

Analysis of the dramatic function of the opening act of othello

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



“ Tush, never tell me, I take it much unkindly That thou, Iago, who hast my purse As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this. ” This line, belonging to Roderigo, both introduces the relationship between Iago and Roderigo, one where Roderigo trusts Iago implicitly, perhaps blindly, and, more importantly, the scene and mood of the play, which is that of eavesdropping. The paragraph is functional in its introduction of characters and background plot to the audience, but more to draw on the audience’s natural curiosity towards an intriguing and apparently secretive dialogue.

It is almost natural to assume a night setting here even before reading the later text implying darkness, due to the sinister and conspiratorial implications of the conversation. Roderigo’s trust is reflected in Iago when he opens up to him as a confidante, telling of his bitterness towards Othello and even of his two-faced plans for treachery against him; “ In following him, I follow but myself”.

Considering this, it seems that Roderigo is foolish or naïve in offering such blind trust to a man admitting deceitfulness and duplicity, and this further implies Iago recognises Roderigo as a character he can easily manipulate towards his bidding.

Interestingly the title character is not introduced in person or even by name in this initial conversation, the reason for which is perhaps to create a sense of unpredictability, especially as the single reference to the target of Iago’s plot is ‘ his Moorship’. An Elizabethan audience would generally have expected the Moor (foreigner) to be the villain of the play; even in other Shakespeare

plays black is closely associated with evil, including in reference to skin colour.

Shakespeare would have needed to use this technique both to intrigue the audience and to develop the characters away from the clarity of distinction between villain and hero previously seen, if the audience had not questioned the villainy of Iago they might not have developed an empathy for his character and free willed spirit, which is essential for recognising the depth of character in the play. Iago is the focus of much of act one, and is a very strong character in himself.

A theme of the play that seems to be centred around Iago is that of strong beliefs, an element not present in Othello at all, despite the fact that this kind of strength of will is normally only seen in the hero character. Iago's belief is in free will and in his control of his destiny, a belief he fights for throughout the play. "Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners" is a reference to a person's right and ability to shape their own futures, and is challenging the more common beliefs of fate and destiny at the time.

Iago could be seen as a noble character for this were it not for the Machiavellian way in which he tries to control his life. The lying and deceit he uses without hesitation to get where he wants, and he is not at all reluctant to destroy the lives of others even for a small personal gain, a lack of nobility of character that would never be expected of a classic hero, although he is comparable to Macbeth in his all powerful ambitious drive.

Iago's techniques for manipulating people are despicable, his very language changes when speaking to the likes of Othello, in comparison to the vulgarity and colloquialisms used when addressing Roderigo, or when waking Brabantio to tell him of his daughter and Othello, probably to encourage Brabantio's disgust. When speaking to Othello he attributes his slander to Roderigo, and claims " Though in the trade of war I have slain men, Yet do I hold it the very stuff o'th'conscience To do no contrived murder: I lack iniquity... ".

This sanctimonious and highly ironic proclamation is typical of Iago's manipulation, and it makes Iago both seem to be the strongest in character and without character at all, barring the underlying evil and willpower that persists throughout his operations. The dramatic function of the development of Iago is to allow the audience to recognise his duplicitous and dishonest ways and to create concern for the noble Othello, because of the impact on the audience of witnessing the friendly interaction between Othello and Iago despite knowing of Iago's ultimate plans.

Shakespeare perhaps does not want to introduce Othello until the audience fully understands Iago, so that this deceitfulness can be seen immediately as he enters, and to form the audience's opinion of Othello through the words of Iago to create the same sense of unsure curiosity in the audience as to his real character. One of the main themes through the play, and which is introduced very clearly in Act 1, and becomes more obvious as it progresses, is racial prejudice.

This becomes more prominent in Iago especially ' Even now, now, very now, an old black ram Is tupping your white ewe'. The characters also use synecdoche such as Roderigo's ' thick lips'. Brabantio is also convinced that Othello's relationship with his daughter is not only unnatural but an act of the devil, mostly as a result of Iago's influence, he is drawn into believing stereotypes, that Othello must have used magic to ' win' his daughter ' corrupted by spells and medicines.... sans witchcraft could not. '.

Othello is also referred to as ' the Moor' more than by his name, and while this alone may not have been a derogatory term, it serves to remind that the characters view Othello as an outsider, and emphasises his constant alienation. However, Othello is still valued in Venetian society and by the duke, who refers to him as being honourable and valiant, as such Othello's position is not compromised by his race, and it only becomes a significant factor in helping Iago turning characters and situations against him. Similarly Desdemona proves her father's sexist prejudice to be unfounded.

Brabantio portrays her as being a weak and impressionable person, but she disproves this when asked to speak on behalf of Othello in front of the duke she gives a powerful speech (Act 1, Scene 3, lines 180-189 and 249-275, showing both the genuine nature of her relationship with Othello and her strength of character. Othello does not play as larger part as Iago in Act 1, not even speaking until the beginning of scene 2. However we still get a preformed, possibly prejudged idea of his character through Iago before his introduction.

Though through Othello's first words and by the end of the act we begin to get a more realistic impression; he seems very calm and remains calm even while Iago tries to provoke him " 'tis better as it is' and is obviously a great general through the comments of the Duke and senate. He also seems very proud and confident, shown when he offers his life to the court should Desdemona not testify that Othello did not steal her through witchcraft, ' And if you do find me foul in her report, The trust, the office I do hold of you, Not only take away, but let your sentence even fall upon my life'.

Despite this Othello remains foremost humble and modest ' Rude am I in my speech, And little bless'd with the soft phrase of peace'. He says this regardless of the fact that his argument is based on Desdemona loving him because of his words and stories, and he has already proven he can settle a conflict with a few words, this shows his genuine humility, far apart from the self proclaimed hypocritical humility of Iago. Othello it seems is the antithesis of Iago, in that Othello is very much what he seems, being honest and noble, but falsely thought of by some others as being barbaric.

Iago on the other hand is trusted, but hides his motives and goals under his many different personalities. The mention of witchcraft and trickery was of particular personal interest to King James, who had just written books and poetry on the subject. Free will was also a newly emerging idea and this free will in the hands of a villain would have been especially horrific to an audience of the time. Racial prejudice is key to the downfall of Othello, Brabantio would never have challenged Othello were it not for his race, but

perhaps Othello's own racism provoked by Iago that prompts his mistrust of his wife and her alleged white lover Cassio.

The dramatic function of the first Act, therefore, seems to be to set up an attitude of unease among the audience, through Shakespeare's placing the audience in media res, as a witness to the sinister conspiracy, and in the dark urban street setting. It also serves to give the audience an idea of the scale of the play, although Othello is an important character in terms of his social and military standing amongst the Venetians, the actual conflict is on a very individual level, with Othello's domestic jealousy and will for revenge, fuelled by Iago's frustration and desire for power.

This is perhaps also emphasised in the setting, the confined urban streets allow us to relate to the characters much better than in plays focusing on a king or grander conflict, whose situations seem much more distant.

Additionally the first act addresses several issues which would have interested the Elizabethan audience and were particularly relevant at the time.