

Introduction to Othello

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Major Characters

- ▶ Othello—Moorish general who leads Venetian Navy
- ▶ Desdemona—Venetian noblewoman who marries Othello
- ▶ Brabantio—Desdemona's father who disapproves the marriage
- ▶ Iago—Othello's "Ancient" who manipulates him
- ▶ Emilia—Iago's wife and servant to Desdemona
- ▶ Cassio—Othello's Lieutenant
- ▶ Roderigo—Venetian gentleman who lusts for Desdemona
- ▶ Bianca—a courtesan in Cyprus who loves Cassio
- ▶ Duke of Venice
- ▶ Lodovico and Gratiano—Venetian gentlemen
- ▶ Montano—Governor in Cyprus

Performative Context

- ▶ Performed by King's Men at the court of King James I on November 1, 1604.
- ▶ Performed at Oxford in 1610; Court again 1612-13; at Globe and Blackfriars
- ▶ Tragic Era of Writing: *Hamlet* (1600), *King Lear* (1604-5), *Macbeth* (1606), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-7)
- ▶ Wars between Venice and Turkey were important in late 16th century—Battle of Lepanto, 1571

Sources

- ▶ *The History of the Turks* by Richard Knolles, which was published in England in the autumn of 1603.
- ▶ The story of *Othello* is also derived from another source—an Italian prose tale written in 1565 by Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinzio (usually referred to as Cinthio).
- ▶ The original story: a Moorish general is deceived by his ensign into believing his wife is unfaithful.
- ▶ First Act expands one line from Cinthio that indicates Desdemona's family does not approve of the marriage.

Shakespeare's Modifications to Plot

- ▶ Shakespeare added characters: Roderigo and Brabantio, Desdemona's father.
- ▶ Compressed the action into a few days and set it against the backdrop of military conflict.
- ▶ Added Othello's story about how he courted Desdemona by telling his stories of war and adventure
- ▶ Turned the ensign, a minor villain, into the arch-villain Iago.
- ▶ Changed death of Desdemona: In Cinthio it is the Ensign who kills her at the instigation of Othello whereas Shakespeare has his hero do the deed himself
- ▶ Characters and motivation are more complex: greater psychological depth

Moor and Race

- ▶ Race of Othello is debated today; but race and racism is major theme
- ▶ Moor today describes the Arab-Islamic inhabitants of Spain who invaded Spain from N. Africa in 8th Century.
- ▶ In Elizabethan era, the term was used to describe Africans in general.
- ▶ George Abbott, for example, in his *A Brief Description of the Whole World* of 1599, made distinctions between “blackish Moors” and “black Negroes”
- ▶ Iago is bothered by the race of Othello and envies his success
- ▶ Desdemona’s father also expresses racist objections to their marriage.
- ▶ Bottom line: Moor connotes difference—whether racial or religious

Moorish characters from Era

- ▶ The most stereotypical and racist depiction of an African character is Aaron, the villain of Shakespeare's early play *Titus Andronicus*.
- ▶ Aaron is the opposite of Othello: he is lecherous, cunning, and vicious; his last words are "If one good deed in all my life I did / I do repent it to my very soul" (*Titus Andronicus*, V.iii.188-189).
- ▶ Othello is admired by most of Venice and all of the court including Cassio, Montano, and Lodovico. He is brave, loyal, and driven by a desire for Honor. He truly loves Desdemona.
- ▶ In contrast, Iago describes Othello as beastly, vicious, and ignorant, using racist terms and analogies. **In the end, we must judge whether the play is questioning or reinforcing racist stereotypes of the day.**

Iago's Motivation: Class Envy

- ▶ Iago is driven in part by Envy
- ▶ He wanted to be Othello's lieutenant, but Cassio was chosen; instead Iago is Othello's ancient—a standard bearer and lowest officer designation.
- ▶ Cassio has seen little action but knows how to play the court I.1.9ff

Race and Sex

- ▶ Many of the racist statements of Iago are in the context of sex: to Brabantio, “You have lost half your soul; even now, now, very now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe. Arise...or else the Devil will make a grandsire of you.”
I.1.95
- ▶ I.1.125 “You’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse, you’ll have your nephews neigh to you, you’ll have coursers for cousins, and jennets for Germans.”
- ▶ 130: “your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.”

Brabantio accuses Othello of Magic. I.2. 80ff

- Brabantio: O, thou foul thief, where has thou stowed my daughter? Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her! For I'll refer me to all things of sense, **[if she in chains of magic were not bound,]** whether a maid so tender, fair, and happy, so opposite to marriage that she shunned the wealthy curled darlings of our nation, would ever have, **t'incur a general mock,** run from her guardage to the **sooty bosom** of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight!

