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Ira Aldridge's Reputation in the United States during his Lifetime

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ABSTRACT

Ira Aldridge is widely recognized today for having been the first African American to earn an international reputation as a professional actor in the nineteenth century. During his first twenty-seven years performing throughout the British Isles, he was recognized as a skillful actor. He went on to perform Shakespeare with great success in major theatres on the Continent for the remaining fifteen years of his career. Yet his remarkable achievements abroad were seldom mentioned in newspapers in the United States during his life-

time. More stories about him finally began to circulate when it was announced in 1867 that he would be returning to America to perform in New York City, but he died in Poland shortly before he was due to sail. The many obituaries written about him immediately afterward earned him a measure of belated recognition.

PAROLE CHIAVE: *Ira Aldridge, American newspapers, professional reputation, European theatre history, American theatre history*

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Today Ira Aldridge is widely recognized for having been the first African American to earn an international reputation as a professional actor in the nineteenth century. As a young man he had joined the company of a small black theater in New York that survived for only two years. Since there were no other theaters in America that employed black actors, he emigrated to England to seek opportunities to appear on stage in black roles. His first break came on May 11, 1825 when, at age seventeen, he was billed to appear as Othello at the Royalty Theatre, a small playhouse in London's unfashionable East End. His debut there was successful enough to win him additional appearances as Othello and as heroes in a few old and new melodramas about slavery.

His next break came in October, when he was hired for seven weeks to perform in rapid succession a variety of racial roles at London's well-established Royal Coburg Theatre (later known as the Old Vic). By the time he ended his stint at the Coburg, he had proven his worth as an attraction that drew large crowds, and alert theater managers outside London were eager to sign him up.

Aldridge spent the next twenty-seven years performing mainly in provincial cities and towns throughout the British Isles, where he made a name for himself as an exotic touring player. He seldom was called back to reappear in London, except occasionally at minor theaters and once at prestigious Covent Garden. While making his rounds, he sought to expand his repertoire by learning new roles, including such classic Shakespearean characters as Richard III, Macbeth, and Shylock, which he had to white up to play.

But during all these years, Aldridge's accomplishments on stage in Britain were never mentioned in the United States. There was not a single article or review of his appearances abroad published in any American newspaper.¹ He was gone and totally forgotten. It was not until a quarter of a century later that information about him was included in *Tallis's Drawing Room Table Book of Theatrical Portraits, Memoirs and Anecdotes* (1851), a book published in London and New York about famous actors and actresses in Britain. A laudatory biography of each performer was accompanied by full-page engraving showing that individual in a favorite role. In Aldridge's case it was Mungo, the comical drunken servant in Isaac Bickerstaff's farce *The Padlock*. In April 1851 another engraving of Aldridge as Aaron the Moor in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* had appeared in *Tallis's Dramatic Magazine and General Theatrical and Musical Review*, but no biographical information was included with

¹ I base this generalization on the more than 253 million records drawn from nearly sixteen thousand American historical newspapers published from 1607 to 2022 that can be screened at the website for *NewspaperArchive.com*. There are no entries on Ira Aldridge available on this data base from 1807 to 1850.

it. Aldridge had started performing this role in 1849, having collaborated with Charles A. Somerset in the first revival of the play in more than a century, one in which they chose to present Aaron as a hero instead of a villain. This radical revision was regarded by some as another of Aldridge's important contributions to British theatre.

Here is the way Aldridge was described in *Tallis's Drawing Room Table Book*:

This gentleman, popularly known as the *African Roscius*, is a veritable negro; and we believe the only member of his race who ever adopted the stage as a profession. His ancestors were princes of the Fulah tribe, whose dominions were Senegal, on the banks of the river of that name, on the west coast of Africa. His grandfather appears to have been more enlightened than his subjects, for he proposed that prisoners taken in war should be exchanged, and not, as was the custom, sold for slaves; this humane desire, as it interfered with the perquisites of his chiefs, caused a revolt among them, in which the prince, together with his family, attendants and connections were savagely butchered.

One son only, then a boy, escaped this massacre; and, in conjunction with a missionary who had found his way to that rude and inhospitable tribe, fled to America. Here he was educated as a minister of the gospel, and was regarded as a man of remarkable talent. Desirous of establishing himself as the head of his tribe, and also of propagating amongst them the religion he had embraced, he returned to his native land, taking with him a young wife of his own colour, whom he had married in America. The result of his arrival in his own country was a civil war, in which his adherents were defeated, and he himself compelled to fly for his life. At this period Mr. Ira Aldridge was born, and until he was nine years old lived concealed with his parents in the neighborhood of their foes, enduring every variety of hardship and vicissitudes. On the termination of this period of trial, the fugitive family found means to escape to America, where the father resumed his functions as a minister of religion. He died at New York, greatly regretted by his coloured brethren, on the 27th of September, 1840.

