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Anti-Racism and Othello

At the core of William Shakespeare's *Othello*, the play is all about opposites: animal versus man, devil versus angel, and dark versus light. In the modern-day study and production of *Othello*, it is difficult to separate the current polarization of our world from that of Othello's especially in terms of race. In Shakespeare's time, the concept of race was very different from ours today, but that does not mean that there were no prejudices towards outsiders like Othello. Lightness or whiteness was praised as it represented purity, chastity, and divinity. The antithesis of Desdemona's whiteness is Othello's blackness. This is why many of the characters in the play see Desdemona and Othello's relationship to be an "error of nature." As a result, Othello's insecurities about his race make him all the more suspicious of Desdemona cheating on him with his subordinate, Cassio.

Written in the early 1600s, *Othello* has an undoubtedly racist premise, but that does not mean that it cannot be used as an act of anti-racism in 2020. Movies, plays, ballets, and operas have all been inspired by the play's central themes. However, *Othello* contains lines within it that propagate negative feelings towards marginalized groups. These lines should be left out in live productions. On the other hand, the play should be studied in its entirety in a classroom setting because it gives the opportunity for students to have multiple interpretations of the text and discussions about the relevance of race with Othello as a main character.

Understanding the historical context of *Othello* is crucial if the play is to be performed and taught as a form of anti-racism. Five years ago, the Royal Shakespeare Company held a debate about *Othello* and race where historian and author Onyeka Nubia argued that the play was not racist. He explains, "That English people in Tudor society did not understand what race was" (Royal Shakespeare Company, 4:09-4:32). Nubia goes on to elaborate that what we now view as nationalities, French or Italian, would have been considered their own race in Shakespeare's time. This is why Othello's race is never specifically mentioned. To Shakespeare's audience, a Moor could refer to a person from North Africa, the Middle East, or even a muslim. Provided with this context, the typical interpretation of Othello as a black man can vary.

Additionally, black and white had specific meanings apart from racial identity as they were used in Shakespeare's writing. In her article published by *Shakespeare's Globe*, Professor Farah Karmin-Cooper examines the racial meanings behind the language of light and dark used in Shakespeare's England ("Anti-racist Shakespeare"). Karmin-Cooper goes on to talk about how whiteness was associated with good or virtue and was placed above blackness. These notions created a sense of "self" and "other" for scholars of color like herself reading work that was intended for white actors and audience members. Since Shakespeare's audience is no longer limited in this way, it is important to leave out language within *Othello* that could make certain groups feel alienated.

Examining various perspectives on *Othello* can be helpful in determining which parts of the play experts view to be racist. In addition, the analysis of specific lines can allow readers to better understand how the antithesis of black and white is used to develop Othello's character throughout the play. An example of this comes in the First Act when the Duke is speaking to Desdemona's father about Othello, "If virtue no delighted beauty lacks, your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (*Othello* 1. 3.330-331). This quote is an example of a backwards compliment Othello receives. Othello is not fair, but because of his valors of war, he is treated with respect. To call him black would be an unwarranted putdown that the Duke feels he does not deserve.

Another instance of dark and light language returns when Othello reflects on his decision regarding Desdemona's guilt, "Her name, that was as fresh as Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black as mine own face" (*Oth.* 3.3.441-

443). In this passage, Othello is comparing his blackness to the lack of innocence which Desdemona's name now possesses. Black is used as a derogatory term in this case, but it carries with it a deeper meaning because it is his own face Othello is referring to. This gives the audience an impression that his innocence is already gone and Othello viewed Desdemona's purity as a precious jewel which is now lost.

These quotes from *Othello* have been interpreted in various ways by scholars, historical figures, activists, and actors. Gary Taylor does an excellent job highlighting these contrasting perspectives in the introduction to his book *New Oxford Shakespeare*. Taylor writes, "In 2016, undergraduate English majors at Yale University petitioned to eliminate the monopoly of 'white male poets' (including Shakespeare) in a compulsory English course" ("Is Shakespeare racist?"). Later on in the article, Taylor returns to his main question and provides us with well-known figures, Frederick Douglass and Nelson Mandela, who believed Shakespeare's work was not racist and worth studying.

On the spectrum of those who believe that Shakespeare's work is not racist, most will argue that *Othello* should remain uncensored in all productions. Proponents of this, nevertheless, should consider what it would feel like for a modern day audience member of color to hear the vulgar, racial slurs that are present throughout the play. In Act 1, Iago refers to Othello as the "old black ram tuppung your white ewe" (*Oth.* 1.1.97-98). Then, in Othello's final monologue, he says, "Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away richer than all his tribe" (*Oth.* 5.2.407-408). To leave these lines in the play would continue to propagate the historical trauma that people of color have been subjected to. This would also fail to forward the positive ideals of anti-racism which we hope to uphold as a society.

In many recent productions of *Othello*, directors and actors have altered the play to make it feel more inclusive. The debate Onyeka Nubia was part of for the Royal Shakespeare Company included actors Hugh Quarshire and Lucian Msamati. Lucian Msamati, a black man, starred as Iago in the theatre company's 2015 production. Having actors of color play Othello and Iago changes Shakespeare's discriminatory narrative of a white man succeeding in manipulating a black man. This casting decision makes it so that race is no longer the primary concern of *Othello*. Iago's motive for ruining Othello and Desdemona's relationship is open to interpretation in this scenario because Iago shares more in common with Othello and potentially sees him as a rival for those reasons.

Anti-racism can be defined as acting against racism with the hopes of ending it through conscious group or individual effort. Something that makes this definition so accurate is that it includes the word "effort." *Othello* is not racist at its heart as the main themes of jealousy, insecurity, humanity can be considered universal. However, *Othello* contains lines within it that are racist and propagate harmful feelings towards marginalized groups. It would take effort to change the status-quo and leave parts of *Othello* out in major productions, but it is what needs to be done. The play can and should be studied in its entirety in a classroom setting, yet again with an emphasis on the relevance of it to anti-racism today.