad, Émilie is attended by her maid, Rosine and her husband's trusted steward, Georges, a free African. Consumed by his burning love for his employer's wife, Georges decides to confess his love to Émilie and then commit suicide during Gerval's absence. Georges finds his efforts to execute this plan thwarted by two mysterious callers, Horace Manfred and Marguerite. When he finally manages to confess his love, Émilie proudly rejects his advances. The furious and jealous steward jumps to erroneous conclusion the male caller must be Émilie's lover and the female, Marguerite, a peasant who rents them a house in Sèvres for their adulterous trysts. In fact, as the audience learns, nothing could be further from the truth. Manfred loves Émilie's sister, Claire. After killing a man in a duel, he was forced to abandon his pregnant mistress. In a desperate attempt to save her sister from ruin and hide this from her husband, Émilie has hidden her sister in Sèvres. With the birth of her illegitimate child, the abandoned sister begins to go mad. Meanwhile, after months of correspondence with Manfred, Émilie has finally arranged for Claire and Manfred to marry. At the most inopportune moment, Émilie's husband returns and a madly jealous Georges convinces him that Émilie has been unfaithful. The two men follow Émilie to Sèvres in search of proof of her adultery. There, the peasant woman, Marguerite allows herself to be bribed into betraying information that appears to demonstrate Émilie's guilt. A tense confrontation between Émilie and Gerval fails to clarify the situation since Émilie feels herself honor bound to preserve Claire's reputation. Meanwhile, Claire has run away, leaving the infant alone. Émilie returns to Paris with the baby in tow and Gerval and Georges in hot pursuit. In a fit of jealousy, Gerval agrees to let Georges kill Émilie. Immediately after stabbing Émilie, the truth comes out, but too late for Émilie. Georges kills himself and Émilie pardons her husband in the final lines of the play.

neutralizes much of the dramatic interest of the Othello plot. The jealous husband and conniving servant in *Le Nègre* offer little other than the promise of violence and malice. Would these have been enough to capture the public's attention and ensure the play's success? Certainly, staging force could prove lucrative since it enticed spectators in search of thrills. At the same time, it posed a risk since censors and the *Ministre de l'Intérieur*, concerned with maintaining public order, feared spectacles that would encourage or incite violence. As noted earlier, the selection committee for the *Gaîté* greeted the manuscript with ambivalence in part because of the "*vigueur*" that characterized scenes in this melodrama. Their sensitivity to this perceived and ambiguous quality of "*vigueur*" or force tracks with an important innovation in this particular theatrical genre at approximately this moment. The reactions relayed by Lévesque in his letter rejecting the play appear to respond to a shift in the aesthetics and poetics identified by Jean-Marie Thomasseau.[33] He suggests that in melodrama around 1823 the "classical" or "*larmoyant*" melodramas gave way to a new model of "Romantic" or "*alarmant*" melodramas with the opening of Antier, Lacoste and Chapponier's *L'Auberge des Adrets, ou la Pauvre Marie*.[34]

Linking the shift we note in the color paradigm used in Balzac's version of *Othello* to the shift in the melodramatic paradigm seen in 1823 is not simply an academic sleight of hand. By the same token, Thomasseau's observations should not be confused with esoteric trivia. In fact, they offer a key to understanding why *Le Nègre* matters despite all the paradoxes, ambiguities, and weaknesses it presents. In tailoring *Othello* for the *Gaîté*, Balzac experimented with what to trim, modify, and embellish. Whether governed by ideology, expediency, artistic intuition, or a desire to imitate avant-garde theatrical techniques, his choices served to construct a melodrama that appears simultaneously innovative and derivative, simultaneously *mélodrame larmoyant* and *mélodrame alarmant*. His adaptation proves interesting because it balances at the precise tipping point between the two models Thomasseau describes.

To a great extent, Balzac appears bent on producing a "classical" *mélodrame larmoyant*, but despite these efforts, *Le Nègre* remains poised in an intermediary position. The paradoxes function at multiple levels. The title proposes Georges as its protagonist, but the script presents Émilie as its main protagonist. The melodrama illustrates racial prejudice at the same time as it paints the plight of women. The play challenges social injustice at the same time as it reinforces them. The structures and themes in Balzac's text mark it indelibly as hybrid. While this hybridity led to critical rejection, for literary historians, this quality makes the text a powerful lens that renders visible the creative process and originality at work in a genre usually dismissed as formulaic. Analysis demonstrates that the very elements used by Balzac to rewrite *Othello* as a *mélodrame larmoyant*, which centers

