

To be in the world but
not of the world: aye,
there's the rub

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



Othello is a man of action. Hamlet is a man of inaction. If Hamlet were placed in Othello's world and vice versa one could assume that both would function well in those circumstances. Othello is a man of action in a play that demands his hesitation and thought. Hamlet is a philosopher in a situation that asks him to act. The resultant drama of both plays is that neither character reacts tidily to their situations. The fact that both plays also end in tragedy may mean that neither choice of conduct is ideal. Hamlet and Othello represent the extremes of thoughtful inaction and thoughtless violence, respectively. To their detriment, both characters adhere to the logic of their world. Despite their protagonists' differences, Hamlet and Othello have much in common. Both plays deal with the betrayal of a loved one and the protagonists' responses to that betrayal. The betrayals are similar in that they involve female characters in the play and the question of their supposed infidelities. Both plays also make references to ears, hearing, and the possibility of deception in speech. Ultimately, both plays demand that their main characters be something they are not. The texts push the characters to act and react in ways that are contrary to their natural habits. The challenge for both Hamlet and Othello is to accept those demands by stepping outside their constructs. The problem is that neither is able to transcend the logic of their world to successfully avert tragedy. Othello is not a character prone to philosophizing. Neither is he the "barbarian" Iago dubs him. Othello presents its main character as a courageous soldier, a loving husband, and a respected statesman. The one thing he is not is a critical thinker. On the contrary, his lack of thought is glaringly obvious. Iago too easily convinces him and Othello too quickly acts on those doubts of

Desdemona's faithfulness. He has the skills to "love deeply" and fight bravely, yet those tools do not help him in the end. The text seems intent on portraying him as a thick-headed fool, all brawn and no brain. Hamlet is presented as a courtier and a scholar. He is not a valiant warrior, yet he lives in the shadow of his father, a celebrated war hero. When the Ghost of his father comes to tell him to avenge his death, he is dressed in his military garb. Hamlet the philosopher must confront his inadequacy as a soldier in the same way that Othello the soldier reveals his inadequacy as a philosopher. Othello oozes with agency. He has a depth and intensity that separates him from the rest of the characters in the play. That depth is intricately tied to his history as a warrior. His history in battles gives him a sense of self. His actions redeem him when faced with adversary. Othello has confidence that comes with the knowledge of respect well won. When Iago tells him that Brabantio speaks against him, Othello self-assuredly replies, "Let him do his spite;/ My services, which I have done the signiory,/ Shall out-tongue his complaints." (1. 2. 17-19) Othello's calm signifies his security in his own nobility. He knows that his "services" validate him in the world of Venetian nobles. In the economy of honor in the play Othello has banked enough to withstand attacks on his character. The only tools he has to "out-tongue" Brabantio are not words, but a lauded history of actions. Those experiences form his narrative. His ability to shape his own narrative, to be in control of the story of his past are what Desdemona finds so appealing. Though in his own words Othello is "little blest with the soft phrase of peace" he redeems himself by telling his "unvarnished tale." He is in control of his own narrative; his past speaks for him in ways that lucid pontificating

can not. Desdemona and Brabantio value him for what he has done and what he can do. They “questioned me the story of my life/ From year to year ? the battles, sieges, fortunes/ That I have passed.” (1. 3. 130) Othello’s person is the sum whole of those experiences. The story of his life is the story of military accomplishments and exotic locales. His tale is clear and “unvarnished” by complexities and complications. Not only does he display mastery of his life through narrative; the narrative itself is testament to his action. If Othello’s self-narrative is clear and untarnished, Hamlet’s is fraught with contradiction and inconsistency. This is obvious when Hamlet promises the Ghost that he will avenge his father’s death. He declares that he will wipe away all trivial fond records, All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past That youth and observation copied there, And thy commandment all alone shall live Within the book and volume of my brain. (1. 5. 99-103) He so easily wipes away the years of grooming, training, and formal education that has prepared him for a life in court society. Yet he can only process his conduct using the language of education and civil society. He replaces “fond records” and “books” with a commandment that will exist in the “book” of his brain. His language belies his purpose. If he were to really replace his revenge for culture, he would not need to articulate it. Violence implies a rejection of speech; the act speaks for itself. His commitment to avenge his father’s murder is therefore problematic. Contained within his promise of violence is allegiance to culture and civility. In his eagerness to appease his father’s Ghost he swears whole-heartedly in the only way he knows how ? by referring to the “book” of his brain. The only way he can express true resolve is by offering the power of his mind. The point of this promise is that

