

“Haply for I am Black”:

The Issue of Race in Othello

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In his production of *Othello* for BBC television (1981), Jonathan Miller asserted that Othello’s race does not greatly impact his downfall in the play. He maintains that while Shakespeare touches upon the issue of race, the cause of Othello’s demise lies elsewhere.¹ However, the implications of race in the play directly lead to its tragic ending; it is this issue that impels the characters to set the tragedy in motion. Brabantio would never revolt against the union of Othello and Desdemona if it were not for Othello’s blackness. Roderigo could never be motivated to pursue Desdemona were it not for his belief that their relationship is unnatural. By far the most significant racism is Othello’s own, racism that Iago brings to the surface by playing upon Othello’s racial insecurities. Finally, it is racism that serves as Iago’s primary cause in his destruction of Othello.

Brabantio is very selective about suitors for Desdemona, as is evident from his vocal condemnation of Roderigo. After learning it is Roderigo lurking about his window, Brabantio tells him, “The worser welcome! / ... In honest plainness thou hast heard me say / My daughter is not for thee” (1.1.92-95).² Although Roderigo is a wealthy native Venetian, in Brabantio’s eyes he is not worthy of Desdemona. Despite these strict standards, it would seem that Othello could win Brabantio’s approval; he holds a lucrative and prestigious position as the general of the army, he is born of a noble

background, and he has the respect of the State. In addition, Brabantio has an affinity for Othello; as he explains, “[he] loved [Othello]; oft invited [him]; / Still questioned [him] the story of [his] life” (1.3.128-29). There is no reason for Brabantio to disapprove of Desdemona’s union with Othello—apart from his race.

Yet Brabantio begins to take Roderigo seriously only when he informs him, in racist fashion, that Desdemona has fallen “To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor” (1.1.123). It is this thought that drives Brabantio to wake his household in search of his daughter. Even though his daughter’s husband is Othello, a man whose company Brabantio has enjoyed, he still finds the thought of his daughter eloping with a black man extremely repulsive. He believes that if Desdemona really loves Othello it shows “a judgment maimed and most imperfect / That will confess perfection so could err / Against all rules of nature, and must be driven / To find out practices of cunning hell / Why this should be” (1.3.99-103). Brabantio can not fathom how Desdemona, “a maid so tender, fair, and happy,” could run “to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as [Othello]” (1.2.65, 69-70). According to Brabantio, their union is so preposterous and “against all rules of nature” that the only logical explanation is that there is magic involved.

Despite strong evidence of his hostile attitude towards Othello, we must question whether Brabantio’s racism does in fact add to the tragic outcome of the play. His impact as a character is relatively minor when compared to that of others, and his uprising against the marriage does not seem to impinge on Desdemona and Othello’s relationship. Nevertheless, while Brabantio’s revolt does not affect the strength of their love, it does serve as a precursor to the upcoming events. As Iago prophesies, “It was a violent commencement in [Desdemona] and thou shalt see an answerable sequestration”

(1.3.340-42). The tumultuous beginning of Othello and Desdemona's relationship, sparked by Brabantio's resistance, foreshadows the future of the relationship as well as the ultimate tragedy.

While Brabantio sets the ominous tone of the relationship, Roderigo's actions indirectly help to devastate Othello's and Desdemona's marriage. Though Roderigo lacks confidence and determination in his quest to charm Desdemona away from Othello, Iago, like an angel to a doubting saint, is there to restore his faith. In Act 1, Scene 3, Roderigo's bathetic hopelessness even brings him to the verge of suicide, but Iago gives him many reasons why Desdemona will not remain true to Othello: that Desdemona "must change for youth," that "she first loved the Moor but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies," and that Desdemona needs "sympathy in years" (1.3.346, 2.1.221-22, 228). While Iago offers these reasons that Roderigo should be steadfast in his pursuit, the underlying theme of Iago's argument, and the ultimate motivating factor for Roderigo, is the idea that the relationship between Desdemona and Othello is unnatural because of Othello's race.