33 Jean-Marie Thomasseau, *Le Mélodrame*, Que sais-je ? (Paris: Presses Universitaires des France, 1984).

34 *L'Auberge des Adrets* opened at the *Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique* on 2 July 1823 and proved a watershed event in the history of French melodrama. [Benjamin Antier, Jean-Armand Lacoste et Alexandre Chapponnier] *L'Auberge des Adrets, drame en 3 actes et en spectacle de MM. Benjamin, Saint-Amant et Paulyanthe* (Paris : Pollet, 1823). Benjamin Antier (1787-1870) was a melodramatist who usually wrote under Benjamin or Benjamin Chevrillon. Jean-Armand Lacoste (1797-1885) was a dramatist known also for his 1822 comedy, *La Veuve de Malabar*. Little is known about the dramatist Chapponnier who used the pseudonym Paulyanthe (sometimes Polyanthe).

on the female protagonist and which rejects interracial unions, prove the emblematic of the *mélodrame alarmant*. The choices he made to emphasize the characteristics of the "classical" melodrama function as Derridean supplements and flag it as Romantic. Thomasseau's description of the two helps to contextualize and to explain Balzac's artistic decisions and their consequences in his marginalization of the Othello character and his creation of a sister for the Desdemona character.

Thomasseau notes that before 1823, melodramas provided an intensely visual spectacle of the struggle between the forces of good and evil. The basic paradigm was constructed around the unrelenting aggression of a villain toward a vulnerable heroine—or, less frequently toward a vulnerable hero. Ancillary characters like children, the elderly, the sick or the mentally infirm often appeared alongside the heroine—or hero. Their presence emphasized the vulnerability of the protagonist, as well as her/his selfless heroism in trying to protect these secondary characters. These melodramas provided an intensely visual and highly prescriptive experience for the audience. Dialogue focused the spectators' attention on the action at the same time as it explicitly directed their reactions to ensure that the spectacle elicited the appropriate emotional response. This highly codified form reinforced social conventions and norms at the same time as it highlighted the role of providence in maintaining the social order. Thomasseau argues that with the advent of *L'Auberge des Adrets* and the new model of "Romantic" melodrama that it heralded, a shift in emphasis called into question the morality of the genre and the traditional ideological code it had previously conveyed. The new paradigm privileged the role of rebellious and marginal protagonists. Excess and subversion served as the dominant modes. Fate, rather than providence, proved the new motor driving the plot and action.

While Thomasseau's account casts this shift in terms that make it appear abrupt, a reading of *Le Nègre* and the selection committee's response to the manuscript suggests that it was more gradual and that the warning signs that such a change was underway may be overlooked. *Le Nègre* predates *L'Auberge des Adrets* by several months. The comments flagging the "*vigueur*" in Balzac's melodrama hint that this play balances on the very point between the old and new models. If we focus on Georges as the main male protagonist, then the play appears as a "Romantic" melodrama, whereas if we focus on Émilie, the female protagonist, then it appears to hark back to the "classical" model.

Considered objectively, as a source text, *Othello* would seem to hold great potential for adaptation as a *mélodrame alarmant*. Analysis demonstrates, however, that Balzac shies away from fully exploiting these possibilities in *Le Nègre*. He does not take Shakespeare's hero and present him as a rebellious protagonist who challenges the ideological code with its inherent racism. Instead, the playwright erases the two defining features of Othello—his heroism and his exotic alterity. By transposing Othello's color onto the Iago character, Balzac trivializes the model further. Émilie's husband is a pale shadow of Othello, just as the Georges, as a servant lusting after his employer's wife, remains a pale and degraded shadow of the Shakespearean hero. Despite monologues in which the African steward eloquently denounces racial prejudice as the force that condemns him to a life on society's margins, the playwright never allows the character of Georges to rise above selfish and criminal impulses. Georges' desires appear irrecuperably culpable in large part because Balzac focuses the audience's sympathies on Émilie as the main protagonist rather than on Georges.

In modifying the color paradigm and shifting attention from race to gender, the aspiring young French author's proposed adaptation sets itself apart from the most notable versions of the time – Ducis' translation, Cuvelier's pantomime, Berio di Salsa's libretto set to music by Rossini, and Penley's English language performance of Shakespeare's original. By making the jealous husband white and the love-lorn subaltern black, Balzac marginalizes the African. Georges becomes a powerful secondary character and Émilie, the female protagonist, takes on the greatest importance.[35] Examination of the major modifications introduced by Balzac reveals that his text distances itself from any attempt to challenge racial prejudice, injustice, and hierarchies. Instead, these changes, which once again track with the shift between classical and Romantic melodrama, allow him to openly explore the themes of female vulnerability and desire.

