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'Til Deception Do Us Part:

Racism and Marriage in Shakespeare's *Othello*

William Shakespeare's tragedies are notorious for their vibrant characters and arguably rushed endings. *Othello*, on the other hand, may prove to be an exception. While the tragedy does end with a flourish of sudden deaths—including suicide and murder—there is not much surprise of the victims' doomed fates, particularly Othello and Desdemona. From the moment that Othello explains their initial attraction to Iago's false accusations of Desdemona's infidelity, *Othello* carries the weight of a play addressing a far deeper issue. Othello does not mourn the apparent loss of his marriage with Desdemona, but rather the loss of his temporarily accepted role in white society.

Desdemona does not fall in love with Othello because of his appearance; rather, she falls for the idea of him through the stories he tells. Othello himself admits this when faced with accusations of rape and kidnapping in Act 1:

She loved me for the dangers I had past,

And I loved her that she did pity them.

This is the only witchcraft I have used. (1.3.166-69)

Arguably, Desdemona is self-aware of her apparent ignorance in the reliability of romantic attraction when she asks Iago and Emilia if she has unknowingly betrayed her husband when she has done nothing wrong. When Iago asks her what the matter is, Desdemona answers:

I cannot tell. Those that do teach young babes

do it with gentle means and easy tasks.

He might have chide me so; for in good faith

I am a child to chiding. (4.2.111-14)

Both Desdemona and Othello hold important roles in society; however, the trust each character wields is in stark contrast of the other. Even as a woman, Desdemona is more highly favored in white society than Othello simply because of the color of her skin. The duke immediately supports Desdemona's father's potential vengeance upon hearing that Desdemona has been "ruined" by an anonymous man:

Whoe'er he be that in this foul proceeding

Hath thus beguiled your daughter of herself

And you of her, the bloody book of law

You shall yourself read in the bitter letter

After your own sense; yea, thou our proper son

Stood in your action. (1.3.65-70)

According to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature (The Sixteenth Century and the Early Seventeenth Century)*, this is Brabantio's way of saying, "You yourself shall interpret the law as you see fit, even if my own son was the one you accuse" (Norton 816). This willingness to sacrifice one's own flesh and blood for the sake of Desdemona's purity represents a special bond within the upperclassmen of white society—and, perhaps, foreshadowing for Emilia's later defense of Desdemona. After learning that the accused is Othello, the duke and council hesitate to directly pronounce him guilty; however, they also fail to leap to his defense, choosing instead to listen to Othello's explanation. The duke even admits this hesitance to trust because of stereotypes against Othello.

To vouch this is no proof,
 Without wider and more overt tests
 Than these thin habits and poor likelihoods
 Of modern seeming do prefer against him. (1.3.107-10)

Again, Norton further clarifies the duke's words by elaborating that he cannot accept Othello's words "without fuller and more direct testimony than mere appearance and conjecture based on currently popular beliefs against him" (817). If the council is unable to accept Othello's defense without better evidence than the word of one black man, then why does that same council immediately accept and defend the accusations from the mouth of a single white man?

Even Othello recognizes that Desdemona's word is worth more than his, as he summons her to defend him with the truth he has already professed. As expected, the council does not deem the truth as credible until it comes from white lips.

I do beseech you
 Send for the lady to the Sagittary,
 And let her speak of me before her father.
 If you do find me foul in her report,
 The trust, the office I do hold of you,
 Not only take away, but let your sentence
 Even fall upon my life. (1.3.114-20)

Othello trusts Desdemona's word so much that he places his life upon it; however, this trust proves to be ironic and temporary as he wagers her death upon the words of another white man. He trusts her words to be credible when falling upon the ears of another white man, but not to his own in the final act.

Othello is not the only character subject to racial alliance and division. Despite the death of her lady and the death *threats* from her remaining lord, Emilia chooses to side with Desdemona, the dead white woman, instead of Othello, the living black man. Emilia shifts from directly addressing Othello as "my lord" to "the Moor:

O good, my lord, I would speak a word
with you. (5.2.93-4)

I care not for thy sword; I'll make thee known,
Though I lost twenty lives. Help, help, ho, help!

The Moor hath killed my mistress! Murder, murder! (5.2.169-71)

This change is twofold; she slanders Othello with a common derogatory term while alienating him with "*the Moor*." She no longer claims Othello as *her* lord, but rather the monster who murdered her mistress. Emilia directly exclaims:

O, the more angel she,
And you the blacker devil! (5.2.133-34)

It is also worth noting the significance of Desdemona and Othello dying in their own bed. While the deaths occur within the final act of the play, the blood shed on the wedding bed may indicate that their marriage was doomed to die one way or another from the start. Desdemona's pleas to wait until the next day, the morning, the next hour, and even the next moment may represent that she found her fate inevitable; she only wishes that she could prolong its manifestation.

O banish me, my lord, but kill me not!
. . . Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight!
. . . But half an hour!

. . . But while I say one prayer! (5.2.79, 81, 83, 86)

Finally, the very nature of Shakespeare's play indicates that there is no secure place for Othello in the first place. While the play is titled *Othello* and revolves around the Moor's relationship and downfall, most of the lines within the text belong to Iago. This indicates that while he may bear the same name as the play's title, Othello's story focuses on the meddling minds of white men in his life instead of Othello's own works.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's *Othello* is saturated with foreshadowing Othello and Desdemona's fates. Whether based on actual societal context or his own opinions, Shakespeare captures the battles of a "Moor" within a white society on many complex levels. \

Works Cited

Greenblatt, Stephen, and M. H. Abrams. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and the Early Seventeenth Century*. W.W. Norton, 2018.