

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Othello 1603

Shakespeare

OVERVIEW

Othello seems to have been modelled on *Un capitano moro (A Moorish captain)* written by Cinthio (a disciple of Boccaccio), and published in 1565. (Thus once again the fast driving Shakespeare, surging from one work into another, rapidly translates his on the run reading into a work fully his own.) The play embeds itself in the Turkish-Venetian wars, which revolved around trade and commercial power, and ventures deeply into issues of race and jealousy, since the blackness of Othello, who commands the Venetian army, marginalizes him in Venetian society, and makes him sitting duck for the hostility of his ensign, Iago. A play of bitter racial and sexual hostility unfolds from this matrix, yet thanks to Shakespeare's brilliance, we are at the same time given, as in *Romeo and Julie* or *The Merchant of Venice*, a good sense of the historical moment in which the play moves.

CHARACTERS

Othello. Othello is a general in the Venetian army, and commander of the naval force sent to confront the Turkish navy at Cyprus.

Brabantio. A Venetian senator, and father of Desdemona, the bride of Othello.

Cassio. Othello's lieutenant, and in the end a duped co-participant in the downfall of Othello.

Iago. The ensign of Othello, and the prime jealous mover in Othello's downfall. A force of incarnate evil.

Emilia. Wife of Iago, attendant to Desdemona, and in the end the one person who truly understood the innocence of Desdemona. An heroic figure.

Bianca. Mistress of Cassio.

Roderigo. A prominent Venetian aristocrat. A self-indulgent elitist, he is in love with Desdemona from the beginning, and is thus a sworn enemy of Othello.

STORY.

Start. The launching pad for this tragic tale is the recent marriage/elopement of Othello, the black Moorish commander of the Venetian navy, with Desdemona, the lovely young daughter of a Venetian senator. This historic event awakens anger in more than one Venetian. Iago, the ensign of Othello, hates the Moor. (We are never certain what triggers this hatred. It becomes increasingly clear that racial hate is central; but Iago also asserts that he was looked over for promotion by Othello.) This hatred will transfix the entire play, and lead ultimately to the death of Othello. But Brabantio, the father of Desdemona, is equally infuriated by the elopement of his daughter. Finally this band of angered power figures includes Roderigo, a dissolute Venetian nobleman, who has long proclaimed his love for Desdemona, and pursued his case.

Animus. With all this animus aroused, the case of Othello and Desdemona—did they legitimately marry, do they love each other?—is settled in the affirmative, in the presence of the Duke of Venice. At

this point news arrives that the Turkish fleet is sailing toward Cyprus, and Othello—with his wife and assorted retinue, Cassio and Iago among them—sets sail for his new and fatal assignment.

Jealousy. Upon arrival in Cyprus it turns out that a storm has destroyed the Turkish fleet; Othello proclaims a day of island-wide celebration, during which he hopes to spend quality time in bed with his new bride. His ensign, Iago, has other plans, which involve moving Othello to a mood of jealousy of Desdemona. Iago moves there by getting Cassio drunk, promoting a brawl around the general's headquarters; a scene which leads to Othello's abrupt firing of Cassio from his post. That is where Iago's plan kicks in. The general idea is to instill in Cassio, who is devastated by these developments, a strong desire to get back in Othello's good graces. This strong desire is to lead to developments which will bring on the downfall of Othello, and confirm the consummate skill of Iago, as a master of evil.

Handkerchief. The turning point, in Iago's quest to arouse jealousy in the Moor, emerges like this: Iago encourages Cassio to follow Emilia (Iago's wife) in an effort to intercede with Desdemona, who could be assumed to speak to her husband on Cassio's behalf. It is during the growing relation—innocent as a lamb, in fact—between Cassio and Desdemona, that Iago begins to insinuate to Othello that his wife is flirting with another man. The 'green eyed monster,' jealousy, begins to take shape in Othello's mind. The case of the handkerchief is decisive in this plotting. Othello gave Desdemona a lovely embroidered handkerchief, as a love gift early in their relation. Emilia, Iago's wife, has come upon this handkerchief and, not knowing what to do with it, passes it on to her husband. (Later, when Othello's jealousy has been whipped to a frenzy, Iago will have planted the handkerchief in Cassio's lodgings, evidence enough to convince Othello that his wife has given Cassio this precious gift.)

Dagger. Subplots unfold through which Shakespeare makes us see the volcanic jealousy that has overcome Othello. One event after another further inflames the normally placid and self-confident military leader. Despite the heroic efforts of Emilia, Iago's wife, to protect Desdemona and to talk sense into Othello, the inevitable happens. Unable to endure his jealousy pain further, Othello strangles his perfectly innocent wife, and then, brought back to his senses, and realizing what he has done, stabs himself to death.

THEMES

Jealousy. Jealousy is the green eyed monster that destroys Othello, who, we are led to think, is a man of naturally noble and generous character, a military type at its best. Iago is the evil genius who, actually for no reason that is given much importance in the play, decides to act on his native hatred of Othello. His actions, starting with his efforts to introduce Cassio into the Othello-Desdemona household, are directed at inspiring in Othello a sense that his wife has been fooling around with Cassio, and with other men. He succeeds, and in the end even Othello realizes that he has totally, and fatally, misjudged his wonderful wife.

Love. When we first meet them, Othello and Desdemona are 'in love.' They are newly wed, they are hot for one another, and their thoughts are on the bed. Neither of them, by their own natures, would have thought of changing the condition they find themselves in. Shall we say that Othello's love is naïve? That he doesn't know what love is? Othello is a passionate man, at last authorized by his white society to act himself. Which he does.