The Madwoman in the Wings: Magnifying Marginalia

This shift in focus away from Georges results from the strategic need to inject interest into the plot. Once the married couple is of the same race, little remains to capture the audience's attention and emotions. Balzac found himself obliged to create drama. He did so by the introducing an additional character, namely Claire, Émilie's unmarried sister. Claire, as the audience learns through Émilie, Marguerite, and Horace Manfred, had taken a lover, borne a child out of wedlock,

35 The character of Émilie is not without contradiction or paradox. Indeed, the choice made by Balzac to rename his heroine gives rise to speculation that deserves a fuller treatment than is possible here. How should we read the choice to use the name Émilie? By swapping the heroine's name (Desdemona in the original and the majority of the adaptations discussed here) with that of her maid (Emilia), was Balzac inviting the audience to imagine a much more radical scenario? Are we to see Gerard and Émilie as mundane versions of Othello and Desdemona? Or, instead, are we to see the pair as Iago and Emilia replaced in the "proper" order of things, that is to say, as having been restored to their "proper" place in a racist hierarchy as superior to Othello? If this were to be the case, as an unmarried African servant, Georges would, in fact, function as Othello. Such a scenario would pander to a highly racist vision of society. It would correspond to a colonial fantasy privileging the status of "*petits blancs*" over that of a free African such as one might find in the French Caribbean at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Reading *Le Nègre* is this manner proves disturbing as it would imply a resolutely and intentionally racist rescripting of *Othello* that flatly rejects the premise of the Shakespearean source text and the contemporary adaptations. Such a reading would function only if Balzac completely erased Desdemona from the story and instituted a paradigm in which the "*petits blancs*" lord over free men of color. While acknowledging this possibility, it should be emphasized that the portrayal of Émilie in *Le Nègre* does not support such a reading. Desdemona's maid, Emilia, is repeatedly characterized as less scrupulous than her mistress. Balzac clearly cast his heroine, Émilie, on the model of the irreproachable Desdemona. All of Émilie's efforts to save her sister's reputation underscore her moral rectitude. This character does not correspond to that of Desdemona's maid. By the same token, Émilie's husband Gérard, while jealous and violent, is portrayed as a virtuous man lacking in the manipulative wiles of Iago. Once again, Balzac's text appears to offer two potential readings, one that focuses on race, and the other on gender. The first reading appears fairly pedestrian, while the second, more provocative. Considering how gender plays a role in constructing a fatal double bind in this melodrama highlights Balzac's originality in the adaptive process.

gone insane, and abandoned her child. While this female character never appears on stage, her actions create the required dramatic tension throughout the play. Claire's actions, far more than Georges' set everything in motion. Émilie must work to save her sister's reputation and her own. To carry this off, Émilie turns to the old peasant woman, Marguerite, for help. Rather than solving the problems at hand, the choices these three women make and the actions they take all exacerbate them, trapping Émilie in a fatal misunderstanding.

A rereading of *Othello* and the various adaptations found on the French stage in the early nineteenth century reveals that Claire, the volatile, absent character introduced in *Le Nègre*, is not, in fact, wholly new. In creating his plotline, Balzac selects a marginal element used as foreshadowing in Shakespeare's tragedy and develops it as a central structural element in his own melodrama. In Act IV, scene 3, of the original, as Emilia prepares her mistress for bed, Desdemona tries to shake her own forebodings of danger by telling her maid of an unfortunate servant of her mother's who died singing "a song of willow" that "expressed her fortune."[36] The exchange surrounding this song in the original introduces the notions of love, madness, abandon, mistrust, fidelity, and infidelity.

Balzac takes the Willow Song and transforms it from a literary flourish to a narrative mechanism. In the other versions of the Othello plot, this song and the story it told functioned as a *mise en abîme*, reflecting or projecting the fate of the Desdemona character who dies a victim of her own love and her husband's jealousy. Virtually all the translations and adaptations of *Othello* staged in France in this period retain a version of the song.[37] This comes as little surprise, especially for the

