

# Race and ethnicity in *Othello*

## Context: Shifting Paradigms

*Othello* was written at a particular moment in history when the European construction of the 'other' was moving from a medieval to a modern paradigm. This involved a shift from religion to race and colour as the key signifiers of difference. In other words, *Othello* was written at a time when modern racial ideology and racial prejudice as we know them were coming into being but were not yet fully formed. *Othello* can be read as both a representation and an exploration of this shift in ideology. Othello the character, and Shakespeare the writer, can be seen to be caught up in the shifting sands of this ideological movement.

## The Medieval Paradigm of Difference: Religion

The major signifier of difference for medieval Europeans was religion. Medieval Europe defined itself, and saw itself, as unified by its Christianity. In fact it was more common for the term Christendom to be used to describe what we now call Europe. Christendom often also included non-European places, such as the Middle East, at times, and Ethiopia.

The major threat to Christendom, or so Christians believed, was Islam. This was because Islam offered an alternative world view to Christianity, because of its religious doctrines and the sophistication of Islamic culture. Islam also offered a military threat, the Saracens having conquered the Holy Land, the Moors parts of southern Europe and later the Turks much of south-eastern Europe.

But it is important to note that European Christians' antipathy to Islamic people was constructed purely in religious terms. Arabs, Moors and other members of other groups were quite acceptable to Europeans if they were Christian or had renounced Islam and converted to Christianity; had adopted European culture and manners; and were loyal citizens. Military prowess was especially valued as the marker of a Christian gentleman.

## The Modern Paradigm of Difference: Race

Modern racial ideology was motivated by largely by European imperialism and colonialism. The need to conquer or exploit required an ideology which constructed conquered groups as different and thus justified their colonisation or exploitation.

Modern racial ideology constructed physical appearance as the major outward signifier of difference. Physical characteristics were seen as 'racial markers' – signs of a 'natural' difference in internal human characteristics.

While medieval Europeans were also aware of differences of physical appearance between ethnic groups, these were not seen as a sign of internal or natural difference.

## The representation of difference and race in *Othello*

### Act scene 1

1. The title of the play draws attention to Othello's ethnic status, thus constructing him as different or 'other' for the audience.
2. When we first encounter Othello in Iago's first speeches it is not in terms of race or ethnicity that he is constructed but in terms of class. Until line 35 Iago's dislike of Othello is related to his resentment at Othello's failure to promote him.
3. The first move into a racial discourse occurs in Iago's use of the term 'his Moorship', a term which implies that Othello's status is inappropriate to his ethnicity. What this does is imply a connection between ethnic status and appropriate social roles. From this point on Iago refers primarily to Othello as 'the Moor' continually drawing attention to his ethnic difference.
4. Roderigo picks up on and extends Iago's racist discourse in his description of Othello as 'the thick-lips'. This is an extension of Iago's discourse because it emphasises Othello's physical markers as a sign of his difference, not simply his ethnic origins.
5. When Iago taunts Brabantio he extends the racial discourse even further in his references to Othello as a 'black ram' and a 'barbary horse', terms which construct Othello in animal-like terms, part of the developing stereotype of 'coloured people' as inferior and less human, and also part of the developing stereotype of them as sexually unrestrained. The same stereotype in Roderigo's reference to the 'lascivious Moor'. Note that this stereotype reveals a contradiction within the developing racial ideology – a belief in their inferiority is coupled with a fear of their supposed sexual virility.
6. In his reference to 'charms by which the property of youth and maidhood' may be abused, Brabantio's response displays another aspect of the developing stereotype of 'coloured' people – a belief in their association with magic and by implication their association with evil and unChristian practices. Brabantio's immediate reliance on this as an explanation reflects a belief that the difference between 'white' and 'coloured' people is so fundamental that attraction between people of different races is 'unnatural' – against the law of nature – and can thus only be explained in terms of magic.

At this stage then Shakespeare has provided the audience, through Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio, with a representation of the developing ideology of race, the new paradigm of difference within European society, a paradigm based on physical appearance and race, associated with a belief in the fundamental difference of 'coloured' people.

### Scene 2

The first part of scene 2 challenges the paradigm of difference presented in the previous scene.

