

Post-performance reading:

It All Depends on the Difference between “The” and “An”: Branden Jacobs Jenkins’ *An Octoroon*

by Pancho Savery

In 1859, Irish American playwright Dion Boucicault’s play *The Octoroon, or Life in Louisiana* first appeared on the stage, one of more than 100 he would write in his lifetime. *The Octoroon*, based on Mayne Reid’s 1856 novel *The Quadroon*, was popular with both northern and southern audiences, which suggests that either its argument was so overtly neutral, or that one section or the other missed the message. The play tells the story of Zoe, illegitimate octoroon (meaning 1/8 black blood) daughter of the recently deceased Judge Peyton and his slave mistress. Surprisingly, the judge’s wife has accepted Zoe as part of the family and treated her accordingly, although her neighbors treat Zoe as if she were a mere servant. The judge’s nephew, George, comes to Louisiana to take over the family’s estate and to try to save it from creditors. The main creditor, M’Closky, the northern villain, stoops to murder to get what he wants, which includes Zoe, but he is upended when a new photographic technique catches him in the act. Zoe, who loves George, makes the ultimate double sacrifice of first encouraging him to marry the rich Dora, whom George doesn’t love, in order to save the plantation. Zoe then kills herself to both avoid the clutches of M’Closky and to help George forget her and live happily with Dora.

The play’s logic has some flaws. Since M’Closky has been caught in his villainy, the plantation will be saved, and so neither George’s marriage to Dora nor Zoe’s suicide are necessary. But from a southern perspective, neither George’s naïve belief that he can

marry Zoe and thus thwart miscegenation laws, nor the destruction of the traditional plantation way of life by slimy northerners, are threatened. The crucial scene in the play comes when the plantation is about to be sold, and the slaves decide “for de pride of de family, let every darky look his best for the judge’s sake – dat ole man so good to us, and dat ole woman.” This perpetuates the false notion of slavery as a benevolent institution that treats slaves like family. There is no talk of escape, resistance, or the slave revolts led by Gabriel Prosser in 1800, Denmark Vesey in 1822, and Nat Turner in 1831. There is no mention of David Walker’s 1830 Appeal that called for active resistance on the part of the slaves, nor of Frederick Douglass’s 1845 Narrative that depicts his fighting back against the noted “nigger breaker” Mr. Covey, which Douglass prefaces by noting, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.” The play ends with the “natural order” restored. From this perspective, the play could be considered racist. On the other hand, it is also clear that Boucicault sees George as heroic. He loves Zoe despite her “Mark of Cain,” and is willing to marry her. And Boucicault is clear in his message that the southern laws that would prevent Zoe and George from marrying are a mistake. From this perspective, the play is not racist (although there is never any talk about the inherent evil of slavery as a system; only that Zoe, as only 1/8 black should not have to suffer under it).

What does Boucicault mean to convey by his use of the article “the”? Does “the” not convey singularity and uniqueness, as in “the only one”? How is Zoe unique? Is Boucicault saying there were no other octoroons? Surely not. Is Boucicault saying he only cares about this one octoroon? That seems more likely. She is so almost white, and pure, and educated that there shouldn’t be such a law for her. This one is okay, he seems

to be saying, and we need to have sympathy for her. Such an attitude would reinforce the notion of Boucicault's conservatism.