36 Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine's 1993 edition of *Othello* for the Folger Shakespeare Library illustrates this point, as well as the instability in versions of the same play. The printed quarto version of Shakespeare's text from 1622 presents the Willow Song thus: "Desdemona: My mother had a maid called Barbary./ She was in love, and he she loved proved mad/ And did forsake her. She had a song of willow,/ An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune,/ And she died singing it. That song tonight/ Will not go from my mind." The first printed folio version from 1623 adds "I have much to do,/ But to go hang my head all at one side/ And sing it like poor Barbary..." (213) and then after a brief exchange in which Desdemona comments on the attractiveness of Lodovico, she sings the song in question while giving instructions to Emilia (song in italics, instructions in plain text), "T*he poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,/ Sing all a green willow./ Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee,/ Sing willow, willow, willow./ The fresh streams ran by her and murmured her moans,/ Sing willow, willow, willow;/ Her salt tears fell from her, and softened the stones— / Lay by these. / Sing willow, willow, willow. / Prithee hie thee! He'll come anon./ Sing all a green willow must be my garland./ Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve.*/ Nay that's not the next..."(214-215) Here, the original folio and quarto print editions align again briefly as Desdemona wonders at a noise that Emilia dismisses as the wind. In the folio edition, Othello's wife takes up her song once again, "*I called my love false love, but what said he then?/ Sing willow, willow, willow,/ If I court more women, you'll couch with more men*" (215). William Shakespeare, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, *The Tragedy of Othello The Moor of Venice*, Folger Shakespeare Library, 1993 (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009).

37 Ducis moves the song to the second scene of the fifth act where Hédelmone and her maid, Hermance, speak as the former prepares for bed. Berio di Salsa's libretto for a three-act opera positions the song at the very beginning of the final act. In this scene Emilia glosses Desdemona's

operatic or pantomime versions since these genres integrate music into the theatrical performance. Balzac's elimination of this song from his melodrama, despite the musical roots of this genre deserves comment as does his mobilization of themes taken from as key elements structuring his play. In *Le Nègre*, the song disappears, but in its place, Balzac refashions the tale of love and betrayal for which it serves as the vehicle into the action. Émilie's sister Claire replaces the fictional young maid from the song. The choices of this heroine's sister, a female who remains almost invisible in the wings, and the consequences of her choices determine all of the heroine's actions and her fate.

While self-sacrifice and generosity usually motivate the heroic actions of the protagonist in a melodrama, *Le Nègre* flags sororal solidarity and devotion as dangerous.[38] The choice to present familial ties as the shackles that prevent Émilie from telling her husband the truth may represent a debt that Balzac owes to Cuvelier's pantomime in which Othello's jealousy and fury are fueled by the *quiproquo* arising from his ignorance that Desdemona's long-lost brother, Aviano, and his son are in danger.[39] Émilie, like Cuvelier's Desdemona, places herself in mortal danger by attempting to

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lament and song for the audience, explaining that Isaure, Desdemona's absent friend, was an unfortunate young woman who had been kidnapped in Africa where she died suffering from an unhappy love affair. Penley's staging of Shakespeare's original shifted the song likewise to the beginning of the final act. Cuvelier splits the scene into two, placing both in the final act of his three-act pantomime, but neither at the beginning. Instead, in scene 4, Desdemona remembers a prophetic dream in which her dead mother warned her of the unhappy consequences her elopement with Othello would bring. After, in scene 10, Cuvelier uses the romance as the musical backdrop during the staging of Desdemona's fitful sleep. The words he uses differ significantly from those chosen by Berio di Salsa. The romance in the pantomime figures Rosaure as a "jeune", "sage", "belle" and celebrates her courtship by a military hero. While it notes that she dies a bitter death, the positive terms used contrast with the negative ones selected for the Italian libretto.

38 The rejection of fraternal or sororal solidarity that challenges or undermines paternal authority comes as little surprise during the French Restoration, especially during the 1820s. Cuvelier's pantomime specifically promotes filial obedience, that is to say obedience to the father and/or to the state who are closely linked in the spectacle. At the same time, this dramatic work represents the punishment of those, like Desdemona, who refuse to submit to paternal or patriarchal authority.

39 In the second act of this pantomime that quite explicitly privileges the patriarchal authority of the state, scenes 19 and 22 set what will become an inevitable trap. In scene 19, Iago intercepts a message from Aviano criticizing his sister for her marriage and for her liberty while he is prisoner and unable to wed the mother of his child. Iago observes, "*Quelle heureuse découverte ! Le proscrit Aviano caché près de nous dans l'île de Chypre ! L'arrêt qui le condamne l'empêche de se faire connaître. Desdemona, qui craint de compromettre les jours de son frère, s'est vu forcer de laisser éclater la jalousie du More sans la calmer par un aveu dangéreux peut-être avec un homme aussi rigide qu'Othello qui se croirait obligé, par la charge qu'il occupe de sacrifier à la loi impérieuse de la république, les personnes les plus chères... Cachons avec soin le secret que cet écrit renferme. Desdemona va sans doute se rendre auprès de son frère; suivons ses pas, éclairons toutes ses démarches, et saisissons la première occasion de faire croire à l'impétueux Othello que c'est un rival qui entretient avec son épouse une liaison secrète et criminelle*" (24). The text explains the pantomime the actors use in scene 22 to portray the reunion between brother and sister. "*Dans ce mouvement de tendres-*

