



“I am not what I am”: *Othello* and Role-playing in *Les Enfants du Paradis*

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- 1 Marcel Carné and Jacques Prévert’s cinematic masterpiece *Les Enfants du paradis* [*Children of Paradise*] (1945) is a film about theatre. It also is a film that may not have been made if it were not for the unusual and precarious situation of Occupied France during World War II. As it happened, Carné, the master of poetic realism, was forbidden by the occupying German forces to make films focusing on the present state of affairs in his besieged nation. As Ben McCann avers, during the Occupation, “Realism — poetic, social, magical or otherwise — was out”.¹ Therefore, Carné’s two wartime films — *Les Visiteurs du soir* [*The Devil’s Envoys*] (1942) and *Les Enfants du paradis* — were set in France’s past. This film about the ineluctable convergence of art and life is set in Paris in the 1820s on the Boulevard du Temple, which, by 1827, the year the film opens, had come to be known as the Boulevard du Crime [Crime Street], where all walks of life thronged to find diverse entertainments, from carnival acts to “respectable” theatre. French film scholar Edward Baron Turk explains that the famed Boulevard du Crime earned its moniker “because of the sinister deeds that were standard ingredients of the stage melodramas then the rage”.² It is apropos to the film that the Boulevard du Crime was not named for real crimes committed by thieves against Parisian citizens; rather, the street of myriad diversions is named for the fictional assaults perpetrated by actors upon other actors, all displayed on a stage. Similarly, Prévert’s interweaving of historical and fictional people and places in the diegesis of *Les Enfants du paradis* creates a seamless world where performance and reality are perpetually superimposed upon each other and, indeed, are indistinguishable.
- 2 Perhaps more brilliantly than any other film in the history of French cinema, *Les Enfants du paradis* explores the ever permeable and mercurial boundaries between theatrical art and life. Rémi Fournier Lanzoni writes, “The multilayered contemplations of the different natures of theatrical performances — mime, comedy, vaudeville, romance,

¹ Ben McCann. “*Les Enfants du Paradis/Children of Paradise*.” *The Cinema of France*. London: Wallflower Press, 2006, p. 52.

² French film scholar Edward Baron Turk notes that the *Almanach des Spectacles* published in 1823 reported that 151,702 “crimes” had been committed on stage on the Boulevard by only six actors over a twenty-year period (223-24).

melodrama, and tragedy, extending from a glowing image of conflicting dramatic modes and a reflection of the interchangeability of theatre and life — was at the heart of the project”.³ This intense focus on the relationship between the stage and life clearly allies this film with Shakespeare’s oeuvre. Furthermore, Jacques Prévert, writer of the screenplay of *Les Enfants du paradis*, particularly makes Shakespeare’s *Othello* a major focal point throughout the film. As noted by Russell Ganim and John C. Tibbetts, *Les Enfants* makes significant use of direct and indirect references to *Othello*. Film scholar Brian Stonehill argues that the film presents itself “as a set of variations on the theme[s] of *Othello*” (“Commentary”). Indeed, the film shares many of its central themes with the play: obsessive love, corrosive envy, deceit and illusion, betrayal and fidelity, the drive for power, the importance of social roles and role-playing. Moreover, one of the actor protagonists, Frédérick, is obsessed with playing Othello and is shown rehearsing and performing key scenes from the play. *Othello* is a crucial touchstone in the film. Prévert’s relentless *mise-en-abyme* of performances within performances also reminds the film’s audience that during the time of the German Occupation the French people often had to adopt roles that required masking, roles their very lives depended upon.

- 3 It is appropriate that this film, which has been accused of “vertiginous self-reflexivity,” opens with a shot of a proscenium stage with a backdrop of a curtain painted on cardboard.⁴ The “curtains” rise to unveil an exterior shot of the Boulevard du Crime. The camera captures a long shot of a dense crowd watching a tightrope walker and pans across to reveal a deep focus shot of the length of the Boulevard, a shot in which Carné uses forced perspective much like a stage set might, but on a much grander scale (for instance, midgets were used toward the rear of the street set to convey distance) (fig. 1). We see that this film, a veritable catalogue of nineteenth century entertainments, is starting at the bottom of the scale of cultural reputation: the carnivalesque. Soon, the camera pulls into a sideshow crier inviting men to come into his tent to see the “Naked Truth” with their own eyes: “The show is enticing! Audacious! Inspiring!” As men are shown entering this tent, the director cuts to a medium shot inside the tent featuring the “Naked Truth,” who is impersonated by a beautiful woman, the character we will come to know as Garance, sitting naked in a fake wooden well spinning on a platform (fig. 2). Her nakedness is just, tantalizingly, out of view under the dark water in the “well,” and “Truth” is staring into a hand-held mirror, suggesting that truth is defined as an accurate reflection of reality; however, because this whole emblematic (and prurient) show is staged, Truth is revealed to be an illusion. This short scene also underscores the sexual politics of looking, particularly in a nation in which all are the object of a potentially threatening gaze. Edward Baron Turk astutely contends,

The inaugural image of Garance as a peepshow attraction epitomizes woman’s subordination to male-devised artifice. The two shots of Garance in the tub last only fourteen seconds, but they define *Les Enfants du paradis*’ dramatic, psychological, and ideological matrix. The four patrons inside the

³ Rémi Fournier Lanzoni. *French Cinema: From Its Beginnings to the Present*. New York: Continuum, 2002, p. 134.

⁴ Rev. Chris Darke. *Les Enfants du paradis*. *Sight and Sound* 3.9 (1993), p. 55.

booth prefigure Garance's four suitors. [...] And Garance's impassive participation in an exploitative enterprise adumbrates issues of resistance and collaboration and their relation to the politics of spectaclemaking.⁵



Fig. 1. Le Boulevard du Crime

⁵ Turk, *op. cit.*, p. 331.



