OTHELLO, THE MOOR

‘One that loved not wisely, but too well’ (Act 5, Scene 2)

Othello is a Moor, born of royal blood. He was sold into slavery at a very young age and spent his youth living in army camps. This harsh, adventurous, and eventful past shaped him into a ‘Valiant’ (Act 1, Scene 3), ‘Brave’ (Act 2, Scene 1) and level-headed soldier, and he is now revered as a General in the Venetian Army. Although an outsider, as a Moor in a white society, Othello is now accepted as a Christian. His military talents have earned him respect and valuable alliances and he has even won the affections and hand of the ‘most exquisite’ (Act 2, Scene 3) and prized Desdemona.

Othello’s fate however takes a turn when Desdemona’s father does not accept him, and his manipulative ensign Iago proves untrustworthy, convincing Othello that his wife is unfaithful. He is undone.

Othello’s tragic demise is commonly perceived to derive from his most undesired character trait, jealousy, which A.C. Bradley famously termed his ‘fatal flaw’. However, it is important to go beyond this and investigate Othello’s downfall as a result of a more complex persona. Firstly, Othello was very much accepted and applauded by Brabantio as a soldier and invited into his home, but as a son-in-law he is violently rejected and labeled an ‘extravagant and wheeling stranger’ (Act 1, Scene 1). Othello is a man of heroic status with impressive gifts who begins the play with great confidence that his ‘service’ will ‘out-tongue’ (Act 1, Scene 2) any complaints against him. However, he is still aware that his decisive and strict military upbringing renders him ignorant to society’s ways and the company of women. He himself states ‘little of this great world can I speak’ (Act 1, Scene 1). His confidence often seems paired with insecurity over his foreign past and the question of being accepted. Othello has a great command over language (many critics have described it as a ‘musicality’) and a vast imagination, yet describes himself as ‘rude’ in his speech and ‘little blessed with the soft phrase of peace’. Ironically, despite being an outsider of ‘Moorship’ (Act 1, Scene 1), his speech is much grander than that of his white ‘ancient’ Iago who pleads superiority.

Iago cleverly leans on Othello’s trust for rank and allegiance and his habits of command that favour frenetic and absolute decisions. Othello tells us that, ‘To be once in doubt/ Is once to be resolved’ (Act 3, Scene 3). Iago uses this to his advantage and exploits Othello’s grand imagination, knowing how potent a seed of doubt it will be once it is planted. Iago is also aware that Othello’s inexperience with internal reflection and relationships make him ill-equipped to resolve emotional issues. Bearing in mind Othello’s social inexperience, resolute nature, trust in rank and his insecurities over his colour, his vulnerability becomes much more apparent.

As Othello declines his language begins to mirror the baseness of his tormentor, from poetic verse and complex imagery to repetitive, limited prose: from ‘she gave me for my pains a world of kisses’ (Act 1, Scene 3), to the monosyllabic repetition of ‘O, blood, blood, blood’ (Act 3, Scene 3). Only on his deathbed, when he realises Desdemona’s innocence and his own ignorance is Othello’s poetry restored, and he is again differentiated from the foul Iago: ‘I kissed thee, ere I killed thee’ (Act 5, Scene 2). All at once his multiple flaws or insecurities are exposed in his own remorse. He confirms himself as a ‘base indian/Judean’ (Act 5, Scene 2) who has always been an outsider, he still asks for respect for his military achievements (the true source of his confidence) and talks of Desdemona as a ‘pearl’(Act 5, Scene 2), something always more perfect than himself.

To the end of the play, Othello still believes that he is ‘not easily jealous’ (Act 5, Scene 2). Perhaps, this is the case or has he underestimated the delicacy of the human mind when dealing with matters of the heart. Is he still unaware even in his most honest hour?

IAGO

‘I am not what I am’ (Act 1, Scene 1)

