

Religious differences in 'othello' and 'the jew of malta'



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Religion and race are both familiar themes in Elizabethan literature; Shakespeare and Marlowe among other playwrights included many characters of different races and religions throughout their theatrical work. In this essay I will attempt to explore the idea of representation of race and religion in two of the set plays. The plays I am studying are 'Othello', by William Shakespeare and 'The Jew of Malta' by Christopher Marlowe.

I intend to look at the representation of race in 'Othello' and the problems it poses for the characters and how Othello is perceived because of his race and I will also look at the representation of Barabas's religion in 'The Jew of Malta' how he is portrayed as a Jew and how the other characters are portrayed in opposition to him. 'Othello' was written between 1601 and 1604; it was first performed in 1604 and first published in Quarto form in 1622.

It was not the first play to portray a black character, Shakespeare wrote Aaron, an evil Moor, into Titus Andronicus. Moor's were not uncommon in Britain at the time of the play but they were still seen as second class citizens. 'The Jew of Malta' was written between 1589 and 1591 and first published in 1633. Jews were common in Renaissance literature, often to portray villains, as Jews were not well liked or even allowed in England as well as throughout Europe. A Moor was commonly thought of as a Muslim of North African descent.

Othello is a Moor; he can be represented or seen as exotic, interesting and brave. Othello is a soldier, a General, who has managed to distinguish himself and win respect in the eyes of his superior officers. He is married to a

beautiful young white woman called Desdemona, whose father, Brabantio, disapproves of their marriage; he does not believe Desdemona entered into it willingly and he tries to accuse Othello of using witchcraft to steal his daughter away, but Othello is able to defend himself with the loyalty of his wife and is acquitted.

This shows how Othello through his military achievements has been accepted, however reluctantly, into Venetian society. Brabantio's false accusations of witchcraft may have been because of Othello's race or because of his religion. Othello is a Muslim; Christians did not understand and so feared other religions. Also he is a Moor and so he is a representative of the foreign, unknown lands far away. There is some controversy between critics over whether Othello is a black African or a North African Arab.

Many critics believe it is more likely he was an Arab, as African blacks were more likely to be slaves as it was set at the time of the very beginning of the black African slave trade. 'In the 17th century, racism was an accepted part of public life; people of colour were often thought of as "savage."' (WGBH, 2005). Black Africans were thought of as savage and slaves, whereas Arabs were more commonly merchants or soldiers, they were people educated in poetry and the science from exotic, beautiful and far off places.

As Stephen Greenblatt has pointed out, those critics who have found Othello to be a noble hero are all too often the same ones who declare that he is a pale-skinned Arab, while those who think his actions are beastly are also those who insist that he is a black African. (Othello Representations, 2006) Othello can be seen as savage in the way he deals with his wife, Desdemona,

he is insanely jealous, and murders her without concrete evidence of her infidelity. He is finally told of Desdemona's innocence by Emilia before she is murdered by her own husband, Iago.

He then does the honourable thing by killing himself. Othello's death is a typical Shakespearean romantic death, similar to that of Romeo and Juliet, he kills himself over the death of his wife and dies in her arms. Othello's belief in Iago's lies could be another reason for seeing him as uneducated as or at least less educated than the Europeans in the play. He is an honest man and in his innocence believes other men to be honest as well. (Novelguide, 2001). Iago is supposed to have a reputation of being an honest man; he deceives everyone in the play, even his wife is ignorant of his true nature at first.

Othello does not at all suspect Iago of dishonesty until Emilia, Iago's wife, confesses her formerly unknown part in the deception and Othello has an initial reluctance to distrust Desdemona as there is no evidence to prove she has been unfaithful. Iago's motives for deceiving Othello do not seem to be at all related to his race or religion, but more because of Iago's own jealousy, firstly of Cassio for being made lieutenant instead of him and secondly of Othello because he is married to Desdemona who both Iago and Roderigo had hoped to seduce despite Iago being already married.

He also believes his wife to have been unfaithful to him with both Cassio and Othello. (Muir 1977) Othello's Muslim religion is not commonly referred to in the play, this may be because he may have converted to Christianity when he married Desdemona or this may be because it is not an important factor

in the course of events in the play. In Renaissance England much less was known about Islam than other more common European religions such as Christianity and Judaism. As previously stated it may have been associated with heretics and witchcraft as Brabantio accuses Othello of bewitching Desdemona into marrying him.

These were punishable by death, so it was important that Othello was not found guilty of these crimes. Desdemona's classically Christian faithfulness is shown many times within the play, not only in her innocence of Iago's cruel accusations but her unshaken love for Othello, when she defends him from her father's accusations and also she does not reveal her husband as her murderer even in her dying breath she stays faithful although it is almost obvious that it is him. Anti-Semitism was strong in Elizabethan England.

Most Jewish characters in plays were situated in other countries, Italy or colonial islands, partly for authenticity because Jews were excluded from Britain between 1290 and 1655 and also to emphasise the isolation and alienation of Jews from the British Christians. Also Marlowe's own anti-Semitism is shown in titling the play 'The Jew of Malta' rather than using the character's name, Barabas, as he does on some of his other plays for example 'Tamburlaine' or 'Doctor Faustus'.

