THEMATIC CONCERNS AND MOTIFS

APPEARANCE AND REALITY / TRUTH AND PERFORMANCE

Many critics have commented that one of Shakespeare’s great contributions to Western literature is his dramatic exploration of the idea and implications of the difference between appearance and reality. It is thoroughly explored in Macbeth, King Lear, Richard III, Romeo And Juliet, and almost all of his tragedies. It works at the heart of the misidentification and masking of identity in his comedies and is masterfully explored in Othello. Elizabethan and Jacobean society were highly fascinated by, and suspicious of, the notion of performance, and the gap between the private and public persona. Public life in England had become a performance of sorts, a process of constructing one’s identity through clothing, display of rhetoric, education and a strict focus on generally composing oneself. In 1980, Stephen Greenblatt termed this renaissance trend the art of Self-fashioning. 16th century Puritans were revolted onlookers, finding this new arena a false vulgarity, and in their quest for someone to blame they found the theatre. Pamphleteers at the time, such as Stephen Gosson, felt that the melodrama of the theatre was encouraging London society to adopt characteristics other than their own and he labeled the playhouses a ‘whore’s fair’. Ironically the theatre and Shakespeare’s plays went beyond encouraging the trend. Rather, they had become the perfect place to deconstruct, explore and reflect on this behaviour.

Shakespeare’s use of the soliloquy or aside was a revolution in dramatic function, allowing the audience to be privy to a character’s inner thoughts whilst observing their public behavior. In Othello, the discrepancy between Iago’s public and private face is startlingly obvious and he opening and proudly acknowledges it. Iago states ‘I am not what I am’ (Act 1, Scene 1), and admits to Cassio that he thinks that ‘reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit’ (Act 2, Scene 3). Iago is aware of reputation’s fickle nature as he has gained it not through deserving means, but rather by sheer performance. He is also aware of the power of it, and works meticulously to maintain his own. In Act 3, scene 3 Iago ironically proclaims to Othello that ‘Men should be what they seem’, even though he is in the very act of deceiving him and has already proven to the audience on numerous occasions that he is certainly not what he seems. Iago is extremely successful in his deceptions. What is extraordinary is that almost all the other characters view him in a positive light, as ‘honest’, and Othello even goes as far as to humbly thank Iago, ‘I am bound to thee forever.’ (Act 3, Scene 3) (Note: The epithet ‘honest’ has also been seen as a term of condescending praise used in reference to someone of a lower rank.)

Iago manages to appear as a genuine and concerned citizen and gains other’s confidence by consistently offering assistance. He also carefully places himself in the position of defending the victim, whilst simultaneously drawing attention to them, ‘I had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth than it should do offense to Michael Cassio’. (Act 2, Scene 3) Iago is careful to be seen to defend Othello when he appears charged before the Senate, which is soon after the audience has watched him blatantly incriminate Othello. Iago maintains his reputation through discretion and when questioned for information he tells Lodovico that ‘it is not honesty in me to speak what I have seen and known’. (Act 4, Scene 1)

However, Iago is not the only character to present an alternative public persona. Desdemona states in Act 2 that she must ‘beguile the thing she is seeming otherwise’ (Act 2, Scene 1), and Emilia states that she wouldn’t do a deceptive act in the ‘heavenly light’, but she would willingly do it ‘in th’ dark’. (Act 4, 3) Roderigo willingly performs for Brabantio in the pursuit of Desdemona and Cassio teases Bianca with his affections calling her ‘sweet’ and ‘fair’, yet in private he degrades her as a mere ‘customer’. (Act 4, Scene 1) It is public performance that Othello fears, perhaps because he is naïve to the social customs of a culture he sits outside of. When he confronts Desdemona in front of Senator Lodovico he states, ‘if the earth could teem with women’s tears, each drop she falls would prove a crocodile’. (Act 4, Scene 1) Shakespeare explores this art of public performance and the anxieties surrounding it by contrasting Othello, the naïve outsider, with Venetian Iago who is the master manipulator of it.
MANHOOD AND THE FATHER FIGURE

It is important to consider Stephen Greenblatt’s theory of Renaissance Self-fashioning when analyzing the masculine identity of this period. He notes that the ideological traits embedded in the portrayal of manhood were authority and power, hence the reason why male rulers of the time depicted themselves in armour, whether they were active in military or not. This is very much the world of Othello. Our title character is aware that there is currency in his masculine, military skillset and this is the only way he knows how to define himself. In fact he seems to equate his success in love and society with his success as a soldier. In recalling his wooing of Desdemona he states; ‘She loved me for the dangers I had passed and I loved her that she did pity them.’ (Act 1, Scene 3)

Othello recalls Desdemona proclaiming that she wished ‘That heaven had made her such a man.’ (Act 1, Scene 3) This could be read in multiple ways. Desdemona could be simply praising Othello as a heavenly being, however we can also assume that Desdemona wishes she had access to the male realm of prestige and power. This is likely considering her bold choice to travel to the harsh environment of Cyprus. Perhaps it is her strength that Othello fears as it trespasses on the masculine. With the Turks at rest and Othello now an idle soldier he has lost the male arena in which he defines himself and feels most uneasy in the private, intimate or internal. As jealousy consumes him he farewells his sanity using the only vernacular afforded to him, military imagery; ‘Farewell the plum’d troops and the big wars that make ambition virtue.’ (Act 3, Scene 3) Othello completely confuses the two realms and he even attempts to convert his death bed into a military shrine; he farewells his audience with a reminder of the ‘service’ (Act 5, Scene 2) he has done the state. He must remain in the masculine realm and as literary theorist Frank Kermode notes in his publication Shakespeare’s Language, Othello cannot even confess to weeping in his final hour ‘without explaining that it isn’t his usual practice’.