Fig. 2. Garance (Arletty) playing Naked Truth

- 4 Like Desdemona, with her skin as “smooth as monumental alabaster” (*Othello* 5.2.5), Garance is monumentalized in this film from the beginning, shown in the guise of Truth, sitting in a tub of water that, as is made clear a few scenes later, represents Diana’s bathing pool and reminds us of the forbidden gaze of Actaeon which dooms him to destruction. Significantly, Garance’s Truth spinning in a tub of water holding a mirror alludes both to Artemis/Diana, the chaste huntress goddess of the moon, and to the goddess of sexual love, Aphrodite/Venus. Turk notes that Western art frequently features “overlapping representations of Truth and Venus,” which can be seen in the classical literary theme of “Truth Hidden in a Well” that is “often found in renaissance and Baroque pictorial allegories”.⁶ This sort of multivalent identity is a crucial theme in this film about performative personae, a film made by and for French citizens who were dominated and relentlessly surveilled by Nazi occupiers.
- 5 *Les Enfants du paradis* is a film about spectatorship and spectacle, seeing and being seen. Edward Baron Turk maintains that “all characters [in this film] engage in emotion-fraught witnessing”,⁷ and the film rapidly progresses from its first scene of voyeurism to another. When the camera cuts away from the “Naked Truth,” we meet Frédéric, one of the four men who will pursue Garance, the beautiful, serene, mysterious, and, paradoxically, liberated object of desire. Frédéric is modeled after the famous dramatic

⁶ Turk, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

⁷ Turk, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

actor and playwright, Frédérick Lemaître (1800-1876), who established his soaring reputation while performing at theatres on the Boulevard du Crime. In his introductory scene in *Les Enfants du paradis*, he is at the door of the Théâtre des Funambules [Acrobats] badgering the ticket-taker to let him into the theatre to speak with the manager; we will learn later that Frédérick is looking for acting work. Finding the ticket-taker intractable, Frédérick is distracted by the beautiful Garance, now fully clothed, walking down the Boulevard, and he runs off to ply her with hackneyed pick-up lines. She entertains his ridiculous attempts good-naturedly but with a wry wit. She is not one to be taken in by the performance of a lothario, but she also does not judge him. The unflappable, *laissez faire* attitude Garance displays in this scene is what will allow each of her four suitors both to possess and not possess her simultaneously. They each will perform for her in their own manner, but she will not be conquered.

6 After Frédérick has been dismissed by the grinning, imperturbable Garance, she arrives at her destination on the Boulevard du Crime, the public scrivener's office owned by her friend Lacenaire, who has just completed writing a letter of apology to an illiterate client's wife. In Lacenaire's flowery epistle, the client begs forgiveness for beating his wife and promises it will never happen again. This is the first inkling we have of Lacenaire's brutality and use of deceit to veil and enable violence, and, as Russell Ganim argues, it is in this first scene featuring Lacenaire that he is revealed as a Iago figure. Here, Lacenaire — whose character is based on a French criminal and poet of the same name who was executed for murder in 1836 — tells the story of his lonely childhood and claims to relish the freedom of loving and depending upon no one. It is also revealed that he is a playwright currently penning a "ribald farce" called *Misconduct*. He insists, "I loathe tragedy. Such an inferior genre," though it is clear he enjoys causing tragedy in the lives of others, as his chief occupation is thievery and murder. This is ironic foreshadowing of Lacenaire's final act in the film: the stabbing of Garance's lover and protector, the Count de Montray, which is an echo of Othello's killing of Desdemona and Iago's dispatching of his wife, Emilia. This is a man who disdains tragedy only when he cannot be the grand villain of the piece, as evidenced by Lacenaire's elaborate staging of his final act of murder. Garance clearly finds Lacenaire entertaining here, but, only a few scenes later, she will abandon the sinister, lugubrious dandy because he is more enthralled with his underhanded business than with her.

7 In the next scene we are introduced to the idealist, poetic lover of the film, the mime Baptiste Deburau, who was modeled after the famous Parisian mime Jean-Gaspard Deburau (1796-1846). The change of Deburau's name to Baptiste underscores the purity of the mime's art and the idealized vision Baptiste has of life and love in *Les Enfants du paradis*. The talented actor playing Baptiste, Jean-Louis Barrault, insisted that Baptiste's character is akin to Shakespeare's disillusioned philosopher, Hamlet, a claim that becomes increasingly true as his character develops.⁸ This early scene opens with a shot of the front of Théâtre des Funambules on the Boulevard du Crime, where we were when Frédérick first spotted Garance. Now, there is a stage at the front of the theatre on which dancing girls and Deburau *père* are beckoning people to come in and see the

⁸ Turk, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

Funambules' show "*Perils of the Virgin Forest, or Crime and Virtue!* A pantomime that's magic, exotic, pyrotechnic!" The Funambules is selling crowd-pleasing spectacle. Anselme Deburau, Baptiste's father, while promoting the show, denigrates his "useless" son, who is sitting like a sad, comic statue in full mime garb and make-up on a barrel on a back corner of the stage. As the other performers on the stage head into the theatre to put on the show, there is a crowd shot revealing the presence of Garance and Lacenaire in the audience of this pre-show. The two are on either side of a bourgeois gentleman who suddenly realizes his watch is missing and cries out for a policeman to arrest Garance, as she is the only one near enough to him to have taken it. Conspicuously, Lacenaire has disappeared. The police arrive quickly and grab Garance, who proclaims her innocence. When the police ask the crowd if anyone saw the theft, the mime Deburau surprisingly speaks up, declaring that he saw the whole thing. Baptiste proceeds gracefully and comically to act out the theft, impersonating all three of the characters involved in the "case" (fig. 3). This is the first time in the film we are exposed to Baptiste's prodigious gifts as an artist. In his impromptu pantomime, he manages to rescue a beautiful "damsel in distress" from an unjust imprisonment and simultaneously entertain the crowd on the Boulevard. Baptiste's silent art has successfully borne witness to the innocence of a wrongly accused citizen. Illusion has revealed truth. Garance is set free and walks over to Baptiste to hand him the rose she had been wearing on her dress. As she strolls off, she looks back at Baptiste and blows him kisses. The dreamy look in Baptiste's eyes makes it clear that he is smitten, and here begins the torture of love that can only lead to tragedy. The rose will continue to be a symbol of the thorny path toward love and its imposters.



