

Oedipus and othello: tragic figures of manipulated destinies

Literature



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Oedipus and Othello: Tragic Figures of Manipulated Destinies For Othello and Oedipus, the future was written by the manipulations of others according to their desires to control the outcome of events. For Oedipus, his father was trying to avoid a prophesy by being proactive in killing his son before he could grow to commit the acts foretold. For Othello, he was in the hands of a manipulating villain who wished to see Othello come to harm. As Iago betrays the trust that Othello has put into him, Othello has bent to his whim, becoming mad with the version of the 'truth' that he has been led to believe. Both Othello and Oedipus have found themselves on journeys that they would never have taken willingly, but they both had destinies that defied their honorable natures, leading to tragic ends. In comparing Othello and Oedipus, one primary difference in their characterization must be noted. Othello is a man who is not within his own country and is somewhat defined by his 'otherness'. Othello is a Moor, his character reflecting a sense of the exotic to the audience for which it was intended. An example of his 'otherness' can be observed in the handkerchief that he gives to Desdemona. He says of it "'Tis true, there's magic in the web of it:/A sibyl, that had number'd in the world/The sun to make two hundred compasses,/In her prophetic fury sew'd the work;/The worms were hallow'd that did breed the silk, And it was dyed in mummy, which the skilful/Conserve of maiden's hearts.'" (Othello II. 4. 67-73). In setting the importance of the handkerchief, he is revealing a mystery that he has brought with him from his homeland and is defining an outside influence on the tragic end. Because Othello is displaced and in a country that is not his own, Shakespeare makes a point of addressing his sexuality when Othello assures the senate that it is not

because of desire that he is in support of Desdemona coming with him. Andrews states that “ Othello, we are told, knows Moors are considered lustful, and consciously tries to “ side-step” such an imputation” (277). Andrews goes on to contend, however, that this is a part of Othello’s “ lack of self-knowledge” and in entering into the events that will lead to the tragedy, it is his inability to understand himself that contributes to his downfall. This is also reflected in the circumstances that Oedipus faces as he has no knowledge of his history. According Hathorn, Oedipus does not recognize his position in the human condition as he exhibits a failure to see that not everything is a riddles to be solved, but that “ some are mysteries not to be solved at all, but to be coped with by the engagement, active or passive, of the whole self” (225). Both Othello and Oedipus fail to approach their circumstances through faith, but are driven towards their end without recognizing their ‘self’. For Othello, it is his lack of faith in Desdemona that contributes to his downfall. Schwartz calls her “ Othello’s ‘ divinity’ and a warmly human creature”, representing a duality of nature. It is the destruction of his faith in her that leads to his activated tragedy, having more faith in the handkerchief which becomes a symbol of betrayal. In this shift is seen the shift from the mystical which requires faith, to the tangible which can deceive. Oedipus moves forward in faith, but his faith is misplaced. He believes that he has constructed his own destiny, but finds that he is a victim of fate. Where Othello has actively participated in the dark end of his fate, Oedipus is a victim. As Othello goes to take his own life, he tries to lay blame of his actions on something outside of himself, where Oedipus takes upon himself a sin that he did not commit and condemns

himself. Oedipus says “Thou Light, never again/May I behold thee, I in the eyes of men /Made naked, how from sin my being grew, /In sin I wedded and in sin I slew (Sophocles and Murray 71). As Oedipus suggests that he has sinned, he is implying moral guilt and thereby implying that he has committed some crime, all of which he has not done. Where Othello has committed a crime and behaved outside of moral integrity and tries to find blame somewhere else, Oedipus has been a victim of fate yet blames himself for the events that have placed him in despair. Kendall states that for Aristotle, the perfect hero “should lie between the two extremes of perfect uprightness and utter villainy” (195). Both Othello and Oedipus lay between these extremes with Othello slid somewhat more towards villainy in his madness and the act of murder, where Oedipus is slid more towards uprightness as he so deeply feels the shame of the death of his father and the incestuous marriage to his mother. Both characters are victims of manipulation, Othello by those of Iago and Oedipus by those of his father, Laius. However, neither one was a passive victim, each pursuing their ends as much as being driven towards them. Works Cited Andrews, Michael C. Honest Othello: The Handkerchief Once More. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. 13. 2 (Spring 1973): 273-284. Print. Hathorn, Richmond Y. The Existential Oedipus. *The Classical Journal*. 53. 5 (February 1958): 223-230. Print. Kendall, Guy. The Sin of Oedipus. *The Classical Review*. 25. 7 (November 1911): 195- 197. Print. Schwartz, Elias. Stylistic ‘Impurity’ and the Meaning of Othello. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. 10. 2 (Spring 1970): 297-313. Print. Shakespeare, William, and Tommaso Salvini. *Othello: A Tragedy in Five Acts*. New York: G. F. Nesbitt & Co, 1873. Print.

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