save a sibling. Balzac's choice to make this sibling a sister appears slightly unusual. More commonly, the persecuted young woman in a classical melodrama would succor a brother, a father, a child, or perhaps even an elderly mother. In a classical melodrama, the presence of ancillary characters in need, as Thomasseau reminds us, serves to reflect and reinforce the audience's perception of the heroine's vulnerability. Seen in this light, at first, it seems that when Balzac takes the Willow Song and integrates it into the narrative structure of *Le Nègre* that the shift from ekphrasis to plot device reinforces the classical nature of this melodrama. Mobilizing, quite literally, the unfortunate female in the song and the story about the song, the young writer creates the character of Claire, the fallen sister, who acts as a foil highlighting Émilie's fragile position. Hence, George's relentless malevolence and persecution of the innocent and helpless Émilie seem to place this work squarely within the paradigm of classical melodrama that Thomasseau describes as characteristic before 1823.

A second reading suggests, however, that by breathing life into the Willow Song, Balzac moves away from the classical paradigm and toward the emerging Romantic model outlined by Thomasseau. Claire's presence problematizes rather than emphasizes Émilie's vulnerability. Indeed, she never appears physically on stage. Moreover, her absence necessitates both Émilie's autonomous action and her selfless heroism. Although Émilie finds herself punished ultimately for her independence, her efforts very nearly succeed in reestablishing order. Likewise, Claire's moral and mental fragility have little in common with Émilie's relative strength. Undoubtedly, the heroine of *Le Nègre* shows herself to be frivolous, occasionally petulant, and more than slightly ridiculous, but she works actively to shield her sister and herself. In Émilie, Balzac does offer a caricature, but of an unprotected woman, not of a weak woman. Claire, on the other hand, embodies emotional and physical excess, alienation, and a refusal to follow society's dictates. Balzac makes her the marginal character par excellence, so marginal, in fact, that she remains in the wings throughout.

Curiously, the play offers Claire, not Émilie, a happy ending. Reunited with her lover, secure in the promise of future happiness as a wife and mother, the rebellious sister prospers, not the good sister. This renders the ultimate message of *Le Nègre* ambiguous in the extreme. Providence does not intercede to save Émilie, as one would expect in a classical melodrama. Instead, she falls victim to her own efforts to save her sister. When the Willow Song comes to life in *Le Nègre*, the ekphrastic element that foreshadowed Desdemona's fate in *Othello* and the adaptations discussed here suddenly becomes the mechanism that determines Émilie's fate. In the versions of *Othello*, heartbreak and death befall the characters in and the singers of the Willow Song. By contrast, in *Le Nègre*, Claire, the very embodiment of the woman in the Willow Song does not perish in the end. She causes Émilie's death, but does not share this fate. She precipitates the conclusion—her sister's

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se maternelle, la vive émotion d'Aviano a fait rouvrir sa blessure; son sang coule ! sa sœur effrayée, cherche à l'étancher; le premier objet qui tombe sous sa main est le mouchoir qui lui fut donné par son mari : car elle ignore le prix que la superstitition lui fait attacher à ce cadeau fatal" (25). In Act III, scene 3, Othello seals the fatal misunderstanding. Showing Desdemona the infamous handkerchief, Othello goads his wife about the origin of the stains that soil having been left, "*Par un sang qui sans doute vous êtes bien précieux, Madame?*" (29). The script outlines the ensuing events as inevitable. "*L'idée de ce sang fraternel fait frissonner Desdemona. Le More [...] prend ce sentiment de crainte pour un aveu tacite et jure qu'il va punir le traître, laver dans son sang son déshonneur. [...] il repousse la femme*" (30).

murder—but remains untouched by it.

Balzac's mobilization of the Willow Song appears as perhaps the most radical of innovations in *Le Nègre*.[40] While this play was rejected by the *Gaîté* as too weak and too controversial to be profitable, the script reveals its author's sensitivity to and appropriation of the looming changes about to revolutionize the genre. While *Le Nègre* neither offers a celebration of an alienated and marginalized hero,[41] nor a strong challenge to the morality and ideological code,[42] Balzac's domestication of *Othello* as a French melodrama retains, nonetheless, a place on the cutting edge of the genre, poised between the classical and Romantic forms.