The subject of the present memoir was intended by his father for the church, but this was not to be; his first visit to a theatre so dazzled and fascinated him that he resolved, at all hazards, to adopt the stage as his profession and means of life. Having studied the part of Rolla, in the play of *Pizarro*, he made his appearance in that character at a private theatre, where all his fellow performers were all his fellow performers were of his own sable complex, and wore, as Shakespeare eloquently expresses it,—

“The shadowed livery of the burnished sun,”

The success he met in this boyish performance confirmed his histrionic desires. Having in some trivial capacity obtained the *entrée* behind the scenes of the Chat-

ham Theatre, New York, he hung nightly about the "wings," and listened with delight to the various performers; whom he trusted, at some future time, to rival in the intellectual and intoxicating art which he so passionately loved.

But an abrupt termination was put to those evening pleasures; through the interest of Bishops Brenton and Milner, he was entered at Schenectady College, near New York, in order to prepare himself for the ministry; and here for a time he devoted himself to theological studies. He was eventually sent to Britain, and entered at the Glasgow University, where, under Professor Sandford, he obtained several premiums, and the medal for Latin composition.

After remaining there for about eighteen months, he abandoned his scholastic labours, and came to London, where, after great exertions, he obtained an appearance, in the year 1826, at the Royalty, an east-end theatre, now no longer standing. Othello was his opening character in this locality, where he was highly successful, and from which he went to the Cobourg, then a theatre of higher pretensions than at present, and performed Oroonoko, Gambia, Zarambo, &c, with great applause.

One evening, after representing Gambia, in *The Slave*, Mr. Aldridge was invited by a friend to a private box, to receive the congratulations of a party who had witnessed his performance; among the company was a young lady, who appeared to have entertained something more than an admiration for the dark actor, who stood alone in a land of strangers. She saw his "visage in his mind," and within a brief period from that accidental introduction entered into a matrimonial alliance with him.

Mr. Aldridge's next engagement was at Sadler's Wells Theatre, where he performed several leading characters, and then left that establishment for the Olympic.

He now determined to withdraw into the country, and there go through that course of study and practice which he very justly deemed essential to the acquirement of a sound metropolitan reputation. He therefore entered on a provincial tour, and acted in succession at Brighton, Chichester, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Exeter, etc; in every town he visited, his reception was extremely flattering, and his reputation as a rising tragedian at last reached the capital.

For a length of time he had been unable to obtain an engagement at Dublin, the manager could not be induced by letter to accept the services of a man of colour. Mr. Aldridge, therefore, went there at his own expense, and had an interview with Mr. Calcraft, which terminated in an engagement for a limited period. Here he appeared as Othello, and created a great sensation; the inhabitants of Dublin were surprised and delighted, and the newspapers spoke in the highest terms of his great and remarkable talent. He subsequently ran through his list of favourite characters, viz., Zanga, Rolla, Gambia, Alhambra, Mungo, &c., in all of which he added to his rapidly increasing reputation.

During this period, Edmund Kean came to Dublin, and (having seen Mr. Aldridge play) with that good nature which was so conspicuous a part of his character, gave him a letter of recommendation to the manager of the Bath Theatre, couched n

very complimentary terms. At Belfast, Mr. Charles Kean played Iago to his Othello; and he Aboan, to that gentleman's Oroonoko. The testimonials and letters of congratulation which he received at this period would, of themselves, form a small volume; and among those who complimented and encouraged the "only actor of colour upon the stage," was the distinguished dramatist, Mr. Sheridan Knowles. About this period a report was spread of his death; a paragraph went round of the papers, stating, that while returning in his carriage from the seat of Colonel Powell, when within half-a-mile of Llandillo, one of the horses took fright at the blaze of light from the iron-works, while on the very brink of a precipice, over which the carriage swerved with its inmate, dragging down the horses and postilion. The footman, it was said, was providentially saved, as he was in the act of alighting to seize the horses' heads, when the carriage was precipitated over the cliff. The account, which was exceedingly circumstantial, and for this reason obtained general credit, concluded by stating that Mr. Aldridge, the postilion, and horses were killed on the spot, and the carriage dashed to pieces. This story, if circulated by some illiberal opponent of Mr. Aldridge, as it was supposed to be, failed of its effect, for when the public became aware that it was a forgery, and that the African tragedian was still living, they went in even greater numbers to witness his performances. After the fulfillment of several other provincial engagements, Mr. Aldridge received an offer from Mr. Laporte, at that time the lessee both of the Italian Opera House and of Covent-Garden Theatre. This he readily accepted, and made his appearance at the latter house on the 10th of April, 1833, in his favourite character of Othello. One of the morning papers spoke thus of his performance—"We at once gladly express our unqualified delight at his delineation of his masterpiece of the divine Shakspeare. To attempt a minute description would be as superfluous as difficult: he succeeded in deeply affecting the feelings of his audience; and the representation all through was watched with an intense stillness, almost approaching to awe." At the fall of the curtain, he was vociferously called for, and enthusiastically applauded; indeed, nothing could have been more complete than his success. But there were circumstances against him: a portion of the public press were inimical to his dramatic pretensions, and met him—not with candid criticism, to which, however severe, no aspirant to histrionic fame can justly object—but with levity and ridicule—a kind of attack no one can refute, and which, though its effects are often fatally injurious both to interest and reputation, it has almost passed into a proverb that it is idle to resent. The legitimate drama was in an unusually depressed condition. Mr. Laporte, the lessee, became bankrupt, the theatre closed, and the company seceded to the Olympic. He then played for a few evenings at the Surrey Theatre, and left the metropolis, to wait patiently a more favourable opportunity for an appearance in the great city. Though he had not met with the success which he both expected and deserved, still he had stood the test of a London audience, and had not failed; and his reputation and value were enhanced among country managers.

