

OTHELLO (1604)

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

SYNOPSIS

Othello is a black North African Moor who is employed as a general in Venice. He elopes with, and marries, Desdemona, the daughter of Brabantio, a wealthy Venetian who complains to the Duke. The Duke, however, accepts the marriage since Othello is needed to lead an expedition against the Turks who are threatening the Venetian possession of Cyprus. A storm destroys the Turkish fleet but Desdemona, Othello and his officers arrive on the island safely. Iago, one of those officers, bitterly resents the promotion of Cassio to Othello's second-in-command and determines to destroy both by fabricating news of an affair between Cassio and Desdemona. With the aid of Desdemona's handkerchief, found by Iago's honest wife Emilia and placed in Cassio's possession by Iago, Othello is convinced of her guilt. At Othello's behest, Iago arranges the murder of Cassio but the killing, left to Desdemona's foolish suitor Roderigo, is botched. Othello strangles his wife only for Emilia to reveal the truth about the handkerchief. Iago mortally wounds his wife and Othello kills himself. Iago is sentenced to torture and death and Cassio becomes Governor of Cyprus.

Contexts

- By making a Moor his protagonist Shakespeare was drawing on a tradition of Moors as violent, lustful barbarians, such as Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* (p.72). There is debate about the extent to which Shakespeare overturns these expectations in creating the character of Othello.

- There is some evidence to suggest that black people were regarded as unwelcome intruders in London, if Queen Elizabeth's ineffective 1601 edict for their expulsion has any weight:

there are of late divers blackmoors brought into this realme, of which kinde of people there are already here too manie

Iago tells Othello that Desdemona's love for him is unnatural:

IAGO Ay, there's the point: as – to be bold with you –

Not to affect many proposed matches

Of her own clime, complexion and degree,

Whereto we see in all things nature tends –

Foh, one may smell in such a will most rank,

3.3.257-261

- The Moslem Turks were dangerous enemies of Christian Europe, with Venice the frontier state engaged in constant warfare against them, including the great naval victory of Lepanto in 1571. Nevertheless it is true that both the Moors and the Turks enjoyed good diplomatic relations with a Protestant England which was facing a common foe in Catholic Spain. Andrew Hadfield suggests that:

Perhaps our understanding of the play would be altered if it were the case that [North African] Othello was represented on the Jacobean stage as similar to the Turks he was employed to fight rather than to what we think of as Africans.

Andrew Hadfield 2003: 10

- Venice was regarded as a republic with a rational system of government which avoided much of the nepotism and favouritism of monarchies. Its status as a trading nation meant that it was relatively welcoming of foreigners. Despite this, Venetians were regarded as deceitful in trade, and their women as cunning and promiscuous. The elegant *cortezani*, high-class prostitutes and concubines, were an important part of Venetian social life for the upper classes.

The visible legal and political processes of the [Venetian] republic, and especially the ways in which it deals with conflict and racial prejudice [1.3.52-236], stand in stark contrast to the sinister, untruthful and hidden methods of Iago, whose crimes are known only to the audience until near the end of the play. Iago's undoubted cleverness manifests itself only in cruelty and self-advancement, a common English view of the reality of Italian politics. If Venice shows Italian politics at their best, Iago, a scheming Machiavellian stage villain, demonstrates much about Italy that was feared and hated in 16th-century England.

Andrew Hadfield 2004: 169

Othello is an intense domestic tragedy about a marriage which goes terribly wrong. Its political setting, focusing on the conflict between Christian and Turk, and upon the race of its protagonist, makes it also a play full of powerful resonances.

Characters – Iago

OTHELLO Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil

Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?

IAGO Demand me nothing: what you know, you know:

From this time forth I never will speak word.

Iago's last words to Othello in the play's final moments,

5.2.339-42

The Romantic critic Coleridge found Iago's behaviour to be a result of his psychology: his passionless, single-minded pursuit of evil for its own sake make him seem to be a devil (or psychopath as he might be labelled today). Here Coleridge is writing about the concluding lines of Iago's corruption of Rodrigo at the end of 1.3 (ll.342-72), when Iago persuades Rodrigo to pay Iago to help him to seduce Desdemona:

Iago's passionless character, [is] all will in intellect; therefore the bold partisan here of a truth, but yet a truth converted into falsehood by absence of all the modifications by the frail nature of man. And the last sentiment – There lies the Iagoism of how many! And the repetition, 'Go make money!' (1.3.261) – a pride in it, of an anticipated dupe, stronger than the love of lucre.

[IAGO Go to, farewell, put money enough in your purse. Thus do I ever make my fool my purse.] The triumph! Again, 'put money', after the effect has been fully produced. The last speech, [Iago's soliloquy, 1.3.371-93] the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity – how awful! in itself fiendish; while yet he was allowed to bear the divine image, too fiendish for his own steady view. A being next to devil, only not quite devil – and this Shakespeare has attempted – executed – without scandal!