In May 2014, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' *An Octoroon* opens. It is both based on and a response to Boucicault. Much of the basic plot is the same. George, Zoe, Dora, and M'Closky are all present. On the other hand, many things are different. What is the difference between Boucicault's "the" and Jacobs- Jenkins' "an"? Presumably, Jacobs-Jenkins is arguing that whoever this Zoe is, she is representative of many others who are like her. But before the play begins, there is a 10 page prologue entitled "The Art of Dramatic Composition," in which "BJJ," standing in for the contemporary author, engages in a dialogue with the "Playwright," standing in for Boucicault. We immediately know that this is going to some kind of Brechtian meditation on the nature of theatre; and, from BJJ's first line, a meditation on what it means to be a "black playwright," although he also immediately says he doesn't know what that means. Will we by the end of the play is another question. BJJ prepares to act in his own play by covering himself in whiteface. In doing this, he is signifying on the white practice of blackface minstrelsy. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in particular (but also into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with Al Jolson and Fred Astaire), one of the most popular forms of entertainment for white theatregoers was minstrel shows, in which white actors applied burnt cork to themselves and pretended, through racist caricature and ridicule, to imitate the supposed ways of African Americans. And so, before the play proper has begun, we are presented with yet a third question. Is one of the "functions" of a "black playwright" to take back what was taken, to recover the "truth" of African American experience by turning around the tools of the master on himself, turning racist blackface into more truthful whiteface; pointing out, for instance,

how often black actors and playwrights are limited to stereotyped roles such as sports stars, drug addicts, pimps, and physical abusers? What if white actors and playwrights were limited to playing evil, sadistic slaveowners?

In the same way that the play challenges us in the prologue, the opening scene challenges us by commenting upon Boucicault's first scene. Boucicault opens with a comic slave scene where the house slave Pete refers to other slaves as "black trash." In contrast, *An Octoroon* begins with a slave dialogue that features complaints about conditions, a justification for stealing bananas, a lack of a sense of belonging because of having been won in a poker game, talk of rape by slave masters, and the unlikelihood of success in trying to escape because they are surrounded by a swamp. And the language used is particularly contemporary. There is talk of a "slave mixer," and we get, "Bitch you need to calm your busybody ass down." (At the beginning of the play proper, Jacobs-Jenkins notes, "I don't know what a real slave sounded like. And neither do you.") In the middle of the play, there is a frank conversation about the selling of slave children, another interaction absent from the original. At the beginning of the third act, another new scene comments on the fact that it is illegal for slaves to read. One of the two most significant changes is that when the plantation is about to be sold and Pete makes his speech about the proper code of behavior at the auction, it turns out that most of the slaves have already run away as part of the "Runaway Plannin' Committee," contradicting the earlier dialogue about the impossibility of being able to escape. Those who have been left behind have either overslept (adding humor to a serious topic) or have deliberately been left behind because they are house slaves (highlighting the class tension between those who work in the "big house," who are often lighter-skinned, and those

who work in the fields, who tend to be darker). Here, once again, Jacobs-Jenkins complicates Boucicault's vision of slavery. Another significant thing Jacobs-Jenkins has done is to eliminate two characters, Mrs. Paley and Scudder, the lesser of the two northern mortgage holders. The result of this is that their language gets transferred into the mouths of others. George, for example asks, "What's the matter, nigger Pete?," a term he never uses in the original. Zoe also uses the same term (unlike in the original) and kicks Pete when he falls asleep, something Scudder does in the original. Both characters have evolved from one-sided, absolutely good melodramatic figures in the original to characters who clearly have flaws and a dark side in the contemporary version, again complicating Boucicault's vision of slavery as a generally benevolent institution.

After the auction at the end of the third act, there is another interlude between BJJ and the Playwright, in which they analyze the purpose of fourth acts in the theatre, concluding that they are places where multiple plots come together and morals are provided. There is also a fascinating discussion about the fact that the hinge of one of the plots rests on the newness and accuracy of photography. Since photography is no longer new, and no longer always accurate, this might not work for the audience. BJJ suggests that since "the theatre is no longer a place of novelty," the only thing left, "the final solution," is "probably just an actual experience of finality," which turns out to be a lynching photograph projected on the back wall. Not only is the previous section repeated, but the rest of the play is performed in its light. This is not just a random prop designed to get a response, but rather is integral to the play. Lynching was a tool before, during, and after the Civil War to keep "uppity Negroes" in their place. How does the photo affect your response to the play and to the specific repeated speech? In light of the

dialogue on the purpose of fourth acts, did this one succeed? Did it provide a moral and bring the two main plots (Zoe's and Paul's) together?