Othello's Defense. I.3.91ff

- Most potent, grave, and reverend seigneurs,
My very noble and approved good masters:
That I have ta'en away this old man's
daughter, it is most true; true I have married
her...Rude am I in my speech, and little
blessed with the soft phrase of peace; For
since these arms of mine had seven year's
pith, till now some nine moons wasted, they
have used their dearest action in the tented
field, and little of this great world can I speak
more than pertains to feats of broil and ...

Othello's Story of How She Came to Love Him I.3.149ff

- Her father loved me, oft invited me, still questioned me the story of my life...the battles, sieges, fortunes that I have passed...I spoke of most disastrous chances: of moving accidents by flood and field, of hairbreadth 'scapes I' th' imminent deadly breach, of being taken by the insolent foe and sold to slavery, of my redemption thence...And of the cannibals that each other eat, the Anthropophagi, and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders. These things to hear would Desdemona seriously incline...She'd come again, and **with a greedy ear devour up my discourse...**My story being done, she gave me for my pains a world of sighs. She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange, 'twas pitiful, 'twas wonderous pitiful. She wished she had not heart it, yet **she wishes that heaven had made her such a man...**She loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them. This only is the witchcraft I have used."

Iago Hates Othello Because of Jealousy and Racism

- Introduced by Iago: I.3.426ff “I hate the Moor, and it is thought abroad that twixt my sheets has done my office. I know not if it be true, but I for mere suspicion in that kind, will do as if for surety. He holds me well. The better shall my purpose work on him....The Moor is of a free and open nature that thinks men honest that but seem to be so, and will as tenderly be led by the nose as asses are. I have't. It is engendered. Hell and night must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.”

Handkerchief: Token of Love and Magic

- ▶ Emilia picks up a handkerchief dropped by Desdemona because Iago has asked her to get it
- ▶ He gives it to Cassio
- ▶ He tells Iago that he has seen Cassio with it.
- ▶ III.4.60ff Othello: That handkerchief did an Egyptian to my mother give. She was a charmer, and could almost read the thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it, 'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father entirely to her love. But if she lost it, or made a gift of it, my father's eye should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt after new fancies. She, dying, gave it me, and bid me, when my fate would have me wived, to give it her. I did so; and take heed on it, make it a darling your precious eye. To lose 't or give 't away were such perdition as nothing else could match.

Othello's Love and Madness V.2.1

- **It is the cause, it is the cause**, my soul. Let me not name it to you, you chaste star. **It is the cause**. Yet I'll not shed her blood, nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, and smooth as monumental alabaster. Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men. **Put out the light, and then put out the light**. If I quench thee, thou flaming minister, I can again thy former light restore should I repent me. But once pout out thy light, thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature, I know not where is that Promethean heat that can thy light relume. When I have plucked the rose, I cannot give it vital growth again. It needs must wither. I'll smell it on the tree. O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade justice to break her sword. [He kisses her.] **One more, one more**. Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee and love thee after. **One more, and this the last**. [He kisses her.] "So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep, but they are cruel tears. This sorrow's heavenly: it strikes where it doth love. She wakes."

Othello's Soliloquy before Stabbing Himself V.2.397

- ▶ Then must you speak of one that loved not wisely, but too well; of one not easily jealous, but being wrought, perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand, like the base Judean, threw a peal away richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes, albeit unused to the melting mood, drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees their medicinal gum. 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 circumcized dog, and smote him, thus. [He stabs himself]
- ▶ [to Desdemona] I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this, killing myself, to die upon a kiss.

Summary

- ▶ Race clearly plays a central role in the characterization of Othello as well as the motivation of other characters.
- ▶ Iago plays upon racist tropes to upset Brabantio at the idea of his daughter marrying Othello.
- ▶ Brabantio repeats racist tropes in rejecting Othello despite prior respect for his military exploits.
- ▶ Yet, Othello is respected by the Venetian nobility and given command of a fleet.
- ▶ While he kills Desdemona out of jealousy, which could be seen as reinforcing racist ideas about Moors being animalistic and uncivilized, Cassio and Roderigo behave improperly as well because of Iago's scheming.
- ▶ In the end, Othello is responsible for murdering Desdemona, but it is Iago who is the true villain. Othello appears noble and tragic. Does this counteract the racism?