Samuel Taylor Coleridge 1835 in Andrew Hadfield 2003: 49

Othello – character, race and the outsider

Writing in 1952, F.R. Leavis, insisted on the 'simplicity' of Othello's character, seeing him solely as a 'man of action', who does not dramatise himself normally, and has learnt nothing through his suffering. He is, however, overcome with self-pity in his concluding speech. He snaps out of it to act out the very thing he is describing by stabbing himself:

Contemplating the spectacle of himself, Othello is overcome with the pathos of it. But this is not the part to die in: drawing himself proudly up, he speaks his last words as the stern soldier who recalls, and re-enacts, his supreme moment of deliberate courage:

Set you down this.

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,

Where a malignant and turbaned Turk

Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,

I took by th' throat the circumcised dog

And smote him, thus.

Stabs himself.

5.2.394-9

It is a superb coup de théâtre.

As, with that double force, a coup de théâtre, it is a particularly right ending to the tragedy of Othello. The theme of the tragedy is concentrated in it – concentrated in the final speech and action as it could not have been had Othello 'learnt through suffering'. That he should die acting his ideal part is all in the part: the part is manifested here in its rightness and solidity, and the actor as inseparably as a man of action. The final blow is as real as the blow it re-enacts, and the histrionic intent symbolically affirms the reality: Othello dies belonging to the world of action in which his true part lay.

F.R. Leavis 1952: 152 in Andrew Hadfield 2003: 63

In recent decades the political situation rather than the character of the protagonist has been of more critical interest. It can be argued that Othello has power but no status (McEvoy 2006: 214-6). Venice is happy to employ mercenaries to lead its forces. Noble Italian birth is not a qualification in this modern situation; military proficiency is what matters. Yet Othello is black and foreign, so he cannot be accepted in the hierarchy of the Venetian state. Brabantio, Desdemona's father, cannot accept him as a suitable husband for his daughter because of his colour. Yet Othello does not come across, in either his language or his attitudes, as foreign. His foreignness and blackness are, however, emphasised by others. There is a certain

grand pomposity to his language, but this is to do with Othello's vision of himself. He sees himself as a noble, almost legendary, warrior. The story of his life, which he tells to the duke and the senators, is a story of desperate adventures straight out of a 'romance' (a medieval story of the unlikely adventures that a wandering knight meets on his quest). It was the same story that he had told to Brabantio and which had made such an impression on Desdemona (1.3.142-84).

In the medieval romances a knight's feats of heroism win the lady's love. Chivalric prowess is actually inseparable from the love of the knight's lady who dignifies and sanctions his deeds. And it is for these very adventures that Desdemona loves Othello. He tells the duke and senators:

She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
And I loved her that she did pity them.

1.3.181-2

Desdemona's love for Othello is founded on his qualities as a warrior and his history of noble deeds. This is a love from the world of stories and legends, an idealised version of courtly love in feudal chivalry. It is completely at odds with imperialist, pragmatic, money-driven Venetian society.

Desdemona pleads to be allowed to accompany her new husband to Cyprus:

I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honours and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate:
So that, dear lords, if I be left behind
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for why I love him are bereft me ...

1.3.267-72

Both lovers become dupes of the worldly Iago. Othello is an outsider in Venice and unsure of its ways. Desdemona is a young noblewoman who has been kept apart from male society and politics. Their love is not grounded in the reality of how their society operates, and so it founders when it comes into contact with that world in its most pure form: Iago.

Leavis's patronising reading of Othello caused a reaction. More recent critics have been very aware of the play's racial dynamics. In an important modern study, Karen Newman argues that Othello is caught in a contradiction where he is both the monstrous outsider who causes the errant, sexualised woman (Desdemona) to go against society's rules and, as a representative of Venetian male power, is also society's means of punishing her.

Desdemona's desire threatens the patriarchal privilege of disposing of daughters and in the play signals sexual duplicity and lust.

The irony, of course, is that Othello himself is the instrument of punishment, ... both confirming cultural prejudice by his monstrous murder of Desdemona and punishing her desire which transgresses the norms of the Elizabethan sex/race system. Both Othello and Desdemona deviate from the norms of the sex/race system in which they participate from the margins ... Women depend for their class status on their affiliation with men – fathers, husbands, sons – and Desdemona forfeits that status and the protection it offers when she marries outside the categories her culture allows ... The woman's desire is punished, and ultimately its monstrous inspiration as well. As the object of Desdemona's illegitimate passion, Othello both figures monstrosity and at the same time represents the white male norms the play encodes through Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio. Not surprisingly, Othello reveals at last a complicitous self-loathing, for blackness is as loathsome to him as ... any male character in the play, or ostensibly the audience ... Othello is both hero and outsider because he embodies not only the norms of male power and privilege represented by the white male hegemony which rules Venice, a world of prejudice, ambition, jealousy and the denial of difference, but also the threatening power of the alien.

