Statements of support for composer Bright Sheng

22 October 2021

Bright Sheng's removal from his teaching duties at the University of Michigan for screening Laurence Olivier's 1965 performance of Othello *has drawn attention and outrage from around the country. The following is a selection of letters sent to David Gier, the Dean of the School of Music, Theater and Dance, in response to an open letter published by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UM.*

Dear Professor Gier,

I am writing to express my dismay at your university's deplorable treatment of one of its most distinguished faculty members. Professor Bright Sheng is an internationally renowned composer, conductor, and pianist, who has taught at your School of Music, Theatre, and Dance for nearly twenty years; he is amongst those who have done most to establish Michigan's reputation as one of the world's leading universities. Yet he has now been publicly humiliated and stood down from teaching for the alleged offence of showing his class one of the best-known films of Shakespeare's *Othello.*

This was apparently triggered by a student's complaint against being shown a film centred upon the figure of a white actor in so-called "blackface." As the editor of the play's Oxford edition, I am of course fully aware of the production's controversial reputation—to which, indeed, I devote several pages of my own introduction. But, mistaken as Laurence Olivier's decision to play Othello as a black African may seem, it is important to realize that it was partly inspired by the performances in which the great African American singer and actor, Paul Robeson, had sought to liberate the play from its racist history: hence, in the details of his acting and appearance, Olivier was at pains to separate his Moor from the crude "blackface" travesties of the minstrel tradition.

That does not necessarily exonerate the result; but it is important to any full understanding of the performance. Of course, Professor Sheng's interest in John Dexter's film must necessarily have been focused upon its use of music and its relation to Verdi's *Otello*; but any concern with Olivier's appearance ought surely to have provided an occasion for serious class discussion of the issues it raises, rather than a complaint to higher authority. Indeed, a principal reason for the very existence of any university worth the name is to provide a forum for such discussions. Instead, your institution chose to make an ill-informed student attack on a prominent professor an occasion for a display of public bullying, in which Professor Sheng was forced to make two public apologies, and then suspended from teaching his course. It is only a short step from such repressive action to the banning of Shakespeare's tragedy itself.

I believe that the University of Michigan owes a public apology to Professor Sheng, who should immediately be returned to his teaching commitments.

Yours sincerely,
Michael Neill FRSNZ
Emeritus Professor of English
University of Auckland
Editor of the Oxford edition of *Othello*
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There was a time not so long ago when it would have been this incident that precipitated shock, more so than Olivier's outré appearance in the role. That an exhibit of a performance by one of the great actors of history, in a work by the greatest writer in English, would prompt such backlash would have seemed bizarrely counterintuitive in another era. Previously, the reactionary stance entailed expressions of indignation about canonical figures like Shakespeare disappearing from college curricula in favor of dumbed-down pop culture, or Zora Neale Hurston. Now the regime of "diversity and inclusion" requires, precisely, the *ex* clusion of Olivier's troubling, commanding vision of the play and the *ex* clusion of a MacArthur fellow of global renown who is, in fact, a "person of color" himself – all because the infliction of this material on impressionable freshpersons might have deprived them of their expectation of a "safe space."

One could object unequivocally that a Black actor should have played the part. Would this have appeased the freshpersons? My hunch is that then they'd have just been bored. Historically, a great Black actor had played the role – Paul Robeson in 1943 – but he was among the first since the play's appearance around 1603, and on Broadway, the next Black actor to play Othello was Moses Gunn in 1970, five years after Olivier's film. Anthony Hopkins played it in a reticent bronzer in 1981. Would we now deign to cancel Hannibal Lecter himself?

We need not dwell on the question of whether Shakespeare was "racist." Though it's possible to cast more recent presumptions backward in time, even with some intellectual legitimacy, the attribution would remain as ahistorical as calling Saint Augustine (of Berber descent) a Moor. But what would our furious social-justice warriors know of Moors? For them, it would seem, "persons of color" are something of a constant quantity, a virtually undifferentiated mass – the "BIPOC"! – about which what we mainly know is that their current well-being or disparagement hinges in some yet unarticulated manner on the showing of a sixty-year-old movie. (The phrase "people of color" would have fallen on ears even a few years past as a jarring locution, recalling the roundly rejected designation "colored people," even as it falls today as having an apparently universal validity.) Had discussion of the course material not been so curtailed, in any case, some reflection on these matters might have transpired, with every opportunity to air objections and perhaps even achieve some understanding of one's own feelings of disgust.

As it happens, Moors were mixed-race Muslims of Arab, North African, and/or Southern European descent, a small number still residing in Mauritania and Mali. In other words, a nearly extinct ethnic population, named with a word mainly used by Europeans and usually intended pejoratively (though they sometimes distinguished "white Moors" from "blackamoors"). What was this Moor doing in Venice, anyway, in a play by a writer who never left England? Alas, no chance to raise the question presented itself. In the Venice of Shakespeare's imagination, that port city was a hub of cosmopolitanism in which many different kinds of people mingled, in stark contrast to his own homogeneous Stratford. He set plays there because he was interested in exploring questions of human

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differences, including in *Othello*, as in *The Merchant of Venice*. The latter play is sometimes read as anti-Semitic and sometimes as an eloquent, intricate critique of the anti-Semitism that was all but universal in the Europe of the day, just as Othello is sometimes read as a play about the title character's suffering under Europeans' projections of him as intractably Other. To understand what race is, and by extension what racism might be, we would need to look into these former explorations.

