

Introduction to Othello

Dr. Alan Haffa

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.

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

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

Who Should Play Othello?

- ▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsUoW9eNTAw>
- ▶ The role was written for Richard Burbage. Thus, it started tradition of white actors playing the role in blackface
- ▶ 1833, when Edmund Kean fell ill, Ira Aldridge was first black actor to play the role in a legitimate London theatre.
- ▶ 1943, Paul Robeson gave first American performance by a Black man on Broadway
- ▶ Controversy over mixed race romance on stage, yet the show had 296 performances and was a commercial success
- ▶ Laurence Olivier played Othello in 1965 and white actors continued post-Robeson
- ▶ James Earl Jones performed on Broadway in 1982—one of the most memorable
- ▶ First Black Othello on film, 1995, Laurence Fishburne

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 courses 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!**

More Witchcraft Implied by Brabantio I.3.71ff

- ▶ She is so abused, stol'n from me,
and corrupted by spells and
medicines bought of montebanks;
being not deficient, blind or lame of
sense—sans witchcraft could not

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.”

Desdemona's Testimony I.3.208ff (compare to Cordelia in King Lear)

- ▶ My noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty. To you I am bound for life and education. My life and education do both learn me how to respect you. You are the lord of duty. I am hither to your daughter. But here's my husband. And so much duty as my mother showed to you, preferring you before her father, so much I challenge that I may profess due to the Moor my lord.”
- ▶ B: God be with you! I have done.

Proper Role of Woman in Society and Family? I.3.269ff

- ▶ Desdemona's request to go to war with Othello, like Regan and Goneril usurping male power to rule the kingdom or Lady Macbeth being more masculine than her husband, creates discord.
- ▶ Where is she to be while Othello makes war with the Turks?
- ▶ Duke: What would you, Desdemona?
- ▶ Desdemona: That I love the Moor, to live with him my downright violence and storm of fortunes may trumpet to the world. **My heart's subdued even to the very quality of my lord.** I saw Othello's visage in his mind, and to his honors 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 and I a heavy interim shall support by his dear absence. Let me go with him.

Theme of False Appearances

- ▶ Introduced by Iago: 1.3.426ff “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.”

Act II.3280ff: Cassio Loses His Honor for Drunken Brawl

- ▶ Cassio: Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, Iago, my reputation!
- ▶ Iago: As I am an honest man, I thought you had received some bodily wound. There is more sense in that than in reputation. Reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving. You have lost no reputation at all, unless you repute yourself such a loser...”
- ▶ Iago suggests that he ask Desdemona to be his advocate—thus setting up Othello to suspect some liaison.

How does Iago cause Othello to suspect Cassio? Act III.3

- ▶ He insinuates by playing on the word 'honest'
- ▶ He makes Othello demand an explanation so it seems as if he doesn't want to tell him anything
- ▶ Iago: "Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, is the immediate jewel of their souls. Who steals my purse steals trash. 'Tis something, nothing; 'twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands. But he that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him and makes me poor indeed.
- ▶ I speak not yet of proof. Look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio; wear your eyes thus, not jealous nor secure...I know our country disposition well. In Venice they do let God see the pranks they dare not show their husbands.
- ▶ O: Dost thou say so?
- ▶ I: She did deceive her father, marrying you, and when she seemed to shake and fear your looks, she loved them most.

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.
- ▶ D: Is 't possible?
- ▶ O: 'Tis true. There's magic in the web of it. A sybil...in her prophetic fury sewed the work. The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk, and it was dyed in mummy, which the skillful conserved of maidens' hearts."

Iago's Plot and Murder to Cover Up. V.1.12ff

- ▶ He tricks Roderigo into attacking Cassio
- ▶ I have rubbed this young quat almost to the sense, and he grows angry. Now, whether he kill Cassio, or Cassio him, or each do kill the other, every way makes my gain. Live Roderigo, he calls me to a restitution large of gold and jewels that I bobbed from him as gifts to Desdemona. It must not be. If Cassio do remain, he hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly. And besides, the Moor may unfold me to him. There stand I in much peril. No, he must die. Be 't so.”
- ▶ Roderigo stabs Cassio; Cassio stabs Roderigo; Iago stabs Cassio in the leg
- ▶ Later Iago will finish off Roderigo
- ▶ He accuses Bianca of plotting the attack on Cassio

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 the 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."