While performing at Manchester, in 1834, he received a highly complimentary note from that gifted and ill-fated vocalist, Madam Malibran, who stated, that never, in the course of her professional career, had she witnessed a more interesting and powerful performance. A similar compliment was paid to him by Lady Wrixon Beecher, the late Miss O'Neill, who said—"During my professional, as well as my private life, I never saw so correct a portraiture of Othello amidst the principal luminaries of my day."

In 1848, he accepted another engagement at the Surrey, and made his appearance there in the character of Zanga. Upon this occasion, the press was unanimous in its expression of unqualified approbation; encomiums of the loftiest character were lavishly bestowed upon him; and his engagement terminated with an offer to renew it: but it is on the Middlesex side of the river that he is desirous of again submitting himself to the judgment of the London playgoers; and we trust that, at no distant period, his wish will be granted.

As both a tragic and a comic actor, Mr. Aldridge's talents are undeniable: he possesses every mental and physical requisite for both walks of the profession. In tragedy, he has a solemn intensity of style, bursting occasionally into a blaze of fierce invective, or passionate declamation; while the dark shades of his face become doubly somber in their thoughtful aspect: a night-like gloom is spread over them, and an expression more terrible than paler lineaments can readily assume. In farce, he is exceedingly amusing—the ebony becomes polished—the coal admit sparks. His face is the faithful index of his mind; and as there is not a darker frown than his, there is not a broader grin. The ecstasy of his long, shrill note, in "Opposum [sic] up a gum-tree," can only be equaled by the agony of his cry of despair over the body of Desdemona.

A fugitive from his father-land, and an enthusiastic follower of an elegant and refining art, the African tragedian has made this country the land of his adoption; and we sincerely trust that no ungenerous prejudice against his colour or his race may be permitted to interfere with his professional progress, or rob him of one leaf of that histrionic laurel which, we believe, he is destined to enjoy, Genius is not confined to any one race or country: it is of all complexions and of all climes; and its mission is uniformly beneficial and elevating to humanity. Be its recipient white or black, let none dare to despise it.

This account was gleaned from a twenty-eight-page biographical booklet entitled *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius* that he had arranged to publish in London two years earlier and had started to sell at his performances. The facts contained in it were supplemented by several fabrications. He had never lived in Africa. He had been born and raised in New York City and had been educated there at an African Free School until he was fifteen years old. He had never attended Schenectady College or Glasgow University. When he first arrived in England and started performing, he was known to have arrived from the New World, but eight years later, when he was honored by an invitation to appear as Othello at

Covent Garden Theatre, he was described on the playbill as a “native of Senegal.” A negative review in the *Times* of his first performance as Oroonoko at the Coburg Theatre in October 1825 referred to him derisively as an “African Roscius,” an ironic allusion to the eminent Roman actor Quintus Roscius Gallus.² Aldridge appears to have had a playful sense of irony, too, for when he started touring the provinces afterward as a visiting star, he chose to identify himself on playbills and in newspaper advertisements as the African Roscius. He took what had been intended as a humorous insult and turned it to his advantage as a flattering compliment. And once he adopted this title, he never gave it up. To the very end of his career, forty-three years later, the largest words appearing on his publicity materials remained the AFRICAN ROSCIUS. It became his theatrical trademark.

Becoming a professional African helped him in other ways as well. Theatregoers who saw him for the first time often assumed he would be an incompetent performer. They came to the theatre expecting to laugh at him in a serious role. What they discovered instead was that he had real talent, and this turned out to be a very pleasant surprise, given their prior racial assumptions. We should remember that Aldridge was on stage in Britain at a time when there was a national debate going on about human rights. The year he performed at Covent Garden, 1833, happened to coincide with the culmination of a long-fought campaign in Parliament to abolish slavery throughout the British Empire. As an African, Aldridge had great symbolic value as an emancipated man. And he made recognition of his stature as an intelligent human being one of his goals in performance. He sought to prove himself the equal of his European peers.

On February 5, 1852 the *National Era*, a newspaper in Washington, DC, may have been the first in America to report news on “An African Roscius” named Ira Aldridge performing with remarkable success at theatres in London.³ This was done by condensing the biographical account given in *Tallis’s Drawing Room Table Book*, which itself was a condensation of what had been published in the *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge* around 1849.