Iago reassures Roderigo that Othello and Desdemona's marriage is nothing more than a "frail vow betwixt an erring barbarian and a supersubtle Venetian" and that Desdemona "will find the errors of her choice" (1.3.351-52, 347-48). Implicit in this remark is the notion that Othello is a barbarous subhuman creature, and it is this idea that strikes a chord with Roderigo. Perceiving that Roderigo takes to this argument, Iago continues along the same lines in future conversation when he says, "what delight shall [Desdemona] have to look on the devil? ... Very nature will instruct her in it and compel her to some second choice... If she had been blessed, she would never have loved the

Moor” (2.1.224-25, 252-53). According to this argument it is highly unnatural for Desdemona to be united with a “devil,” or Moor; for nature itself must correct this mistake. To say that if Desdemona were truly “blessed” she would never have loved Othello implies that it is sacrilege for Desdemona, a Venetian, to love Othello, a Moor. In light of this argument, Roderigo receives the motivation to continue in his quest for Desdemona. Granted, Roderigo’s underlying reason for aiding Iago in his pursuit to destroy Othello is his obsession for Desdemona. However his motivating hope is based upon racial presuppositions—namely that it is aberrant for a Venetian woman to be in love with a Moor.

In the play racial prejudice is not confined only to those surrounding “the Moor,” for even Othello internalizes the predominant racial stereotypes of the time. After succumbing to this bigotry, Othello’s character undergoes a dramatic change, resulting in a destructive sequence of events. Only when Othello begins to fear that his position as a black male is cause enough for Desdemona to abandon her love for him does the tragedy become inexorable.

While many stereotypes of the black man exist in Othello’s society, the main prejudices held against “the Moor” are that he is devoid of basic intelligence, involved in superstition and magic, oversexed, and barbaric. In the beginning of the play, when we encounter a relatively calm Othello, confident in himself, he does not fit any of these stereotypes. Contrary to prejudice, Othello displays a wealth of intelligence. His success as a general attests to this. To succeed as a general, a man must possess great analytical skills; he must be able to assess the details of a situation and quickly make a decision. Apart from this, the position of a general requires that he have the social skills and

sagacity to maintain ordered structure within the army. When Othello takes away Cassio's lieutenancy after Cassio's fighting while on duty, Othello displays his ability to maintain order. Contrary to the stereotype, the "erring barbarian" succeeds in all the aspects of his occupation, demonstrating his intelligence.

Although Brabantio repeatedly accuses Othello of using magic in his seduction of Desdemona, Othello clearly demonstrates that he is a religious man. Later, in response to the fight between Cassio and Montano, Othello asks, "Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that / Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites? / For Christian shame put by this barbarous brawl!" (2.3.169-71). Along with his country, Othello feels graced by God in their victory over the Turks; he is repulsed by Venetians who would fight amongst themselves when, by drowning the fleet, God has forbidden the Turks to attack Venetians. The passionate disgust Othello displays upon seeing this melee clearly demonstrates his Christian faith.

Rather than embodying the stereotype of the "lusty Moor" (2.1.295), Othello is not preoccupied with sex. He desires Desdemona's company "not / To please the palate of [his] appetite, / Nor to comply with heat" (1.3.256-58). Admittedly, these are only his words, and a case could be made arguing that he would never admit to being oversexed in front of the Senate and his wife's father; however, there is much textual support for trusting Othello's claim. In Cyprus, he tells Desdemona, "The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue, / That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you" (2.3.42). Evidently, they have not yet consummated their marriage because Othello has remained focused on the war at hand instead of being preoccupied with his new wife. Up to a certain point in the

play, we have no reason to doubt that Othello is a complete gentleman rather than a “lustly Moor.”

We also see Othello act with civility and dignity that are not expected from an “erring barbarian.” After Brabantio accuses Othello of using magic on Desdemona, Othello ignores these racist attacks, remains calm, and suggests they talk about the matter rather than resorting to violence (1.2). Othello disarms Brabantio and his men with the eloquence of his tongue, and then continues to win the approval of the senate with his speech. The Duke is so impressed by Othello’s presentation that he says to Brabantio, “If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (1.3.284-85). Regardless of the racism present in the comment, the Duke acknowledges that Othello possesses some of the qualities of a civilized man.