Fig. 3. Baptiste (Jean-Louis Barrault) miming the crime

8 When this scene cuts to the interior of the Théâtre des Funambules, we are backstage as the acrobats and mimes prepare for their show. Frédérick is importuning the theatre manager to give him some work, but the manager is ranting about his pantomime show operating on a “volcano” of antagonism between the two performing groups at the Funambules: the Deburau and the Barrigni families. Frédérick replies with flare, “Like *Romeo and Juliet*!” However, the low-brow stage manager of a company of mimes and acrobats has no knowledge of, interest in, or time for such “pretentious” entertainments. Frédérick declares, “Alas, few know and appreciate Shakespeare,” and the manager growls back, “Who knows you? Who appreciates you?” indicating that Frédérick’s theatrical snobbery is not appreciated at the Funambules. Immediately after, there is a cut to the action on stage as the silly, infantile *Perils of the Virgin Forest* is performed. It features a ridiculous-looking man wearing a lion costume. When, as scripted, the “lion” strikes another character on stage, played by Anselme Deburau, he immediately becomes irate, as he feels he had been hit too hard, and attacks the “lion.” This leads to an explosion of the “volcano” of antipathy between the families, and suddenly the stage turns into the site of a real, violent brawl between multiple family members and their allies, much like the opening scene of *Romeo and Juliet*. Once again, the barriers between performance and reality have been breached. During this mêlée, there are multiple shots of the Funambules’s audience, particularly of *le paradis*, the high balcony of cheap seats where “the gods” are seated, though none remain seated (or quiet) during this raucous scene. Frédérick, seeing his opportunity, tells the desperate theatre manager that he has played “all lion parts” before, such as “Richard the Lion-hearted and Pygmalion,” and Frédérick is immediately put on stage, as the show — as it must — goes on, without the Barrignis. The plays mentioned by Frédérick in this scene reveal his Anglophilia and his love of dramatic theatre, but, beyond this, they foreshadow his obsession with playing Othello and Baptiste’s imminent desire to transform Garance, à la Pygmalion (both classical and Shavian forms), into the ideal monument to his pure love.

9 Later that night, Baptiste sets Frédérick up in a room at his boarding house and heads out to walk the Paris streets. Baptiste fortuitously encounters Garance at a bar, and, pleased to find each other again after the momentous events on the Boulevard du Crime earlier, they leave the bar together, sharing their life stories with each other as they stroll. As Baptiste declares his passionate love for her, Garance laughs at his seriousness, telling him, “You talk like a child,” and insisting, “Love is so simple.” This is the first sign we are given of the incompatibility of Baptiste’s and Garance’s concepts of love. Baptiste helps Garance get a room at his boarding house that evening, and Garance charmingly invites him to share her bed. He refuses her advances, declaring in an anguished voice that he wants her to love him as he loves her, then kisses her and rushes dramatically out of the room (fig. 4). Garance looks confused but placid and nearly shrugs, not understanding Baptiste’s point of view and not worrying about it. Baptiste wishes for a pure, chaste passion with his beloved Garance; he does not want to “soil” the purity of his ideal vision of her with sex on their first night together.



Fig. 4. Baptiste's tortured kiss

- 10 When Baptiste flees the sexual temptation of his idol, the camera cuts to the room next door, where Frédérick is lying in bed smoking a pipe and dramatically reading lines from *Othello*:

“Yet I'll not shed her blood, nor scar that whiter skin than snow and smooth as monumental alabaster. Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men. Put out the light, and then” — Yes, let's put out the light. Good night, Desdemona [*he kisses his copy of Othello and tosses it cavalierly on the side of bed*]. Good night, Othello [*in a deeper voice*].

- 11 The woman Frédérick could be speaking about here is Garance, as she has been monumentalized by Baptiste. Although Baptiste is too timorous to threaten Garance physically, as Othello does Desdemona, he has had his idealized picture of Garance/Desdemona destroyed by her perceived concupiscence. In addition, Baptiste will soon cast Garance as a statue of Phoebe, and Pierrot's love interest, in the new pantomime he pens, *The Palace of Illusions, or Lovers of the Moon*. However, there is a further ominous reference to Shakespeare's work in this scene. As Frédérick is poised to “put out the light,” he hears Garance singing, “I am as I am / I'm made as you see / When I feel like laughing / I laugh heartily / I love those who love me / Am I really to blame / If the man that I love / Is never the same?” Frédérick immediately comes out on his small balcony, which faces Garance's, and calls to her. When she appears on her balcony wearing her oriental print bedspread like a sari, Frédérick seems to lick his chops (fig. 5). When Frédérick asks if she is alone, she replies, “Alas, all alone. Left to do

penance.” She knows Baptiste has abandoned her because she was not the flawless woman of his dreams, but real flesh and blood. Frédérick flirts with Garance, but she mentions that the sun will soon be up, which Frédérick dismisses by saying they can pretend it is night by closing the shutters. The balcony to balcony conversation in this scene obviously parodies the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet* (II.1) and ironically incorporates images from Act three, scene five of the play, when the lovers are parting the morning after they have consummated their marriage and disputing whether it is night or day, poetically highlighting the tension between the darkness accompanying the moon (here associated with the chaste Baptiste) and the light of the rising sun (associated with the libidinous Frédérick) (see III.5.1-59). The humorous comparison throws into relief the easy sexuality of these two adults, Frédérick and Garance, and reminds us that Baptiste, who swears by the “inconstant moon,” is the Juliet-figure who indignantly inquires, “What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?” (II.1.168), when he flees from Garance. Needless to say, the flirtation between Frédérick and Garance ends with him entering into her room in the background of a deep focus shot taken from outside Garance’s balcony.



