

Introduction

Are modern audiences more sympathetic towards Othello's character?

Othello was first written in the 17th century, it was shaped by social and geopolitical issues. From its first staging to the present Othello has also been amongst the few shakespearean plays to be repeatedly staged to please audiences across the globe.

Othello is a tragedy of sexual jealousy. It is a story of an African general who is manipulated into believing his wife 'Desdemona' is unfaithful. Othello allows this jealousy to consume him, resulting in him killing his wife and himself.

Context

18th, 20th and 21st century productions

Analysis about the different centuries

Extract from Othello



Context



'Othello' by William Mulready

- **Origins and Influences**

- Originally was influenced by a short story called 'Hecatommithi' published in 1565 by Gerald Cinthio
- This was later developed following the raging wars between the Catholics and Muslims/Moors which stretched over centuries as the Catholics battled to reconquer Spain
- Othello is inspired and takes place a year after the battle of Lepanto
- Due to this and the integration of races and ethnicities, racial tensions and prejudices began to heighten

- **Social Contexts**

- Within society, any races other than the white 'superior' race were ignored and dismissed
- The term 'moor' used by many within Othello is a derogatory term used to describe black people
- Holistically they were seen as barbaric and brutal even associated with the devil or devilish behaviour

IMAGES OF OTHELLO



Othello Relating His Adventures 1879 - John Emery



Ben Kingsley as 'The Moor' 1986 - Benjamin



Othello and Desdemona c.1841/1843 - John Everett Millais



Herbert Beerbohm Tree, as Othello 1914 - Charles A. Buchel



Othello - N'REY, 2008



Othello c.1880/1881 -Edouard Frederic Wilhelm Richter



Othello and Desdemona c.1840/1856 - William Powell Frith



Ira Aldridge (1807-1867), as Othello



Portrait of a Lady (actress who played Desdemona c.1685 - Willem Wissing)



'Othello' Act II, Scene 1, (from the Boydell series) - Thomas Stothard



Othello - Oliver Michael Robertson, 2010



18th Century Performances of Shakespeare's *Othello*

- James Quin Early 18th Century Performance

- Quin's performance in the first half of the 18th Century chose to emphasise Othello's professionalism as a general and was depicted wearing full British military uniform wearing a wig and blackface. The presentation of a dignified Othello was not popular.

- David Garrick Early 18th Century Performance

- Garrick portrayed Othello as an anxious figure unable to assert self control. He was depicted wearing a turban to give a 'newfound air of exoticism' which illustrated Othello further as a rogue and an outsider. This less dignified and furthermore impulsive presentation of Othello was more popular.

- Spranger Barry Mid 18th Century Performance

- Barry's performance of Othello was characterised by excessive use of physical acting and animalistic imagery to emphasise Othello's brutality and potential to be violent. This was extremely popular with audiences as it conveyed Othello to be a tragic hero driven by savage tendencies.





18th century production analysis

During the 18th century James Quinn played the role of Othello and presented him as professional and dignified by wearing a British military uniform and wig. This went against how people stereotypically viewed those of colour.

On the other hand, David Garrick presented a anxious Othello in an turnben, being more stereotypical towards an 'Moorish' background.

John philip Kemple portrayed a majestic Othello and impressive Othello. As a result of this it was unpopular as this went against a common idea of the day that African people had trouble controlling their passion and and strength.

Audiences were originally shocked by unusually un-stereotypical behaviour of what they thought African people acted like. However, by the late 18th century people had started to liked this European and reasonable Othello.



20th Century Productions of 'Othello'

1964 Production of 'Othello' at the National Theatre

- Later made into a film in 1965
- The British actor, Laurence Olivier (1907–1989) played Othello for the National Theatre at The Old Vic in 1964. Maggie Smith took the part of Desdemona while John Dexter was Iago. As this photographic postcard shows, Olivier 'blacked up' to play the part, as was common until the early 1980s.
- Described as 'a tropical storm of energy', Olivier's Othello was vain and proud, making his sudden display of jealousy more plausible. He received rapturous reviews from fans and many critics, though others were angered by his personification of Black stereotypes.
- "must be described as problematic, but so too is it a rewarding and important record of a historically important production"

1997 Production of 'Othello'

- In this kinetic, earth-toned, eye-filling production at the Shakespeare Theatre here, Othello, played by Mr. Stewart, is white. The Venetians, from noble Cassio to twisted Iago to doomed Desdemona, are black. In the race reversing, the company seeks to shatter stereotypes and remind playgoers of the endlessly adaptive nature of Shakespeare's exploration of otherness.
- This racial turning of the tables tends to take the racial issue off the table, therefore directly contrasting the 1964 production.
- "Of all the parts in the canon, perhaps Othello is the one which should most definitely not be played by a black actor" (Actor Hugh Quarshie – played Othello himself in the 2015 RSC production - , talk at University of Alabama, 1998)
- Though lines have been modified to conform to the production, the insults to Othello are left as written and Stewart's Othello is sneered at as black.