it should be translated into action, not thought. Hamlet's promise of revenge contains a contradiction in content and in practice. Not only does he rename the violence promised as a "commandment" to be contained within a book, he also refutes the promise as he is making it. He is talking to a Ghost, a representation of the past. This is a past that retells itself until it is resolved. The Ghost's narrative is one that begs to be retold and remembered, echoed in the Ghost's request of "Remember me." In the same breath that Hamlet vows revenge, he wipes away "all forms, all pressures past." Included in those "pressures past" is the memory of his father. He is telling the representation of his father's past that he will wipe away any record of that past. His promise is then meaningless. This speech, articulating whole-hearted allegiance to the Ghost, is filled with conflicting ideas. Hamlet's idea of his self-narrative could not be more confusing. The intellectual grooming of his past is so distasteful to him that he rejects it and starts anew. He replaces his narrative of books and records with a narrative of revenge. But the logic of his promise collapses in on itself when examined closely. He thinks that he needs to wipe away the past in order to memorialize it. Hamlet actually does want to memorialize the Ghost in a meaningful way. The irony is that when attempting to narrate his decision, Hamlet's speech is thoughtful yet lacks clarity of thought. Despite the pitfalls of thinking too much, Hamlet is confined by his thoughts, whereas Othello is unencumbered by the shackles of thought. The text repeatedly uses the word "free" when describing him. Othello tells Iago after he has emphasized his love for Desdemona and is about to face Brabantio's anger that, "I would not my unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine/ For the sea's

worth." (1. 2. 26). He asserts the value he places on his freedom and his resolve to not let the views of others "circumscribe and confine" him. And when Othello asks that Desdemona accompany him to war he wants only "to be free and bounteous to her mind." (1. 3. 266) Their relationship is built on the foundation of free minds. Othello loves his freedom and enjoys the freedom that loving Desdemona affords him. Given that Othello is a former slave, it makes sense that his sense of freedom is important to him. He has earned his freedom, further underscoring his sense of independence. Othello embodies the freedom to act that Hamlet lacks. If, for Hamlet "Denmark is a prison," then for Othello Venice is a place where he can assert his autonomy as a decorated soldier. He is not bound by the hesitation and thrust towards constant reflection that plagues Hamlet throughout the play. Iago picks up on this aspect of Othello's character and uses it against him. "The Moor is of a free and open nature/ That thinks men honest that but seem to be so," (1. 3. 397-398) remarks Iago after the ordeal with the senate. Iago understands that Othello's "free and open nature" leave him susceptible to the suggestion of betrayals. Othello's freedom also encompasses freedom from thought. His mind is free and open in that he does not have fixed notions about the characters of others. He simply thinks those honest that "seem to be so." Once those individuals no longer "seem to be" honest, Othello's world breaks down. Even when convincing Othello of Desdemona's unfaithfulness Iago stresses his allegiance to Othello's sense of autonomy. "I would not have your free and noble nature/ Out of self-bounty be abused," (3. 3. 202-3) Iago says in an effort to allay Othello's fears. He creates a situation of dependence by underscoring Othello's "free nature" in

assessing these matters. Othello is too free and generous with his affections; he needs Iago to protect him from the abuse of others. Iago also alludes to Othello's "free nature" because he knows Othello possesses the liberty to take action when resolved. Othello's freedom to act prevents him from stopping to think; he values his agency too much to allow for a moment of reflection. Othello's mistake is that he looks to Iago for thought. As a man of action, he has little confidence in his deductive capabilities and is therefore susceptible to the nagging doubts Iago plants in him. The scene where Iago starts to convince Othello of Desdemona's disloyalty is a volley of "thoughts." Oth: What does thou think? Iago: Think, my lord? Oth: Think, my lord! By heaven thou echo'st me As if there were some monster in thy thought To hideous to be shown? If thou dost love me Show me thy thought. Iago: My, lord you know I love you. Oth: I think thou dost. (3. 3. 106-20) Othello is begging Iago to share his thoughts. He looks to Iago to process information for him. He has so little confidence in his own ability to think things through and thus appeals to his best friend for that. If Othello has no faith in his own thoughts he is justified in this? This passage demonstrates his flawed thinking. Iago clearly does not love him, yet Othello "thinks" he does. If Iago needed anymore evidence that Othello is easily fooled, he receives it in this scene. By asking Iago to "show" his thoughts, Othello confesses to lacking mental acuity. Any "thinking" that Othello does have is useless because it is so obviously mistaken. The text constructs Othello as an actor and not a thinker. The moment that he alludes to his thinking process is the moment when Othello reveals his true weakness. Hamlet's initial resort to violence, like Othello's display of thinking, works to worsen