Iago is a young Venetian career soldier, with advanced military experience that has earned him the senior position of ‘ancient’ or sword bearer to the General Othello. He is infamously ambiguous in motivation and reveals little humanity to help the audience to perceive him as anything but evil. Initially he seems resentful of Cassio’s promotion above him, but mentions this briefly and swiftly shifts his focus to criticism of Othello. He repetitively refers to Othello’s ‘Moorship’ (Act 1, Scene 1) revealing a racial bias, is revolted by Othello’s ‘pride and purposes’ (Act 1, Scene 1), states that he only follows him to ‘serve his turn upon him’ (Act 1, Scene 1) and blatantly announces that he hates the Moor. However Iago never gives a clear reason for his hatred of Othello. He does speak of rumours that Othello has committed adultery with Iago’s wife Emilia, but then suspiciously attributes the same act to Cassio who has little dealings with Emilia. Iago is certainly motivated by self interest and greed as he extorts large sums of money from Roderigo: ‘Thus do I ever make my fool my purse.’(Act 1, Scene 3)
Iago is married to Emilia and although she seems loyal to him, her very harsh notions of love in the close of Act 4 are not evidence of a happy marriage. Iago shows little respect, trust or understanding of women, who he labels ‘wildcats’ (Act 2, Scene 1). He appears to be paranoid of his own wife’s adulterous behavior, yet at the same time seems somewhat unaffected by it. As Kermode notes, Iago’s interest in sex ‘is to watch other’s doing it, or at least to think about it.’; he reveals little evidence of his own engagement in the act. He continually reduces sexual relationships to something base, physical or perverse; to him sex is ‘merely a lust of the blood’ or ‘the beast with two backs’ (Act 1, Scene 1). Every relationship Iago maintains is for his own gain, he is relentlessly manipulative and there appears to be no limit to his malice.

A striking feature of Iago is his rhetorical flexibility and skill. Kermode describes this in Shakespeare’s Language as ‘lexical resourcefulness’. He moves from verse to prose easily and appears to adjust his language to suit his audience. His language is often shockingly base and he begins the play with a cacophony of profanities and sexual innuendoes, ‘Zounds’, and ‘an old black ram is tupping your white ewe’. (Act 1, Scene 1). Iago has the skill to contaminate Othello’s mind with filthy and degrading images, and is able to plant notions in Othello’s head using seemingly harmless questions. He often plays the opposite role to his true intentions. For instance, Iago stirs Othello to jealousy but gives the appearance of placating, ‘Why how now General? No more of that?’ (3:3) He is ironically described as ‘honest’ several times throughout the play by Othello, Cassio and even once by Desdemona.

Iago is even defiant at the end of the play when he is caught and accused of his masterplan. He refuses to justify his actions, saying ‘From this time forth I never will speak a word.’ (Act 5, Scene 2) The characters and audience will remain blind to Iago’s true intentions.

DESIDEMONA
‘my noble Moor is true of mind, and made of no such baseness as jealous creatures are.’ (Act 3, Scene 4)

Desdemona is the daughter of the Venetian nobleman Brabantio and at the beginning of the play, has secretly married Othello. Desdemona is a complex character as her true nature often seems quite contrary to how others perceive her. Her father describes her as pure, meek and subservient, ‘a maiden never bold’ (Act 1, Scene 3), yet when confronted by him she promptly defends her choices in a public forum, and says she will ‘trumpet them to the world’ (Act 1, Scene 3) and willingly follows Othello to Cyprus. Her decision to marry Othello is highly unconventional, and she knowingly disregards her father’s wishes and even describes her actions as ‘downright violence’ (Act 1, Scene 3) against acceptable codes of behavior.

In striking contrast to Emilia, Desdemona does appear naïve and innocent, and argues that she is incapable of committing adultery, no matter the price. However, Desdemona does jest quite bawdily with Iago at the start of Act 2, and in an aside reveals that she is capable of deception. She discloses to the audience that she is actually not merry but is merely presenting a contrived public face, ‘I do beguile the thing I am by seeming otherwise’ (Act 2, Scene 1). She shows great strength in her perseverance to defend Cassio and when her husband strikes her in public she responds abruptly in defense, ‘I have not deserved this.’ (Act 4, Scene 1) Desdemona does underestimate her husband’s capacity for jealousy or insecurity and assumes she possesses deep understanding of a man she has only been married to for a few days.

Arguably, Desdemona’s strongest and most dignified moments are in death and her anticipation of it. When Emilia prepares her for bed and the end of Act 4, she is not only perceptive enough to know what awaits her but prepares for it with quiet strength. She forthrightly defends her honour to Othello and argues for her life and reputation right up until her death. Even in her last breath she maintains integrity, defending her husband’s honour and refusing to incriminate him – ‘Farewell. Commend me to my kind lord’ (Act 5, Scene 2).

EMILIA
‘The world’s a huge thing; it is a great price for a small vice.’ (Act 4, Scene 3)

Emilia is Iago’s wife and Desdemona’s companion or ‘ladies maid’ when she travels to Cyprus. She shows loyalty to her husband by retrieving the handkerchief for him, yet there is little sign of affection in their interaction. There is no exchange between them until Act 3 and even then it is brief. Iago firstly addresses her as a ‘foolish wife’ (Act 3, Scene 3) and even when she pleases him he only manages to raise his praise to ‘good wench’ (Act 3, Scene 3). Perhaps, due to this, Emilia is worldly, practical, cynical and shrewd. She is often considered an early feminist voice and argues for gender equality, maintaining that men and women have the same desires of attraction and potential for infidelity. She states that women share the same ‘affections, desires for sports, and frailty’ as men do and even goes as far as to claim that ‘it is their husband’s faults if wives do fall.’ (Act 4, Scene 3) Emilia even admits to Desdemona that she would commit adultery for the right price.

