



OTHELLO

- Othello is the first great black protagonist in Western literature.
- He is a general in the army of Venice who is described as a **Moor**, a native of North Africa.
- He is a strong, well-respected soldier.
- He is an eloquent and physically powerful figure.

A black and white photograph of a man in a military uniform, likely representing Othello. He is wearing a dark uniform with a high collar and a sash. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the right of the camera.

## Race and Gender Issues in *Othello*

By Michael Sofie

The play, *Othello*, follows the Greek example of a tragedy, where as Meyer explains, “Shakespeare’s protagonists are exceptional human beings whose stature makes their misfortune all the more dramatic” (1160). Although the basic plot is Othello’s jealous rage which leads to the murder of his devoted wife, Shakespeare raises questions about human foibles and perceptions. Trust and honesty are central to the story, but of greater importance are the race and gender issues and how they affect Othello and Desdemona’s relationship and contribute to their tragic end. Perhaps the more interesting aspect is that four hundred years after this play was written, many societies have not adequately addressed these subjects.

Racial misconceptions and prejudices existed in Elizabethan England, in the twentieth- century, and as they persist today. “The Moors...were victims of European racial prejudice,” as Ackroyd discloses, and “a large colony of Moors [were] in London, refugees from Spanish persecution” (427). Othello “was of Moorish stock, olive-skinned, and Shakespeare portrays him as ‘black’ for the purposes of theatrical emphasis and symbolism” (Ackroyd 427). McDonald notes that the playwright “took advantage of his audience’s cultural racism by presenting exotic figures who can behave barbarously and

yet who command respect and sympathy” (273). Queen Elizabeth I made a public edict in 1601 which conveyed her dismay at the large numbers of “Negroes and blackmoors which (as she is informed) are carried into this realm,” and made a policy to expel them soon (McDonald 273). The article, “The Bard, the Black, the Jew”, insists that “*Othello* is not...an expression of an established racism; rather, it highlights the danger of racial categorization at a point in European history when it was soon to be a problem” (25).

The problem being that Shakespeare’s *Othello* polarized seventeenth-century audiences’ cultural attitudes upon the “issue of miscegenation,” as Vaughan suggests, “by repeating patterns of black/white, light/dark imagery” (15, 23). Iago takes full advantage of this sentiment, as he addresses Brabantio, “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe. Arise, arise!” (Oth.1.1.88-89). Within ninety years from the birth of the play, Europeans held black Africans as “naturally inferior,” and in 1693, “Thomas Rymer [found] it intolerable for a noble black man to win the love of a noble white woman and marry her” (First Things 26-27).

Iago uses imagery, “your daughter covered by a Barbary horse,” and “your nephews neigh to you,” to inflame Desdemona’s father (Oth.1.1.112-3). As G. K. Hunter illustrates:

[w]e hear from men like us of a man not like us, of ‘his Moorship’, ‘the Moor’, ‘the thicklips’, ‘an old black ram’, ‘a barbary horse’, ‘the devil’, of ‘the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor’. The sexual fear and disgust that lies behind so much racial prejudice are exposed for our derisive expectations to fasten upon them. (192)

The underlying conflict is between “Christian orthodoxy” and “erotic intensity” of the times, as Goldblatt claims, where the suppression by Church doctrine cripples Othello’s sexuality (First Things). Novy concurs, “that Othello’s guilt about sexuality is an important subtext of the play;...I see him feeling guilty for loss of control of his passions...as...reflected in some Elizabethan sermons thought made sex inevitably suspect even within marriage” (132).

Othello is quite aware of his “blackness” and his segregation from the society of Venice, where he is accepted for his service to the state under contract, but not integrated into it. Consequently, the “desire for love...is his attempt to escape from his underlying sense of separateness” (Novy 133). In “Othello’s alienation,” Berry believes:

Othello’s alienation, then, is central to the play. It is important not merely because Shakespeare portrays Othello as a Moor or because of racial tension and anxiety pervade the...Venetian society, [but]...in his aspirations toward assimilation and anxieties about his blackness, internalizes a false dichotomy that can only dehumanize him. A rootless wanderer, Othello defines himself in Venetian terms, as an exotic European or brutal savage, or, in the final paradox of his death, as both.(pp.20)

His recent conversion to Christianity offers him assimilation through the “doctrine of the equality of all human souls,” but as a military commander, his value to that society is limited by its need for his leadership (Berry pp.4). Venetian society views Othello as “a noble, deeply admired man,” and the tragedy is how systematic exploitation of his weaknesses bring about his ruin (Porter 27).

