

Scout Carter

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI

Educator: Karen Leland-Libby

Category: Critical Essay

Othello in the wake of Black Lives Matter: Is It Still Possible?

Othello in the wake of Black Lives Matter: Is It Still Possible?

Breyonna Taylor, Jacob Blake, George Floyd. These are all names that have come to the light of the public in the wake of growing protests against police brutality. As the world discusses what those people and countless others left behind them, one other name is starting to be included in these conversations: Othello. Written somewhere in the early 1600s by William Shakespeare, this tragedy of the same name depicts the life of a black soldier manipulated into killing his wife and himself by his white colleague. Of course, there is much more nuance to this story, but when the plot is stripped to its bare bones, there lies a clear sense of the racial implications that exist within its structure that must be addressed (and quite frankly, should've been addressed sooner). There are many perspectives to this argument, from considering the time period it was written in, or how the play was written by a white man for a white actor. If the play is going to be produced in today's world, there are a few key things one must bear in mind. While it is possible for study and or production of Othello to be considered an act of Anti-Racism, for the use of the play to fit that description, those working with it must not only acknowledge the racism that exists within the show, but they must also allow black people to have their voices heard, and begin to break down the majority-white ideals that hold together these classical pieces.

While it's hard to get a complete consensus among those in the academic community, there are many aspects of *Othello* that exhibit at least the idea of racism. Most times, the racist language comes from Iago, from his constant use of animal imagery, "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe," (1.1.97), to his much more direct ways of referencing Othello as something inhuman:

"As, to be bold with you,
Not to affect many proposèd matches
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Whereto we see in all things nature tends—
Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural..." (3.3.268-273)

What Iago states here is that Desdemona's love for Othello was completely against the laws of nature, referencing her skin tone almost immediately in his speech, also mentioning that any color of skin unlike it is abnormal to the rest of the world. These are just a few instances from one character, many of the other characters frequently refer to Othello as "the Moor" rather than his ranking (as the white officials are, for example, Cassio being referenced to as the Lieutenant). These are just a few indications of the level of racism that clearly exists in this show. If this is to be considered, 'just a show about soldiers', as some people put it, why must Othello's race be brought up and typically degraded in almost every scene? Why can't Othello be called his official name of General by his colleagues, rather than consistently being named Moor, even by those who are beneath him in rank? Clearly, Shakespeare's language is shedding negative light on those who were of a different color than him.

However, to truly understand the racism of the show, one must also consider the time period that Shakespeare was writing in. Africans had already entered the world of the Europeans when Othello was written and had almost certainly crossed paths with Shakespeare. Historian and Professor Ayanna Thompson, in a chat with the Oxford Press, states, "In terms of a little historical background, we know that there were a few Africans used as court servants and slaves...there were a few Africans in the postmodern period and clearly, Shakespeare was aware of the kind of global expanding world around him..." (Shakespeare and Race, 0:28). It's clear here that the Bard was

aware of those with a different skin tone, and that many of them filled the positions of the lower or inferior classes in his society. The language in the play also demonstrates that, while the play does take place in Venice and not England, the characters are familiar with people of Othello's race as well:

"O, thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter?
Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her...
Whether a maid so tender, fair, and happy...
Would ever have, t' incur a general mock,
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight!" (1.2.80-90)

These lines, said by the father in law of Othello, clearly demonstrate that not only do the people within the play have their own preconceived notions about Moors, but push harsh stereotypes on them as well, like the idea that Othello has put Desdemona under a spell. Would Brabantio truly believe that a white suitor of Desdemona's would charm her? He certainly doesn't imply that of Roderigo, who is much more of a nuisance and annoyance to Desdemona according to Brabantio himself. We learn later in the play Brabantio has even formed a good working relationship with Othello, something it is obvious he doesn't have with Roderigo or any of the other white courtiers of Desdemona. Through this passage, we get a definite idea of what the other characters in this play perceive about Othello's character and actions based solely on his race.

How might Shakespeare himself have seen these people, those who had a skin tone so drastically different from his own?

Professor and scholar Farah Karim-Cooper explains in her article, "Anti Racist Shakespeare," "The early moderns would have inherited their ideas about the values of white and black from a range of sources: artists manuals that describe the nature and symbolism of colour; poetry of the classical and medieval periods that praised ideals of whiteness...and religious painting – portraits and frescoes – that emphasized the shimmering divine light of God or Christ and the darkened complexions of devils, demons and death," (Karim-Cooper). Karim-Cooper's point is that not only would Shakespeare have known of people of color in his society, but he would have also been heavily influenced by the idea that darkness or blackness was inherently bad, based on the ideals of the world around him. Almost more importantly, his audience would have been well aware of this phenomenon as well. If one thing is known about Shakespeare, it's that he knew how to play to his audience, clearly demonstrated in the drinking scene of Act II of *Othello*, where Iago credits Englishmen as the best drinkers out there:

"I learned it in England, where indeed they are
most potent in potting. Your Dane, your German,
and your swag-bellied Hollander—drink, ho!—are
nothing to your English," (2.3.79-82).

This speech is important because it's evident that Shakespeare wrote not only blatantly racist references to Othello in his show, but also continuously praised those who were of his own race, not only in the sense of being white but also in the nationalistic pride of being an Englishman. He catered directly to his audience and fed the fire of racist ideals towards people of color, black and African people especially, in this time period. He silenced those who were actually of that race and perpetuated the stereotypes that surrounded them.