Analysis of 20th Century Productions

Laurence Olivier as Othello- 1964 (made into a film in 1965)



White actor in blackface relatively recently (common but controversial)

Race reversal, dubbed "photo-negative"

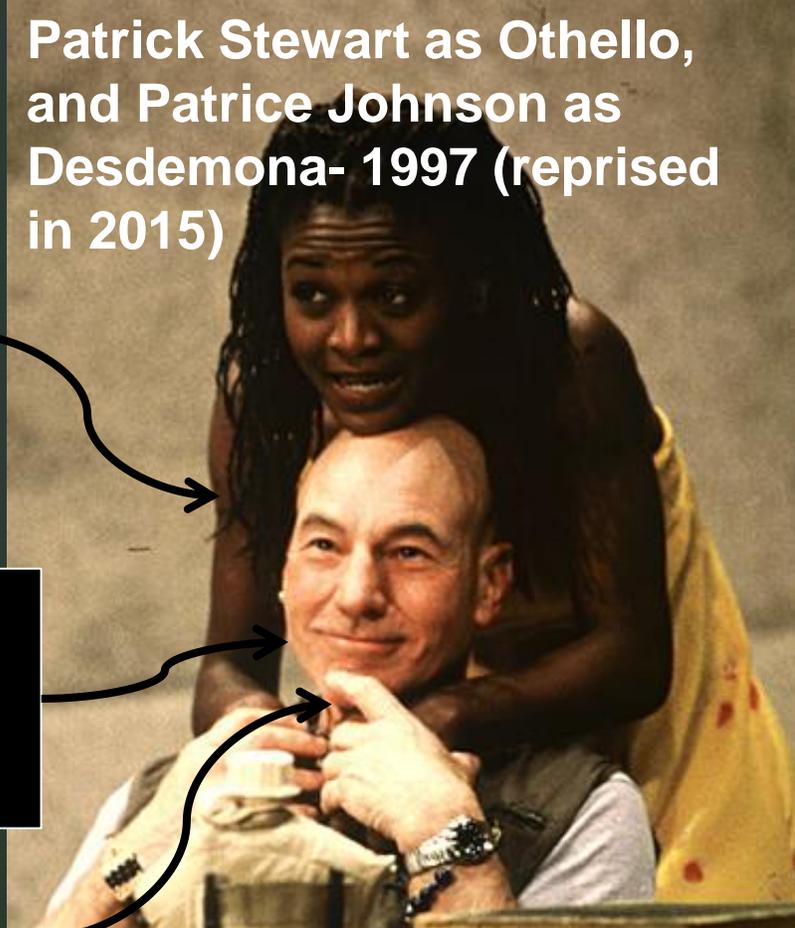
Described as 'a tropical storm of energy'

Some argue that in doing this, Stewart created a more familiar authority figure.

Portrayed as vain and proud- "explain" his jealousy

Very mixed reviews

Patrick Stewart as Othello, and Patrice Johnson as Desdemona- 1997 (reprised in 2015)



"Collapses rather than explodes" - generally a calmer portrayal, but this is more Stewart's acting style than a directorial choice.

“Of all the parts in the canon, perhaps Othello is the one which should most definitely not be played by a black actor.” – Hugh Quarshie



From left: Hugh Quarshie plays Othello
Lucian Msamati plays Iago

Iqbal Khan's 2015 production featured the Royal Shakespeare Company's first black Iago, bringing a new dynamic to his character's relationship with Othello.



“As Iago worked his evil magic in the so-called Temptation Scene of 3.3, Othello's body language became [...] decidedly more “African” – Yu Jin Ko

From left: Anthony Sher plays Iago
Sello Maake ka-Ncube plays Othello

Othello: 21st Century

Adapted by Jette Steckel, a production in Berlin, 2009 where Othello was played by a woman (Suzanne Wolff). She appears in a gorilla suit after becoming doubtful of Desdemona and then later wears a blonde wig and red dress.