his situation. The scene where he kills Polonius is the one time where he gives into his violent impulse and acts impetuously. This act of uninhibited violence is also one of absolute clumsiness. The image of Hamlet stabbing through the arras, ignorant of his target, trying to convince himself it is Claudius when there is no possibility that it could be Claudius since he has just left him in another room, is so emblematic of his enterprise. When Hamlet does resort to violence, he stabs into the darkness, ungracefully killing, and not fulfilling his purpose. Killing Polonius also works against him in that he commits the injustice towards Laertes that Hamlet himself is trying to avenge. He perpetuates the cycle of violence and undeserved death that he rails against at every opportunity. Hamlet's first moment of action equalizes him with Claudius; he becomes that which he hates. Hamlet wants to prove his mettle as a warrior of justice, but he cannot break so easily from the "glass of fashion and the mould of form." When he does attempt to act against his natural inclinations, he accomplishes nothing. Even when both characters do what they are accustomed to, it does not help their situations. Hamlet's philosophizing is his way of decoding and revealing the political truths of the court. In Hamlet's circuitous approaches to the act of revenge is the constant presence of a fruitless endeavor to address Claudius's sins by talking about them. His pontificating never leads to a resolve; rather it serves to stultify the action. He can never openly acknowledge the evil he knows Claudius has committed. Hamlet is verbally castrated; he is free to soliloquize, but only in a limited capacity. He can never address the issue through speech, yet for most of the play that is his choice of defense. Philosophizing becomes a comfortable position for

Hamlet. It validates his inadequacy to act. The one scene when Othello displays his ability to maintain resolve and carry out his purpose, is the moment when he should be acting against his nature. When he kills Desdemona he maintains a stoic determination to kill her no matter how much she professes her innocence. At first he seems loathe to kill her, the only thing working in Desdemona's favor is Othello's residual feelings of love for her. Yet those emotional attachments can not sway his decision that "She must die, else she'll betray more men." He has already decided on her guilt, and all he knows is his commitment to his own decision. This is the moment where the text begs Othello to listen, to stop, and to think.

Desdemona herself asks him to "have mercy" on her. She asks him to be the arbiter of something he is not capable of; she wants him to be something beyond himself. Othello's confrontation with his tragic loss is simple. As Emilia enters the room Othello reasons, "If she come in, she'll sure speak to my wife. My wife, my wife! What wife? I have no wife." In this statement Othello's simplistic thought process is displayed. In the same moment of realization is the simultaneous acceptance of a new reality. The desperation of the second "my wife" is matched only by the calm resignation of the truth "I have no wife." He is a man accustomed to war and violence; the death of his wife garners a second cry and is ultimately met with the resolution of his despair. In the same way that Hamlet is confined to thinking his way through the world, Othello is resigned to acting his way to a resolution. When these characters step out of their usual modes of behavior is the point where they display their inability to function successfully within their worlds. Hamlet would never ask anyone to share their thoughts; he is too satisfied and too

involved with his own pontificating to access the ideas of others. Othello would never delay avenging a dead father the way Hamlet does; he lacks the capacity for reflection that causes Hamlet to delay. The tragedy is that they remain stuck in the logic of their respective worlds. When they do break out of their individual world views they are unable to do so effectively. It's interesting to think how well both characters would work if they could switch worlds but the truth is that they can not. They are only offered the opportunity to remain in their worlds and function according to their nature. They have no choice but to accept the challenge of the text, yet they are doomed from the start because of their character construction. The message of those plays, when examined in light of their protagonists' constructive differences is that one should aim for a unity of thought and action that is neither extreme.