

Othello by william shakespeare



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Othello: The Tawny Moor In October of 1943, America would witness one of the most celebrated and at the same time, one of the most controversial Broadway debuts of a Shakespearian tragedy that the world would ever know. On stage, holding her frail alabaster physique against his broad ebony chest, the great actor, singer, and activist, Paul Robeson as Othello The Black Moor, would ultimately grieve the desperate pleas of Uta Hagen as the fair Desdemona; claiming her innocence and her last breathe in the dramatic climatic scene of the renowned tragedy. No Black actor had played the Black Moor with such critical acclaim, since the day that Ira Aldridge won rave reviews on a London stage in 1833. After a ten minute standing ovation, followed by an amazing ten curtain calls, the world suddenly returned back as it was. Outdoors, the cool autumn New York City air was tinged for a moment with the melancholy sounds of Billy Holliday belting out her first-hand impression of the ever-present scourge of lynching in the Deep South; painfully echoing through the words of a song she named Strange Fruit. Set in northern Italy during the late sixteen century, William Shakespeare's tragedy has never been able to avoid its powerful racial imagery. Perhaps that is as it was meant to be. However today, in such a multi-cultural and yet arguably still a rather segregated society, it is often difficult for Americans to truly gage racial sensibilities across several centuries and such wide bodies of water. When have we ever been able to gage an honest understanding of the true nature of racism within our own society So it is, that the best that we may hope to do is to put notions of racial antagonism and identity within the proper context of a prominent European city immersed within the waning years of the Italian Renaissance.

Watching from the very first scene, as Iago appears to speak somewhat

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disparagingly of him as - 'The Moor', and Roderigo mocks his 'thick lips', what are we to make of the contemporary attitudes that are actually being alluded to There can be no mistaking the fact that his marriage to the " fair"

Desdemona is repeatedly frowned upon, but wait, notice that no mob seeks to capture Othello and string him to tree. In fact, he is indeed a rather respected military official; in spite of the fact that the Duke makes it clear just who is really in charge. However still, there can be no mistaken his 'otherness'. He is an outsider and a Black man. None of this can this be disputed. But how are we to view what we are witnessing upon this Shakespearean stage

Here perhaps are a few clues. Moorish soldiers are mentioned in battle as early as Livy's History of the Second Punic War (Book 21). Along with Nubians, they were known to have fought gallantly on the side of the Carthaginians, against the armies of Rome from 218-201 AD. In fact, the Moors would own an illustrious history as a conquering army who would occupy and ultimately transform the entire Iberian Peninsula; until that faithful year that Columbus would sail the ocean blue in 1492.

However, this would all begin in the year 711 AD., when the Moorish General Tarik brought with him an army of more than 7000 men crossing from Africa to Gibraltar and into Spain. This would begin an occupation that would ultimately become ingrained within the Mediterranean mind for more than a millennium. The Moors brought with them the knowledge of science and technology; they built libraries, and beautiful cities; they paved thousands of roads, and built thousands of public baths. At a time when 99% of Europe was illiterate, in Cordoba education was universal. They lifted the Mediterranean world out of the Dark Ages. Ultimately, they brought with <https://assignbuster.com/othello-by-william-shakespeare-essay-samples/>

them gunpowder as well; and this would eventually prove to become their downfall.

Othello exists prior to what was only The Second Rise of Europe. Sometimes history is difficult to reconcile, as it has so often been cast simply as a lie agreed upon. To try and view the racist codes self-evident within the Shakespearean drama, from out of the cultural worldview of racism as we know of it today, is akin to applying the actions of a child to an adult. The racism that we have become accustomed to, took centuries of chattel slavery to develop.

Nevertheless, Othello is cast as a man with emotions that almost seem childlike. The swiftness and ease, with which Iago ensnarls him in deceit, would appear to betray his role as a military commander. His jealousy quickly becomes his downfall, and I am even a little bit suspicious, that he is indeed somewhat drawn with characteristics that are actually intended to be mockingly so. Europe would soon begin the Triangular Slave Trade. The conquerors had finally been driven away. In time, the conquered would become the conqueror.

Suggested Reading

Bevington, David Complete Works of Shakespeare. Longman Pub. 6 edition

July

2008

Duberman, Martin Paul Robeson A Biography Knopf 1st edition February

1989

Lane-Poole, Stanley The Story of the Moors in Spain Kessinger Publishing July

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Livy Hannibal's First Campaign in Italy Macmillan & Company 1879 Original

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Harvard University. Digitized April 27, 2007