For a time, all that makes Othello “the Moor” is the color of his skin; apart from that he demonstrates the qualities of a noble Venetian. It is actually quite remarkable how much Othello, a foreigner, has integrated himself into Venetian society; he is of the utmost importance to the well-being of the state and he holds the respect of the Senate. In addition to his political career, his private life is joined with Venetian society when he marries Desdemona. No longer an outsider, Othello has become everything that “the Moor” cannot be, appearing “far more fair than black” (1.3.285). Yet in the midst of racism, this cannot endure. Something happens that puts Othello in his place as “the Moor.”

Othello’s situation with Desdemona is new to him; he is no longer the wandering soldier fighting for his life but a human being, accepted and treated as one by Desdemona. When Brabantio suggests that Desdemona may prove unfaithful, Othello can

only respond, “My life upon her faith!” (1.3.289); he has complete faith in Desdemona’s love for him. When Iago begins to suggest that there is *reason* to doubt Desdemona’s love, Othello says to him, “Exchange me for a goat / When I shall turn the business of my soul / To such exsufflicate and blown surmises, / Matching thy inference” (3.3.180-83). Yet this quickly changes when Othello begins to doubt his faith in their love and subject their relationship to reason.

What leads Othello, who demonstrates such strong faith, to scrutinize his love intellectually is no more than that which motivates Brabantio and Roderigo to question the relationship—Othello’s race. While Othello is confident in his love with Desdemona, he has an underlying insecurity about his race and position as an outsider in Venice. Iago plays upon this when he claims to “know our country disposition well: / In Venice [wives] do let heaven see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands” (3.3.201-03). Othello would not give Iago’s suggestion a second thought unless he was, consciously or subconsciously, insecure about the position that “the Moor” must inherently possess as an outsider (according to commonly held opinions at the time). Iago perceives this lack of confidence in Othello and intellectually traps him, so that Othello is forced to act from the mindset of an ostracized Moor. That is to say, Iago causes Othello to doubt his position as an integrated Venetian and accept his “natural” role as a Moor. As the outsider, Othello can no longer rely upon his faith to validate Desdemona’s love; he does what anyone separate from social experience must do—he intellectualizes his situation and now merely does “not *think* but Desdemona’s honest” (3.3.225; italics mine). But belief based on logic is never enough to secure one’s faith inexorably, for doubt, circumstantial evidence, or sly logic can always alter a belief. Iago understands this and

preys upon Othello's racial insecurities by feeding him an argument based on shaky logic that solidifies Othello's worst fear—that Desdemona could not be true to Othello because of their racial differences.

After Othello begins to accept the idea that he is an outsider, he still “thinks” Desdemona is honest, but he starts to question Desdemona's love: “And yet, how nature erring from itself—” (3.3.227). Iago assumes the question pertains to the racial implications of their relationship and finishes Othello's thought for him, adding additional (and convincing) reasons as to why Desdemona “naturally” should abandon Othello:

Ay, there's the point...

Not to affect many proposed matches

Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,

Whereto we see in all things nature tends...

One may smell in such a will most rank,

Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural... (3.3.228-233).

Othello then bids Iago “farewell, farewell,” but it is really Othello whom we no longer see. From this point on, Othello disappears from the play and we are left with “The Moor of Venice.” We might as well “exchange [Othello] for a goat,” because he has given his soul, the eternal aspect of his being, to the thought of racial inferiority and jealousy. Othello feels that his “name” is now begrimed and black / As [his] own face” (3.3.383-85). In other words, Othello no longer maintains the purity of his inner character; he has been reduced to the stereotyped blackness of his physical appearance. All the stereotypes of the Moor that have been absent from Othello now control his every

thought and action. Turning extremely irrational and naïve, he buys into Iago's circumstantial evidence of Cassio's dream (3.3). His thoughts cease to be logical, merely becoming a chain of free associations: "Noses, ears, and lips? Is't possible?—Confess?—Hand-kerchief?—O devil!" (4.1.43-45). His Christianity gone, he commits himself to shadows by proclaiming, "Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell! / Yield up, O Love, thy crown and hearted throne / To tyrannous hate!" (3.3.444-446). While Othello does not become oversexed himself, he becomes preoccupied with sexuality, constantly brooding over Desdemona's sexual activity. He now also embodies the uncultured barbaric stereotype of the Moor; he speaks irrationally and strikes his wife.