The director of this production, Peter Evans, notes that many of Shakespeare’s texts present complex father/daughter relationships, in which the daughter must escape her father, marrying in order to find herself. This occurs in The Merchant of Venice, Romeo And Juliet, and A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Conversely, in Hamlet, Ophelia fails to achieve independence and by following her father wishes she ultimately perishes. It is certainly the inciting event in Othello, and Desdemona’s public proclamation of love proves her to be more defiant than many of Shakespeare’s young females. What interests Director Peter Evans is the men that these honourable heroines choose, who rarely prove worthy of their female counterpart. Desdemona shifts from a father that misunderstands and underestimates her, to a husband that mistrusts and eventually kills her.

SEXUALITY

During the 20th and 21st century, a number of critics have focused on the relationship between Othello and Iago as possessing a subtext of repressed homosexuality. Particular focus has been given by David Somerton, Linford S. Haines and J.P. Doolan York (Notes for Literature Students on the Tragedy of Othello, 1996) to the analysis of Act 3, Scene 3. The vows, declarations and oaths between Iago and Othello have been seen as a dark parody of a heterosexual marriage ceremony. They point out that at this point in the play, Iago replaces Desdemona in Othello’s affections and loyalty. They have also contended that the unrequited nature of Iago’s love for Othello could help to explain his otherwise motiveless but passionate loathing. It is worth noting that such views of the play are held by a minority of critics and there are other aspects of human sexuality in the play that have drawn the attention of commentators.

Disgust, horror and the perversity of female sexuality is apparent in many of Shakespeare’s plays, including King Lear, Mercutio in Romeo And Juliet and most certainly Iago in Othello. He uses a range of pejorative images to describe women, such as ‘guinea hen’ (Act 1, Scene 3) and ‘wildcat’ (Act 2, Scene 1) and appears to distrust their sexuality in general. Iago is hasty to brand Bianca as a prostitute and Cassio’s arrogance and amusement at his manipulation of Bianca perhaps reflects a wider misogyny and belief that the sexuality of women, is intended for the benefit of men. A number of critics have pondered whether Othello’s idealistic notion of female virtue is symptomatic of his sexual innocence. Elizabethan and Jacobean society considered the Venetian woman to be both beautiful and licentious and Othello, unversed in Venetian society is perhaps fearful of this. In general, the men in Othello struggle to define women outside the pure or the promiscuous, yet the women prove more complex and work against this reductive binary. Emilia will only commit adultery to earn her independence, Bianca is labelled a ‘customer’ but proves loyal and determined, and Desdemona can’t even comprehend adultery despite the Venetian stereotype.

Cassio, who appears to be the most sexually aware character in the play, refers to Desdemona as a ‘maid’ (Act 2, Scene 1). There has been much analysis of whether Desdemona and Othello’s relationship is ever consummated. Given the very narrow time frame of the play (the Venetians disembark on Saturday and Desdemona dies on Sunday) and night time interruptions, such as Cassio’s drunken brawling, it is possible that both characters die without consummating their marriage.
RACE AND THE OUTSIDER

In his essay ‘Blackness made Visible’ (*Othello: New Critical Essays*, 2010), Kolin discusses how the play centres around one of the ‘most inflammatory issues confronting early and late modern audiences alike: miscegenation - a black man marrying a white woman’. Shakespeare and Elizabethan audiences would have been well accustomed to Moors and their plight due to high immigration and common place racial vilification. Elizabeth I deported eighty nine Moors from London in an edict against ‘the great number of negars and blackamoors which are crept into the realm since the troubles between Her Highness and the King of Spain’. Conversely, in 1600, the Moorish Ambassador of the King of Barbary visited the English court and Shakespeare acted before him during the Christmas season.

There is much contention over Othello’s ethnic origin. Ackroyd believes it is a mistake to consider Othello to be of African or West Indian origin, as is often the case in modern productions. However, it is believed that Moor was an ambiguous, general term used to describe ‘black-skinned people of ‘African, Arab or Indian descent. Theorist Russ McDonald maintains that in twenty-first century terms, Othello is not black, but to the Elizabethans he might be considered so. The Elizabethan ideal of human beauty was what was called ‘fair’, or light-skinned with light brown or blonde hair; its opposite, the brunette, or person with darker skin or darker hair, was known as ‘black’ or ‘dark’. So simply by not being white-skinned or fair, Othello could be considered black.

