

Context of othello

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



1) How are Jacobean attitudes to race reflected in the treatment of Othello by other characters in the play? Shakespeare conveys the attitudes towards race in the Jacobean period through the use of Iago continually referring to Othello as 'The Moor'. This is not a particularly derogatory term as it means 'A member of a Muslim people of mixed Berber and Arab descent, now living chiefly in northwest Africa', however Shakespeare often described brunette or darker than regular Europeans as black, showing the ideology of ignorance towards people of different races in this period of time.

The fact that 'the Moor' replaces Othello's actual name in the play, suggests that any sense of individuality is lost, and he is immediately susceptible to being categorised by his ethnic origins and any type of stereotype that goes with it. Also, the extremely graphic metaphor to describe Othello and Desdemona having sex of 'an old black ram is tupping your white ewe' that Iago says to Desdemona's father, portrays the colour of Othello's skin being seen as destructive as it is contrasted with a 'white ewe', 'white' giving connotations of innocence.

Catherine Belsey in 'Shakespeare: interpretative contexts' said- 'imperial values developed a mythology of white civilisation and black barbarity' supports this. Also, the homonym 'ram' can also be used as a verb- 'to pound something into someone or something' giving the explicit image of sexual intercourse, and having 'old' and 'black' in the same sentence as this, implies being 'black' has a link with paedophilia. Also when Iago is telling Desdemona's dad about her daughter and Othello, he says 'You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary Horse'.

Being ‘covered with a... horse’ illustrates the image of Othello being physically violent towards Desdemona like a horse would be towards a human if on top of them. Also a ‘barbary’ horse is a horse that ethnically originates from the Barbary Coast of North Africa, which would create the effect of the black origins being the link between the violent nature of the horse and Othello. This suggests that in the 17th century, the general public would think of the black race as a vicious race.

Also the fact that Othello is referred to as an animal relates to how in the time the play was written, like animals, black people were seen as objects to entertain the public, as Julia Briggs said that in England, black Africans ‘were still unusual enough to be treated as wonders’ and that the Scots had a ‘long tradition of employing black entertainers whom they treated as little more than performing animals’.

Furthermore, when Brebantio hears that his daughter has married a black man, he says ‘Are there not charms by which the property of youth and maidhood may be abused?’ Brebantio instantly assumes that Othello must have used some sort of ‘charm’ -which in the 17th century meant spells or love potions- on Desdemona for her to marry him, as she couldn’t possibly have fallen in love with a black man of her own accord. This portrays the naivety of Jacobean attitudes towards love and marriage between people of opposing races in that there must be some sort of sabotage or manipulation for it to occur as it couldn’t possibly happen willingly and naturally. 2) Individualism, Machiavelli and Venice: How do these shape the characterisation of Iago?

Setting the play in Venice was an interesting choice for Shakespeare as at the time, as Philip Brockbank said, it was ‘famed for its mercantile prosperity, its proud resources of gold and treasure’. However he also says ‘but it is a city where money can be made by ruthless exploitation’. This conveys a theme of hidden deceit in the city of Venice, which is exactly how Iago is executed in Othello. This is supported when Iago says when talking about working for Othello whom he is seen to dislike ‘I follow him to serve my turn upon him’.

The matter-of-fact statement suggests Iago is very confident and guiltless of his want to take advantage of his boss. This attribute is amplified through the setting of Venice also because it is the home of the 16th century historian and philosopher Machiavelli who had extremely controversial political views. He was so famous in England that in the late 16th century, just before Othello was set, a word was coined because of him- ‘Machiavellianism’. This then meant “the employment of cunning and duplicity in statecraft or in general conduct”.

The English interest of Machiavelli’s ‘intriguing intrigues and perfidious poisoners’ seems to make deceitful plots and attributes fashionable and stimulating, influencing the characterisation of Iago. Individualism is an ideology that started with the beginnings of Capitalism, which the character of Iago embraces- ‘others there are who [...] keep yet their hearts attending on themselves’. This evokes a sense of selfishness as he praises the men who serve their lords under false pretences and in return ‘do well thrive by them’ meaning they get rich.

To the Jacobean audience, Venice reminds them of unscrupulous capitalism where the government would leave everyone to their own devices economically-wise, a typical ‘lessaiz faire’ approach. This is a type of individualism which Iago thrives on, as he is only interested in self-interest.

3) How are Jacobean attitudes towards women evident in the treatment of and response to Desdemona by other characters in the play? In 17th century Britain, women were seen inferior to men in all aspects.

For instance it was only in 1918 did some women start to get the political vote, so 300 years prior to this, sexism was most evident and generally expected. This is shown when Iago says to Brabantio ‘Thieves, thieves! Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags’. This gives the impression that Desdemona is a possession of her father’s along with his ‘house’ and his ‘bags’. It also suggests she is of similar value to these material objects as she is in the same list as them.

Also, the fact that he refers to her as ‘your daughter’ and not her actual name strips away any individuality that Desdemona has and supports the idea of her status in society just being, as Cornelius a Lapide would say ‘an excellent ornament of men since she is granted to man not only to procreate children’ but for men to ‘exercise his jurisdiction and authority [over]’. In the 17th century, women were expected to do as they were told from the commands of men and the standards of society. This is most evident when Rodrigo exclaims to Brabantio ‘your daughter hath made a gross revolt’.

‘Gross’ conveys the disgust of Rodrigo that Desdemona rebelled against her father’s will. The homonym ‘revolt’ gives a second meaning by giving a

synonym of the adjective to describe it- (' gross'). This amplifies the repulsion of Rodrigo of her rebellion and mimics the outrage of the Jacobean audience of Desdemona not conforming to the stereotype of women in this period- as Sir Thomas Elyot says ' mild, fimorous, tractable [and] benign' which should be their qualities that are ' most apparent and for this time sufficient'.