1. Othello is presented as conforming to all the characteristics of a noble Christian gentleman as Shakespeare's audience would have understood the term. He is dignified, restrained and can produce moving and poetic oratory. At this stage of the play he is constructed by the play, in contrast to Iago's emphasis on his difference, as *not* different.
2. Further, Othello's comments 'My service which I have done the signiory shall out-tongue his complaints' and 'I fetch my life and being from men of royal seige, and my demerits may speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune as this that I have reached' offer an alternative ideology to that presented by Iago. Othello's comments reflect a belief that service to the state, breeding and conduct should outweigh physical appearance and race as signs of difference. This belongs to the older medieval paradigm, but Othello's use of the term 'out-tongue' suggests an awareness of a conflict between this way of thinking and the newly developing discourse of race.
3. The appearance of Cassio with the demand from the Duke for Othello's attendance further challenges the construction of Othello in scene 1, as it indicates that for the Duke and the Council, Othello is seen, not as someone different because of his ethnicity or race, but as a valued servant of the state.

The confrontation between Brabantio and Othello at the end of scene 2 offers a dramatic representation of the conflict between the two ideologies: Brabantio's racial ideology and Othello's dependence on the older paradigm which does not view race as important.

1. Brabantio, in the phrase 'sooty bosom' speaks of Othello in terms of physical markers of race, and again draws on stereotypes which associate 'coloured' people with magic. There is again a strong emphasis in Brabantio's speech on Othello as unChristian: he describes him as a 'practicer of arts inhibited' and a 'pagan'. Brabantio's belief in the naturalness of his ideology is so strong that he automatically assumes that it is shared by the Duke and Council.
2. It is significant that Othello's response to Brabantio's attack is significant. He is dignified and respectful as befitting a noble gentleman as Shakespeare's audience would understand the term: 'Good signior, you shall command more with years than with your weapons.' Further, Othello is able to use his status as a valued citizen of the state to resolve the confrontation.

### Scene 3

In many ways this scene offers a resolution, but a false resolution as the rest of the play shows, to the conflict between the two paradigms of difference in conflict in the first two scenes.

1. The Duke's first words to Othello, 'we must straight employ you against the general enemy Ottoman', are significant in two ways. First they invoke and reassert the older medieval paradigm of difference by emphasising the Ottomans, representatives of Islam, as the 'general' enemy of Europeans and Christians.
2. When Brabantio states that Desdemona has been 'corrupted by spells', the Duke does not automatically assume that Othello is responsible. In other words, the Duke does not automatically invoke a racial stereotype. He sees Othello's qualities as a man and a citizen, not his colour. The Duke's reaction shows that in the case of Brabantio Othello's colour blinds him to the reality of the person – a reality already seen by the audience.
3. It is significant that the Duke refers to Othello by name, whereas Iago and Brabantio and later Emilia normally refer to him as 'the Moor'.
4. Brabantio once again invokes the myth of 'nature', the belief that it is unnatural for members of different racial groups to be attracted. He also invokes the racial ideology which equates physical difference with ugliness, not understanding how Desdemona could fall in love with 'what she feared to look on.'
5. The Duke's reaction to this is significant as it criticises 'these thin habits and poor likelihoods of modern seeming' which 'prefer' against Othello – a clear criticism of the developing modern racial ideologies and prejudices.
6. Othello's explanation of his courtship is a rejection of the stereotype of black magic and a rejection of the idea that it must be unnatural for members of different racial groups to be attracted. It emphasises the adventure and excitement of his deeds – his qualities as a person. It also, it should be noted, emphasises his conversion to Christianity – his 'redemption'.
7. The Duke's response – 'I think this tale would win my daughter too' - indicates an acceptance of Othello's presentation of himself and a rejection of Brabantio's prejudices.

In his construction of this speech and of the Duke's response, the play seems to be positioning the audience at this point to reject the developing racial ideology which Brabantio exhibits.