Fig. 5. Frédérick (Pierre Brasseur) and Garance play *Romeo and Juliet*

- 12 A few weeks later, we find ourselves in the Théâtre des Funambules, which is now staging Baptiste’s new, more substantial pantomime, *The Palace of Illusions, or Lovers of the Moon*, in which Harlequin, played by Frédérick, steals the beloved of Pierrot, played by Baptiste. Baptiste has written an allegory of what has happened between him, Frédérick, and Garance, and the parts are played by the protagonists of the “real life” tale. The scene in the Funambules opens with a long shot of the packed audience then a

reverse long shot of the stage from the audience's point of view. Carné never allows the film audience to forget that it is watching a film about watching. On the stage, we see Garance standing completely still on the right side of the stage wearing Greek robes and white makeup and holding a bow and arrow; she is Phoebe/Artemis, the goddess of the moon, the hunt, and chastity (fig. 6). She has been transformed into Baptiste's idol. Appropriately, she stands on a pedestal, revealing her to be a monumental statue. This view of Garance is linked to the opening shot of her in the film, the high-angle view of Garance sitting completely still in a spinning tub, staring at herself in a mirror, playing the role of "Naked Truth." In that shot, she is like the bathing Diana who draws forbidden mortal eyes — although, all through the film, she is hunted rather than hunting — as well as the wanton goddess of love tempting her audience. Baptiste's vision of Garance in his pantomime links the mythological icons of Diana and Venus. Carné encourages us to see Garance as a monument with a low-angle medium shot of her that gazes up at her imposing elegance and powerful beauty. Baptiste's Garance, as she stands on the plinth on stage, is precisely this, an exhibition of Baptiste's idealized desire. However, as his pantomime continues, Garance/Phoebe, like Galatea and Hermione before her, steps off the pedestal and into the life of a male partner. Unlike the other two, though, Garance/Phoebe betrays her husband or creator and comes alive for the interloping, facile Harlequin, played by Frédéric. This treachery reveals her to be the lascivious Venus rather than the Phoebe/Diana she appeared to be (to Baptiste).



Fig. 6. Garance on stage as Baptiste's goddess

- 13 Before *The Palace of Illusions* begins, as the camera surveys the audience at the Théâtre des Funambules, we are introduced to the Count Édouard de Montray, Garance's

fourth suitor, who sees her from a box in the audience and exclaims, “Have you ever seen such a splendid creature?” His response to her is objectifying. The panning long shot that moves across the Funambules audience and ends in a tight medium shot of the Count and his aristocratic companions in a box, set apart from the common rabble, reveals in one sweep the universal appeal of the theatre. Like Shakespeare’s Globe, Théâtre des Funambules tells stories of human tragedy and redemption which draw all social classes while keeping the classes separated spatially. As the show begins, Pierrot walks onto the stage chasing invisible butterflies with a net when he notices the breathtaking statue of Phoebe. He bows worshipfully before it on one knee, silently but passionately declaring his love for it, then rushes off and back on stage with a large bouquet of roses for the statue, which makes no response at all despite his exertion. When the exhausted Pierrot falls asleep on the bench in front of Phoebe, Harlequin sneaks up, steals the roses out of Pierrot’s hands, and woos Phoebe for himself. Surprisingly, she breaks her frozen posture for him and the pedestal lowers down until it is even with the stage level. The goddess then literally steps off her pedestal and carries on a romance with Harlequin, much to the despair of the lovelorn Pierrot, who considers hanging himself, but then is comically saved by a country lass, played by the stage manager’s daughter Nathalie, who is in love with Baptiste. The illusory distance between art and life collapses once again in this scene.

- 14 Backstage after the show, Frédérick showers flattery upon his lover, Garance, but she sarcastically rebuffs him. She is not impressed with Frédérick’s hackneyed Petrarchan conceits and informs him that it is obvious that neither of them is in love with the other. Frédérick continues his performance, telling Garance that she has been saying Baptiste’s name in her sleep. He pretends to be jealous, proclaiming, “O perfidious creature! Othello killed Desdemona for much less. For nothing, Othello became a widower by his own hand. For nothing [*he smiles*]. For a trifle. A little handkerchief. A batiste handkerchief, no doubt.” Garance shakes her head with faux disgust at his dumb joke; he giggles mischievously and retreats out of the room. This is the second time in the film that Frédérick has evoked *Othello* in reference to Garance, but it is the first of several times that he will compare Garance and Desdemona knowingly. While Garance — the beautiful beloved of several men and a monumentalized figure — has some resemblance to the character of Desdemona, Frédérick’s true obsession is to *play* Othello on stage, and he rehearses this by playing with the role in “real life.” As the film continues, it becomes increasingly evident that the film is presenting itself as a set of variations on both the characters and themes of *Othello* (Stonehill). Following Frédérick’s exit as the feigning scorned lover, the Count de Montray sends in a gigantic arrangement of white roses to announce his arrival in her dressing room. Though he has never met her, he proclaims his undying love for Garance, whom he has been watching play Phoebe on stage. She counters his grandiose claims of affection with clever, down to earth indignation. He offers to make her “the envy of all women” with his immense wealth, and she sardonically inquires, “What if I enjoy my little life?” She is not tempted by his offer. The Count offers her shelter and protection if she should ever need it and leaves her with his card. This proves to be her salvation when, later that day, she is accosted by the police and accused of being an accomplice to an attempted murder in the boarding

house. Lacenaire was clearly responsible for it, but she would not inform on him. As the police grab her to haul her into jail, Garance produces the Count's card and the police unhand her.