In 1852 Aldridge had decided to try his luck performing on the Continent for the first time, so he recruited a troupe of experienced British actors and actresses to support him in *Othello* and a number of other Shakespearean plays as well as a few melodramas that they could perform in English. He was hoping they could start their tour in Paris, but finding bookings there proved impossible so instead he took his company to Brussels for two weeks in mid-July where they unfortunately failed to

² *Times*, 11 October 1825: 2.

³ The article in the *National Era* was credited as having been reprinted from the *Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch* so it may have originally appeared in the United States a day earlier.

attract an audience. Only twenty spectators attended their debut in *Othello*, and no one at all turned up for their second attempt to stage *The Revenge* by Edward Young. However, the Belgian press rewarded them with favorable publicity, heaping praise in particular on Aldridge's talents as an actor, and this resulted in an invitation to appear at a theatre nearby in Aachen, Germany. Aldridge could not afford to take his whole troupe there, so he dismissed half of them, sending them back to England, and he continued on with only the most essential personnel.

News about this unusual black actor spread quickly in the German theatrical world and he was deluged with offers of engagements at cities and towns throughout the Rhine valley. He and his slim troupe appeared in twenty-eight of them in the five remaining months of the year, and though the acclamations continued, the American press was slow to notice what was happening. During this entire period, only three papers happened to mention in a single sentence that a negro by the name of Ira Aldridge had performed *Othello* in Leipzig.⁴

This changed when Aldridge reached Berlin at the beginning of January and remained on stage there for two weeks before large crowds that included local royalty:

The Negro Roscius.—A letter from Berlin, of the 19th, says:--The King of Prussia has presented to Mr. Ira Aldridge, the American actor of color, at the close of his performances here, the great gold medal, with an autograph testimonial—a distinction bestowed only on persons of the first eminence in their professions. Mr. Aldridge's success in Berlin has obtained for him invitations to "star" in almost all German capitals. After visiting the nearest Baltic towns, he goes to Breslau, Prague, Vienna, and Pesth.⁵

Another report, quoted from an Augsburg paper, provided details on his style of acting:

Ira Aldridge, the Negro tragedian from America, is now acting at Berlin. He is favorably criticized in the Augsburg *Allgemeine Zeitung*. His *Othello* is said to be as new to European playgoers, as it is true to nature—that is the nature of the Negro. His acting is said to be remarkable physically and psychologically. He is a real volcano, no player who merely rolls his eyes and deals in convulsive gestures, but who pours forth the devastating lava of awful passion. But it has an element of the wild beast in it. It is the true African he depicts, not mere imitation and clap-trap, but profound study of a nature which he by his birth can appreciate better than any white man. He is an artist whom no one should fail to see, but not a tragedian of

⁴ *Daily Commercial Register* (Sandusky, Ohio), 17 January 1853: 3; *Boston Post*, 27 January 1853: 1; *Lebanon Post*, 9 February 1853: 1.

⁵ *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 9 February 1853: 2; *Staunton Spectator*, 16 February 1853: 2; *Lancaster Examiner and Herald*, 16 February 1853: 3.

the highest rank. He is [] to calm, epical characters and situations, but in effective passages his performance is wonderful.⁶

An amusing anecdote of Aldridge's appearance in Dresden later in 1853 received wide circulation:

In Dresden theatre, not long since, Ira Aldridge, the Ethiopian tragedian, was acting "Othello," when Desdemona appeared in the last scene in a real bed, having on real night clothes. The ladies were greatly shocked, some cried, some fainted, some left the theatre, others looked up with becoming loyalty to the Royal box, and seeing that Her Gracious Majesty never took her eyes from the interesting negro, they followed her example.⁷

In the years immediately following there were occasional brief references in the American press to Aldridge's successes on the Continent, but one commentator wanted to know how he managed to communicate with audiences there: "We suppose Mr. Aldridge is not, as Mrs. Chick might say, 'a native.' In what language or languages does he perform in that very ample stage, the continent?"⁸

There was also some decidedly negative coverage of Aldridge's behavior off-stage, particularly in media published in southern states. A Louisiana paper reported what happened when he returned to England briefly between a couple of his tours abroad:

A Negro Defendant in a Seduction Case:—The Picayne says that the "African Roscius," as he styles himself, in England, and who has for years been acting in different parts of Europe as a tragedian, has recently been tried in London for seducing the wife of a brother actor, a white man. The name of the negro tragedian is Ira Aldridge, and he attempted to prove his entire innocence of the charge; but the color and hair (wool!) of a child born to the plaintiff's wife went against him, and he was mulcted in damages. These keen Othellos have so great trouble in finding Desdemonas on the other side of the Atlantic.⁹

In addition, there was this reaction to a rumor that Aldridge was about to return to the United States to perform:

⁶ *Covington Peoples Friend*, 19 February 1853: 3; *Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post*, 26 February 1853: 2.

