

William Wells Brown

(1814–1884)

Ira Aldridge

Born into slavery in Kentucky in 1814, William Wells Brown escaped to freedom at age twenty and went on to become a leading abolitionist, historian, travel writer, and novelist (his *Clotel* was the first novel published by an African American). Brown traveled to Britain in 1849 and, after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law the following year, which put him at risk of capture and re-enslavement, remained there writing and lecturing until 1854 (when his freedom was purchased). While there, he saw the great black actor, Ira Aldridge, play both Othello and Hamlet. Brown recalled that experience a decade later in *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1862). Ira Aldridge, who was born and educated in New York City, left for England as a teenager to pursue opportunities denied to black actors in America. He thought it useful there to promote himself as African-born (a fabrication, along with a few other invented biographical anecdotes that appeared in Aldridge's ghostwritten *Memoir* and are repeated in Brown's sketch). Aldridge first played Othello on the London stage in 1825. Some British critics had difficulty with the idea of a black man playing Shakespeare (a reviewer for the *Times* complained that it was "utterly impossible" for Aldridge to pronounce the language correctly "owing to the shape of his lips," while one for the *Athenaeum* objected to a white Desdemona "being pawed about" onstage by a black actor). Aldridge soon established himself as a popular Shakespeare actor in Britain and on the Continent, adding to his repertory the parts of Richard III, King Lear, Macbeth, and Shylock (which, a Russian critic noted, he performed sympathetically as "an exploited, despised Jew" who was "the bearer of the sorrow and tragedy of his hunted people"). Aldridge died in 1867, shortly before he was to return to the United States and finally play Othello there.



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ON looking over the columns of *The Times*, one morning, I saw it announced under the head of "Amusements," that "Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius," was to appear in the character of Othello, in Shakspeare's celebrated tragedy of that name, and, having long wished to see my sable countryman, I resolved at once to attend. Though the doors had been open but a short time when I reached the Royal Haymarket, the theatre where the performance was to take place, the house was well filled, and among the audience I recognized the faces of several distinguished persons of the nobility, the most noted of whom was Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, the renowned novelist—his figure neat, trim, hair done up in the latest fashion—looking as if he had just come out of a band-box. He is a great lover of the drama, and has a private theatre at one of his country seats, to which he often invites his friends, and presses them into the different characters.

As the time approached for the curtain to rise, it was evident that the house was to be "jammed." Stuart, the best Iago since the days of Young, in company with Roderigo, came upon the stage as soon as the green curtain went up. Iago looked the villain, and acted it to the highest conception of the character. The scene is changed, all eyes are turned to the right door, and thunders of applause greet the appearance of Othello. Mr. Aldridge is of the middle size, and appeared to be about three quarters African; has a pleasant countenance, frame well knit, and seemed to me the best Othello that I had ever seen. As Iago began to work upon his feelings, the Moor's eyes flashed fire, and, further on in the play, he looked the very demon of despair. When he seized the deceiver by the throat, and exclaimed, "Villain! be sure thou prove my love false: be sure of it—give me the ocular proof—or, by the worth of my eternal soul, thou hadst better have been born a dog, Iago, than answer my waked wrath," the audience, with one impulse, rose to their feet amid the wildest enthusiasm. At the end of the third act, Othello was called before the curtain, and received the applause of the delighted multitude. I watched the countenance and every motion of Bulwer Lytton with almost as much interest as I did that of the Moor of Venice, and saw that none appeared

to be better pleased than he. The following evening I went to witness his Hamlet, and was surprised to find him as perfect in that as he had been in Othello; for I had been led to believe that the latter was his greatest character. The whole court of Denmark was before us; but till the words, "Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother," fell from the lips of Mr. Aldridge, was the general ear charmed, or the general tongue arrested. The voice was so low, and sad, and sweet, the modulation so tender, the dignity so natural, the grace so consummate, that all yielded themselves silently to the delicious enchantment. When Horatio told him that he had come to see his father's funeral, the deep melancholy that took possession of his face showed the great dramatic power of Mr. Aldridge. "I pray thee do not mock me, fellow-student," seemed to come from his inmost soul. The animation with which his countenance was lighted up, during Horatio's recital of the visits that the ghost had paid him and his companions, was beyond description. "Angels and ministers of grace defend us," as the ghost appeared in the fourth scene, sent a thrill through the whole assembly. His rendering of the "Soliloquy on Death," which Edmund Kean, Charles Kemble, and William C. Macready have reaped such unfading laurels from, was one of his best efforts. He read it infinitely better than Charles Kean, whom I had heard at the "Princess," but a few nights previous. The vigorous starts of thought, which in the midst of his personal sorrows rise with such beautiful and striking suddenness from the ever-wakeful mind of the humanitarian philosopher, are delivered with that varying emphasis that characterizes the truthful delineator, when he exclaims, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" In the second scene of the second act, when revealing to Guildenstern the melancholy which preys upon his mind, the beautiful and powerful words in which Hamlet explains his feelings are made very effective in Mr. Aldridge's rendering: "This most excellent canopy, the air, the brave o'erchanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire. . . . What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how