Recognition for Emilia

V.2160ff

- ▶ O: She turned to folly, and she was a whore.
- ▶ E: Thou dost belie her, and thou art a devil!
- ▶ O: She was false as water.
- ▶ E: thou art rash as fire to say that she was false.
- ▶ O: Cassio did top her. Ask thy husband else...
- ▶ E: My husband?...
- ▶ O: He, woman. I say thy husband. Dost understand the word? My friend, thy husband; honest, honest Iago.
- ▶ E: If he say so, may his pernicious soul rot half a grain a day! He lies to th' heart!

Recognition for Othello

V.2.235ff

- ▶ Othello reveals his 'evidence' was the handkerchief
- ▶ Emilia finally recognizes her part in the tragedy and tells how she found the handkerchief
- ▶ Othello attacks Iago but not before Iago kills Emilia and escapes
- ▶ Finally letters to Roderigo and Cassio's testimony about how he found the handkerchief prove Iago's fault

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.

Questions for Discussion

- ▶ 1) How does Othello's final speech and suicide affect our assessment of his character? (V.2.396ff)
- ▶ 2) Why does Shakespeare include the Courtesan, Bianca? All three women characters are accused of sexual impropriety—what is the play saying about sex and gender? Is it challenging or reinforcing misogyny?
- ▶ 3) What is the play saying about race? Is it challenging racist stereotypes or reinforcing them?
- ▶ 4) What does this play say about human nature? What lessons do you draw and why?

Director and Actors

- ▶ Bill Rauch is directing: his last year as Executive Director at OSF
- ▶ Contemporary setting in the United States; US navy is military context and Othello is an immigrant from N. Africa living in US
- ▶ Chris Butler as Othello; 2 seasons at OSF; Extensive work in film and television (*Rescue Dawn*, *True Blood*, *Designated Survivor*, *Scandal*, among others).
- ▶ Danforth Comins as Iago; Hamlet; Brutus; Stanley Kowalski

Director's Take

- ▶ <https://www.osfashland.org/productions/2018-plays/othello.aspx#lightbox>
- ▶ Xenophobia theme is current today—
theme of Difference
- ▶ Distilled cast to minimum number of
actors—12 in this case—to focus on
character interaction
- ▶ 8 actors who are people of color to add to
racial complexity
- ▶ Explains why he chose the modern setting

Review:

<http://www.siskiyoudaily.com/news/20180309/othello-shines-in-haunting-production-at-oregon-shakespeare-festival>

- ▶ “Haunting production”
- ▶ “What this rendering of “Othello” does so well is to show what a good, honorable man Othello (Chris Butler) is, as the play begins, and how joyfully in love he is with Desdemona (Alejandra Escalante).”
- ▶ Butler is stunning as “Othello” and brings an intelligence, charisma and confidence perfect for this part. We truly understand why those around him admire him so much, and why someone like Iago would despise him. Butler does excellent work here, with his scenes with Escalante as Desdemona so beautifully layered, and ultimately, beyond tragic, as we see two people truly in love destroyed by lies.
- ▶ Escalante is heartbreakingly superb as Desdemona. She brings a wonderful intelligence to the part, as we see this character grapple with the fact that her love believes her to be false and unfaithful. What this character has to endure is almost unbearable and sad to watch, but to the credit of Escalante, we can’t look away because we care about Desdemona, as we wait with dreaded certainty for what we know must happen on stage.

Second Review:

<http://mailtribune.com/tempo/modern-touches-distract-from-power-of-othello->

- ▶ The male characters in this OSF production have few honorable scenes. Six packs of beer fuel drunken brawls and "booyas," and Shakespeare's lusty witticisms have a different feel in the context of these players' very contemporary contempt for women.
- ▶ In contrast, "Othello's" female leads are powerfully played as honest and true, giving weight to honor and loyalty as dominant themes in this production.
- ▶ Alejandra Escalante is brilliant as Desdemona...Desdemona's beauty, poise and loyalty to her husband are without fault.
- ▶ The set is spare and clean. There are few props, and with the small cast, the performance is an intimate expression on the expanse of the Angus Bowmer Theatre's stage.