- 15 The cardboard curtain lowers after this final scene in Part One of *Les Enfants du paradis*, and Part Two, entitled "The Man in White" [L'Homme Blanc], opens with the intertitle "Several years have passed." The curtain rises to reveal Frédérick Lemaître once again on the Boulevard du Crime, now riding in an expensive carriage and flanked by two pretty ladies. He has become a stage celebrity performing in lavish melodramas at the Grand Théâtre. Despite his success, he is upset by continually being asked if he has seen Baptiste's "masterpiece" at Théâtre des Funambules, *The Old Clothes Man* [*Chand d'Habits*]. Frédérick still longs to perform the role of Othello, and he has searing contempt for contemporary French playwrights who write ridiculous melodramas such as the one in which he is performing, *L'Auberge des Adrets*.⁹ On the evening Frédérick finally goes to see *The Old Clothes Man*, he is told that tickets for Baptiste's show are sold out for days, but the box-office manager comes up with an idea to seat Frédérick in a box with a "young society woman" who comes alone every night "to see Baptiste perform." The womanizing Frédérick replies, "Lucky Baptiste. Is she pretty?" When Frédérick enters the box, he recognizes the lady sitting in her dark silk dress and bejeweled black lace veil as Garance, after all these years. She is pleased to see Frédérick, but he feigns offense that she is so formal with him. Garance explains that she is like this with everyone now as she has become a part of "high society" with the Count. Frédérick responds mockingly, "O Desdemona! Perfidious creature! To walk off like that, saying, 'See you later,' and then vanish for years." He scolds her with an air of humor but tells her she has changed, become more "distinguished." She clearly plays a different role in society now. Frédérick goes on to ask her, "So, Desdemona, it was that man with the large flower arrangement you left with?" phrasing the question to imply that Garance is a Desdemona who truly has transgressed but has gotten away with her betrayal. As they watch Baptiste's graceful, brilliant performance on stage, Frédérick stares at Garance gazing adoringly at Baptiste and remarks, almost in a daze, that she truly loves Baptiste, which she assents to, explaining that she has thought of Baptiste every day since she left Paris years ago. Astonishingly, Frédérick appears to be genuinely envious of Baptiste's emotional hold on Garance. With a pained look on his face, he explains, "I've never felt anything like this. It's insidious, unpleasant. It infects your heart... Do you realize, Garance? Just now, because of you and because of Baptiste, I felt jealous! Me, jealous!... And to make things worse, there's Baptiste performing like a god... At least when I talk about it [the pain] goes away." When Garance points out that his suffering could not be very serious if he has already recovered, Frédérick starts

⁹ At one point, Frédérick insults the three playwrights of *L'Auberge des Adrets* while in rehearsal, and they assert that they will not take advice from someone whose career started in a pantomime show. Carné and Prévert underscore the fallacious divisions and prejudices held in the world of stage entertainments: melodrama is superior to pantomime, a lesser art which panders to the "ignorant." While *L'Auberge des Adrets* is a clichéd melodrama, Baptiste has written a moving, profound pantomime dubbed a masterpiece. Inferior art can appear in all types of entertainments. There are terrible melodramas, as the one Frédérick stars in and despises, and masterful pantomimes, as the sensitive, beautifully-wrought piece Baptiste creates.

up, standing above her now, “Recovered? What if jealousy is helpful to me? Useful, even necessary. Thank you, Garance. Thanks to all of you, I can at last play Othello! I didn’t feel the character. He was alien to me. Now he’s a friend, a brother [*Frédéricks grows excited*]. I’ve found him. Othello, my heart’s desire! [*gesturing to Garance*] After you, Desdemona.” Frédéric is elated by the end of this speech, and it is evident that his newfound inspiration is more important than any attachment he has ever had to Garance. By experiencing a mere sliver of genuine emotion, Frédéric feels he has bridged the distance between himself and his obsession: playing Othello. While Othello kills the beautiful woman who inspires his jealousy, Frédéric thanks her for giving him what he truly desires. Frédéric also has discovered that speaking his feelings alleviates the pain of loss and betrayal. Performing the part of Othello will be cathartic, as it provides emotional relief for those in the audience. He does not need to destroy his beloved; he can channel his emotions into positive, collective performance whereby he and others can purge their anti-social, violent impulses by identifying with a character. In other words, though one may wish to transgress, performance of those desires may be a less deleterious or deadly outlet than enactment. In Occupied France, this was a critical concept.

16 Though Garance does not want Baptiste to know she is attending *The Old Clothes Man* every night, he does learn of it through Frédéric. This knowledge haunts Baptiste, who now is married to Nathalie and has a son. The criminal Lacenaire re-enters the narrative as well at this point, looking for someone to kill to make up for his loss of Garance, whom he calls his “guardian angel” (another idealization). He has become famous for the sensational, high-profile crimes he has committed over the past few years and arrogantly revels in his celebrity status. After menacingly appearing at the opulent townhouse in which Garance and the Count live, Lacenaire tells her that he has considered murdering both Baptiste and Frédéric, but he has decided that this would be a waste of his efforts because, though he hates people, “Actors aren’t people. They’re every man and no man. People of high society: Those are people!” Though he does not tell Garance, Lacenaire clearly has determined to assassinate the Count, whom he holds in great contempt for reasons of class and power, besides blaming the Count for absconding with Garance.

17 A few weeks later, Frédéric is playing Othello at the Grand Théâtre. This fateful night, Garance has come with the Count, Lacenaire has come to torture the Count, and Baptiste attends to distract himself from his listless brooding. As in the earlier shots of the *Funambules*, this scene in the more sophisticated theatre opens with a long shot of the well-dressed audience sitting quietly as Othello and Iago plan Othello’s murder of Desdemona. Iago instructs Othello, “Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated” (IV.1.202-03), and the camera reverses the long shot of the stage to a long shot of the audience that zooms into a medium shot of Lacenaire in the gallery, who is evidently thinking of just such a visceral murder. When the camera reverses the shot back to the stage, it pans and tilts diagonally up from Othello damning Desdemona to Garance and the Count in their box. This movement of the camera forces us to follow the line of Frédéric/Othello’s gaze from the stage directly up at Garance, who is enjoying the performance regardless of, or perhaps because of, her obvious role as

his muse and Desdemona's double. The Count, however, declares that the play displays, "Such savagery and lack of decorum. I can't say I like this Monsieur Shakespeare." As Othello exclaims, "Hang her!... The pity of it!" Frédéric turns again to glance up at Garance, who sees his wide-eyed glare at her in close-up through her binoculars. Just at this point, there is a knock on the box door; Frédéric has sent Garance a giant flower arrangement the size of the one the Count first gave her backstage at the Funambules. The Count reads the note: "Desdemona came tonight. Othello is no longer jealous. He is cured. Thank you." Again, Frédéric's performance of Othello's jealous murder has satisfied, sans bloodshed, his desire for violence. The Count, meanwhile, is hereby convinced that Frédéric is the man Garance loves, whose identity she keeps secret from him, and threatens to challenge Frédéric to a duel, ironically determined to move the "savage" violence from the stage into the real world. The film now skips forward in *Othello* to the scene of Othello's murder of Desdemona (V.2), at the moment he asks her about the handkerchief Cassio had in his possession then, despite her denial, smothers her to death. The "ocular proof" in *Les Enfants du paradis* seems to be the recurring roses, which here represent the men's desire for Garance rather than her concupiscent desire for men. This rose motif, as Desdemona's handkerchief, reveals Garance to be the pawn of men, regardless of her cleverness and seeming independence from the rules and expectations of her society.