She is fiercely loyal to Desdemona, strongly attacks Othello for his accusations and easily hands her husband
over as the guilty party when she realises the truth. She shows incredible courage when she discovers that Othello has killed Desdemona – ‘I care not for thy sword.’ (Act 5, Scene 1) Although she was unaware of her husband’s intentions, Emilia evidently harbours some guilt for the part she played with the handkerchief. In disgust of Iago’s plot, she immediately defies her husband and ultimately lays down her life in Desdemona’s honour.

**CASSIO**

‘I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial.’ (Act 2, Scene 3)

Cassio is a highly educated young Florentine and has recently been promoted to Othello’s lieutenant, or second-in-command. He is, however, young and inexperienced in the field and Iago scorns him as an ‘arithmetician’ (Act 1, Scene 1), someone who has theoretical rather than practical knowledge. He is also described by Iago as a ‘proper man’ (Act 1, Scene 3) who is handsome and well made. Iago uses this to his advantage by making Othello jealous of Cassio’s relationship with Desdemona. Observing Cassio, Iago states that ‘the knife is handsome, young and has all those requisites in him that folly and green (jealous) minds look after.’ (Act 2, Scene 1) Cassio is very aware that he has ‘unhappy brains for drinking’ (Act 2, Scene 3) or a low tolerance for alcohol and is careful to restrain from it as reputation is of the highest importance to him. Iago exploits this weakness and convinces Cassio to drink, after which he loses his dignity and favour with Othello. Cassio laments, ‘I have lost the immortal part of myself and what remains is bestial.’ (Act 3, Scene 3) Cassio can also be proud and arrogant, and alcohol seems to heighten these qualities. He goes to great pains to reinstate his reputation and struggles to be in the presence of Othello after his misdoings, due to shame. He shows varied respect for women. Although he talks of Desdemona as ‘perfection’ (Act 2, Scene 3), he is very quick to mock her virtue and manipulate his mistress, Bianca. His position and reputation are restored by the end of the play.

**RODERIGO**

‘It is silliness to live when to live is torment.’ (Act 1, Scene 3)

Roderigo is a Venetian nobleman and a failed suitor of Desdemona. Perhaps it is an act of romantic desperation, but Roderigo’s intellect is questionable as he is so easily manipulated by Iago, and embroiled in his many schemes. Iago convinces Roderigo to hand over sums of money in exchange for help winning Desdemona’s love, even though she is already married to Othello. Roderigo also seems to share Iago’s prejudice towards the Moor, addressing him as ‘thick-lips’ (Act 1, Scene 1). He is also quite melodramatic in his dealings with Desdemona and tells Iago that, as she can never be his, he will ‘drown’ (Act 1, Scene 1) himself. Many critics view Roderigo though this light, as a foolish and foppish aristocrat. Brabantio describes him as one of the ‘wealthy curled darlings’ (Act 1, Scene 1) who have failed in their suit of his daughter, and Iago refers to him as his ‘sick fool’ (Act 2, Scene 3) and as a ‘silly gentleman’. It is important to consider though that Roderigo is willing to battle Cassio twice in pursuit of his love and he is not the only character fooled by Iago. In most of their private meetings, Iago speaks far more lines than Roderigo, who is beguiled by Iago’s skilled rhetoric, so much so that his responses are rarely longer than a line. Roderigo does however muster up the strength to challenge Iago in Act 4, questions his truthfulness and threatens to opt out of their dealings. Roderigo is also the only character to be truly exposed to Iago’s base and vile philosophies and is the only one to challenge him directly before the final scene unfolds. He eventually, and quite ironically, dies at the hand of Iago.