Within a Jacobean audience, women were judged much more imminently than in modern society. This shows when Brebantio, on hearing that his daughter has married a black man without his permission, says ' O treason of the blood'. ' Treason' is seen as one of the worst if not the worst crime possible in the 17th century, to which punishment was almost certainly death. In today's society, to say that a woman that has eloped with a man of the opposite race is in the same category as treason would seem a little over-exaggerative, yet to the Jacobean audience it would seem ordinary and even justifiable.

' Blood' doesn't only give the metaphoric sense of how family is most important in the 17th century; it also gives connotations of death and violence which supports the idea that it is ordinary to want such brutality as punishment of dishonour to the family.

4) Why is the play set in Venice? One of the reasons that the play is set in Venice is that it is a place with many opposing views acting on it which compliments its complicated plot and its contrasting characters. Firstly, it is seen as a very strongly Christian city, where the ' Venetian society is orderly, law-abiding, and formal'.

The point of the play could be seen to rebel against this opinion, as the plot is full of conceit and manipulation from more than one character. Another example of this is that the hero at the beginning of the play- Othello, turns into a man who kills his innocent wife and is presented as an ignorant, judging character. This could suggest that Vienna is similar in that the primary view of Vienna contains innocence and admiration, however when we look more closely, we see it is much more complex and corrupt.

When looking at the individuals of Vienna, and not the overall picture, we are shown with a lot more views of promiscuity and controversy over relationships and marriages. William Davies, a 17th century English barber-surgeon was critical of women in Italy as he said ' Italian women were very lewd and wicked [...] there are many thousands of lewd living women that pay monthly unto the Pope for the sinful use of their wicked bodies.

' This suggests that there was a prominent view that even though Italy was seen to be a highly Christian religious place, many women used prostitution as a form of income. Prostitution and general promiscuity was disapproved of to a great extent by the Jacobean audience. Another example is when Thomas Coryat, another 17th century Englishman says about women of Venice ' at the very least twenty thousand, whereof many are esteemed so loose, that they are said to open their quivers to every arrow.'

This euphemism makes the view a lot less respectful and more inflammatory, supporting how judgmental the English opinion of the immoral women in Venice was. There is indeed one woman in Othello that fits this stereotype which is Cassius' prostitute Bianca; however she plays a relatively insignificant role. The two main woman roles in the play are Desdemona and

Emilia. Desdemona may conform to the opposing stereotype of women in the 17th century which is a passive and feeble wife with no strength of character.

However Emilia is considered to be the hero at the end of the play, where she, a loyal and woman of chastity, is the only one that confronts the man that was in the middle of all the manipulation and deceit, even though it was her own husband. Therefore Shakespeare uses the common observation of 17th century Britain of people of women of Vienna (whether the opinion may be factual or not is insignificant) as a device to shock the audience with an unconventional Italian female hero.

5) Why does the play move to Cyprus? The play moves to Cyprus because Othello was chosen to lead a troop to fight there. Already this brings in the theme of conflict to the plot, where in particular Iago is in secret conflict with Othello. It is also something of historical reality, where in 1570, the Turkish attacked Cyprus which belonged to Venice. This led to a famous battle of Lepanto in 1571. This gave the Jacobean audience an insight of the background of why they were fighting, and it would be far more emotional and rational for the audience if they knew details about the war before-hand.

Also, the movement in setting mirrors the plot line in that Venice is seen as 'important [...] to the Christian as the protector of the Christian faith'. This suggests that Venice is a place with protection- a 'powerful city-state' This is similar in the plot as Iago has tried to manipulate Othello and not succeeded in Venice, however when the setting moves to Cyprus, the audience feels that Othello is in a more vulnerable position- both geographically and

emotionally. Cyprus is also the home of the Greek goddess of love- Aphrodite.

This is significant because even though when the setting moves to Cyprus more conflict occurs in the plot, it is the first time where Othello and Desdemona are allowed to be together. However, the mythology of the Greek gods and goddesses emulates the romantic but idealistic progress of plot, suggesting that realism will soon take over which brings forward the more sinister side of the story.

6) What would a contemporary (Jacobean) audience have understood about the 'Turks'? Within a common Jacobean audience, the people would mostly be fairly oblivious to the details of events around the world or on the 'Turks' as it was, because in that period they didn't have the technology that we have today to instantly publicise them. All that the Jacobean audience would have thought they knew about the Turks would be from hearsay and literature, which would be a biased, interpretative account of events. However, through what little resources they would be exposed to, the general consensus would be of Turks as 'the enemy'.

This is because thirty years before Othello, the Turks were the ones who invaded Cyprus, and they would be reminded of this by the poem on the Battle of Lepanto by their new monarch, King James I. This was the main piece of literature that informed the Jacobean audience of the happenings, which on page 9 of the book 'King James VI and I Selected Writings', was described as 'James's original epic poem in fourteeners celebrating the victory of Don John of Austria against Turkish forces in the Battle of Lepanto.'

His personal judgement of the battle and his obvious happiness of Austria winning the battle over the Turks would definitely put the Turks in the worse light, especially seeing as the view was by the respected leader of the country. However, this opinion can be seen as totally ignorant, as Oliver Morals, a modern day philosopher said ‘ Greece threatened to take complete control of Cyprus [which was made of Turks and Greeks] by a military junta [...]. As a guaranter power Turkey invaded Cyprus to bring peace’.