- 18 During a reception at the theatre following the performance of *Othello*, Baptiste and Garance, finally aware of each other's presence, rapturously lock eyes. Baptiste excitedly leads Garance out to the terrace, another form of balcony, to escape the crowd, allowing them at last to declare their mutual adoration. However, Carné markedly interrupts this action to show us the disdainful exchange between the Count and Frédéric, still in his Othello costume and black-face make-up (fig. 7). The Count declares haughtily that Frédéric plays a "bloodthirsty brute" well, to which Frédéric responds, "I merely played him as Shakespeare wrote him," placing the blame and praise in Shakespeare's lap. Their conversation continues:

COUNT. A peculiar fellow, this Mr. Shakespeare. I hear he made his literary debut as a butcher's apprentice... Which would explain the bestial nature of his plays, and his popularity among dockers and carters.

FRÉDÉRIC. And kings!

COUNT'S FRIEND. I see why I found this play so distasteful and shocking. I'll buy my coachman a seat.



Fig. 7. Frédérick in Othello costume scorned by the Count (Louis Salou)

- 19 The hypocritical class politics fly as Shakespeare is “accused” of being low-brow and offensive by aristocratic men who enjoy bear-baiting entertainments, as revealed earlier in the film. In addition, the film audience knows that the Count has killed at least one inexperienced young man in a duel simply for smiling at Garance, after she smiled back at him, and the Count intends to kill Frédérick as well. These high-class men believe that *committing* acts of violence is superior to *performing* acts of violence on stage; they have not learned the cathartic lesson Frédérick has mastered through playing Othello.
- 20 Meanwhile, Garance and Baptiste face each other out on the terrace, their arms around one another, proclaiming their enduring love. This is another clear *Romeo and Juliet* allusion, and, as Douglas Lanier avers, the reprise “‘corrects’ the earlier balcony scene between the ill-matched Garance and Frédérick,” whose affair was merely corporeal.¹⁰ The reunion between Baptiste and Garance is joyous, full of the bittersweetness of lost opportunity regained. However, as they move in for their passionate kiss, Carné’s camera cuts from a close-up to a distant long shot, so the couple resembles “a two-figure statue from afar”¹¹ (fig. 8). To describe the significance of this shot, Turk quotes Gilles

¹⁰ Douglas M. Lanier. “L’homme blanc et l’homme noir: *Othello* in *Les Enfants du paradis*.” In *Shakespeare on Screen in Francophonie* (2010-). Ed. Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin and Patricia Dorval. Montpellier (France), University Montpellier III, Institut de Recherche sur la Renaissance, l’Âge Classique et les Lumières (IRCL): 2013. Also published in *Shakespeare in Performance*. Ed. Eric Brown and Estelle Rivier. Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2013. 177.

¹¹ Turk, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

Deleuze's assertion that "the 'masochistic art of phantasy' concerns itself with 'frozen' postures and 'arrested' movements because it must contain, within the fantasy, 'the specific freezing point, the point at which idealism is realized'".¹² This tableau shot of the consummation of love devoutly wished for by Baptiste and Garance reveals that this "frozen moment," by its very nature distant from reality, will be the height of their happiness. As in John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, the greatest delight, and torture, is in the suspended moment. However, in a dramatic 180-degree camera pan, Carné reveals Lacenaire watching them and grinning wolfishly at the terrace door. The camera then cuts to an interior shot of the reception room in which Lacenaire confidently approaches the Count, who promptly begins insulting Lacenaire and asks him how he is using his "talents" these days; Lacenaire explains that he is "putting the finishing touches on something that will cause a sensation." When the Count insists that this "play" must be "a tragedy, no doubt," Lacenaire replies that it is "a comedy, a farce. Or a tragedy, if you prefer. It's all the same. There's no difference." Lacenaire goes on to make an argument based on classical theatrical rules: if the wife of a king cheats on him, the play is a tragedy of epic proportions; if the wife of a "poor devil" cheats on him, it is a comedy about cuckoldry. The social class status of the protagonists determines the genre. Lacenaire concludes, "Always the same matter, the same stories, the same tears. So the genre is nothing. My play need only amuse, starting with the author." He announces that his play is in progress at that moment and that it is "very funny, but, I warn you, there are murders, and at the final curtain, the dead won't rise for a bow." At this point, the Count, feeling threatened, orders his friends to escort Lacenaire out of the theatre, but the killer hisses, "Don't you dare try to humiliate me! I am not a character in a farce, but you are!" He proves this by strolling directly to the glass terrace doors and tearing back the curtain, revealing the startled Baptiste and Garance, who had been in an amorous embrace. Lacenaire's "stupendous execution of a real-life *coup de théâtre*" mortifies the Count, making him the buffoon in a farce.¹³ The Count de Montray, whose name is a homonym for the French verb *montrer*, meaning "to show," is here shown that his elite class does not shelter him from public shame. The framing of Garance and Baptiste here, portraying them in a long shot behind a closed glass door — the image of the two divided by the rectangular divisions of the window panes — expresses their unwitting entanglement in Lacenaire's "play" and the divide between their stolen moment together as lovers, a performance of sorts, and their real roles as mistress and husband (fig. 9). The terrace is the stage where they perform the idealized lovers' embrace that cannot survive in the real world. The next morning, after their one night together, Garance will flee to an uncertain future through the crowds of Carnival celebrants on the Boulevard du Crime, and a desperate Baptiste will pursue her fruitlessly through the throng, immersed in a sea of Pierrots who have taken their play into the streets. These unforgettable final moments of the film remind us once again that "[a]ll the world's a stage / and all the men and women merely players..." (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II.7.139-40) (fig. 10).

¹² Turk, *op. cit.*, p. 308.

