

OTHERNESS IN OTHELLO

الغيرية في " عطيل "

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Europe was shut in on itself: the Orient, when it was not merely a place in which one traded, was culturally, intellectually, spiritually outside Europe and European civilization...[I]n Shakespeare's Othello (that "abuser of the world"), the Orient and Islam are always represented as outsiders having a special role to play inside Europe.

Edward Said, *Orientalism*.

Abstract

"Otherness in 'Othello'" is about Shakespeare's representation of Othello and the latter's interaction with the Venetian community, an inquiry as to whether Shakespeare succeeded in securing this brave and loyal military general within the European self, or, conversely, attributed him to the realm of cultural exoticism and of the marginal other which leads to phobia and oppression. Because the concept of "otherness" is so multi-faceted, an attempt is made here to specify the kind of otherness that better encapsulates Othello. This study does not emphasise the two evil characters Iago and Roderico, however, because neither one truly represents the entirety of the Venetian citizens. Regardless of their marginal roles in the play, focus is put on the more representative Brabantio and the Duke.

Keywords: "Othello", literary representation, the European self, the other, otherness.

الملخص

الآخر في "عطيل" يدور حول تمثيل شكسبير عطيل وتفاعل الأخير مع مجتمع البندقية ، وهو تحقيق حول ما إذا كان "شكسبير قد نجح في تأمين هذا الجنرال العسكري الشجاع والمخلص داخل الذات الأوروبية ، أو على العكس من ذلك ، نسبه إلى عالم الغرابة الثقافية والآخر الهامشي الذي يؤدي إلى الرهاب والقمع. نظرًا لأن مفهوم "الآخر" متعدد الأوجه ، يتم إجراء محاولة هنا لتحديد نوع الآخر الذي يجسد عطيل بشكل أفضل. لا تؤكد هذه الدراسة على شخصيتين شريرتين هما رودريكو و ياغو، لأن لا أحد يمثل حقًا كامل مواطني البندقية. بغض النظر عن أدوارهم الهامشية في المسرحية ، يتم التركيز على برابانتيو والدوق الأكثر تمثيلًا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التمثيل الأدبي ، الذات الأوروبية ، الآخر ، الغيرية

Othello (1604) differs from the rest of Shakespeare's tragedies in a number of respects. It is closer to the classical dramatic convention of the three unities of time, place, and action; it applies more modification and alteration to the original; and it proceeds as a comedy first (with the elements of love and marriage) before it turns to a tragedy. The most striking aspect however, is that its main character is not white, but rather a converted black or tawny Moor¹.

The appearance of Moors and Africans on Elizabethan stage followed the gradually developing trade with, and interest in North and West Africa starting from 1550. Threatened by Catholic Spain whose presence in the Mediterranean held the British commercial ships in check, England sought to engage the Barbary powers of North Africa (the present-day Morocco and parts of Algeria and Tunisia) in a political alliance. Accordingly, a diplomatic delegation from Morocco was received by Queen Elizabeth in 1601 and remained in London for six months. Moors and Africans marked their presence in London and became a public attraction with their "strange" attire and habits that might, speculations claim, have interested Shakespeare. Besides curiosity and interest, the Moors and blacks in London provoked a sense of fear and insecurity too; and that was why Queen Elizabeth shipped them back to Africa. The Spanish threat over, the Moors lost their respectable position in England and were reduced to one image of the "other"—an image which was currently exploited by dramatists in the form of villains and evil characters.

Shakespeare himself made dramatic use of blacks and Moors in *Titus Andronicus* (1593), *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) and *The Tempest* (1611) in the characters of Aaron, The Prince of

Morocco, and The King of Tunis respectively. Never before or after *Othello*, however, did Shakespeare raise a Moorish character to the status of tragic hero, and thus disrupted the Elizabethan dramatic convention of representing blacks as villainous, evil and lecherous. Like Hamlet, Macbeth, and King Lear, Othello draws sympathy regardless of his African origin. Instead of a villain or simply a minor character, Shakespeare presented the Moor as a valiant and noble character who would subsequently meet his doom in a heroic manner.