Cataloguing Female Vulnerability

If analysis of the changes Balzac introduced in creating his adaptation of *Othello* reveals his attunement to the stylistic and aesthetic changes occurring within this genre, a close reading of *Le Nègre* suggests his sensitivity to the importance of the theme of gender on stage and in literature. As demonstrated above, *Le Nègre* proves a story focused far more on the disadvantages that stem from gender than from race. Does this shift in attention from one type of social injustice to another stem more from dramatic imperatives or from the playwright's desire to reform society?

A quick review suggests the former. Dramatic imperatives appear to drive the emphasis on gender. By making the Othello character white and the Iago character black, Balzac presents the story of a white female protagonist happily married to a white male protagonist. Although their free African steward aspires to her affections, the resulting story—the unrequited love of a black employee for his employer's white wife—fails to generate the same dramatic tension and interest as a heroic interracial couple persecuted by a jealous and devious subordinate. Balzac's subsequent choices to generate interest in and to unify the action concentrate the spectator's attention on the condition of women in nineteenth-century French society. Following the lead of previous translators and adaptors, he developed the role of female characters in *Le Nègre*. Like Ducis and Berio di Salsa, he trained the audience's attention on the Desdemona character. Balzac's melodrama expands considerable the two storylines associated with female characters and adds a fourth female to the plot, though not on stage. *Le Nègre* stands out from other versions because Émilie's passion and her own desires do not function as the mechanism driving the plot to an inevitable conclusion. Instead, betrayal of one female by another, moreover a betrayal motivated by vulnerability and ef-

40 Interestingly, the story of the mother's maid and the Willow Song, the very elements that Balzac will transform with such originality, come from a scene that Shakespeare creates for his own adaptation of Cinthio's "*Un Capitano Moro*."

41 While Claire might display some of the characteristics associated with the Romantic hero (alienation, emotional excess, rejection of social conventions), she could in no way be considered the hero of *Le Nègre*.

42 A comparison of the two sisters' fates does suggest a reversal in the conventional prescription of morality. Ultimately, good behavior is not rewarded here, nor is bad behavior punished. Georges murders Émilie and her sister will marry and live happily ever after. Still, these troubling details do not form part of a concerted attempt to subvert the morality of this genre. Likewise, they do not seek to overturn the dominant ideological code generally presented.

forts to overcome this, proves the trigger.

Dramatic tension and the need for *vraisemblance* appear key in determining the emphasis placed on female characters in this text. Nonetheless, Balzac does sketch the female condition in nineteenth-century France and expose a double bind that cut across class differences, and herein lies the interest of his failed theatrical venture. By staging female vulnerability and persecution, *Le Nègre* offers a rich case study of how the genre of melodrama participates in the institutionalization of patriarchal domination. An examination of the female characters and their roles in this play reveals the extent to which the narrative and poetic logic of this dramatic form depends upon the reiteration and normalization of a social dynamic that undermines women's agency and punishes the female characters' attempts to improve the material conditions of their lives. In particular, the burlesque and Manichean stereotypes that structure and energize this melodrama – like so many others – introduce a predictable inevitability in the plot that serves to institutionalize social inequalities and reproduce the structures of patriarchal domination (Balzac, *Physiology of Marriage*).[43] Balzac's deliberately heavy-handed use of generic conventions and clichés repeatedly draws the audience's attention to the plight of these women, whose attempts to ensure their own well-being continually place themselves and other women in danger.

Le Nègre proves a key text for examining the descriptive and prescriptive staging of the imbalance of power between the sexes and the fate of the weaker sex in melodrama. It sheds light on this process and its consequences because this play deliberately pushes the melodramatic form to its limits through a parodic intensification of the genre's mechanisms and structures. In particular, the weaknesses that characterize females, servants, and peasants in melodrama govern their efforts to wrest some measure of control over their lives and function – or 'dysfunction' – as the motor driving the plot to its predictable conclusion. The various manifestations of this powerlessness – naïveté, frivolity, innocence, fragility, misguided efforts to adhere to masculine codes of honor, loss of virtue, madness, inarticulateness, pride, vanity, ambition, self-sacrifice, vulgarity, greed, deceptiveness, cunning, brutishness – form the bases of the caricatural stereotypes that perversely function to legitimize the structures of patriarchal domination portrayed on stage by presenting it as justified by the inferiority of those who lack power. By embracing and exploiting the comic and emotional potential of generic stereotypes while staging the less exalted ranks of society for the very people it portrays, melodrama normalizes oppression and inequality.