But the scene ends with a reassertion of the racial ideology by Iago with his assertions that 'these Moors are changeable in their wills' and 'the Moor is of a free and open nature ... and will as tenderly be led by the nose as asses are' which constructs Othello as both fickle and naively simple in nature – in other words, childlike. Early in Act 2 Iago reasserts Brabantio's belief that miscegenation is unnatural when he says to Roderigo that Desdemona is certain to be unfaithful 'what delight will she have to look on the devil ... very nature will instruct her ... and compel her to some second choice.' Note that later Iago in his soliloquy states that he does not necessarily believe this to be true of Desdemona. What matters to Iago is that the idea is credible. What the play

can be read as doing here is showing the power of the developing racial ideology to shape people's thoughts, in this case Roderigo.

In Act 2 scene 3 Othello once again asserts his membership of the Christian community and invokes the medieval ideology of difference: 'Are we turned Turks... For Christian shame'.

### Act 3 scene 3

In terms of the text's representation of race the next key scene is in the temptation scene. Here Iago uses a number of techniques to persuade Othello of Desdemona's infidelity. For example, he plays on his supposedly greater knowledge of Venetian women and Othello's status as an outsider a discursive positioning which Othello accepts.

1. In terms of race what is significant is that he also uses Othello's apparent willingness to accept certain aspects of the new racial ideology. Othello's comment about Desdemona 'And yet nature erring from itself' suggests that he is susceptible to the belief articulated earlier by Brabantio and Iago that miscegenation is against the laws of nature. Not surprisingly Iago seizes on this comment and extends it: 'Not to affect many matches of her own clime, complexion, and degree, Whereto we see in all things nature tends..'.  
2. Othello's further acceptance of the racial ideology is indicated in his comment: 'Haply for I am black. And have not those soft parts of conversation'. For the first time, Othello talks of himself as different in racial terms. Contrast this with his behaviour in Act 1 where his actions challenged and refuted the racial ideology. Note also Othello's comment 'Her name that was fresh as Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black As mine own face' – here Othello is commenting on his own blackness in negative terms.
3. When he vows revenge 'Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell' we see a rejection of Christianity and an association of blackness with evil.

Othello's downfall proceeds from this point. Thus his downfall can be read as a result of his infection by the newly developing ideology of race and the stereotypes accompanying it.

### The final scene

Othello's final speech:

'... say that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and a turbanned Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog,  
And smote him ...'

with its emphasis on his service to the state and his membership of the Christian community and its emphasis on the Turks as the 'other' can be read as an attempt by Othello, and perhaps Shakespeare, to have Othello finally viewed within that older paradigm of difference, one in which the important difference is religious affiliation, rather than race.

Thus Othello can be read as a challenge to the newly developing discourse of race, and a plea for the reassertion of the older medieval paradigm of difference.

### References

Griffiths, Gareth and Saunders, Ian (1997). *Writing the Politics of Difference: Race/Ethnicity and Class in Literary Representation*. Nedlands, Western Australia: Department of English, The University of Western Australia.

## AND YET

1. The construction of Othello's speech in 1,3 reveals an ethnic stereotype at work of a different sort. Othello's speech constructs him as different in another way, as an exotic and romantic figure. Admittedly this is a positive stereotype, not one based on physical appearance.
2. In Desdemona's speeches she refers to him (like Iago and Brabantio) as 'the Moor', signifying his difference in ethnic terms.
3. She also says 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind' which seems to reveal an acceptance of one feature of the developing racial ideology - the equating of racial difference with ugliness - but disputing that this signifies a fundamental internal difference between the races by asserting the worth of Othello's character.
4. The Duke's comment, 'Your son-in-law is more fair than black' indicates a similar position – a recognition of physical markers of race but a disputing of their significance in terms of personal characteristics.
5. The portrayal of Othello in the second half with its emphasis on his uncontrolled emotionalism and passion, seems to be reflect the developing stereotypes.
6. Othello's comparison towards the end of himself to 'a base Indian' who 'threw a pearl away, Richer than all his tribe' marks him as still infected by the newly developing racial ideology.

In conclusion then we can argue that in writing the play Shakespeare could not entirely escape being influenced by this ideology, and that the play, while seeming to challenge the new ideology, unintentionally reveals its power, and as a consequence the plight of people caught up in the shifts of ideology.