Othello – introduction

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William Shakespeare adapted the tragic Italian tale of *Othello* to appeal to a British audience and, in particular, to the new king, James I. Shakespeare was a child at the time of the Cyprus Wars and was familiar with the famous Battle of Lepanto—a grand victory for Christian forces that serves as the backdrop to the main action of the play. The religious and social conflicts depicted in the drama reflect events and changes occurring in both Italy and England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* was a tale that, despite the Venice setting, addressed concerns of his own time.

Events in History at the Time the Play Takes Place

Venetian History

Up until the 1500s, Venice was a powerful, independent state that controlled territories throughout Italy and the Mediterranean. Situated on the Adriatic Sea at the gateway of the overland route to the Spice Islands of eastern Indonesia. It was a thriving port that served as the link between the Far East spice trade and the European market. Venetians (citizens of Venice) became wealthy as brokers of exotic spices and manufacturers of silk imported from the East.

When Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama sailed around the Cape of Good Hope in 1499 and established a sea route from Europe to the Far East, Venice began to decline. The city reeled under the consequences of a public panic that forced most major banks to close and a devastating outbreak of bubonic plague. The state became increasingly weak and vulnerable to outside attack.

By the late 1400s the once-powerful Venetian military was also in decline, struggling to man its formidable naval fleet. The increasingly wealthy and luxury-loving citizens of the city showed little appetite for risking their lives at war. Where once it had been considered a duty or honor to serve the state in battle, military involvement during these years became less appealing, and as a result the state was defended mainly by reluctant recruits, convicts, and debtors.

As Venetian defense capabilities waned, the Ottomans (Turkish rivals whose empire included the Middle East, Asia Minor, and North Africa) initiated attacks on Venetian territories in the Mediterranean in 1463. Venice suffered a series of humiliating defeats. In several instances, a majority of Venetian forces retreated or surrendered to the advancing enemy without engaging in combat. The Turks captured key Venetian outposts and by 1500 controlled virtually all of mainland Greece, territory that had previously belonged to Venice.

Turkish Religious Wars

The war between the Turks and the Venetians raged for more than 100 years. The conflict grew from a territorial battle into a religious war. The Ottoman Turks were Muslim, while the Venetians were Christian To Christian Europeans, the threat of Muslim Turk control of the Mediterranean was a serious one, for such control increased the potential for a Turkish invasion of western Europe. As the Turks captured key Venetian territories, including the island of Cyprus, Europeans became increasingly alarmed. Several states rallied to Venice's defense and joined in the war effort in the name of Christianity. Spain, Genoa, and the Holy Roman Empire—together known as the "Holy League"—allied with Venice against the Turks, who formed their own Muslim alliance with Berbers, Levantines, and corsairs (pirates) of the Barbary Coast

War of Cyprus

The island of Cyprus, a Venetian territory, was vital to the economy of Venice. It produced honey, saffron, cotton, wax, salt, sugar, indigo, and wine, as well as abundant tax revenue. Its geographic location, however—close to the Ottoman Empire and distant from Venice—made it a likely target for Turkish invasion. By September 1570 almost all of Cyprus was in the hands of the Turks, and the Holy League had been formed to recapture it. In September 1571 Pope Pius V predicted a Christian victory over the Turks and backed his vision with strong military participation. A fleet of 209 ships was amassed, and the allied forces set sail from Italy toward Cyprus, intent on defeating the Turks and retaking the island for Venice.

Cyprus was well fortified, though, and the Turkish fleet of 309 ships outnumbered the attackers. In addition, Venetian troops had suffered a crushing defeat at the Port of Famagusta in Cyprus after holding out against the much more formidable Turkish military for over a year. The victorious Turkish forces subsequently killed the leaders of the Venetian troops in brutal fashion. News of the fall of Famagusta reached Venice's troops at sea. They realized Cyprus was totally lost and probably could not be recaptured Rather than abandon hope, though, the Christian forces became enraged over the deaths of their comrades and vowed revenge against the Turks. With that in mind, they sailed forth to meet their enemy at sea.

Lepanto, 1571

Confident in their ability to defeat the Venetians and their allies in the Holy League after their earlier successes, the Turks deployed their fleet to attack the approaching Europeans. The enemies met at the Port of Lepanto and a famous sea battle ensued. The ships of the League, which sailed under an azure flag that depicted Christ on the cross, encircled the Turks, whose ships flew white and gold flags inscribed with phrases from the Muslim holy book, the Koran. For two hours the bloody conflict raged. Kettle drums pounded as cannons fired, swords clashed, and arrows soared. Though greatly outnumbered by the Turks, the League managed to trap the Turkish fleet in the Lepanto harbor and set fire to hundreds of their ships. The commander Sebastiano Venier, described as a ferocious old Venetian, fought vahantly against the Ottomans and helped ensure the League's victory. The Turks were forced to retreat, their fleet in tatters. The Holy League lost 7,600 men and 12 ships in the battle, but the Turks lost 240 ships and 30,000 men. It was a stunning victory for the Holy League and was seen by some Christians as a validation of the pope's prophecy. Although Cyprus was not recaptured, the victory restored European confidence and virtually ended the Turkish wars. Venice emerged once again as a formidable power with a strong military.