⁷ *Richmond Morning Mail*, 2 August 1853: 2; *Daily Evening Star* (Washington, DC), 3 August 1853: 4; *Pittsburgh Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, 3 August 1853: 2; *Milledgeville Southern Recorder*, 16 August 1853: 4; *Burlington Iowa State Gazette*, 31 August 1853: 2.

⁸ *Daily National Era*, 1 March 1854: 1.

⁹ *Houma Ceres*, 6 March 1856: 3.

A Nigger Tragedian—Ira Aldridge, a runaway from America, and a pet of the English aristocracy, a real dyed-in-the-wool Ashantee, has the honor to announce that he is coming to the States, and will be supported in his delineations by a powerful company of white actors. November is the period fixed for the advent of this black phenomenon. He will take immensely in Boston and other small New England towns, but his reception may not be so pleasant in the Metropolis. A negro playing white characters must be a disgusting sight to an audience of decent white folks.⁹

To this, another contributor added: “What a grotesque appearance must this sable son of Ham present upon the boards!”¹⁰

There was also a neutral commentator, this time from Boston, who tried to make a joke of Aldridge's name: “*The Black (Stage) Diamond*.—Mr Ira Aldridge, if there is anything in a name, must become the ‘rage.’ But he should beware the injudicious puffing of his manager *pro tem*, or he may find the truth of the old copy book proverb, ‘*Ira est furor brevis*’—that the rage for him will be but a brief *furor*.”¹¹

Of course, Aldridge had defenders as well, one of whom submitted a letter to the editor of a New Hampshire paper on the topic of Colored Merit in which he made the point that

Every colored person who achieves anything noticeable in the intellectual world, by that very deed assaults the main fort which defends the castle of slavery. A colored artist like Ira Aldridge, whose acting has become famous in all the courts of Europe; a colored orator like Frederick Douglass—nay, every gentlemanly, well-educated colored man, in his sphere, is an argument in the face of pro-slavery politicians and religionists.¹²

The glowing praise for Aldridge's acting in a dramatization of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred*¹³ in Belfast, in Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Merchant of Venice* in Stockholm¹⁴ and *Othello* again at the Lyceum Theatre in London,¹⁵ show that he was continuing to impress audiences during this period. A report on his appearances in Stockholm quoted enthusiastic responses to him in four Swedish newspapers, one

⁹ *Evansville Daily Enquirer*, 23 September 1858: 2; *Hannibal Messenger*, 25 September 1858: 2; *Daily Southern Reveille*, 27 September 1858: 3.

¹⁰ *Marysville Daily National Democrat*, 4 November 1858: 1.

¹¹ *Boston Post*, 16 August 1858: 4.

¹² *Newport Daily News*, 22 October 1858: 2.

¹³ *Memphis Daily Appeal*, 30 January 1857; 4.

¹⁴ *New York Herald*, 9 August 1857: 5; *Memphis Daily Appeal*, 16 August 1857: 6.

¹⁵ *Boston Post*, 17 August 1858: 4.

of which suggested that “many Swedish actors might learn much from Mr. A.’s by-play, his expressive outbursts, and the freedom with which he treads the stage.”¹⁶

Aldridge’s next major stop was in St. Petersburg, where he performed in a German theatre for six consecutive weeks starting on November 22, 1858. One paper called it

A Funny Performance. Ira Aldridge, the colored tragedian, has met with great success in St. Petersburg, where he has been performing several Shakspearean characters. The representations must appear rather funny, however, for Aldridge plays in English, and the company that supports him is German, while very few, comparatively, of his Russian audiences understand either language. Only think of Othello calling for his handkerchief, a Shylock claiming his pound of flesh, in English, and Desdemona excusing herself, or Portia expounding the law, in high Dutch.”¹⁷

Nevertheless, the entire run went well:

A letter from St. Petersburg says the success of the negro actor, Ira Aldridge, in that city has been wonderful. Tears wet his cheeks, his mouth foams, and his eyes flash fire when he plays the Moor, but he turns his back to the audience, which the Russians don’t like. The grand duchesses are said to be all smitten with him, and many of the court ladies admire his somber complexion, such a contrast to their own blond skin. Aldridge is evidently in a good spot.¹⁸

At his benefit on January 1, 1859 the theatre was crammed to excess, and he was presented with a crown of laurel, a valuable gold clasp that the Russian actors gave him, and a shower of bouquets “completed the homage of the public, whose enthusiasm recalled to us the early days of the Italian opera at St. Petersburg.”¹⁹

Except for the lengthy descriptions of Aldridge’s life and professional career in *Tallis’s Drawing Room Table Book* and the *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge*, all the documents quoted so far were brief excerpts drawn from British and Continental newspapers. On January 1860 a six-page article on him was finally published in an American journal, the *Anglo-African Magazine*, summarizing some of his accomplishments abroad. This was written by James McCune Smith, a medical doctor and famous radical abolitionist who happened to have been one of Aldridge’s former classmates at the African Free School in New York City. While earning his BA, MA and MD at the University of Glasgow, Smith had seen Aldridge perform at that

¹⁶ *Memphis Daily Appeal*, 16 August 1857: 6.