Also in the prologue Machevill states the play is 'the tragedy of a Jew,' using 'A Jew' to once again devalue Barabas's individuality. (Emily Bartels, 1999) Barabas is a merchant; this is unusual because Jews were usually usurers, money lenders. Barabas uses his great wealth to trade whereas other Jews just used their money to make more money out of other people. Barabas

can be compared to Shylock in 'The Merchant of Venice' in that; he loves his money most of all and the Jew's daughter converts to Christianity.

Although Barabas shows less love for Abigail than Shylock for Jessica because Barabas kills his daughter with intent and rejoices in her death and the death of those she has joined. 'Barabas: (when asked if he grieves for Abigail) No, but I grieve because she lived so long and born Hebrew, and would become a Christian. 'Barabas is a very controversial character, a villain who seems to enjoy being bad and 'encourages the audience to revel' in his badness (h2g2, no date). We see Ithamore laughing at the death of Mathius and Lodowick and we see Barabas and Ithamore rejoicing at the death of Abigail and the nuns.

His name refers to the bible; Barabas was the murderer who was released in place of Jesus before the crucifixion, so to the predominantly Christian audience at the time this would already have pointed out that this character was not a nice, trustworthy person. All of the other characters apart from Abigail who converts to Christianity and the Turkish Ithamore, Barabas's semi-faithful sidekick are Christian; we do not seem to meet any other Jews although their presence is implied. Ferneze is a knight and the governor of Malta; in the end he plots with the Turkish prince, Calymath, to trick and kill Barabas.

Lodowick, Ferneze's son and his friend Mathias are played off against each other by Barabas for the hand in marriage of his daughter Abigail, he promises her to both of them and as result they kill each other in a duel initiated and orchestrated by Barabas. Two friars Jacomo and Bernardine

fight for Barabas's wealth when he pretends to want to convert to Christianity, before faking his own death. This could be seen as Marlowe's private stab at the Christians for their greed and wealth. Bellamira is prostitute with her pimp, Pilia Borza, which translates literally and quite appropriately as Pick-purse (h2g2, no date).

They plan to rob Barabas, for money, with the help of Ithamore who has fallen in love with Bellamira and subsequently confesses to her all his and Barabas's dirty deeds. Barabas on hearing of this second betrayal by Ithamore, disguised as a French lute player, kills all three of them with a poisoned flower. The character in the prologue, the ghost Machevil from the underworld can be thought to be the spirit of controversial philosopher and 'renaissance villain' Niccolò Machiavelli. Machevil implies in the prologue that Barabas may be his heir or disciple.

He does not explain Machiavelli's whole doctrine in the prologue because it is not needed; it is though that it would be well known and practiced in Elizabethan England. Those aspects that he does mention are the ones used on the play; 'murder by poisoning (Barabas's method of choice), atheism, might over right, ruthlessness and the belief that the ends justifying the means.' (h2g2, no date) and it is shown that those who followed his teaching most closely are the ones that achieved the most in the play.

Barabas fails when he misses key points of Machiavelli's beliefs and it is through this that it is realised at the end that Machevil's real heir is actually Ferneze, the Christian governor of Malta. The Elizabethan audience would have loved Christopher Marlowe and his violent, blood-thirsty play. In

conclusion the representation of race in Othello is ambiguous as we are unsure of his actual race; whether he may be black African or an Arab, there are the stereotypical elements of both, the savage, uneducated elements of an African black and the honourable, heroic elements of the Arab.

This may have been deliberate on Shakespeare's part to perhaps try and portray a more modern view of Othello as the every man but showing him as a Moor to appeal to an Elizabethan audience. This however is highly unlikely. Anyone can be a noble and honourable man, but given the right fuel, like that of an unfaithful wife, that same man can become very savage. Savagery can come out in times of rage and desperation, this I believe is what Othello feels for his wife's supposed adultery and these emotions can override rationality and even love.

Shakespeare likes to explore several varied emotions in his plays, especially love. ' Shakespeare was brilliant at creating absorbing scenarios that drew in crowds and kept their attention. Racial tension in ' Othello' (with a good dose of sexual jealousy) is no small part of the drama that rivets the viewer — in modern as well as Elizabethan times. ' wgbh (2005) The representation of religion in the Jew of Malta is basically the stereotypical Jew being the villain and the Christian being triumphant over him.

The Jew is a bloodthirsty villain who is ultimately damned and comes to a sticky end and Christianity eventually prevails over all. Although it could have been Marlowe's way of showing that although Barabas killed a lot of people the Christians were fighting over who got his money and at the beginning the Jews were stripped of their riches and religion if they did not

obey the order of giving up half their estates so in reality everyone is greedy and materialistic and he sent Barabas to his death just to please the vicious Elizabethan audience.

A bloodthirsty Jew seems to be a common character in renaissance drama what with Barabas and Shylock, there may be more. The only things that make Barabas remotely likeable is the fact that he does not hide his villainy, he knows he is a villain and does not pretend to be anything else, more or less, unlike Ferneze and the other Christians who hide their villainy under ' a cloak of pious respectability', (h2g2, no date).