The aim of this article is to inquire whether Shakespeare, by juxtaposing Othello to other white tragic heroes, could integrate him into the European self or rather retained his status as "other". Given that a tragic hero in Renaissance drama generally suffers from a serious flaw (*hamartia*), did Shakespeare relate Othello's to his race and culture? Contending that otherness is a complex concept with various definitions and interpretations, it is fair to consider the type of otherness—if any—Othello undergoes. Besides, is Venice unified in its attitude(s) towards Othello or are their many forms of otherness in the play to which he succumbs

The study of otherness in *Othello* both relates to and breaks away from the most common trends of criticism applied to this play. Despite some points in common, it clearly diverges from A.C. Bradley's approach in his seminal *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), and from F. R. Leavis's in *The Common Pursuit* (1937)ⁱⁱ in that it analyses the character of Othello not as psychologically realistic, but rather as a dramatic personae which interacts with other characters within a particular Venetian setting. Instead of character per se, this perspective analyses the character's position in its environment.

Otherness is, moreover, closely related to the concept of race which was usually either argued away as of minor importance, or simply avoided by criticsⁱⁱⁱ. It was only by the twenty-first century that critics began to consider race as central to the tragic development in *Othello*. Some limited race to blackness, which was for them very significant in the play, while others rather emphasized Othello's status as culturally and socially foreign^{iv}. The latter attitude is closer to the concern of this study.

One of our aims is to see whether Othello is a mere outsider, or else an image of the other; given that the main difference between the two qualifications is that while the outsider can in some way incorporate the group and become accepted therein, the other is, conversely, a permanent stranger who can never be good enough to qualify for assimilation in the group, nor can, in most occasions, his children after him. The other is:

perceived as different in kind, as lacking in some essential trait or traits that the group has; [their] offspring will inherit the same deficient nature and be the Other also^v.

This missing essential trait can be related with nationality, origin, political stance, race, religion, or social class. In a typical capitalistic white Christian society, examples of the other are respectively the foreigner, the immigrant, the communist, the non-White, the Muslim/Jew, and the working class^{vi}. Of all these traits, only political ideology is not transmitted to the offspring who thus have a possibility to reintegrate the self or the "normal" group. As to religion and social class, there is only a very limited chance for few individuals to change or go beyond. The remaining forms of otherness (i.e. race, nationality, and origin) are permanent and inherent, unless the group which sees itself as the norm changes in such process as "carnivalisation" (in Bakhtin's terminology) or other. Therefore, in case Othello is the Other, the aim of this study is to inquire about the form(s) his otherness takes.

In order to answer the questions above, it might do well to shift focus from Iago and Roderigo to Brabantio and the Duke, minor characters as they prove to be. Iago cannot arguably be deemed representative of the Venetian society, nor can Desdemona and Cassio who are in diametrical opposition to him as regards the relationship with the Moor. Of course, Iago is not taken here as just "a necessary piece of dramatic mechanism" and not much more^{vii}, but rather as an arch-villain, bad in himself, no matter what type of environment he belongs to. Furthermore, one can study the Venetian society's prejudices towards Othello through a character that represents the hegemonic class which is responsible for the production and diffusion of the hegemonic culture or ideology. Accordingly, Brabantio and the Duke—far better than Iago, Desdemona, and Cassio—are well equipped to stand for Venice and its conventions: social, political, and cultural alike.

Yet, it is not fair to speak about Otherness straightaway as we discuss Brabantio's attitude towards Othello. One reason is that Brabantio changes attitude even in his comparatively short appearance on stage^{viii}. Before the crucial incident when Iago and Roderigo scare him out of a sleep already haunted by a nightmare^{ix}, we learn from Othello's account to the Duke that Brabantio was an admiring friend who used to invite the Moor to his lodgings in the presence of his daughter—Desdemona, and that Othello was encouraged to narrate his war and travel adventures to the excitement of both father and daughter

"Her father lov'd me, oft invited me:

Still question'd me the story of my life,

From year to year: the battles, sieges, fortune

That I have pass'd... These things to hear,

Would Desdemona seriously incline...