**BIANCA**

‘This is some token from a newer friend.’ (Act 3, Scene 4)

Bianca is Cassio’s mistress or lover and she is described in the text as a courtesan or prostitute. Writer and feminist activist Sian Norris states that although Bianca is a minor character she ‘reflects the angers and hurts of many of the characters and the problematic status of women in this period’. She is also an actual illustration of the imagined jealousies that sit at the heart of the play. Bianca shows a genuine love for Cassio, yet for him she comes second to his career. He teases her with affection and marriage proposals, yet keeps her at a fair distance and mocks her in private. In Shakespeare’s era the Venetian courtesan had a notorious reputation in England, often associated with sophistication and potential treachery. Iago refers to Bianca as a ‘whore’ and a ‘notable strumpet’ (5:1), yet she seems to dedicate herself solely to Cassio and even has the dignity to reject him when she suspects ill-treatment and infidelity. It is important to note the symbolism of her name meaning white, which works against her archetype and that Shakespeare affords her lines in her own defense. She protests to Emilia that she is ‘no strumpet but of life as honest as you that thus abuse me’ (Act 5, Scene 1). In a traditional dramatic sense, Bianca should be the literal representation of the whore or “fair devil” (Act 3, Scene 3) that Othello assumes Desdemona to be and yet her true and faithful nature works to prove this archetype untrue.
THE DUKE OF VENICE

‘If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.’ (Act 1, Scene 3)

The Duke is the ruler of Venice and the highest authority. He has great respect for Othello as an employee of the Venetian state, and addresses him as ‘valiant’ (Act 1, Scene 3). He initially supports Brabantio’s plight to punish the man who Brabantio says has ‘beguiled’ (Act 1, Scene 3) Desdemona, but on finding the felon to be Othello he withdraws, patiently hears him out and dismisses the case. The Duke tells Brabantio to let his grief rest and states that Othello’s tales ‘would have won’ (Act 1, Scene 3) his daughter too. He eagerly sends Othello to attack the invading Turkish fleets as he knows he is the most experienced and capable commander. The Duke is often seen to back Othello because of his own invested interest, however the fact that he shows public and genuine affection for him does not go unnoticed.

BRABANTIO

‘If thou has eyes to see: She has deceived her father, and may thee’ (Act 1, Scene 3)

Brabantio is a Venetian Nobleman, a Senator and the father of Desdemona. He is a public voice for the complex racial issues that exist within the world of the play, and represents beliefs that Elizabethan audiences would have readily recognised. He serves the role of the disapproving father, a dramatic function that dates back to Plautus. Although previously supporting Othello’s military prowess and often inviting him into to his home to regale heroic tales, Brabantio, on hearing the news that the Moor has secretly married his daughter, is horrified and reveals his true prejudice. He assumes his daughter innocent, and thinks that Othello must have enchanted her with ‘drugs’, ‘foul charms’ or the ‘chains of magic’ (Act 1, Scene 2), and refuses to believe she would willingly expose herself to ‘general mock’ (Act 1, Scene 2). He denounces the marriage as evil, feels that his life and ‘time’ (Act 1, Scene 2) spent with Desdemona is now a waste and gathers officers to confront Othello. He then brings the matter before the Duke but when Desdemona defends her love for Othello he turns cold and rejects her, stating that it is lucky she is an only child as he would scorn the others after witnessing her behavior. He warns Othello strongly of Desdemona’s deception and plants the seed that she may one day deceive Othello. He eventually dies of heart ache over his daughter’s so called betrayal.

MONTANO

‘It were well the general were put in mind of it.’ (Act 2, Scene 3)

Montano is the Governor of Cyprus prior to Othello’s arrival. His first appearance is at the beginning at Act 2, when the play’s action shifts to the island of Cyprus. He announces that the Turkish fleets have been destroyed by a storm and that the threat of invasion is passed. Iago pollutes Montano’s opinion of Cassio, saying that he is often consumed by the vice of drinking and could prove disloyal. When Montano stumbles across a brawl between Cassio and Roderigo he intercedes and is wounded by Cassio, but does not give Cassio’s name over when Othello enquires as to who started it.

LODOVICO

‘Is this the nature whom passion could not shake?’ (Act 4, Scene 1)

Lodovico is a Venetian nobleman and a kinsman of Brabantio. He travels to Cyprus as a messenger and brings news that Othello must return to Venice and Cassio is to take his place as Governor. He is witness to Othello striking his wife in Act 4, the fight between Cassio and Roderigo in Act V and adopts the role of adjudicator in the final scene reporting the letter found in Roderigo’s pocket, the evidence that finally incriminates Iago.

GRATIANO

‘Thy match was mortal to him, and pure grief shore his old thread in twain.’ (Act 5, Scene 2)

Gratiano is a Venetian nobleman and a kinsman of Brabantio. He accompanies Lodovico to Cyprus. He is present after the brawl between Cassio and Roderigo in Act V and is shocked by Iago’s report that Roderigo is the culprit. He also brings news during the tragic conclusion of the play that Brabantio has died, due to heartbreak from Desdemona’s betrayal of him, in marrying Othello.