like a God!" In the last scene of the second act, when Hamlet's imagination, influenced by the interview with the actors, suggests to his rich mind so many eloquent reflections, Mr. Aldridge enters fully into the spirit of the scene, warms up, and when he exclaims, "He would drown the stage with tears, and cleave the general ear with horrid speech,—make mad the guilty, and appall the free," he is very effective; and when this warmth mounts into a paroxysm of rage, and he calls the King "Bloody, bawdy villain! Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!" he sweeps the audience with him, and brings down deserved applause. The fervent soul and restless imagination, which are ever stirring at the bottom of the fountain, and sending bright bubbles to the top, find a glowing reflection on the animated surface of Mr. Aldridge's colored face. I thought Hamlet one of his best characters, though I saw him afterwards in several others.

Mr. Aldridge is a native of Senegal, in Africa. His forefathers were princes of the Foulah tribe, whose dominions were in Senegal, on the banks of the river of that name, on the west coast of Africa. To this shore one of our early missionaries found his way, and took charge of Ira's father, Daniel Aldridge, in order to qualify him for the work of civilizing and evangelizing his countrymen. Daniel's father, the reigning prince, was more enlightened than his subjects, probably through the instruction of the missionary, and proposed that his prisoners taken in battle should be exchanged, and not, as was the custom, sold as slaves. This wish interfered with the notions and perquisites of his tribe, especially his principal chiefs; and a civil war raged among the people. During these differences, Daniel, then a promising youth, was brought to the United States by the missionary, and sent to Schenectady College to receive the advantages of a Christian education. Three days after his departure, the revolutionary storm, which was brewing, broke out openly, and the reigning prince, the advocate of humanity, was killed.

Daniel Aldridge remained in America till the death of the rebellious chief, who had headed the conspiracy, and reigned instead of the murdered prince. During the interval, Daniel had

become a minister of the gospel, and was regarded by all classes as a man of uncommon abilities. He was, however, desirous to establish himself at the head of his tribe, possess himself of his birthright, and advance the cause of Christianity among his countrymen. For this purpose he returned to his native country, taking with him a young wife, one of his own color, whom he had but just married in America. Daniel no sooner appeared among the people of his slaughtered father, than old disagreements revived, civil war broke out, the enlightened African was defeated, barely escaping from the scene of strife with his life, and for some time unable to quit the country, which was watched by numerous enemies anxious for his capture. Nine years elapsed before the proscribed family escaped to America, during the whole of which time they were concealed in the neighborhood of their foes, enduring vicissitudes and hardships that can well be imagined, but need not be described.

Ira Aldridge was born soon after his father's arrival in Senegal, and on their return to America, was intended by the latter for the church. Many a white parent has "chalked out" in vain for his son a similar calling, and the best intentions have been thwarted by an early predilection quite in an opposite direction. We can well account for the father's choice in this instance, as in keeping with his own aspirations; and we can easily imagine his disappointment upon abandoning all hope of seeing one of his blood and color following specially in the service of his great Master. The son, however, began betimes to show his early preference and ultimate passion. At school he was awarded prizes for declamation, in which he excelled; and there his curiosity was excited by what he heard of theatrical representations, which he was told *embodied* all the fine ideas *shadowed forth* in the language he read and committed to memory. It became the wish of his heart to witness one of these performances, and that wish he soon contrived to gratify, and finally he became a candidate for histrionic fame.

Notwithstanding the progress Ira had made in learning, no qualities of the mind could compensate, in the eyes of the Americans, for the dark hue of his skin. The prevailing prejudice, so

strong among all classes, was against him. This induced his removal to England, where he entered at the Glasgow University, and, under Professor Sandford, obtained several premiums, and the medal for Latin composition.

On leaving college, Mr. Aldridge at once commenced preparing for the stage, and shortly after appeared in a number of Shaksperian characters, in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, and other provincial cities, and soon after appeared on the boards of Drury Lane and Covent Garden, where he was stamped the "African Roscius." The *London Weekly Times* said of him, "Mr. Ira Aldridge is a dark mulatto, with woolly hair. His features are capable of great expression, his action is unrestrained and picturesque, and his voice clear, full, and resonant. His powers of energetic declamation are very marked, and the whole of his acting appears impelled by a current of feeling of no inconsiderable weight and vigor, yet controlled and guided in a manner that clearly shows the actor to be a person of much study and great stage ability." The *Morning Chronicle* recorded his "Shylock" as among the "finest pieces of acting that a London audience had witnessed since the days of the elder Kean."

(1862)