She'd come again, and with a greedy ear

Devour up my discourse"

(I, 3, p.38. All quotations are from the 1994 Penguin edition.)

The phrases "lov'd me" and "oft invited me" may discard any illusion one might have about otherness; yet the statement that Brabantio "question'd me the story of my life" encourages us to speculate about the nature of this relationship which seems more of an interest in the exotic strangeness of Othello than of a sane and natural friendship. Accordingly, Brabantio appreciated Othello and admired him as a noble and appealing "outsider" who can be befriended and invited home.

But all this happen off stage well before the play's real time. On stage we see a developing tension as Iago and Roderigo spoil Brabantio's comfortable negligence into negative attitude, aversion and scorn, i.e. otherness. The villain and his companion do not merely state the cold fact of Desdemona's evasion with Othello; they rather wrap it in vulgar sexual diction and bestial images. The effect thereof is very strong on Brabantio who ends up unconsciously reiterating the very words Iago used to discredit Othello. Escorted by Roderigo and officers, Brabantio "greet" the Moor as he first meets him after the realisation of his daughter's escape with the words: "Down with him, thief", "Oh thou thief" (I,ii,p.31); a direct echo of Iago's warning cry: "Awake: what ho, Brabantio: thieves, thieves. Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags, Thieves, thieves" (I, i, p.25, underlining mine).

True, Iago engraved the word "thief" in Brabantio's mind by repeating it four times in one statement; yet there are other reasons for Brabantio's adoption of this derogative qualification. The word "thief" is indeed crucial to the understanding of the shift in Brabantio's attitude from friendship (though of an exotic nature) to otherness. Accusing Othello of theft underlies that he has become an other for Brabantio more on economic and social grounds than on racial ones. A thief usually takes away something that does not belong to them.

This accusation signifies that Othello has stepped beyond his acceptable status of a noble, if exotic, outsider to a potential socio-economic threat. Marrying Desdemona means integrating a ruling oligarchy/clique and thus disturbing, even disrupting the Venetian body politic which accentuates wealth and social background.

Throughout the first Act, Brabantio is hailed with the most revered and solemn titles. He is addressed or referred to as "Signior", "most reverend Signior", "good Sir", "most grave Brabantio", "sir", "Senator", "your reverence", "the Magnifico", "noble Signior" not only by the spiteful Iago and his lackey, but by the Duke himself. Furthermore, he is said to enjoy an influence comparable even to the Duke's and capable of holding Othello in place with the authority of Law:

"...the Magnifico is much belov'd,

And hath in his effect a voice potential

As double as the Duke's: He will divorce you,

Or put upon you, what restraint or grievance,

The Law (with all his might, to enforce it on)

Will give him cable" (I,ii,pp.29-30)

Brabantio is a dignified citizen of Venice, and he behaves accordingly. He often boasts out about his influence and "class": "I have charg'd thee"" (I,i,p.26), "my spirits and my place have in their power"(I,i,p.26), "This is Venice: my house is not a grange" (I,i,p.26), "At every house I'll call, (I may command at most)" (I,i,p.29), "Lay hold upon [the Moor], if he do resist/Subdue him, at his peril" (I,ii,p.32).

In sum, by endeavouring to marry a Venetian upper-class lady (very humanely and even naively), Othello shows a lack of understanding of the "social conventions" and "political ideology" predominant in Venice, and a breach of the deep-established laws of "clime, complexion, and degree". Othello, the exotic outsider, has now become for Brabantio a social and political other who must be held in check. Desdemona's appropriate match must be one of "The wealthy curled darling of our Nation" (I, ii, p.32, underlining mine) and wealth is a demarcating line between social classes.