In Act I Scene 1, Iago and Roderigo’s racist and insulting descriptions of Othello, ‘thick-lips’, ‘old black ram’ and ‘Barbary horse’ are believed to be stereotypes or caricatures that emerge from hatred and therefore should be questioned as an accurate guide to his appearance. Ackroyd argues that Othello is of Moorish stock and so is olive skinned. He believes Shakespeare presents Othello as black in contrast to the ‘fair’ Desdemona for the purposes of theatrical emphasis and symbolism. The two characters are constantly defined against each other by this dichotomy. In the opening scene, Iago announces that ‘an old black ram is tupping your white ewe.’ Desdemona skin is described as white as ‘snow’ (Act 5, Scene 2) and Othello’s bosom as ‘sooty’ (Act 1, Scene 2). In trying to rectify Brabantio’s disapproval of the marriage of these two opposites being united, the Duke tells him that Othello ‘is far more fair than black’ (Act 1, Scene 3).

The terms ‘black’ and ‘fair’ for Elizabethans were encoded with strong culture presumptions. To be black was to be evil, ugly, ‘lascivious’ (Act 1, Scene 1, as Othello is deemed), untrustworthy, primitive and associated with the devil. To be white was to be beautiful, intelligent, civilised and pure. At the start of Act 2, Desdemona muses on the two opposites in regards to women’s intelligence and beauty. She asks what success a women would have ‘if she be black and witty’ (Act 2, Scene 1), black meaning brunette and ugly, Iago responds that she can use her intelligence to fool men into accepting her. Even Othello’s language is tainted with this simplistic, dichotomous way of thought. When in full doubt of Desdemona’s purity, he can’t help but say that her name is ‘now as black as my own face’. (Act 3, Scene 3) As black and white denote the simple division between good and bad, religious imagery often comes in to play. As Desdemona shares her dying words, Emilia scorns Othello, exclaiming that, ‘O, the more angel she, and you the blacker devil’. (Act 5, Scene 2)

Kolin believes that class warfare sits at the ‘emotional centre’ of this play. Venetian nobleman and characters such a Cassio or Desdemona sit at the top. Iago is the ‘underdog’ and, although lauded for his military prowess, Othello actually sits outside this completely. As discussed earlier in regards to notions of manhood, Othello defines his identity by his position as a soldier and so do the society around him. He is only accepted by Brabantio for his ‘siegues’ (Act 1, Scene 3), and the Duke possibly disregards his secret marriage to Desdemona because he is required in battle against the Turks. As discussed earlier with regards to race there is much evidence that Othello’s ethnicity prohibits him from being truly accepted and his social and relationship anxieties and insecurities are bound up in this. Perhaps Kolin’s notion of Othello and Iago as citizens extricated from the inner circle can help to give Iago motivation and explain Othello’s rashness. One wreaks havoc because he has been somewhat devalued and the other destroys himself over insecurities of his own.
UNITY OF PLOT AND DUALITY OF TIME

*Othello* has virtually a single plot with very little in the way of sub-plot; even the minor character Roderigo is linked to Desdemona as a failed suitor and fulfills the role of sounding board for Iago’s plotting. The plot is also somewhat simple to follow, with only sixteen characters, when compared with Richard III that has over 50. The two tragedies written on either side of *Othello* – *Hamlet* and *King Lear* – are said to be two of Shakespeare’s greatest, however both are notoriously hard to stage. They are less action driven, are steeped in philosophy about mortality, religion and humanistic pursuits, and present great soliloquies that are incidental to the narrative drive of the plot. *Othello* on the other hand is a tightly woven story full of forward-moving action. The only moment Shakespeare steers off course is when Emilia prepares Desdemona for her inevitable death. This brief, contemplative scene perfectly pauses the narrative to allow the audience to properly ponder what has passed, and what will proceed.

Time in the play, however, works in two schemes, side by side, as many of Shakespeare’s works do. The director of this production, Peter Evans, is interested in the tension that is created by Shakespeare condensing action that in its reality would happen over a few months, into a mere 36 hours. This places the character’s decisions and mental/emotional clarity under immense pressure, whilst heightening the dramatic rise of the narrative. The theatre space becomes a pressure cooker for both the audience and characters.

THE QUESTION OF THE MAIN CHARACTER

Who is the ‘main’ character? Who do we follow in the play? Although thematically Iago is the antagonist, to a certain extent he is actually the protagonist – he is the one that tells us his ambitions and is fighting to achieve them. It is Othello who is given the greater emotional range, but Iago who is truly active in the play, manipulating the other characters and going after what he wants. Apart from having more lines in the play than Othello – 1,097 to be exact – audiences are taken through the narrative by Iago, and are complicit with his ideas and decisions through soliloquies and asides. Iago somewhat complicates the role of the protagonist as the audience are repulsed by him and in awe of his mental agility, yet never able to escape their alliance with him.

The question to ask when considering this contentious issue is, can a character be considered the protagonist if they do not change throughout the story?