Karen Newman 1987: 153 in Andrew Hatfield 2003: 76-7

Ewan Fernie argues ingeniously that what makes Othello heroic in his tragic suicide is that he fully acknowledges the shame of his conduct in a society where the whites merely transfer the shame they feel for their lives and actions onto the outsider:

Blackness in white Venice is invested with the shameful qualities of human existence: this is typical of Western culture generally ... An important lesson of *Othello* is that any hateful perception of other races, or women, or any other stigmatised individual or group, is like as not an indirect expression of shame. It is emblematic here that Othello begins to see Desdemona as black and blackened at the very point that he is possessed by a sense of his own hideous blackness. It is not so much that one should be ashamed, which we often assume today, as that all should be ashamed: more or less equally, although beyond this they may compound their shame by shameful behaviour. The shame of stigmatised minorities is properly the shame of majorities too. But, as the one black in the play, Othello conspicuously, and more involuntarily than Hamlet, bears the shame of the world, though his wife temporarily and fatally has to bear his shame ... this is a saintly role. That Iago, Brabantio and Cassio are so precariously vulnerable to embarrassment and humiliation should instruct them that they are fallen – that they fall short – but they

are not perceptive or courageous enough to accept this ... Othello at the climax searingly sees that he is black, in a social context where blackness represents animality, mortality and sinfulness. He sees this with an absoluteness the whites could not achieve, though in the same terms Iago especially is far, far blacker. Othello is morally degraded – we must never forget that he has killed his wife – but he is also a spiritual hero, one who shows up the cosseted and frightened self-deception of those who thrust off and misplace shame. He has been wicked, much more than Brabantio and Cassio, but there is a real sense in which only Othello is great enough for his climactic experience of shame in the worsening series of shames that has constituted the play.

Ewan Fernie 2002: 171-2

Fintan O'Toole, however, considers that the play's shifting contrasts between black and white, experience and innocence, malice and virtue is consonant with the close relationship between Iago and Othello. Iago is so involved with his superior that Othello cannot be considered a tragic hero separately from his ensign:

There is no Othello without Iago: it is Iago who draws out his inner fears and longings, who makes him the character that we see and hear. And the tragedy is not just Othello's, it is also Iago's, Iago is as much a tragic figure as any of Shakespeare's protagonists, as much caught between one world and another, one way of thinking and another ... He has the soliloquies. He is the one who reveals himself to the audience. He is the most active character in the play. (Othello, for a hero, is strikingly passive ... Othello suffers, kills and dies.) And Iago has the longest part, not merely the longest in *Othello* but the longest part in all of Shakespeare. To see the play as being about a tragic hero called Othello is absurd ... And Othello, anyway, is not a tragic hero in any classical sense. In the first place, he is not a king or a prince or a ruler ... And because of this, his personal tragedy does not involve the tearing apart of the state or the order of nature or the universe. On the contrary, he is a servant – a highly important servant, admittedly, but a servant nevertheless ... The world will not be corrupted by his misdeeds and we, as an audience, do not feel that there is anything necessary or significant, never mind inevitable, about his death.

Fintan O'Toole 2002: 71-2

OTHELLO

Speak of me as I am: nothing extenuate,

Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well:

5.2.385-7

Time

It has often been noted that there is a 'double time scheme' in the play. Given the compression of acts two to five, featuring the taut dialogues between Othello and Iago, it is impossible for Cassio to have had the time to have an affair with Desdemona. Fintan O'Toole takes this double time scheme and notes the play's concern with historical change, particularly the shift from the values of pre-scientific thinking and the static nature of feudal society to the emerging modern world (for a similar argument about *Hamlet* see p.91). This shifts the emphasis from a tragedy of individual weakness to one of an individual caught in a world of changing values.

In this brilliant division of time into two different and at times competing logics, Shakespeare dramatises the core of the play. There is normal time in which the rest of the world and events unfold themselves in the usual way. But there is also the time of Iago and Othello. Both are out of synch with the times, Iago unable to reconcile himself with the new order, Othello ahead of the times as a man who has power but no status. This sense of the two men being out of their time becomes literal. We feel it and experience it as we watch the play, their fast, passionate time at odds with the unfolding of history.

This bold breaking into two of time is possible because *Othello* is a play in which things in general are refusing to stand still, in which hitherto fixed things are turning into opposites. Most obviously, black and white, the clearest of distinctions, are melting together, both in the marriage of Othello and Desdemona and in the surrounding imagery of darkness and light. Othello himself as someone who is deeply ambiguous in his meaning for others is superbly dramatised in the opening scenes, where one group is seeking to apprehend him as a criminal and the other is seeking to appoint him a defender of the state ...

In this, as in so much else, what happens in the play is caught in the middle of an old way of thinking and a new one ... If Othello were fully of the old way of thinking, he would stay within his 'clime, complexion and degree' (3.3.259). If he were of the new way of thinking, he would adopt the scientific way of looking at things, which is to move from the external to the internal, from outward evidence to inner conviction about what the evidence means. But he does neither of these things. He breaks with the old way of thinking by breaking out of his 'proper' position, but he doesn't adopt the new way. Instead of moving from external evidence to internal conviction, he moves from his inner conviction, his conviction that Desdemona must be unfaithful, to the 'evidence', the handkerchief and Desdemona's pleading for Cassio. He moves from conviction to evidence and not the other way round as a new humanist would do.

Fintan O'Toole 2002: 90-2