¹³ Turk, *op. cit.*, p. 310.



Fig. 8. The passion of Garance and Baptiste in the second balcony scene



Fig. 9. Baptiste and Garance caught in the act



Fig. 10. The end: Baptiste loses Garance in the crowd

- 21 The “director” Lacenaire’s revelation of the tableau with Garance and Baptiste also mirrors Prospero’s pulling back of the curtain to reveal the lovers Miranda and Ferdinand in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (V.1.167-84). Prospero’s stagecraft, like Lacenaire’s, effectively astonishes his audience with a vision of idealized love. Prospero and Lacenaire unveil these “performances” to accomplish a goal: to acquire restitution for a perceived injury.¹⁴ Russell Ganim notes that, in this scene, Lacenaire “provides the ‘ocular proof’ so crucial to Shakespeare’s plot” in *Othello* and argues that the curtain Lacenaire draws aside substitutes for Othello’s handkerchief.¹⁵ Ganim asserts that the film “literalizes the Shakespearean antecedent by actually depicting the Desdemona figure with another man [Baptiste]”; however, the proof of “[t]he drawn curtain underscores the Count’s vulnerability not so much in terms of Garance’s faithlessness, but because it shows the degree to which someone as powerful as Montray is susceptible to the attacks of sworn enemies such as Lacenaire”.¹⁶ The crucial treachery here is not a woman’s betrayal of her lover/protector but one man’s assertion of triumph over another. This performance concerns male power plays, pride, and mortification, not romantic love.

¹⁴ Prospero will accomplish this by marrying his daughter, Miranda, to Ferdinand, the son of his enemy, King Alonso, allowing his heirs to be more politically powerful than Prospero had ever been.

¹⁵ Ganim, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

¹⁶ Ganim, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

Lacenaire's "play" concludes with the murder of the Count the next morning in a Turkish bath.¹⁷ Lacenaire tracks down the Count in his private room at the baths and impales the Count with his dagger. Much has been written about the feminization of the Count through the sexualized penetration of Lacenaire's dagger,¹⁸ but more pertinent to this study is the reading of this murder as a "revenge against a plutocratic oppressor"; in this sense, "the assassination is a positive political gesture".¹⁹ Indeed, there is a striking shot of the dead Count's arm draping out of the bath which uncannily echoes Jacques-Louis David's famed painting *The Death of Marat* (1793), romantically depicting the assassination death of the French revolutionary with ties to Robespierre. Jean-Paul Marat, like Lacenaire, was a controversial rebel, some argue a butcher, but in *Les Enfants* Lacenaire is the killer rather than the prey, and he, like Marat's assailant, Charlotte Corday, makes no attempt to escape the authorities who will come to execute him for his grand crime (figs. 11 and 12).²⁰ Turk accurately observes that "the film displays an equivocation with regard to sexuality similar to its ambivalence in the matter of contemporary politics. *Les Enfants du paradis* resists capitulation to the status quo, while at the same time lending its support".²¹ The film also is ambivalent about theatre: it can be trivial and hackneyed, as is the mediocre French melodrama or the silliness of much traditional pantomime; but it can be profound, redemptive, and cathartic, as are Baptiste's magnificent pantomimes and Frédérick's performance of *Othello*. As Lacenaire can be read both as a symbol of the French Resistance — in that he fights against the police and established law — and as a symbol of fascist Nazi power, in his amorality and extreme violence, *Les Enfants du paradis* also can be read both ways. The character of Garance underscores this concept as well. Turk describes her as a "metaphoric representation of France": she circumvents police pressure to inform on Lacenaire but runs to a rich man who controls her life; she makes it clear she still loves Baptiste but does not resist the Count's authority or struggle to be with Baptiste:

Like most of the French during the Occupation, Garance does not move from sentiment to action [...] But it is [...] the values at stake — independence and love — that scandalize. *Les Enfants du paradis* is not a perfect allegory of France under Occupation; no one-to-one correlation exists between Garance and la France. Yet Garance's readiness to accommodate an enemy and relinquish a lover reverberates disturbingly with the climate of compromise and

¹⁷ Cf. the attempted murder scene set in a Turkish bath in Orson Welles's *Othello* (1952), also designed by *Les Enfants* production designer Alexandre Trauner.

¹⁸ Turk, *op. cit.*, p. 329-31.

¹⁹ Turk, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

²⁰ Turk perceptively connects the visual style of *Les Enfants* to that of various French painters and other visual artists, and maintains that the "structure" of the film closely resembles "a succession of David-like *grands tableaux*," arguing that "the relative predominance of flat, diffused lighting, impersonal distance shots, and sheer self-proclaimed monumentality make Carné the cinematic inheritor of David's heroic Neoclassicism" (233-34). Though Turk contends that Carné does not explicitly quote any particular piece by David, this shot of the murdered Count's arm hanging out of the bath certainly references *The Death of Marat* and nods toward the complex politics and history of revolution, resistance, and violence surrounding the notorious painting.

