



SHAKESPEARE'S THEATRE

WORKSHEET 5: *OTHELLO* (c. 1604)

I. *Othello* and the Early Modern Context

1. Do you think race is important in *Othello*, and do you agree with A.C. Bradley's claim that "in regard to the essentials of his character it is not important" (1992, p. 159), because Shakespeare did not have a "historical mind" (p. 159)? What view of tragedy do Bradley's words imply? Choose two examples from the play where you may see, instead, that Shakespeare insists on Othello's skin colour as a marker of difference.

2. What did Venice stand for in the early modern period, and why do you think Shakespeare chose to set the play there? Acts II-V of the play, instead, are set in the island of Cyprus. Read pp. lx-lxii of McAlindon's "Introduction" (2015). Where was Cyprus located and what was its significance in the early modern period, according to him? Bearing this in mind, why do you think Shakespeare chose Cyprus as the place where Othello and Desdemona's tragedy unfolds?

3. In "Racial Discourse: Black and White" (1994), Virginia M. Vaughan offers an account of different narratives which contributed to the construction of Otherness in early modern times. What writings about 'other worlds' existed at the time, and what was blackness associated with in these writings? How were black characters portrayed on stage, and is *Othello* different in this respect?

II. Venice: Providentialism, State and Family

1. In what terms is Othello described by different characters in act I, scene i, before he appears on stage? What common prejudices against the Other are reflected in their words? From this point of view, does *Othello*, as a whole, support this kind of racial discourse, or rather, does the play question such expectations and dominant discourse of the time?

2. How does Othello react to Brabantio's accusations in I, ii (ll. 17-32 and 57-91)? Does Othello's behaviour here support or contradict the way he is described by Brabantio, Iago and Roderigo at the start of the play and what implications does this have? Read pp. xxv-xxvi of McAlindon's "Introduction". What qualities does he observe in Othello and why, do you think, is it important that he is presented in this light? Now watch the opening scene of Oliver Parker's cinematic adaptation of *Othello* (1995). Do you think the film offers a positive or negative initial presentation of Othello?

3. How does the Duke react to Othello's 'tale' in I, iii, after Othello recounts how he won Desdemona's love (l. 170)? Does the Duke support Brabantio as he expects to be supported? How do you explain the contrast between Brabantio's and the Duke's reactions to Othello and Desdemona's marriage, as well as regarding the language they use to refer to Othello?

III. Othello and Desdemona at the Senate

1. What, do you think, does Greenblatt mean when he claims that, in his speeches at the senate in I, iii, Othello "comes dangerously close to recognizing his status as a text" (1980, p. 238), and that he submits to "narrative self-fashioning" (1980, p. 244-245)? Why do you think Othello may conceive his life as a story, and what implications does this have for the whole play?

2. Look at Brabantio's speeches in I, iii. What angers him in particular about Othello's and Desdemona's actions? What does he claim Othello has done to Desdemona, and what conventional, dominant notions about women and black men reflect in Brabantio's words? Now read Desdemona's speeches to the senate (ll. 178-274). How, do you think, do her responses to the Duke challenge Brabantio's portrait of her in ll. 94-98, as well as conventional, early modern views on women?

3. How would you interpret Desdemona's "divided duty" speech in ll. 178-187? Do you see the speech as expressing submission or disobedience to her father's authority? Why? Can it be claimed that she is taking advantage of a contradiction in the dominant ideology on gender and sexuality?

4. What is the significance of Othello's last speech to the Duke in ll. 256-270, in relation to the whole play? What attitude towards both passion/sexuality and towards Desdemona does he show in this speech, and what does it say about Othello's relationship with white mainstream culture? In this respect, how does Greenblatt (1980, p. 243) read the metaphor of the storm Othello uses in ll. 173-191), and what does it reveal about himself and early modern attitudes to sexuality?

5. Watch the Senate scene in Parker's cinematic adaptation of *Othello*, and then compare it to Iqbal Khan's filmed stage production for the Royal Shakespeare Company (2015). In which production does Desdemona appear most subversive, and which portrayal do you prefer? What unconventional aspects of Desdemona's behaviour do the films highlight?

IV. Cyprus: The Two Desdemonas and the Two Emilias

1. Act IV, scene iii is often referred to as the 'willow scene'. Read lines 5-51. What is the relationship between Emilia and Desdemona? Is it a close friendship, or that of mistress and servant? In this scene there is a general sense of foreboding. What words, dramatic elements or objects contribute to creating such an atmosphere?