¹⁷ *Weaverville Weekly Trinity Journal*, 2 April 1859: 1.

¹⁸ *Marysville Daily National Democrat*, 17 February 1859: 3.

¹⁹ *Philadelphia Press*, 5 February 1859: 1; *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, 12 February 1859: 1.

city's Theatre Royal and remained in touch with him thereafter. He told his African American readers that

Of the British actors, [Aldridge] may be classed with Garrick, in that it is hard to say whether he excels most in tragedy or comedy. His triumphs on the Continent are greater from the fact that he used the English language in the various stages, whilst his audiences were French, German, Russian or Norse. He reached the eye and ear and heart by something higher than pantomime, inasmuch as the tones of the voice swept the heartstrings with their resistless magic. It was the human appealing to the human, through the universal language of passion which accomplished these highest triumphs of art.²⁰

Aldridge returned to the Slavic world quite often in the years that followed, performing in Kiev and Odessa in Ukraine as well as in Moscow and a number of provincial Russian towns and cities. Two accounts written by eye-witnesses are worth quoting. One told of his performance of Othello at Taganrog, a port city in southwestern Russia:

The prices of the theatre were doubled, and no small sum was made by speculators who had previously taken a number of boxes, and afterwards disposed of them at what might be called a usurious rate of profit. At the conclusion of the first night's performance a vast crowd conducted the gifted actor to his hotel, which was brilliantly illuminated.²¹

The other account was written by Bayard Taylor, an American author and diplomat who recalled having seen Aldridge perform Macbeth in Nizhny Novgorod (now Gorky) while serving as acting minister to Russia in 1862-63:

He was a dark, strongly built mulatto, of about fifty, in a fancy tunic, and light stockings over Forrestian calves. His voice was deep and powerful; and it was very evident that Edmund Kean, once his master, was also the model which he carefully followed in part...Mr. Aldridge's acting was really very fine. The Russians were enthusiastic in their applause, though very few of them, probably, understood the language of the part...Nevertheless, the audience was delighted, and when the curtain fell there were vociferous cries of "*Aira! Aira! Aldreetch! Aldreetch!*" until the swarthy hero made his appearance before the footlights...

This son of the South, no doubt, came legitimately (or, at least naturally) by his dignity. His career, for a man of his blood and antecedents, has been wonderfully successful, and is justly due, I am convinced, since I have seen him, to his histrionic

²⁰ "Ira Aldridge," *Anglo-African* 2.1 (1860): 32.

²¹ *Philadelphia Press*, 24 October 1864: 4.

talents. Both black and yellow skins are sufficiently rare in Europe to excite a particular interest in those who wear them; and I had surmised, up to this time, that much of his popularity might be owing to his color. But he certainly deserves an honorable place among tragedians of second rank.²²

Interest in Aldridge began to pick up in his last years of touring. In 1866 there were at least thirty-one articles published on him in the American press. Many of these focused on sensational events, the earliest of which was his appearance on stage in Constantinople:

We have a tragedian celebrity here at the present moment, in the person of Ira Aldridge, a native of New York. He has acted with great success in the French theatre as "Othello," all the others reciting their parts in the French translation of Shakespeare. Strange as this seems it went off quite well, especially as few of the audience understood English. He is of a dark complexion—at least three-fourths black—but with a highly intelligent countenance and most tragic and noble manners...Mr. Aldridge is a most gentlemanly person, well calculated, even among people of his own country, to remove that unjust prejudice which is entertained against his color.²³

Another account suggested that Aldridge's reception in Constantinople was one of several signs that "European and American civilization is making astonishing strides among followers of the prophet. Such an infusion of Western ideas can hardly fail to be beneficial."²⁴

In September there was a report that Aldridge had been robbed, at Kiev, "of his jewel-box, which contained the different decorations he had received from German sovereigns."²⁵ Another paper said he had been robbed of 10,000 roubles but corrected this the following day by saying that the theft was of 10,000 roubles and presents.²⁶ A third paper reported erroneously that the robbery had taken place in St. Petersburg.²⁷

²² *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, 19 January 1865: 2.

²³ *Philadelphia Evening Telegraph*, 30 April 1866: 6. The same report was carried in the *Baltimore Daily Commercial*, 1 May 1866: 4. Briefer versions appeared in the *Portland Daily Press*, 24 April 1866: 2, and the *Janesville Gazette*, 28 April 1866: 1.

²⁴ *Portland Daily Press*, 7 May 1866: 2.

²⁵ *Philadelphia Evening Telegraph*, 7 September 1866: 7.

²⁶ *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, 18 September 1866: 2; *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, 19 September 1866: 1.