Wild Venice

Late sixteenth-century Venice was known by many as a city of sin Venetians were famous for their wild dress and behavior Upper-and middle-class existence was often marked by flamboyant costumes, elaborate carnivals, a passion for gambling, and sexual practices that resulted in epidemic rates of syphilis. Even the popes of the era were allowed to have intimate relations with women; they fathered a number of children during this period. In *Othello* Shakespeare portrays this liberal atmosphere in the celebration that follows the defeat of the Turks. Each Venetian in attendance is given full freedom to engage in "what sport and revels his addiction leads him" (Shakespeare, *Othello*, 2.2.5–6). The general climate of debauchery helps explain how easily *Othello* could be convinced of his wife's adultery.

The Moor Question

The Moors were originally a nomadic people of northern Africa. They became Muslims in the eighth century and invaded Spain in 711, where they established a kingdom (the Umayyad emirate) in the south at Córdoba. The transplanted Moorish culture thrived in Spain, establishing splendid centers in other Spanish cities as well. But the Moors never established a strong central government, and by the fifteenth century the various Moorish strong-holds had surrendered to stronger rulers, including Christians like Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. Most of the Moors were driven from Spain to other European countries.

In sixteenth-century Italy, the terms "Moor" and "pagan" were almost interchangeable. By and large, Moors were considered barbarians, were treated as slaves, and often were made scapegoats for crimes or seen as causes of society's problems. Though attitudes slowly began to shift by the seventeenth century, when the slave trade died out, the Moor was still considered a second-class citizen.

Some Moors, however, were able to escape the negative stereotypes and integrate successfully into Venetian society. Citizens of Venice, in fact, insisted that theirs had always been a multiracial and multicultural society. They pointed out that in the fifteenth century the city had imprisoned a prominent nobleman for raping a black slave girl. Such instances of social justice may lend legitimacy to Shakespeare's depiction of Othello, a Moor, as a general in the Venetian army. As the play shows, he was still subject to racism. At the same time, however, he was respected for his ability as a warrior. The treatment of the Othello character illustrates both a shift toward tolerance and the lingering seeds of prejudice in the real Venice of the late 1500s.

A second explanation for how Shakespeare's Othello could have become such a powerful member of the Venetian military is that the historical model for this character may not have been a Moor at all. Some Venetians insist that an earlier writer named Cinthio (or Cinzio)—who has been cited as a source used by Shakespeare—and Shakespeare himself misinterpreted the story of a Venetian general named Moro who hailed from Morea. A statue of Moro dressed in battle armor even stands outside the palace at the Campo dei Carmini.

The Play in Focus

The Plot

(Omitted by edict of instructor so it doesn't ruin the surprises of the play – sorry, guys.)

Sources

Like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* was apparently based on a collection of Italian tales, in this case a story included in *Gli Hecatommithi* by Giavanni Baptista Giraldi Cinthio. The specific naming of Desdemona and her marriage to a Moorish general is owed to him. Other details may have come from Geoffrey Fenton's *Certain Tragicall Discourses*, a book published in 1567 that Shakespeare apparently consulted to locate plots for his tragedies. The story also incorporates details from the true history of the Cyprus Wars and the Battle of Lepanto. The play may or may not have been expressly written for King James I, but its subject matter was certainly of great interest to him. Before becoming king, James wrote a poem about the Holy League's famous victory at Lepanto and was known as an expert in witchcraft. Shakespeare may have added several witchcraft references and shaped his portrayal of the evil Iago with the king's interest in mind.

Events in History at the Time the Play Was Written

Africans in Elizabethan England

The English of the sixteenth century had access to a variety of source materials regarding Africa, some factual and some fictional. Legends and tall tales rooted in the popular imagination—due in some part to classical historians' stories of monsters and strange creatures—gradually became replaced by the more accurate accounts of sea and land travelers, who also provided more accurate maps than before. It has been suggested that Shakespeare probably knew one of these books, *A Geographical History of Africa* by Johannes Leo Africanus, a North African Moor, and that its background material on, for example, the adventures of its author may have influenced the creation of *Othello*. In addition, with the advent of the slave trade in the 1560s, more and more Africans began to be brought into England. From the mid-sixteenth century onward, therefore, the English in London and other ports had ample exposure to both dark-skinned and light-skinned Africans. They also encountered blacks as free men in official capacities; they traded with them, and in 1600 a Moorish nobleman was sent as an ambassador to Queen Elizabeth.

The Reign of King James

At the time the drama was written, King James I had just ascended to the English throne, ending years of bitter feuding over who would succeed Queen Elizabeth I. Though James took the throne peacefully, the religious and social conflicts that marked the end of Elizabeth's tenure remained. Protest against the powers of the Church of England increased, as did calls for lower taxes and fairer representation in Parliament. The country began to divide into religious and political fronts. Puritans broke from the mainstream and threatened to close theaters and taverns, while moderates urged religious and racial tolerance. The debate over reforming the established church grew as heated as the challenge to the power of the monarch, and in 1642 civil war finally erupted. James's son and successor, Charles I, was beheaded by Oliver Cromwell's government in 1649.