For the modern reader, the exaggerated proliferation of female characters struggling to take control of their destinies in *Le Nègre*, as well as the deliberate underscoring of melodramatic devices, notably Balzac's use of *aparté* and *quiproquo* help create a critical distance that invites a reassessment of this institutionalization and normalization of patriarchal domination. Thus, the obvious injustice of Émilie's fate begs an analysis of the sequence of events that render it inevitable and

43 See Honoré de Balzac, ed. and trans. Sharon Marcus, *The Physiology of Marriage* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). In the introduction to this translation of Balzac's *Physiologie du mariage*, Marcus highlights the ways in which a Balzacian text can institutionalize patriarchal domination. Marcus signals the importance of this early work in understanding how Balzac laid a foundation for considering power dynamics and gender inequalities in society, even as a young writer.

a greater understanding of how these events were all the results of social structure that considered an imbalance of power between the genders and female dependence as 'normal'. While *Le Nègre* exposes critically the phenomenon of female vulnerability and the institutionalization of patriarchal domination, the text should not be construed as subversive in nature. Its message remains conservative.

Structurally, Balzac's play melodrama remains typical of the form. Three female characters appear on stage: Émilie, her maid, Rosine, and an old villager, Marguerite. Pulled from the range of stock characters designed to entertain audiences, each of these characters embodies one or more female stereotypes. By turns, Émilie plays the role of the bored, pretty, and slightly ridiculous wealthy wife; the worried and protective older sister; the maligned but faithful wife; and the virtuous innocent female persecuted by a predatory male. Her maid alternates among the roles of faithful servant, naïve *soubrette*, and young woman happily in love. Marguerite switches off as the cunning and careful old woman, the helpful and protective nurse figure, the burlesque country bumpkin, and the greedy traitor. Using three female roles was a basic norm in melodramas staged at the *Gaîté* at this time and corresponded to the composition of the troupe.[44] (*Almanach* 1822; *Almanach* 1823). As noted earlier, Balzac adds one more female character to the plot in the form of Émilie's unfortunate sister Claire. Although Claire never actually sets foot on the stage, she proves a dynamic element for the plot. The absent Claire embodies female desire, weakness, excess, and ruin as both an unwed mother and a fallen, forsaken woman mad with grief.

Balzac's reliance on the conventions and clichés of melodrama (asides, *quiproquo*, caricatural stereotypes) in his staging of the play's four female characters underscores their fragility – in body and in spirit. His representations suggest that weakness, coupled with longing (womb envy, greed, sexual desire), leads inevitably to a predictable and catastrophic conclusion for the heroine. Furthermore, his portrayals of female desire tend to mask the practical imperative for women to ensure their own material survival. *Le Nègre* privileges the impression of feminine powerlessness in a spectacle calculated to elicit an emotional response in the viewer. This tends to divert attention away from the portrayal Balzac offers of a contemporary social reality for women. Rereading his text highlights how the descriptive and prescriptive staging of female emotion in *Le Nègre* exposes on the vulnerability of women.

The Double Bind of Female Vulnerability

Although the play shows the dangers unprotected females face, it repeatedly flags female attempts to ensure their own well-being negatively. Virtually all efforts made by a female character to secure a safe environment for her family and herself endanger that character and other women. By presenting female agency in such an unfavorable light, this melodrama offers a strident apology for the legitimacy of patriarchal domination and control.

While heightened sensibility and female persecution both appear as standard tropes in melodrama, Balzac's play distinguishes itself by probing the intersection of female vulnerability

44 See the *Almanach des Spectacles* (Paris: Barba 1822) and *Almanach des Spectacles* (Paris: Barba 1823).

and female desire across class divides. He offers four examples of women at risk: a wealthy married woman left alone by her travelling husband, a young woman ruined by the flight of aristocratic lover and the birth of their illegitimate child, a lady's maid, and an old peasant woman. Balzac uses each to catalog the various forms of female desire. Émilie, although married, embodies unsatisfied sexual and maternal desire. Claire, although unmarried, personifies fully-realized sexual and maternal desire. Rosine exemplifies deferred sexual and maternal desire and Marguerite rejects sexual desire and lusts instead after money and land.