Now that it's clear that Shakespeare would have had racist inclinations, and that the play includes incredibly racist language, how do we use the show to promote against what it clearly includes within its borders? The first way that this process must begin is by amplifying the voices of black people who feel targeted by the way Othello is portrayed. Actor and playwright Keith Hamilton Cobb speculated on this in an interview with Stephen Greenblatt, referencing his own experiences, "...I realized very quickly that there was a gatekeeper there too. You can play Othello...you're right for that. Hamlet, you're not so right for...I've never played the role... it's huge and problematic in so many ways...all but one, and that one I was fired because I brought too many of my ideas of who this character was...I said 'Wouldn't I know who the black guy is? Wouldn't I know how he feels, how he behaves a little bit better than you?'" (A Conversation on American Moor, 1:24) What Cobb implies here is that not only is he typically limited to Othello when being considered for classical parts (even when he might not be able to play the part well), but that he also feels as if white directors he's worked with have silenced his voice, presuming that they know more about what Othello might have experienced than an actual person of color. When that experience is examined with what we know about the history of when *Othello* was written, one thing is clear; both in today's world and back in the postmodern period, white people would never completely understand the experience of black people in society. I know that I will never understand what it feels like to read sections of the play like this, where Brabantio refers to Othello and Desdemona's love:

"And she, in spite of nature,
Of years, of country, credit, everything,

To fall in love with what she feared to look on!
It is a judgment maimed and most imperfect
That will confess perfection so could err
Against all rules of nature..." (1.3.114-119).

Brabantio basically says here that Desdemona is too pure to fall in love with something so vile to look at (a clear reference to Othello's complexion). In fact, he directly references it as against the laws of nature for the two to be in love, circling back to the idea that Othello must be controlling Desdemona and enchanting her into being with him. This is the kind of language that might make it hard for an actor of color to approach this show, as it is almost unabashedly the degradation of those who aren't white. Therefore, when one is attempting to stage or study *Othello*, to continue to produce it under the umbrella of Anti-Racism, they must consider the voices of those who have experienced what it is like to be marginalized in such a way that relates to your race, in a way that is completely unique to those that are not white. Only then can we continue to delve deeper into the study and direction of *Othello*.

Another thing that must be considered when approaching *Othello* is how the language is interpreted and how one combats the language within the play. Many spaces, as Cobb mentioned, are dominated by white people trying to 'make a difference.' We exist in a world inherently white (not quite unlike that of the Bard's time), making it incredibly difficult for people of color to feel welcome within spaces overwhelmingly whitewashed. The idea that white ideologies are superior even finds their way into the play itself, such as when the Duke of Venice says, "If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black," (1.3.330-331). What the duke is basically saying here is that Othello should be considered 'one of the good ones', if you will, as his demeanor and behavior adhere to the white standard. This concept is something that actors of color still struggle with daily. Actor and director Elliot Barnes Worrell describes in an interview at the Globe how theatrical spaces can change to begin to include black people into these spaces, without making the person of color in the room feel like a token, "It can't just be a situation where you color something black. Where you invite in a black director and have black actors on the stage, and they are under the tyranny of white supremacy to perform a play that if they were white would be no different. You have to... allow us freely to see where this language fits within us. Not with the tyranny of someone looking over us, the overseer being like 'this is how it fits in here, you have to wear these clothes, these are the rules.' It's about reimagining that space and reclaiming it, and if Shakespeare is this thing we have to do... we have to figure out a way in which we feel safe," (Globe Theatre London's Shakespeare and Race festival, 6:08). In other words, spaces have been so long overwhelmingly dominated by white people, and to begin to fully immerse people of color into productions and artistic settings without it being performative, you actually have to give those people space to see how the words and circumstances affect them. You have to allow for their thoughts, feelings, and voices to be heard. You have to acknowledge that there are things you cannot understand about their experience, and a way that a play is written might strike something in them that you will never fully understand. To truly be able to look at *Othello* under the lens of Anti-Racism, the world has to start dismantling the white normalcy that erases black people who don't "fit the mold" and start allowing them to examine these 'classic' shows, and give their opinions the energy they deserve to be getting.

Many people, even historians, say that *Othello* can't be looked at under the lens of Anti-Racism, because the play is much more deeply rooted in other ideals, like the behavior of soldiers rather than the juxtaposition of the behaviors of two races. Iago even seems to state at the beginning of the show what his true motive is:

"Three great ones of the city,
In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,
Off-capped to him...
I know my price, I am worth no worse a place...says he,
"I have already chose my officer."
And what was he?
Forsooth, a great arithmetician,
One Michael Cassio, a Florentine..." (1.1.9-21).

It seems clear that Iago is much more enraged by the idea that he was passed up for the promotion to lieutenant after years of service. However, while it does seem evident that Iago's reasons for his sabotage are not rooted in race, that does not mean the play shouldn't be examined under the light of Anti-Racism. There is far too much racist terminology and references not only for an audience member to ignore, but for an actor of color not to acknowledge and have certain feelings about. Ayanna Thompson continued her segment saying, "... many more have found it a quite powerful role for them and for their careers. But many of them have to do a kind of mental calculus about how to make sense of playing the role," (Shakespeare and Race, 2:15). While Thompson does go on to discuss actors who choose to work around or ignore the racial aspects of this show, it's also clear that many actors have struggled

with how to interpret the role, and how to deal with the way that a black man is portrayed by his white playwright. While it is possible to study this show without the lens of Anti-Racism, in this time that the world is currently in, it would be a blatant disregard of the heavily offensive language that exists in the show, and how we have to interpret this language in the lens of our modern interpretation of race.

The world is finally beginning to acknowledge (and in the right way) the hardships that people of color face in our predominantly white society. One major aspect of this is dismantling the classics we are so fond of that degrade those who the works were built upon. Shakespeare is not, and cannot be exempt from this. As we continue discussions on how to create a much more actively Anti-Racist World, figuring out how to look at the Bard's work through this lens is key. By listening to black voices and making them feel welcome and heard, we can begin this process.