Arts

Though the nation was rocked by turbulent debates about various issues, the arts flourished under King James. Dramatists such as Shakespeare received as much or even more support from the king than they had under Queen Elizabeth, who was considered a great patron of the arts. James, who considered himself an artist and intellectual as well as a theologian, enjoyed reading and writing poetry. He sponsored his own theater company, the King's Men, for which Shakespeare was the primary playwright. The King's Men performed regularly at court. In addition to writing new works for the king's company, Shakespeare also revived several of his older plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, which James had not seen at its opening.

Religious Conflict and Prejudice

As a largely Protestant nation. England was often in conflict with neighboring Catholic countries such as Spain. In 1588, the Spanish Armada was pummeled by a sudden, violent storm while on its way to attack England. This event made many people in England believe that God had intervened on their behalf as a sign of approval of their Anglican Protestant religion. Similarly, in *Othello* the Turkish fleet is destroyed at sea by a wild wind storm, a development that brings victory to the Christian Venetians. Shakespeare does not, however, paint a perfectly rosy or one-sided picture of religion and holy wars. He shows the hypocrisy of so-called Christians such as Iago and the ill-treatment suffered by truly Christian characters such as Othello. Clearly the most Christian of all the men at the outset of the play, Othello is accused of being a pagan and practicing witchcraft simply because he has dark skin.

The term "Moor" historically refers to the lighter-skinned African race of partial Arab descent, rather than the darker-skinned blacks of Africa. Yet Shakespeare, like other men of his day, does not draw any distinction between the two types and portrays Othello as a distinctively black African, in full appreciation of the racial tensions that would be evoked by his union with the fair Desdemona.

Shakespeare's depiction of Othello reflects an emerging shift in attitude in seventeenth-century British society. Prejudices and long-held notions about the roles of men and women and racial and religious differences were beginning to break down. By the end of the civil wars—which Shakespeare did not live to see—some British began to realize that "individuals ... could hold differing views about foreign policy, the nature of Christ's presence in the sacrament ... without necessarily precipitating social chaos" (Abrams, p. 1053). The growing concept of tolerance, an underlying but powerful idea in *Othello*, may be seen as affecting the subsequent course of British history.

Shakespeare's Emerging Genius

By 1604, the year that *Othello* was first performed, Shakespeare had established himself as London's premiere playwright. The tragedies that had beset his personal life—the deaths of his son and father, imprisonment of his patron Southampton, and execution of his friend the Earl of Essex—were in the past, and he was able to devote his time to developing his skills as a writer.

Othello is considered an inspired play that cemented Shakespeare's popularity with the new government and the general population. To his audience, tragedies were considered the

highest form of drama and something all legitimate playwrights should strive to perfect. *Othello* was another of Shakespeare's attempts to master the form; he had had a similar goal when he wrote *Hamlet* (also covered in *Literature and Its Times*) some three years earlier.

Mature Understanding

The major issues raised in the play—jealousy, racism, aging, evil, social and religious conflict—illustrate Shakespeare's growth as a playwright and his interest in a wide range of contemporary issues. Whereas many of his previous plays had dealt primarily with political intrigue, *Othello* examined social issues and human behavior; politics are here relegated to secondary status. In looking at the subject of age—and situations wherein romance was complicated by differences in age—Shakespeare may have drawn on personal experience. Shakespeare himself, it has been speculated, was previously involved in some sort of love triangle with his patron, Southampton, and an unnamed mistress. Whether true or not, Shakespeare did express much jealousy and frustration in his own poetry—sentiments that are also exhibited by Othello. Shakespeare remarks in Sonnet 57, for example, that love has made him a slave:

Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?
...Nor dare I question with my jealous thought
Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,
But like a sad slave, stay and think of nought
Save where you are....
(Shakespeare, "Sonnet 57," lines 1–2, 9–12)

Othello's lines, like Shakespeare's poems, show a man confused and frustrated by love. Othello's lament "I think my wife be honest and think she is not" (*Othello*, 3.3.389–90) is strikingly similar to one found in Shakespeare's Sonnet 138: "When my love swears that she is made of truth, I do believe her, though I know she lies" (Shakespeare, "Sonnet 138," lines 1–2).

A Common Experience

When it became apparent that Shakespeare was one of the great writers of his age, rival playwrights harshly criticized his works. Writers from Cambridge and Oxford universities denounced the output of this playwright who was self-educated and had not gone to college Even the great dramatist and Shakespeare's friend Ben Jonson said that Shakespeare wrote too much and should have "blotted" or deleted a thousand lines (Rowse, p. 49). By the time he wrote *Othello*, then, Shakespeare, like his main character, had distinguished himself and experienced the resentment of others firsthand.

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