Gregory Doran's 2004 Production of *Othello*

The casting of two South African actors, Sello Maake ka-Ncube and Antony Shear, as Othello and Iago hugely influenced the production through its allusions to South-African Apartheid. This stark casting evokes a very emotional response to the tragedy of apartheid, with the dissolution of Sello Maake ka-Ncube's stately portrayal of Othello conveying the isolation of the black man in a white-dominated colonial world.

Deutsches Theater 2009 Production of *Othello*

This production emphasises the evolution of Othello's character and unstable sense of identity, as Othello is acted by a female actress Susanne Wolff who undergoes numerous costume changes. Wolff initially appears in a smart and refined white shirt and black trousers emphasising Othello's self-assurance and dignity, however, following the alleged discovery of Desdemona's betrayal, Wolff appears in a gorilla suit, conveying Othello's estrangement from his true identity as he falls victim to others' racial prejudice and becomes the monster they wrongly perceive him to be.

Iqbal Khan's 2015 Production of *Othello*

Khan's casting of a black Iago marked a fascinating development in the relationship between Quarshie's Othello and Msmati's Iago as Iago appears furthermore an antagonist hell-bent on destruction, with the weaponization of race appearing additionally disturbing. Iago's own disdain for his manipulation of racial prejudice to hasten Othello's downfall is evident, as conveyed by his poignant rendition of a Zimbabwean folk song. This emphasizes Iago's dangerous nature as a villain, as he is willing to sleight his own racial identity to corrupt the status of Othello, his rival.



Extract Adaptation of 1.3.43, A racially flipped interpretation with Iago's character as a black man, as played by Lucian Msamati in the 21st Century RSC Production, untrustworthy and villainously perceived.

Duke

[to Brabantio] I did not see you: welcome, gentle signor, we lacked your counsel and your help tonight.

Brabantio

So did I yours. Good your grace, pardon me, Neither my place nor aught I heard business Hath raised me from my bed, nor doth the general care Take hold on me, for my particular grief Is of so flood-gate and o'erbearing nature That it engulfs and swallows other sorrows And it is still itself

Duke

Why? What's the matter?

Brabantio

Iago! Iago! O' black devil 'tis he!

Duke

What watermelon smile? Come, I'll have it not so What news hath you received?

Brabantio

My daughter! Pure is she, o' in all your compassion I beseech you, this news shall plague your mind as it hath mine, Iago, black demon, spit from his serpentined mouth hath he proclaimed that Desdemona wed with that Moor Othello. O'tis not true your grace! She never She repulsed back into her angelic soul at thought and vision so hellish No Moor would she allow to cross the barrier she hath determined Lies! Lies! Lies!

Duke

What ho? He hath no sane mind to make judgement so tainted and most imperfect

Brabantio

Humbly I thank your grace No witchcraft, what drugs and mighty magic shall turn her to love that which she feared to look upon My Lord duty hath fallen, chaos descends, reputation so clean now rotted and burned at the stake

Duke

Be still good Brabantio Men. My fellow noble masters put up thy swords and chop Iago into messes Honour who which o'er Lord blessed For King and Country Come put death in thy grave He shall face thy wrath which he hath caused himself No shadow shall cast its' sinful ways onto the beauty o'er bold spirited peace. What ho, who cometh?

Brabantio

I pray you, put down thy weapons. Desdemona stand in your action, it is she who comes.

Duke

[to Desdemona] Fair maiden, so mild and meek, fear not. Good signors, send for Iago Come put death in thy grave 'Tis time that fool's soul and fortunes be subdued for everlasting Here, Desdemona let her witness it.

“Are modern audiences more sympathetic towards Othello’s character?”

We can assert that modern audiences, who are living during the powerful revolution that we know as the ‘Black Lives Matter Movement’ fighting racial injustices; are more likely to perceive Othello’s character as the racially profiled victim, as opposed to the black “Moor” in which his counterparts attack him for throughout the play. As we move away from the racist beast that can easily be recognised as the true “abuser of the world,” as an audience we frown upon the theme of racism in ‘Othello,’ as we continue to fight tirelessly against the murderous racial oppression across the globe. Perhaps Shakespeare’s budding egalitarian soul infiltrated his contextually morally correct play, with glimpses of equality, a humanitarian diamond Iqbal Khan’s 2015 RSC Production of ‘Othello’ hyperbolised and played upon so incredibly.