

Getting a Handle on *Othello* as Tragedy

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To help you get handle on *Othello* I am going to offer you a particular reading of the play. You need to remember that:

- all readings are partial - they never fully explain a text; and they privilege certain aspects of the text over others
- there are always other possible readings
- readings are always influenced by the context of the reader
- no readings are innocent - they serve particular purposes.

The reading I am offering is that as modern readers we can best understand *Othello* if we see it as a play about the impact of social forces on individuals. These social forces are to do with cultural identity, racial ideology, gender construction and, to a less extent, class.

It is important to note that this reading is from the perspective of modern reader and is influenced by modern understandings of race, gender and class. Specifically, it is influenced by feminist and Marxist ideology.

Othello as Tragedy

Tragedy usually deals with the downfall of noble person. This downfall is often attributed to the character's hamartia (fatal flaw or error of judgement). The events of the tragedy normally have consequences beyond those of the individuals involved and are related to the order of society and the world in general. The downfall of the character usually offers us a tragic view of existence, usually a view which emphasises the weakness and insignificance of humans in the face of more powerful, usually supernatural, forces.

Critics have had trouble with *Othello* as a tragedy because it does not seem to conform to the last of these two conventions. The events of the play do not seem to affect anyone other than the participants. *Othello* does not seem to be the victim of more powerful supernatural forces as say *Oedipus* and *Macbeth* are. Because of this it has often been described as a domestic tragedy.

However, if we read *Othello* as a play about the impact of social forces, we can see these as the forces beyond the individual which bring about the tragedy. We can also see that the events of the play do have wider significance than their impact on the lives of individuals.

Traditional Liberal Humanist Readings

The absence of a sense of a larger supra-human world in *Othello* can be seen as reflecting the growing humanist outlook of Europe, humanism emphasising human's control of and responsibility for their own destiny.

Between the 18th and early 20th centuries *Othello* was mainly read from a liberal humanist perspective. Traditional liberal humanist readings emphasise that he is the victim of an individual's malevolence - Iago's - and his own personality, especially his gullibility and jealousy. Traditional liberal humanist readings largely ignored the impact of social forces on the individual. They saw the play as concerned simply with personalities.

Although you should also be aware that, since its first publication, there have been many readings of the play as a warning against miscegenation (sex between members of different races) or the problem of trying to fit into a society where you don't really belong.

Race in *Othello*

However, with our modern understandings of race we can argue that Othello is a victim of an ideology which constructs him as 'different' and in terms of particular racial stereotypes.

Othello can be seen as a victim of this ideology in two ways.

The first is that Iago's hatred of Othello can be seen as, in part, racially motivated. This is evident in his use of racially disparaging terms such as his descriptions of Othello in animal-like terms (which can also be read as fear of Othello's supposed racially characteristic sexual prowess) and his descriptions of Othello as gullible and 'easily led by the nose'.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Othello can be seen as a victim of racist ideology because he succumbs to and accepts the racist constructions of himself.

The title of the play can be seen as simply reproducing the ideology of racial difference by constructing Othello as 'other' and inviting the audience to see him in these terms. But it can also be profitably read as drawing attention to the fact, not that Othello is different, but that he is constructed as different by the society in which he lives.

The opening scenes, through the dialogue of Iago and Roderigo and then Brabantio, can be read as establishing Othello's status as an outsider in Venice. Iago's hatred of Othello as racially motivated is emphasised especially in his description of Othello as 'his Moorship' which implies that Iago sees Othello's high status as incompatible with his race. Iago's taunting of Brabantio in terms which emphasise the horror of miscegenation ('a black ram tugging a white ewe') and Brabantio's response further act to present Venice as a society in which racist ideologies hold sway over at least some members, and thus draw attention to Othello's outsider status, and the insecurity of his position.

The third scene to some extent counteracts the first two by presenting other characters, most notably the Duke, for whom Othello's race is by and large not an issue. And of course Desdemona who has married Othello, an act which also marks her as not sharing the racial ideologies of Iago, Roderigo and her father. In sum, the play does not present Venice as a society in which racist ideologies and discourses are naturalised. Rather, Venice is portrayed as a society in which there are competing ideas about race and its significance.

But it is also portrayed as a society where no-one seems to be totally unaware of Othello's difference and totally ignorant of racial discourses. This is evident in Desdemona's comment that 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind' and the Duke's comment to Brabantio that 'Your son-in-law is far more fair than black', both of which seem to indicate some participation in racist discourse. They further serve to emphasise Othello's 'difference' and therefore insecure status in Venetian society.

It is also important to note that the play does not endorse or naturalise the racial ideologies represented by Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio. Iago is clearly a villain and Roderigo a fool and a dupe. The construction of these characters can be read as an invitation to the audience to reject the ideologies which they represent and the discourses they articulate. Their views are further subverted by the appearance of Othello whose calm and dignified demeanour contradicts their construction of him.

Initially Othello appears confident on the surface and certain of his position in society. For instance, in response to Iago's relating of Brabantio's threats he states, 'My services which I have done the signiory

shall out-tongue his complaints'. But we can also read a certain insecurity into Othello's character, an insecurity deriving from his outsider status in Venetian society, which is partly connected with his race. In his speech to the council Othello claims, 'Rude am I in my speech' when his speech actually demonstrates the reverse, thus suggesting insecurity. Othello attributes his lack of rhetorical skills to his life as a soldier but it betrays an awareness of himself as culturally different and ill-at-ease in Venetian society. It is significant that later on, in the temptation scene, he attributes his supposed lack of grace in speech to his blackness.