²⁷ *New Albany Daily Commercial*, 19 September 1866: 1.

In November Aldridge had an “immense success” playing Othello in English at the theatre of Versailles in Paris with a company that spoke their lines in French.²⁸ While he remained there, Alexandre Dumas, “who boasts of negro blood in his veins,” gave a supper to Aldridge, leading one paper to remark, “We are left in the dark as to where Ira got his breakfast the next day.”²⁹

The most remarkable account of Aldridge published at the end of this year appeared after a portrait of his head had been examined by phrenologists, the results of which were reported in a newspaper containing an early issue of *The Illustrated Annual of Phrenology and Physiognomy for 1867*.³⁰ Included in this lengthy description were details explaining why Aldridge was such a successful actor:

The head of this eminent colored man is very much larger than the average size for a white man, which, as is generally known, is above the negro type of head. According to details sent to us by the American consul in Odessa, it is about twenty-three and a half inches in circumference. Referring to our portrait, we find the indications of an excellent combination of the organs, a fair balance of the intellectual faculties. The knowing organs [are] predominant, Individuality, Language, Form, Locality, and Time are large, and give his mind the tendency to inquire, examine, observe, and hold in memory tenaciously whatever he deems worthy of attention. The high forehead denotes a sympathetic nature and considerable ability to read character. Large Human Nature and very large Imitation qualify him to enter into the spirit of dramatic impersonation and assume with unusual facility the various phases of human character as he understands them.

After further scrutiny of his outstanding physical and psychological traits, the report concluded by emphasizing that Aldridge was an unusual exception:

His superior talents furnish a strong testimonial in favor of those who advocate negro equality; but unfortunately his, like that of Fred Douglas [sic], is an isolated case, and proves only rare possibilities or outcroppings from the common stock.

In the first seven months of 1867 and up until his death on August 7th, there were forty-nine articles on Aldridge in the American press, nearly a score of them in January and February reprinting or quoting excerpts from a very positive and accurate biographical summary of his life and career that had appeared in *Wilkes' Spirit of the Times*, arguing that his achievements “show what the negro can do if you will

²⁸ *New Albany Daily Commercial*, 13 November 1866: 7. This story was picked up in several papers a month later: *Cincinnati Commercial*, 12 December 1866: 8; *Indiana Daily Herald*, 13 December 1866: 3; *Portland Daily Press*, 14 December 1866: 2; *Winona Daily Republican*, 20 December 1866: 1.

²⁹ *Cincinnati Commercial*, 6 January 1867: 7; *Sunbury American*, 26 January 1867: 2.

³⁰ *South Carolina Leader*, 17 November 1866: 1.

only give him a chance...Give the whole race the open, untrammelled field which Ira Aldridge has had in Europe, and who shall say that they will not prove their fitness for every utility and every duty?"³¹

Coverage increased in July when it was reported that Aldridge was due to appear on stage in New York City at the beginning of the theatrical season:

The fortunate manager who has engaged him, however, is in some tribulation about getting actors, and especially actresses to support the smoked Roscius. No "leading lady" has yet been found willing to accept the embraces of a sooty Lear, or respond to the affections of a true-blooded Moore [sic]. The passion for the "real," which possess so many managers, finds no responsive throb in the bosom of lovely women, particularly if the lovely woman happens to be an actress, and is called upon to play Desdemona to a genuine Carthaginian.³²

But by the following month a detailed report in the *New York Clipper* indicated that this problem had been overcome:

[Aldridge] is expected to sail from England about the middle of the month, and will make his *debut* in this city at the Academy of Music, about the first of September, as Othello. From the first mention being made of the actor's intended visit to this country, considerable doubt has existed as to the possibility of finding a leading lady or a first-class company that would support him, but we have seen letters from one of the best actresses in the country, who has expressed a wish to support him, and we are also informed that another leading lady can be secured, as well as any quantity of leading people for support.³³

Unfortunately, what columnists at the *New York Clipper* may not have known when publishing this information on August 10, 1867, was that Aldridge had died three days earlier in Lodz, Poland. His death prompted even more coverage of him in the American press, ninety-eight articles in all before the end of the year. Some of these were simply brief obituaries paying respect to a notable celebrity, but papers that attempted to review his career in depth tended to write garbled histories of his life. For instance, it was claimed that he had been born in Belair, a community near Baltimore, where he gained fluency in the German language; that he had served as a personal attendant to Edmund Kean and accompanied him to England; that he had returned to the United States in 1830 to perform at the Mud Theater in Baltimore;

³¹ See, for example, Indiana's *Evansville Journal*, 21 January 1867: 6. Most of this kind of coverage appeared in newspapers in northern states.

³² *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, 20 July 1867; 6.