The conjunction of desire with the need of a woman to ensure her safety proves key for each of the female characters in *Le Nègre*. Émilie is married, but in her husband's absence, she finds herself vulnerable to Georges' advances. She must try to maintain her reputation at all costs in order to survive and to keep her husband's love. The fact that nothing guarantees the eventual return of Émilie's husband further increases her vulnerability. Claire, Émilie's degraded double, has lost her reputation, her means of subsistence, and her reason. Having given up everything to fulfill her desires, she finds herself wholly dependent on Émilie and Marguerite for her survival. Émilie's attempts to broker a marriage between Claire and Manfred are of material importance to both sisters. While this union would ensure Claire's survival and restore her reputation, it would also provide Émilie with a measure of support should her own husband never return. The servant, Rosine, makes her own living, but the possibility of marriage would offer her additional surety. By waiting to receive the blessing of her future father-in-law, Rosine follows the wisest course of all the female characters. George plays on this, however, to victimize Émilie. He manipulates Rosine into leaving her mistress alone by telling her that her intended wants his father to sanction their betrothal. Marguerite, the old peasant woman, seeks to maintain her reputation and the business that form the bases for her livelihood. Although married, she continually seeks to extend her property holdings. Claire and Rosine place Émilie in danger by their actions, but it is Marguerite who determines Émilie's fate by selling her secret to Gerval. While the stereotype of the old peasant woman may be linked to greed, initially, Balzac casts Marguerite as the voice of generous, kindly rustic reason and feminine solidarity. The fatal irony in *Le Nègre* remains the fact that Marguerite should betray Émilie by attempting to provide for her own future by buying more land and that Émilie should be murdered because of her efforts to provide for her sister's future.

Ultimately, Émilie and Marguerite act totally in character. Their actions follow the script, stereotypes, and logic governing melodramas. The element that precipitates the betrayal functions most often as the protective supplement in the Derridean sense. Put in place to counteract the vulnerability of a character, it increases this vulnerability. Heroines tend to put themselves at risk with protective and self-protective actions. Secondary female characters, especially older ones, further endanger the heroine. While the persecuted heroine stands out as one of the key elements of melodrama, readings of other texts produced at the *Gaîté* in the 1820s demonstrate that Balzac's use of an old woman as traitor is not unique.[45] This pattern of females making dangerous choices in a bid

45 The peasant woman's actions in *Le Nègre* function like those of another Marguerite, namely the old woman in Boirie and Léopold's *Le Paysan grand seigneur, ou la Pauvre mère*, also staged by the *Gaîté* in April 1822. Archives nationales de France, *Le Paysan grand seigneur*, folder Gaîté (1820), F[18]601 and Léopold [Chandezon] and Eugène Cantiran de Boirie, *Le Paysan grand seigneur, ou la Pauvre mère mélodrame en 3 actes* (Paris: Quoy, 1820). Both old women speak

to provide for themselves also holds true for younger female characters. Classic examples in melodrama of this include young unwed mothers giving up a child, or poor young women marrying to save their fathers from poverty. These actions typically render the women powerless.

Le Nègre differs little, on the one hand, from other melodramas in its portrayal of women struggling unsuccessfully to secure their own futures. It differs little in its conservative reaffirmation of male institutions of patriarchal domination. On the other hand, Balzac's melodrama—even unstaged—stands out because it offers of the four complementary representations of female desire and vulnerability and their consequences. Without attempting to produce a subversive or feminist text, Balzac offers a shrewd portrayal of the double bind French women faced in the early nineteenth century.

Conclusion

While the very title of Balzac's melodrama might suggest the centrality of the question of race, the text itself invites readers to focus instead on issues of gender. By making the heroine's husband white and the villainous interloper black, the playwright evacuates the question of mixed marriage and offers a flat oversimplified rejection of cross-racial desire. Intriguingly, exposure of women's fundamental lack of security appears to be a necessary consequence of erasing race in Balzac's version of the *Othello* plot. In his rescripting, the elimination of a positive representation of cross-racial desire (Desdemona's love for Othello and his for her) saps the plot of interest and energy.

Le Nègre offers a fascinating case study of Balzac's creative process and its consequences. Examination of his adaptation of *Othello* his ability to render the pedestrian unexpectedly unique. In *Le Nègre*, Balzac translated a well-known plotline and reduced it to a melodrama. He introduced simplifications based on racial intolerance. He embraced generic constraints that prized formulae and technical gimmickry rather than true originality. In doing so, he penned a melodrama that balances between the classical and Romantic models for this genre, integrating elements of both in such a way that *Le Nègre* and its transformation of the Willow Song illustrate the very process by which Romantic writers appropriate classical rhetorical elements like ekphrasis and reimagine them as plot devices, that is to say as the motor driving the narrative. In the process, Balzac created a play that swept one societal problem—racial prejudice—out of sight while foregrounding another—female vulnerability.

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when they should remain silent, endangering others by trying to secure their own futures. Unlike *Le Nègre*, Boirie and Léopold's melodrama clearly fits in the mold of the "classical" *mélodrame larmoyant*. Their Marguerite's ill-timed words come as a desperate bid to ensure her own well-being, but they are couched in terms of the sanctity of family and the mother's bond with her children. While both plays stage peasant women who calculate their actions based economic security, *Le Paysan grand seigneur* masks this imperative beneath the rhetoric of family ties.

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