2. Now read lines 57-101, paying special attention to Emilia's speech (ll. 82-99). What difference do their respective social positions make to their divergent views on adultery? Does the fact that all female characters in *Othello* (Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca) come from a different social class have an influence in their attitudes to other men in the play? Watch and compare Trevor Nunn's filmed stage production (Royal Shakespeare Company, 1990) with Khan's rendering of the same scene. Which one is most effective in conveying the women's growing intimacy and their different personalities?

3. It has been claimed that Emilia and Desdemona exchange roles as the play progresses. Compare Desdemona's behaviour at the Senate and Desdemona's and Emilia's different responses to Iago in II, i (ll. 96-162) to their attitudes in IV, ii and in the 'willow scene'. In what ways are they different, and why do you think the women's attitudes change in the play? Look also at Emilia's speech in V, ii (ll. 161-196). Which rules of female behaviour does she break in the last act, if any, and what is the consequence for her?

4. To what extent would you claim that the real tragedy for Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca is that their marital and emotional bonds take precedence over their common cause as women?

V. Iago as a 'Cultural Emblem'

1. Read Iago and Roderigo's initial conversation in I, i (ll. 1-68) and explain what may be the purpose of opening the play with Iago instead of with Othello? What do Iago's words reveal about Othello? How does McAlindon, in his "Introduction", interpret this speech by Iago (see especially pp. xlvi-xlviii)? He claims that Iago reflects the new values that were developing in early modern England. What "new historical type" (xlvi) does he identify Iago with, and why?

2. Now turn to Iago's soliloquies in I, iii (ll. 365-386), and II, i (ll. 267-293). Identify the motives Iago gives for acting as he does, and discuss their veracity. Which signs that he is improvising/constructing racism can you detect in his soliloquies? Finally, consider whether Iago is more interested in truth or in "plausibility" (Sinfield, 1992, p. 31).

3. Read Iago and Roderigo's conversations in I, iii (ll. 297-364), and then in II, i (ll. 206-266). What "'common sense'" (Sinfield, 1992, p. 31) notions on race and gender from the dominant culture does Iago exploit and take advantage of in order to convince Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio? Analyse the extent to which it could be claimed that Iago works in the play as a 'cultural emblem'.

4. Watch Iago's first soliloquy as rendered in Nunn's production and then compare it to Parker's cinematic *Othello*. In what ways are they different and which director do you think is most effective in conveying Iago's self-interest and manipulations? In his production, Khan decided to cast a black Iago. How do you think such decision can affect the meaning/s of the play, if at all?

VI. Othello's Demonisation and Racial Othering

1. Act III, scene iii contains the famous 'temptation scene' (ll. 92-259), where Iago convinces Othello of Desdemona's infidelity with Cassio, and culminates with Othello's soliloquy (ll. 260-281). Read the scene and try to determine whether it is easy or difficult for Iago to convince Othello. What notions about women and race does Iago invoke, in order to do so? To what extent would you assert that Othello, Desdemona and Emilia are cooperative with their victimisers?
2. Read Othello's words in V, ii, ll. 257-281, and then his final speech in ll. 334-352. Does Othello see himself as an insider or an outsider to the culture of Venice here? What elements from his language or the *mise-en-scène* make you think so?
3. What is the significance of Iago's final words in lines 300-301? What do you make of the fact that Othello wounds Iago and of Lodovico's closing words (ll. 357-367)? Do you think that, at the end of *Othello*, and with the death of Othello and the women, the dominant, early modern ideology is more firmly re-established, or rather, has it been debilitated?
4. Watch the last scene of Parker's adaptation of *Othello*. Would you have filmed it like this if you were a director? What message do you think the last image (the shot of the bed) conveys to spectators? For his production at Teatre Lliure (2010), for instance, Thomas Ostermeier ended the play with Othello's murder of Desdemona, and decided not to include the killing of Emilia or Othello's suicide. What do you think may be gained or lost by such decisions, and what does each ending seek to emphasise?
5. Compare the last scene of Orson Welles's cinematic adaptation (*Othello*, 1952) with Parker's *Othello* and/or Khan's production. Which ending do you think is most effective in denouncing the early modern ideologies of race and gender that bring Othello and Desdemona to their tragic ending?

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Visual Material

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Welles, O. (Director). (1952). *Othello*. Italy, United States: Scalera Film, United Artists.