In Love’s Argument, Novy admits:

[t]he power of *Othello* is the juxtaposition of the black man, who knows he is seen as foreign, with a woman whom he sees as foreign – in whom he punishes all the passions he wishes to deny in himself, partly under the pressure of his society's expectations about his passionate nature. (96)

The movement of the setting to the war frontline of Cyprus from the civilization of Venice is crucial to play's plot, because the removal from society to the military outpost shifts Othello from being affected by higher authority to be the authority himself. From this position of power, he is blinded by his perception of himself and swayed by false information and innuendo (Vaughan 16).

As Pollard speculates, “[t]he Othello of the first act is, I think, ‘valiant’ Othello of heroic poise and dignified eloquence – the authentic man to whom Desdemona gave away her heart. What invades him gradually on the island of Cyprus is a second self. This self is the projection of Iago” (94).

Although in a position of power, Othello is submissive to Desdemona's advances and is not comfortable in his role as a husband, demonstrated by the fact that they have not consummated their marriage upon arrival in Cyprus. As Hunter summarizes:

Shakespeare takes a traditional military hero with all the glamour that attaches to that role, places him in an inappropriate domestic setting, and gets him to play a traditional comic role as the despised [imaginary cuckold], so that the openness of love and the meanness of possessiveness sound against one another. (131)

Desdemona heard Othello's stories and out of empathy fell in love with him, and as she defiantly tells the senate, “That I did love the Moor to live with him, / My downright violence and storm of fortunes / May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdued” (Oth.1.3.247-49).

The much older Othello on the other hand, as Novy reports, “[f]rom the beginning he has denied the presence of ‘heat’ or ‘young affects’ in his love,” and “his jealousy shows him his passionate attachment to Desdemona” (13). Othello’s self-doubts, and humility toward the love shown by the young and beautiful Desdemona, make him an easy target for Iago’s accusations and the tragic outcome (Charney 101-2). “The love between Othello and Desdemona is a great venture of faith,” as Gardner affirms, and “[h]e is free; she achieves her freedom, and at great cost” (167). She goes on to indicate that “the thing that sets him apart is his solitariness...without ties of nature or natural duties” (165). In Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human, Bloom speculates, “[w]hy did Othello marry anyway, if he does not sexually desire Desdemona? ...and Shakespeare allows us to puzzle the matter out ourselves, without ever giving us sufficient information to settle the question” (457).

The questions about the ambiguity of their love and marriage may find some qualification in the interpretations of gender in Elizabethan England. As Raffel acknowledges, “a well-born was always defined and identified by her relation to...men: daughter to her father, wife to her husband,...by her marriage a young woman passed from the guardianship of one male to the guardianship of another” (xxvii). In his introduction, Raffel relates:

[i]n both custom and law, a woman did not ‘own’ herself. Before marriage, she belonged to her father. After marriage, she belonged to her husband. Desdemona’s father had the right to award his daughter to whatever man he chose for her, and Desdemona plainly anticipated that he would exercise that right and veto her marriage to a black man. She therefore arranged

matters, with to be sure Othello's participation...so that the marriage would be clandestine. In other words she eloped. (xxix-x)

"The whole code of manliness, both in war and civil life, is opposed to love because it is believed to feminize the heroic character," as Charney concludes, and that "[i]deas of love in Shakespeare depend strongly on gender concepts, on how masculine and feminine are defined" (107). Shakespeare is not "anti-woman" and portrays his woman as "creatures of much higher intelligence and general capability than the men around them" (Raffel xxx). The women in *Othello* "embody an emotional commitment the men would seem to be incapable of reciprocating," as Gajowski observes, "[t]heir attitudes and feelings toward the men in their lives...sharpen the focus on male treatment of women" (97). As Neely finds:

[t]he men's vanity, their preoccupation with rank and reputation, and their cowardice render them as incapable of friendship as they are of love. The women, in contrast, are indifferent to reputation and partially free of vanity, jealousy, and competitiveness....The men...persistently misconceive the women; the women fatally overestimate the men. Each sex, trapped in its own values and attitudes, misjudges the other. (224, 228)

The relationships between Emilia and Iago, Bianca and Cassio, and Desdemona and Othello, all illustrate the absence of understanding between the genders, if not the common ground of equality.