Ideas about race motivate Brabantio, Roderigo, and Othello, and it is Iago who manipulates their active and latent racial prejudices and insecurities. It is no coincidence that Iago manipulates racial issues to feed the tragedy, for he too is motivated by racism. Granted, Iago has strong feelings of personal inadequacy and is envious of the love shared between the Moor and Desdemona. But surely Othello is not the only happily married man in Venice. Why, then, does Iago seek to destroy Othello? It might be argued that it is because Othello passed him up for the lieutenantcy, but becoming lieutenant is not Iago's ultimate aim; once he gains the position, he still seeks the complete destruction of Othello. Besides, Iago's "cause is hearted," and runs deeper than professional jealousy (1.3.362). Iago feels deeply compelled to destroy Othello's happiness because, in Iago's eyes, Othello is "the Moor" and should therefore embody the societal position of "the Moor." For Iago, the status of "the Moor" is not one of respect, dignity, and prosperity; it is one of separateness, inferiority, and lack. When he says that "nothing can or shall content [his] soul / Till [he] is evened with [the Moor], wife for wife" (2.1.298-99), we

can not take him literally, because Iago makes no attempt to court Desdemona. Rather, Iago's words are no more than one of his mysterious puns, since "wife for wife," can be taken to mean "life for life." Iago will not be satisfied until Othello's life is made equal to Iago's, which consists of feelings of inadequacy and jealousy—all qualities belonging to "the Moor."

In his quest to destroy Othello, Iago constantly uses racist language to precipitate the racism of others. Nonetheless, some of Iago's language demonstrates his own "hearted" racism. In his first soliloquy, instead of referring to Othello by his name, Iago says, "I hate the Moor" (1.3.377). Admittedly many characters, including Desdemona, refer to Othello as a "Moor"; however, Iago refers to Othello only once by his name, and even then he disparagingly speaks of the "black Othello" (2.3.30). For Iago, Othello cannot be separated from his blackness. He despises Othello because he is "the Moor" and does not embody the traditional role of the black man. There is no logic behind this argument, but racism is inherently irrational, and Iago is the embodiment of racism in the play. Despite being mysterious and illogical, racism gives its proponents a justification to act upon their jealousy, hatred, and insecurity, just as Iago gives Brabantio and Roderigo a cause to act on their hatred and Othello a reason to act on his insecurity. Iago acts as racism works in society, for his hatred runs deep yet lacks a rational grounding. However, Iago and other racists would never admit this, as they are not able to identify the root of their hatred. They can only come up with petty excuses, as Iago does when he imagines that "twixt my sheets [the Moor] / Has done my office," even though he "know[s] not if't be true" (1.3.378-379). Iago convinces himself that he is attracted to Desdemona not

because he truly is, but to “diet [his] revenge” (2.1.294). Any excuse is good enough for Iago as long as it serves to motivate his hatred for “the Moor.”

While feelings of inadequacy, hubris, and distrust all arguably serve as catalysts to the tragedy, the play is black and white in the sense that the igniting flame of Othello’s demise is the issue of race. The fact that Othello’s skin color is highly relevant in the play changes our view of the tragedy. Racism, as portrayed in *Othello*, is not merely a case of prejudices being held by one group of people against another, but has much more subtle and devastating implications: namely, that it is propagated not only by the discriminatory section of society, but by the target of this discrimination as well. We see Othello internalize the same stereotypes with which his contemporaries label him. Yet Othello does not demonstrate any of these qualities—until he begins to doubt himself and welcome the possibility of his inferiority, that is. By entertaining the idea of his racially subordinate status, Othello then reacts to this possibility and fights it. Through resisting the stereotypes, as opposed to acknowledging and accepting that they exist, Othello increases his internal conflict. Had he the necessary strength and faith in himself, the conflict could not have arisen; for when there is no resistance, the struggle ceases. Rather than label *Othello* as a racist or anti-racist play, it is more significant to see how, from a racial standpoint, the tragedy demonstrates the explosive effects that racial dissonance can produce when combined with other personal insecurities.

Notes

1. Jonathan Miller, television interview, BBC, 1981. Quoted by Sylvan Barnet, “*Othello* on Stage and Screen,” in Alvin Kernan, ed., *Othello*, Signet Classic Edition (New York:

Penguin, 1998): 230.

2. All references to *Othello* are from the Signet Classic Edition (New York: Penguin, 1998).

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