But apparently, Professor Sheng's transgression was in not prepping his students for Shakespeare – a "trigger warning," don't you know! Never mind that a long tradition exists of discussing course materials following students' initial study of them, rather than prior to it. The abrogation here of this useful custom bespeaks not just pedagogical irresponsibility on the university's part, but the rank anti-intellectualism of this whole cultural current. The university announced yesterday (October 19) that it would not proceed with the Title IX investigation. The student paper darkly reported that "no reason [was] given" for this veto, even though what the office said was that it declined to investigate Sheng's "curricular decision," plainly implying the obvious but belatedly invoked rationale of academic freedom. Yet academic protocols, intellectual integrity, and Sheng's reputation have already suffered. Even if saner heads do finally prevail, the whole sorry episode stands as a stain on the university's reputation and an ultimate revelation of the stupid, bourgeois philistinism and reactionary tactics of this contemporary brigade of crusaders for a very insular brand of "social justice."

James Morrison
Professor of Film Studies
Claremont McKenna College in California

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Dear Dean Gier,

My purpose in writing is to ask that Professor Sheng be reinstated as instructor of all his classes and an apology be issued for his grossly inappropriate (wholly unjustified) mistreatment. To be punished for showing a movie, any movie (short of base pornography), in a university course is a disturbing act of censorship, even repression. Everything indicates that Professor Sheng acted in a good faith and professional manner. Sadly, this is something that cannot be said of the University of Michigan administration.

I will not mince words and state unequivocally that your university administration failed miserably on this matter. You egged on young students to mob opponents (a University Professor no less) and to act with rancor, malice against would-be interlocutors.

If students are unhappy with the content of such a movie, students raise the issues in class. Put differently, the issue regarding Sheng's class was a teachable matter – one where there is more than one side. Once students went to administrators to complain about the matter, Professor Sheng should have received unqualified support – advising students to take up the matter with the course professor.

I hope you would agree that the purpose of institutions of higher education (certainly the like of the University of Michigan) is to help shape young people into good citizens. With this case, the University of Michigan has set an example for students that bullying, retribution are acceptable means to deal with disagreement.

As it stands, I have no doubt that the faculty of your university are literally terrified of their students and fear that any student complaint will result in the damaging of careers and the undue sullying of professional reputations. Unfortunately, given the high profile and otherwise stellar reputation of the University of Michigan, your actions will help set the tone (for the worse) at institutions of higher learning around the world.

Respectfully yours,
George A. Gonzalez
Professor of Political Science
University of Miami

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Dear Sir,

I'm writing to demand the reinstatement of Professor Sheng as well as a formal apology be made to him because of the stupidity and witch-hunt he has endured.

For the record, I've taught Orson Welles's *Othello* in my classes five years ago and would continue to do so were enrollments in the Arts and Humanities possible.

This is an act any University should be ashamed of perpetrating as well as a betrayal of the academic mission of examining and promoting the works of the past, not catering to ignorance and petty prejudice.

Tony Williams
Professor/Area Head of Film Studies
Department of English
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

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Dear Dean Gier,

I wish to add my voice to those of many others in condemning the University of Michigan's treatment of Bright Sheng, the Leonard Bernstein Distinguished University Professor of Composition.

The attitude of the university with regard to the subject of Professor Sheng's assigning the Laurence Olivier film of William Shakespeare's *Othello* is appalling. On the basis of a complaint by an undergraduate who appears to know nothing about Shakespeare, or film history, the university has capitulated to a distorted view of culture expressed by a student who seems to think that a university is a kindergarten for the shelter of fragile infant minds.

A university is not supposed to be a "safe place." A university is supposed to be a place where young minds are challenged by knowledge to expand their limited childhood consciousnesses and receive the wisdom of the world. To reduce the mission of a university education to one of pandering to adolescent ignorance on the basis of some spurious racialist doctrine, in effect taking instruction from someone that you should be instructing, is a travesty and an insult to the very idea of a university or, indeed, of any institution that professes to be a source of enlightenment.

Regarding the apparent lack of knowledge of the Olivier film of *Othello*, and Olivier's reasons for performing the role in black makeup, your decision expresses complete ignorance of the circumstances and intent of the artist and a frankly plebeian lack of cultural knowledge or experience. The lowering of standards indicated by your attack on Professor Sheng is indicative of the deterioration of university education generally, and cultural and artistic education in particular.

The University of Michigan, if it wishes to continue to be considered a legitimate institution of higher education, must reinstate Professor Sheng and apologize to him for its insult to his scholarship.

Carolyn Zaremba
Actor
San Francisco, California

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Dear Dean Gier,

I am a civil-rights attorney in Southern California. I am a regular reader and occasional contributor to the *World Socialist WebSite*, which brought to my attention the despicable actions taken against Maestro Sheng for showing "Othello."

The use of makeup so that Sir Lawrence Olivier could represent the Moor theatrically in the cross-ethnic romance at the heart of the tragedy was entirely appropriate. Regardless, many important cultural works include blackface that, unlike "Othello," actually reflect hurtful stereotyping of their period. That is no reason to protect students from exposure, however. Would you prohibit "Swing Time," perhaps the greatest of the Astaire-Rogers films, because Fred Astaire pays tribute to Bill Robinson in blackface and minstrel dress? Perhaps "New Orleans"

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should be banned because the immortal Billie Holiday was compelled to play a maid opposite Louis Armstrong?

The history of art and culture raises tough questions, and the role of higher education is to give students the tools to work through them in a progressive and enlightened manner, not to reinforce ignorance and stupidity.

John Burton
The Law Offices of John Burton
Pasadena, California

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