Othello believes that his wife has been unfaithful, Iago is betrayed by Emilia, and Bianca's care for Cassio is not reciprocated. "A partnership between equals such as that which Emilia articulates" in Act 4, scene 3, as she shares with Desdemona; that the "impression of balance, reciprocity, and equality within gender relationships" is created by

the similar needs of male and female (Gajowski 108,112). Both sexes have the same senses, need for affections, and if not satisfied with a relationship, disposed to make a change (4.3.89-99). Bradley's Lectures on Shakespearian tragedy suggests that:

[f]ew of Shakespeare's minor characters are more distinct than Emilia, and towards few do our feelings change so much within the course of a play. Till close to the end she frequently sets one's teeth on edge; and at the end one is ready to worship her. She nowhere shows any sign of having a bad heart.(239)

Her revelation is a chance for Shakespeare to let the audience understand the moral of the play, that glimmer of truth which Othello receives before killing himself. "*Othello* has *something* of the structure of a morality play," as Hunter comments, "with Othello caught between Desdemona and Iago, the good angel and the bad angel" (200). "Terror and pity are here too much to bear; we long to be allowed to feel indignation, if not rage; and Emilia lets us feel them and gives them words" (Bradley 242). As the Feminist, Carol Thomas Neely warns:

[t]he conflict between men and women has not been eliminated or resolved. The men have been unable to turn women's virtue into pitch, but the women have been unable to mend male fancy....the men are chastened and their rhetoric somewhat subdued, but they remain relatively unchanged. They do not go forth to do penance.  
(234)

Embodied in the character of Othello, then, is the conflict for equality between men and women and the issue of racism; these are these issues that lead to the end of his world into chaos.

The world as he knew it has disappeared, as Bloom concludes, “[i]f Othello’s occupation is gone, then so is his manhood, and with it departs also pride, pomp, and circumstance that compelled Desdemona’s passion for him, the ‘circumstance’ being more than pageantry. Chaos comes again” (468). Othello equates the loss of his love to Desdemona to disaster and chaos, eternal hell (Macauley pp.23, Oth.3.3.90-3). The values of the seventeenth-century world were in flux; the days of the Renaissance, built upon the medieval splendor of the crusader and believer, were numbered by the Counter-Renaissance ideas of the individual who rationally and empirically described the world (Hunter 206). The reality is the difficulty that his social life and marriage would have endured if it was allowed to continue, in the light of the Reformation and the ideals of Christianity in contrast to the Church actuality (Hunter 206-7). The Elizabethan English had certain preconceptions about Othello’s race and foreignness centering on inferiority, evilness, and sexual prowess. As Hirsch proposes:

[o]ur experience of *Othello* also resembles our experiences of the world, in which we form our perceptions of other people on the basis of mere hints; in such a world, if we are to perceive at all, we must wear fallible eyes, we must use our fallible imagination. *Othello* is a...thought-provoking...play not merely because we witness characters confronted with situations that acutely test their powers of perception, but because we confront such situations ourselves. (156-7)

Othello’s “beliefs about the characteristics of women and at least some kinds of men were flawed,” and he chose to trust “honest” men and distrust “dishonest” women. Placing faith in the wrong people was his moral character defect that he could not escape and colored

all his subsequent actions (Porter 29). The “false moral belief” acted on is that “he believes that he is entitled, and indeed obliged to kill his adulterous wife” (Porter 32).

So the moral of the play begs the question about morality, racism, and the equality of the sexes; what if anything has changed in the four hundred years since *Othello* was written? Although anthropologists find no basis for racial classification and the labeling of ethnic groups with particular characteristics, race and ethnic discrimination still exist in the world today, including many first-world societies. Long held beliefs are difficult to change and many generations may pass before populations are sufficiently homogenous to end the practice. Gains have been made in America since the Civil Right Movement in the 1960's, but the South is still a holdout to the heydays of Southern society. The United States has been less responsive to these changes than many other countries (Scupin and DeCorse 573-90). Gender issues have also improved since the Feminist movements of the twentieth-century, but even today women generally are paid less than men for the same work and do not enjoy the same status (Scupin and DeCorse 462-64). So the issues of race and gender that affected Othello and Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello* are still prevalent four hundred years later. The disturbing fact remains that humankind has been slow to address these issues in the light of scientific evidence, literacy, information, communication, and the benefits of higher standards of living. I believe that William Shakespeare would be appalled to see that the issues he raised in 1604 have not been remedied in 2009 with so much other progress having been made.

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