The phrase "our Nation" in the above quote draws attention to yet another dimension of Brabantio's "othering" attitude towards the Moor. Aversion to the social other triggers fear and distrust of the other culture. As a true and important Venetian, he so firmly believes in the Venetian conventions of marriage (i.e. "clime, complexion, and degree") that it has never crossed his mind that so tender and beautiful a daughter can easily disregard them and prefers the Moor. Conventions for Brabantio are not mere ideology in the sense of "false consciousness"^x constructed by the ruling class to preserve the status-quo. Rather, they are nature itself, and their rejection is very unnatural, and may be the result of witchcraft, which is by definition a breach of Nature:

"She, in spite of nature/ Of years, of country, credit, every thing, To fall in love, with what she fear'd to look on" (I,ii,p.36, underlining mine).

Being an outsider from North Africa (according to the most plausible definition of "Moor"), the charge of magic can easily be leveled against Othello, because the outsider is usually misunderstood, distrusted and doubted. In fact, Brabantio sticks to the charge of witchcraft very obstinately, and uses a profusion of statements to convince himself and the others of foul play on the part of Othello:

"...thou has enchanted her", "chains of magic", "practis'd on her with foul charms", "an abuser of the World", "practiser of arts inhabitted and out of warrant" (I,ii,p.32), "She is stol'n from me, and corrupted by spells, and medicines, brought of mounte banks" (I,iii,p.35)

Othello thus, loses the standing of an outsider friend and gets categorised by Brabantio as a social and cultural other. Being a converted Christian exacerbates his cultural (and thus religious) otherness, and this attitude finds succinct expression in Brabantio's warning which closes the second scene: "For if such actions may have passage free,/ Bond-slaves, and pagans shall Our Statesmen be". "Bond-slaves" stands for the social other and "pagans" for the cultural religious other.

One might possibly refer to the afore-mentioned phrase ("To fall in love, with what she fear'd to look on") and Othello's "sooty bosom" as telling examples of the racial dimension in Brabantio's "othering" attitudes towards the Moor. Such a claim, however, can be dismissed on the ground that these racist references are scarce, and act pretty much as bursts of anger, not as an expression of an established conviction. Under the shock of losing his only child Brabantio is reduced to an excited status of jabbering, using non-sequiturs, and asking many questions of many people at once without even waiting for answers:

"It is too true an evil. Gone she is,/And what's to come of my despired time,/ Is nought but bitterness. Now Roderigo,/ Where didst thou see her? (Oh unhappy girl)/ with the Moor say'st thou? (Who would be father?)/ How didst thou know 'twas She? (Oh she deceives me/ Past thought): what said she to you? Get more tapers:/ Raise all my kindred. Are they married think you?" (I, i, p.29).

Brabantio is here prattling, and thus the two racist allusions under question are very much in tune with this hysterical frame of mind than otherwise. Moreover, Brabantio's language is not always immune from hypocrisy, witness the way Roderigo turns from a man "full of supper, and distemp'ring draughts" who "Upon malicious knavery" disturbs the quiet of Brabantio to the "good Roderigo" who leads the Senator to the Moor at the very end of the first scene.

Surprisingly, the motives behind Brabantio's "othering" attitudes towards Othello are mistaken even by the Duke who belongs to the same Venetian political power coterie as Brabantio: "...And noble Signior,/ If virtue no delighted beauty lack,/ Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (I,iii,p.43). The Duke tries here to convince Brabantio that virtue compensates for Othello's blackness as if it is the colour of skin which torments him.

At first glance, there seems to be a world of difference between Brabantio's attitude to Othello and that of the Duke. Even the neutral and legitimate title of "the Moor", which is used by all—including Desdemona and Cassio—is not pronounced by the Duke who first greets Othello with the magnanimous: "Valiant Othello"(I,ii,35). For all his "show" of respect and tolerance which is supported by the claim that "this tale would win my daughter too", the Duke is no different from Brabantio. Blackness for him is a shortcoming or a degradedness which is *compensated for* in Othello. Moreover, in consoling Brabantio, the Duke utilizes images of theft, robbery and mischief; i.e. acquiesces with Brabantio's view that Desdemona's marriage with Othello is a loss:

When remedies are past, the griefs are ended

By seeing the worst, which late on hopes depended.