The climax of the play is Act 3 scene 3, the temptation scene. Here, Othello's emotionalism and irrationality, might be read as Shakespeare succumbing to racial stereotyping and discourse, but it can also be read as the result of Othello's insecurity caused by the society's construction of him. We can read his breakdown as occurring, not because of an inherent weakness of personality, but because of what Venetian society has made him - it has deprived him of a stable cultural identity. This reading would have us interpret our earlier impressions of him as just a brave front. He can't fit, in not because he is different, but because his society constructs him as different.

Othello's rapid succumbing to Iago's suggestions seems surprising, but is explicable if we see Othello as an insecure outsider. Iago plays upon Othello's outsider status - 'I know our country well' - and Othello accepts Iago's supposed greater knowledge - 'Dost thou say so.' More importantly, and tragically, in this scene we can read Othello as accepting the racial ideologies espoused earlier in the play.

- He accepts without question the belief that miscegenation is unnatural: his comment 'and yet nature erring from itself' echoes Brabantio's earlier description of Desdemona's love for Othello as 'Against all rules of nature'
- He accepts the racist belief that blackness equates with unattractiveness 'Haply, for I am black and have not those soft parts of conversation ...'
- His dialogue participates in discourses which equate blackness with evil and ugliness: 'Her name that was as fresh as Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black as my own face'.

Thus the play can be read as portraying Othello as a victim of the developing racial ideology of early 17th century Europe.

This then is part of Othello's tragedy. Part of his hamartia is his acceptance of the ideology of race espoused by Iago and Brabantio. All else leads from this (and his succumbing to pernicious gender ideologies - see below) - his acceptance of the belief that a white woman could not truly love a black man, that blackness must equate with ugliness and lack of attractiveness. Part of the poison with which Iago infects Othello is the poison of racism. In Marx's term, Othello becomes a victim of false consciousness.

His final speech ('Say besides ... I took by the throat the circumcised dog') can be read as a final tragic cry for acceptance as an equal of other Christian Europeans, as a protest against his construction as different. It can also be read as an invitation by Shakespeare to reject the developing ideology of race in favour of an earlier ideology which emphasised the importance of conformity to the image of a Christian gentleman.

Gender in Othello

The other cause of Othello's downfall is his succumbing to the gender ideologies of his society. Just as certain racist ideologies are presented early in the play, so are certain ideologies concerning gender and especially femininity. Iago and Brabantio construct Desdemona and women in general as

naturally changeable and deceptive. They also construct women as property, the ownership of which reflects on a man's masculinity.

Iago, in particular, seems also to have a deep pathological fear or hatred of women's sexuality at the same time that he has a somewhat perverse voyeuristic, even pornographic, interest in it. This is evident in his frequent descriptions of the sexual act in crude terms such as 'topping'. In this respect Iago, Brabantio and a number of other characters (think of Cassio's treatment of Bianca) can be read as representing certain gender ideologies of the time, ideologies which some people might think haven't changed much since then.

Othello's downfall occurs because he subscribes to these ideologies. This is again evident in the temptation scene. But why does he subscribe so readily? Especially when the evidence is so flimsy, only Iago's words. Or to put the question another way, what can we read into the fact that he succumbs so readily to Iago's promptings?

There are a number of answers we can give. The first is that, as we have seen, his outsider status and his acceptance of this makes him vulnerable to suggestion. A second answer is that the play seems to be suggesting that it is natural for men to distrust women and to see women's infidelity as a threat to one's manhood - natural but not right.

Another answer is that Othello is presented as predisposed to accept Iago's word against Desdemona's because Iago is a man. This can be seen as privileging male comradeship above the relations between husband and wife. In other words we can see Othello's behaviour as offering a representation and a critique of certain patriarchal ideologies.

While the play seems to suggest that these ideologies are natural, it does not endorse these. We can read the play as offering a critique of these: first, because the portrayal of Desdemona as unswervingly faithful contradicts these ideologies in the eyes of the audience and, second, because it is Othello's subscription to these beliefs which leads to his downfall.

In reading the play as a critique of patriarchal ideology, the speech by Emilia plays an important role. Here, Shakespeare has a woman openly articulate criticism of patriarchal ideology. First, she satirises the patriarchal fear of being cuckolded. Secondly, she challenges the hypocrisy of patriarchal ideology which sets different standards of behaviour for men and women: 'have not we affections, desires for sport and frailty, as men have.' Her speech suggests that Othello is wrong not simply in that he is mistaken about Desdemona, but that his whole set of attitudes to women is wrong.

Shakespeare, ideology and language

While we can read Shakespeare as challenging certain ideologies we have to acknowledge that in writing the play he does not appear to entirely escape these ideologies himself. We have noted that both Desdemona and the Duke articulate comments that would today be seen as racist. We can see these as examples of ideology speaking through the text, of the fact that even a writer like Shakespeare cannot entirely escape the power of ideology to speak through him.

In this respect it is important to note that in the final speech Othello compares his earlier behaviour of that to the 'base Indian' and Desdemona to a 'pearl'. The first comparison shows that Othello's speech, while a plea not to be seen as different to Christian Europeans, still accepts the ideology of racial difference. The second comment can be read as a continuing acceptance of women as precious possessions.