Racism. As a Moor Othello was a marginal figure in his society and yet he had been given a central position in Venice. Does Iago hate Othello because he is black—remember how the color black is mocked and reviled in *Titus Andronicus* (Aaron the Moor) and *The Merchant of Venice* (The Prince of Morocco)—or because he has passed over Iago for a job? From inside Othello we tend to imagine this, that this naturally endowed person, noble and strong, is hyper sensitive to the imputations and allegations that could be directed at him, simply because of his race. His sensitivity, to an intrusion onto the space he occupied with his wife, could be superhumanly intense.

Evil. Othello refers more than once to the allegation that he possesses the power of witchcraft, but he dismisses the claim as racist superstition. Pure evil, in this play, seems to define Iago, who appears to will

the downfall of Othello simply because he hates him. To update, one thinks of the case of the serial killer, who is fixated on one targetable victim, and will not rest until wreaking upon that individual the punishment he particularly wants to inflict.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS.

Iago.

Character Iago is an ensign to Othello, general in the military of Venice—the thriving commercial city-state of fifteenth century north Italy. Iago hates his boss, the general Othello, allegedly because he, Iago, was passed over for a job, but in fact, we come to realize, Iago truly *hates* Othello, in and for himself. (Perhaps Iago feels, toward his noble and macho commander, some of that andro-jealousy he wishes to inject into Othello himself. Who could be more gratuitously evil than Iago?)

Parallels The suitors of Penelope, in Homer's *Odyssey*, are evil. They live off another man's substance, besiege his wife, ignore his son, and treat themselves like little kings on Ithaca. They are not brooding-evil, like Iago, but happy go lucky evil. Estella, in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, is nasty evil, toward Pip; she expresses her fascination with him, by verbal bullying. There are a number of *big time* evil figures in great literature: Milton's Satan and Goethe's Mephistopheles (in *Faust*), figures who interact with big time evil, evil constituent to the creation itself. Scrooge, in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, is evil like Iago, a petit bourgeois clearly taking pleasure in other people's misery.

Illustrative moments

Resentful Iago opens the play with griping that he has not been given the military rank he deserves. At this point he is directing his ire at Cassio.

Scornful Iago is quick to call Othello 'an old black ram,' and to make clear his contempt of this commanding officer. Iago is capable of hatred for its own sake.

Nasty Iago urges Rodrigo to make a cuckold out of Othello, by screwing Othello's wife. This of course is the whole narrative in a nutshell, but one must not, in the course of the plot, lose track of the fact that Iago is simply nasty.

Scheming It is Iago who knows what use to make of the handkerchief of Desdemona. He uses the object ingeniously, to arouse in Othello the deep suspicion that his wife gave the handkerchief to Cassio.

Lying Iago never hesitates to lie, as he does to Othello's face, shamelessly and directly, telling him that many men have slept with Desdemona.

Othello

Character Othello is a noble hearted military man, skilled at what he does, sexually attractive and active, and not accustomed to much self-reflection, with the result that he can be out-wiled by a cunning foe like Iago, who has it in for him from the start. Even in his desperate act of murder we respect the human in Othello, for we know that he is the most deliberately doomed person in the play.

Parallels The ancients were familiar with jealousy. Think of Sappho's poem to her lover, whom she thinks of through the imagining of the person sitting over against that beauty, and conversing with her. Sappho is jealous of the person whose privileged position she would love to occupy. Or we may think of Dido, tortured by jealousy of Aeneas' destiny, the real force in his life, which is replacing her. In modern literature one can hardly find a finer dissection of jealousy than the many explorations of it by Proust's Swann, in *Swann's Way*. Anna Karenina is tortured by jealousy as she reflects, near the end of her life, on whether to reconcile herself with Vronsky.

Illustrative moments

Proud Othello acquits himself with pride before the Duke of Venice, as he explains the propriety of his marriage to Desdemona.

Travelled Othello makes clear, to the Venetian senate called to evaluate his marriage, that he is a man of the world, with much experience behind him. He has 'been around.'

Celebratory Upon learning that the Turkish fleet has perished at sea, Othello proclaims a general festivity on the island of Cyprus. He joins, but briefly, for he is hurrying to Desdemona.

Recriminatory Once suspicious of Desdemona, and especially after the handkerchief episode has exploded, Othello holds nothing back from his curses and recriminations against Desdemona.

Horrified After having realized what he has done, in killing his wife, Othello realizes that he no longer has a wife. He is horrified.

Discussion questions

What is Shakespeare's own attitude toward the scene, just before the murder of Desdemona, when Othello gives his wife time to clear her conscience and confess? Does Shakespeare seem to share Othello's sense, that final confession is essential? Or is Shakespeare simply filling his conclusion with the trappings of the time? Is Shakespeare a Christian?

Does Emilia rise at the end, from the role of lady attendant, to something more like a spokesperson for justice? Does she forcefully shape the attitude we have toward Othello at the end? What is that attitude: pity, compassion, revulsion? Are we elevated by the conclusion of the play to something like an Aristotelian awareness, of the grandeur of the human adventure?

Othello (1603) was composed a couple of years before *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, two of Shakespeare's most realized tragedies. *Hamlet* was composed shortly before *Othello*. Do you see any single preoccupation dominating these four plays? Is there anything in common to the destiny which topples the four men who serve as tragic heroes in these four plays?