³³ *New York Clipper*, 10 August 1867: 1.

that he had also appeared at London's Covent Garden in 1857, all of which was untrue.³⁴ Adding to the confusion was the assumption by some theatregoers that Aldridge was actually James Hewlett, a black imitator of Edmund Kean who had been the principal performer at New York's African Theatre in its earliest years, the same black-owned theatre where Aldridge had had his first experiences on stage. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* insisted on pressing the case:

There was forty years ago in New York a theatre the company of which was composed exclusively of colored artists. It was here that Hewlett first distinguished himself. We still incline to the belief that the late Ira Aldridge was Hewlett. If the latter died on Blackwell's Island the theory, of course, is wrong, but our correspondent merely conjectures he died there. He simply lost trace of him. The *American Cyclopaedia* says Aldridge's real name was Hewlett, and it improbable that two negroes of that name successfully entered upon theatrical life in circumstances so nearly identical.³⁵

When Aldridge had written to James McCune Smith to thank him for the piece he had published in the *Anglo-African*, he said, "Yours, among the numerous memoirs that have been published of me, is the only correct one. I saw in the *American Cyclopaedia* what purported to be a biography but it was most incorrect. I never was in Baltimore, or learned German in America. Besides, they confuse me with poor Jim Hewlett."³⁶

James H. Hackett, an experienced actor and Shakespeare scholar, sought to clear up this confusion by publishing a lengthy essay on "Edmund Kean, the Great Tragedian, and His Negro Imitators" in an Indiana newspaper. He had the advantage of having seen both Hewlett and Aldridge perform—Hewlett in the summer of 1826 at Congress Hall in Saratoga Springs, and Aldridge at Covent Garden in April 1833. He had a very negative reaction to Hewlett, referring to him as "a ludicrous spouter of speeches" and a "half crazy nigger actor" whose representation of Kean in *Richard the Third* "provoked great laughter." "Hewlett evidently travestied Shakespeare not

³⁴ *Philadelphia Evening Telegraph*, 12 August 1867: 1; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 13 August 1867: 2; *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, 16 August 1867: 4.

³⁵ *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 14 August 1867: 3. The correspondent mentioned here was J.H. Ray, who had contributed a letter to the editor on the same page of that paper telling what he knew of Hewlett as an actor and a prisoner.

³⁶ *Weekly Anglo-African* 23 June 1860: 2. Philip A. Bell, another of Aldridge's classmates at New York's African Free School, took exception to the mistakes made about him in *Appleton's Cyclopaedia Americana* and published corrections in the *Elevator*, a San Francisco newspaper he was editing. See the issue for 20 September 1867: 2, which has been reproduced in *Ira Aldridge: The African Roscius*, ed. Bernth Lindfors. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007. 48-49.

so much from design or inattention to study, as from his own illiteracy. His caricatured imitation of Kean's voice and action, and his peculiar chuckle, together with a mixture of his own habitual and grotesque gesticulations, were exceedingly funny."

Hackett was also not at all satisfied with Aldridge's acting but at least he did not ridicule him. Instead, he expressed disappointment that Aldridge did not resemble Kean, especially as Othello:

I did not notice any material variation from the words of the stage text, not any particular stage accentuation; they were rendered with a seemingly fair understanding of their meaning, but monotonously. Aldridge's acting, however, of Othello...was in no one respect remarkable for genius or talent. It was unimpressive—he did not seem in earnest, and his gestures, too, marked no passages. It was on no occasion fiery and impatient, like Kean's Moor. In short, as a whole, Aldridge's Othello would hardly have been tolerated, then, at Covent Garden Theater, had he been a white man. Being very familiar with Edmund Kean's, I watched Aldridge's Othello closely all through his performance, in the hope of discovering some spark of original genius in one reported to be of "pure African blood;" but although that time was seven years after I had seen Hewlett at Saratoga, N.Y.,...I became convinced at first sight that he and Hewlett could not be the same person."³⁷

The purpose of quoting these scattered responses to Aldridge in the American press from 1851 to 1867 is to show that he was virtually unknown to the American public until the last year and a half of his life, and even then some of the little that was learned about his life and career was erroneous. The American press had said nothing at all about the initial twenty-seven years he had spent on tour in the British Isles, and the few reference books of that time that included information on him got many factual details wrong. Once he started performing on the Continent, occasionally there was better coverage of some of his experiences and activities in American media, but these reports often tended to be no more than random anecdotes of unusual happenings, not extensive substantive narratives or perceptive analyses that told a fuller story. So Ira Aldridge, despite his historic achievements abroad, had almost no reputation of any significance in the United States during his lifetime.³⁸

³⁷ *Indianapolis Journal*, 26 September 1867: 7. These remarks resemble much of what had been said in reviews of his performance of Othello at Covent Garden in the British press of that day.

³⁸ And this neglect of Aldridge continued throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. An entry on him in *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (1894): 44, repeated all the old lies about him in Baltimore and elsewhere in America, but then supplemented them with some of the new lies Aldridge had told about having been born and brought up in Senegal and educated for the ministry in England. Only details on some of his triumphs on tours of the Continent and the many awards he received while performing there are recorded accurately.

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