To mourn a mischief that is past and gone,

Is the next way to draw new mischief on.

What cannot be preserv'd, when Fortune takes:

Patience, her injury a mock'ry makes.

The robb'd that smiles, steals something from the thief,

He robs himself, that spends a bootless grief (I,iii,p.40) .

Indeed, he advises him to overcome the blow and laugh away the mischief, which indicates that this innocent marriage for love is unnatural.

If the Duke is comparable to Brabantio, why then does he not condemn the wedding? The answer is a matter of tact and exploitation. As the leading political figure in a war-threatened Venice, the Duke is compelled to act as a calculating politician, not as a prestigious and dignified Venetian. Othello is still the outstanding, invincible military commander whose services are now more than ever desperately needed. In fact, the Duke is exploiting Othello as he would do a servant. Good evidence is the order he sent with the messenger to Othello: "haste, post-haste", which is usually

addressed to a post-boy to induce him to greater speed in delivering important mail. Accordingly, Othello's social and political move by means of marriage is played down by the Duke because of the urgent necessities of the warring situation.

It might be fair here to state that Othello's marriage into the ruling class is a turning point in his career and social status, a decline from the social category of outsider to that of a social and political other. The Duke is not reactionary only because he is more politically aware and personally detached. Venice is thus a spectrum of various attitudes ranging from Iago's and Roderigo's racism and denigration, to the ruling class's social and political antagonism, through Desdemona's humane love and Cassio's professional and personal intimacy.

It is such attitudes as displayed by the Venetian hegemonic class which must be held accountable for cutting Othello to the quick, not a 'tragic flaw' in his character. G. M. Matthews, a Marxist critic, asserts that the 'tragic flaw' doctrine "has obscured the true nature of Shakespearean tragedy far more than any over-emphasis on 'character'", and that it here fails to attribute Othello's decline to interaction with the Venetian surroundings, not to his weaknesses; for whatever the greatness of a dramatic hero, any number of potential 'flaws' can be found, or invented, to account for his downfall. Yet in all Shakespeare's tragedies except, perhaps, *Macbeth*, the determining 'flaw' is in society... The 'tragic flaw' theory... shifts the emphasis from *men in conflict* to the *private mind*. (Craig, 125). Despite the fact that Othello is the title character and a 'noble' tragic hero, the Venetian authority holds him in check and readily sees in him an image of the other.

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ⁱ Various speculations are carried out about the colour of Othello's skin, but the essential fact is that he is not white.

ⁱⁱ Although Dr. Leavis claims in *Scrutiny* to have dethroned the Bradleian psycho-realistic approach to Shakespeare's characters, he treats Othello and Iago in *The Common Pursuit* as living beings (rather than fictional dramatic elements).

ⁱⁱⁱ See *Understanding Othello*, p.164.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v "The Other" on (<http://academic.Brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/other.html>). Last modified: 23-09-2001.

^{vi} I am very much indebted to the above Internet article as regards these examples of the other

^{vii} See F. R. Leavis, "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero; or, the Sentimentalist's Othello", p.138.

^{viii} Brabantio leaves the stage in Act One, and only news of his death reminds us of him by the end of the play.

^{ix} It is typically Shakespearean to set a tense atmosphere as a foreshadowing before the main malicious incident happens on stage. We see this, for instance, in the unnatural disorder at the outset of *Macbeth* and in the ghost vision in *Hamlet*.

^x As used here, the word "ideology" is a pejorative term as it means "a system of illusory beliefs—false ideas or false consciousness—which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge" rather than "a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group", or "the general process of the production of meanings and ideas", all of which—Raymond Williams tells us—are common in Marxist writing. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1977), p.55.