²¹ Turk, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

collaboration in Occupied France.²²

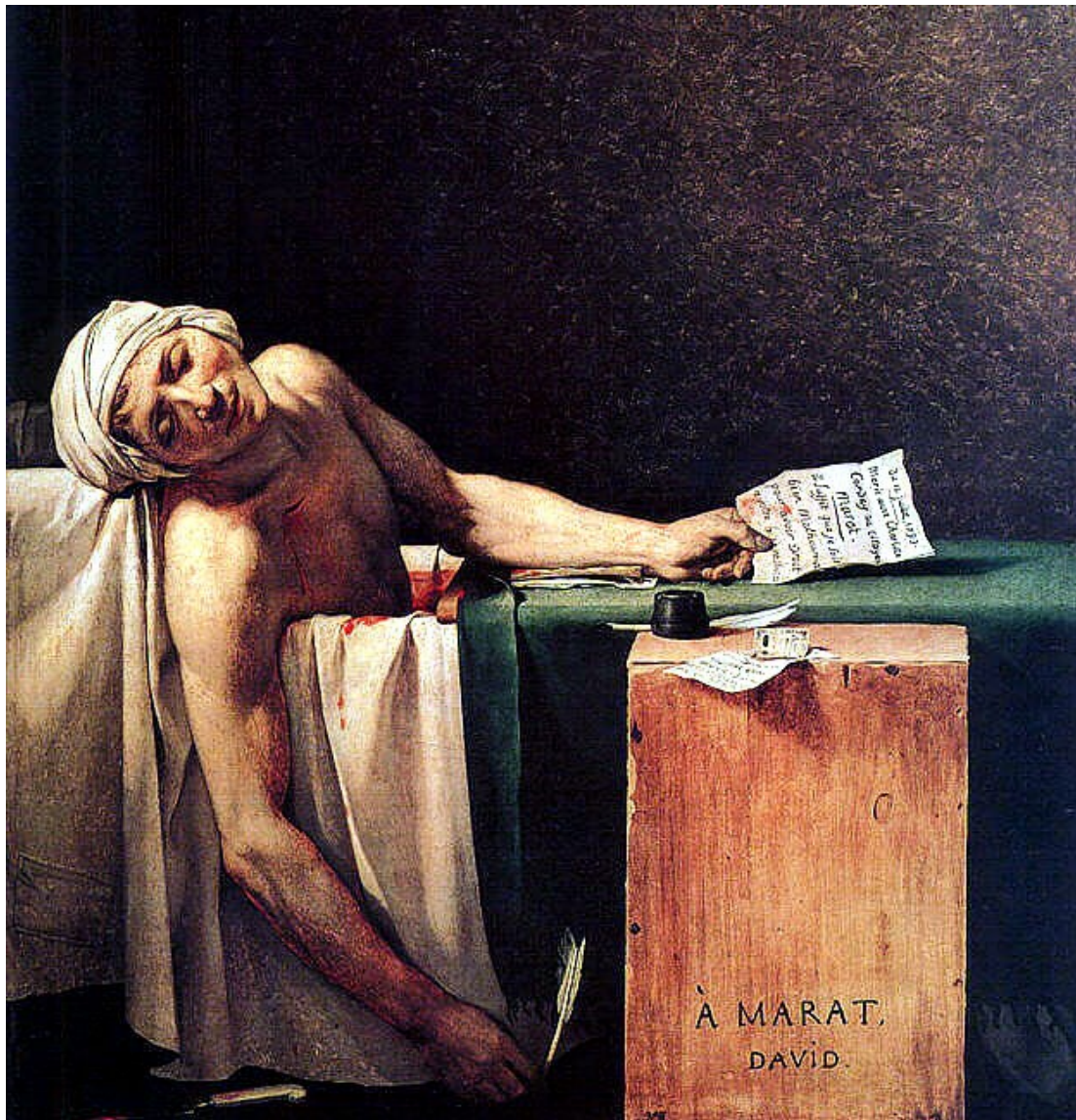


Fig. 11. David's masterpiece *The Death of Marat* (1793)

²² Turk, *op. cit.*, p. 340.



Fig. 12. The Count de Montray assassinated in the Turkish bath

- 23** All of this is punctuated by the fact that the actress Arletty, who plays Garance, was having an affair with a German Luftwaffe colonel during the Occupation. After the war, she was imprisoned for collaboration and, indeed, was jailed at the time the film premiered in 1945. Her portrayal of Garance took on a powerful, inevitable resonance in light of these events.
- 24** Although some critics have interpreted the film as an act of collaboration, pandering, or at least capitulating to the Nazis, *Les Enfants du paradis* predominantly was received as the “ocular proof” that France, despite its suffering, could produce an epic film that patriotically celebrates the nation’s glorious theatrical past, even under the nose of the Vichy regime. Edward Baron Turk asserts that “*Les Enfants du paradis* demonstrates magnificently that France’s theaters — the ‘safe houses’ of those collective dreams that take the form of plays and movies — provided a public site for relief from political oppression”.²³ In 1956, film critic Georges Sadoul declared, “*Les Enfants du paradis* represented in 1943-44 a prodigious act of faith, a cathedral raised to the glory of French art during the most awful moments of what seemed to be a new Hundred Years’ War”.²⁴ Indeed, Marcel Carné and Jacques Prévert used the art of the historical and fictional Deburau and Lemaître in *Les Enfants du paradis* and employed emphatic

²³ Turk, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

²⁴ Quoted in Turk, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

metatheatricity to conjure a vision of a triumphant moment in their nation's past.²⁵ This film is an idealized monument to France at a time when the nation was battling to regain control over its territory and its identity. At moments such as these, "performing" can be an act of valor or an act of betrayal. Shakespeare, Carné, and Prévert understood the profound, redemptive potential of metatheatricity during treacherous times.

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Filmography

Children of Paradise. Dir. Marcel Carné. Scr. Jacques Prévert. Perf. Arletty, Jean-Louis Barrault, Pierre Brasseur, and Marcel Herrand. 1945. Criterion, 2002. DVD.

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²⁵ One could compare this to Laurence Olivier's depiction of Shakespearean theatre and the heroic Henry V in his 1944 film adaptation of *Henry V*, which was intended to raise the morale of the British troops by depicting a glowing, romanticized portrait of the days of Gloriana and the magnificent artistic accomplishments of the English Renaissance. Remarkably, these two films, *Les Enfants du paradis* and *Henry V*, were made in the same years during World War II and, arguably, for very similar reasons: to evoke a victorious moment in their nations' pasts (cf. Lanier 79). Ironically, though, *Henry V* depicts England defeating France, the nation it was helping to liberate at this point in World War II.

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How to Cite

CROTEAU, Melissa. "I am not what I am": *Othello* and Role-playing in *Les Enfants du Paradis*. In *Shakespeare on Screen in Francophonie* (2010-). Shakespeare 450 Conference proceedings of seminar n°15 on "Shakespeare in French Film / France in Shakespearean Film." Paris: 21-27 April 2014. Ed. Douglas M. Lanier. General eds. Patricia Dorval & Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin. University Montpellier III (France), Institut sur la Renaissance, l'Âge Classique et les Lumières (I.R.C.L.): 2016. URL: http://www.shakscreen.org/analysis/othello_role-playing_carne/