Act five leaves us, perhaps, with the biggest questions. It begins traditionally with Zoe going to Dido to ask for poison to kill herself, and Zoe refers to her as "Mammy." We are immediately told that Dido is "Taken aback by her word choice." "Mammy" is about as pejorative a term as one can use, especially because, among other things, it connotes being old. Interestingly enough, Boucicault uses the less offensive term "Aunty." After Zoe has left to kill herself, there is another fascinating conversation between Minnie and Dido, who also open the first act, making clear that Jacobs-Jenkins wants the realistic experiences of slaves to be the frame around the entire play. And from this dialogue, we get an attack on Zoe, both because she has insulted Dido; and even more so, because she is about to kill herself, "Cuz she in love wit that white man." The play concludes with their folk wisdom on not becoming "too worked up over small stuff" and "live life for you."

How does this ending help us understand Jacobs-Jenkins's "an" in contrast to Boucicault's "the"? It would appear that Zoe is not only one of many octoroons, but one of many who places her devotion to a white man over her very life. In doing so, she dies not only in vain, since she doesn't know about the Liverpool letter that will save the plantation; but also, at least according to Minnie, she dies a race traitor. This, I would argue, completely changes the meaning of Boucicault's play, where Zoe is a hero who dies for a noble cause, or at least thinks she does, to Jacobs-Jenkins' play where she is a race traitor who gets what she deserves because of her ill-advised choice.

And what about the rabbit? Why is it in the play? In African American folklore, Br'er Rabbit is a trickster figure who outwits larger and more dangerous animals, and thus is a heroic figure who, like slaves, has to struggle to survive. Unfortunately, the best known examples of these tales are those published by Joel Chandler Harris in the 1880s and '90s as part of the plantation tradition. This was an attempt on the part of southerners and their sympathizers to assuage their Civil War defeat by creating, on the one hand a portrait of the ante-bellum South as a place of joy and security with slaves happy and carefree, and on the other hand picturing the post-bellum world as one in which idle, illiterate, former slaves are a constant sexual threat to the fragility and purity of southern womanhood, thus necessitating the Ku Klux Klan.

The tales morph from tales told by African Americans to other African Americans into tales told by an old black uncle to a young white boy. Br'er Rabbit appears six times in Jacob-Jenkins's play, the first two times at the beginning of the second act when George is in the process of taking Dora's picture. In these two instances, the rabbit is signaling his association with the camera as a trickster's tool that uncovers the true murderer. The third time, also in the second act, is after Zoe has revealed to George her "Mark of Cain." The first two times, the rabbit "wanders through, unseen," and notices "the audience from afar." The third time, he "pauses, notices the audience, and seems to inspect it for a bit before exiting." It's almost as if the rabbit wants to make the audience pause and ask a question. Is Zoe in some way acting the trickster in trying to convince George to marry Dora to save the plantation, or is Jacobs-Jenkins warning the audience that it is being tricked by Zoe? His fourth appearance, "or not" is at the end of the act, again anticipating the tricksterism of the camera. At the end of the third act, BJJ

announces, "Maybe I sit in the audience of every show and play Ratts. Or maybe it's Br'er Rabbit? Let's just say it's Br'er Rabbit." For African Americans, the ever-present rabbit, always scrutinizing the white audience, will watch over and protect, to whatever limited extent possible, the African American presence in the white world. The rabbit's sixth and final appearance comes at the very end of the play, holding "a gavel and a tomahawk, symbols of two forms of "justice." This appearance comes at the end of Dido and Minnie's dialogue in which they both condemn Zoe and resolve to live life as it comes. The last line of the play is Dido's, "Anyway, finish telling me about the rabbit," and then he appears. It is the folk wisdom represented by Br'er Rabbit that will enable African Americans to survive the briar patch of living in the white world.