Shakespeare’s Accomplishment in *Othello: The Moor of Venice*

Shakespeare’s *Othello: The Moor of Venice* has been called the greatest study of jealousy and envy ever penned. It is also Shakespeare’s only domestic tragedy. The play takes us inside the private life of a man of great public stature. Othello is a valiant general, a man of royal descent, and, for a time, the governor of Cyprus.

But once the action begins, Othello’s duties and accomplishments hold no interest for the audience. Instead we are captivated by his emotional response to a domestic crisis. In the words of one critic, “Othello is the story of a hero who went into a house.”

In Act I Othello enjoys the stature of a classical literary hero. He is esteemed by the Venetian senate, which calls for his military leadership when the state is threatened by Islamic aggression. Othello also exhibits an admirable degree of self-control in his responses, first to Iago’s accusations against Roderigo and later to Brabantio’s charges that he has stolen Desdemona by witchcraft.

But Othello’s weakness is his predisposition toward jealousy, a failing aroused in him by the villain Iago, first by innuendo and later by circumstantial evidence. Although Othello has learned to control his other emotions, the
jealous fear that he has lost his wife's love is a passion he has never before experienced, and he has no inner defenses against it.

Iago’s insinuations unleash in Othello a powerful emotion that robs him of his reason and degrades his character right before the audience’s eyes. The man whose behavior has been impeccable begins to treat his bride in an outrageous manner. And the man whose speech has been eloquent and romantic takes up the prosaic, lewd manner of expression that has been Iago’s. Finally, in the name of justice Othello kills his own wife, only to learn shortly thereafter of her innocence.

Although Othello is over 400 years old, it is still regarded by theater audiences as an exciting piece of entertainment with a superbly constructed plot and some of drama’s finest characterization. The issues the play explores are strikingly similar to those which preoccupy our own society: love and forgiveness, domestic violence, intercultural relationships, power and thwarted ambition, jealousy and betrayal, treachery and honesty, hatred and forgiveness, domestic violence, intercultural relationships. Shakespeare sets all these universal themes in the context of a military conflict between the forces of Islam and the Christian states of Europe. Othello is indeed a thought-provoking and emotionally engaging play, both because of the values inherent in Shakespeare’s script and the timely issues it raises.

**Othello Plot:**

Othello, a Moorish military leader in the service of Venice, has secretly married Desdemona, the highborn daughter of a Venetian nobleman, Brabantio. When Brabantio hears of the elopement, he is at first enraged and then brokenhearted at his daughter’s rebellion.

It is the duplicitous ensign Iago, however, who poses the real threat to the newlyweds’ happiness. Othello has passed him over for the office of lieutenant in favor of a man with less military experience, Michael Cassio. Iago thus confesses his hatred for both men and his intent to destroy them as well as Desdemona.

As a military man who has married outside his own social and cultural sphere, Othello is easy prey for Iago’s villainy. Thus the devious plan to convince the general that his wife has been unfaithful with Cassio works quickly and all too well.

Finally the once noble Moor becomes so distraught that in a jealous rage he purposes to kill the wife he loves. When the injustice of his act becomes apparent, the grief-stricken Othello strikes back at Iago and then takes his own life.

Shakespeare’s subtitle for his only domestic tragedy reveals his cultural dilemma he created for his main character, Othello the Moor, in his surreptitious marriage to the Venetian woman Desdemona. The word “Moor” in Shakespeare’s day was a shortened form of “blackamoor,” which meant “black man,” or Negro. The villain in Shakespeare’s first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus,* is a black man named Aaron the Moor.

When Shakespeare penned *Titus* in 1593 or 1594, English writings offered little distinction between the black Moor and another ethnic stereotype, the so-called “white” or “tawny” Moor. By the turn of the 17th century, however, some writers had begun to differentiate between the sub-Saharan black man from central or south Africa and the northern African “Moor.” Today “Moor” means a member of a Moslem people of mixed Berber and Arab descent, now living chiefly in northwest Africa. We usually refer to “white Moors” as Arabs. The comic character Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice,* written by Shakespeare in 1596–97, is a white Moor.

On the Renaissance stage the black Moor was regarded as the incarnation of evil, a sinister devil figure, while the white Moor, a man of lighter complexion, was looked upon as noble in character and appearance. The two types of Moor were distinguished visually onstage by makeup and in some cases costumes.

English playwrights often employed these two character types because their audiences were keenly interested in the strange and exotic people described in contemporary travel literature. Also the stereotypes themselves provided a kind of shorthand for the playwright. Audiences made a whole cluster of automatic associations with stereotypical characters. In drawing from such stockpiles, a playwright did not, of course, necessarily display his own beliefs about other people and nations.

Various lines and images in *Othello,* written ten years after *Titus,* clearly reveal that Shakespeare intended to represent the character Othello, like Aaron the Moor, as a black man – in the role of hero this time, however, rather than villain.

In physical appearance and in character, Othello is one of the noblest of all Shakespeare’s protagonists. As such, he is the first sympathetic black character in English literature. His virtues are highlighted by his being pitted against a white embodiment of evil, the arch-villain Iago. Shakespeare further challenged prevailing stage stereotypes by incorporating qualities of the white Moor in Othello. He is a rational and dignified man, yet his unique background makes him especially vulnerable to Iago’s hypocrisy and treachery.

Shakespeare endowed Othello with three of the major qualities that characterized both types of Moors onstage: credibility, or the tendency to believe what one hears.
Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun, Moorish Ambassador to Queen Elizabeth I

This portrait of the northern African ambassador to Queen Elizabeth I's court hangs in the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. The ambassador came to England from Barbary in 1600 to persuade the queen to enter into an alliance with his nation against Spain. Apparently he and his party spent six months at the court. Shakespeare could have been familiar with the ambassador himself and/or with this portrait.

This third quality is brilliantly exploited by Shakespeare in Othello’s inordinate regard for a handkerchief which is both a link to the black magic of his past and a symbol of his and Desdemona’s love. According to Kenneth Muir, Othello is “a Christian who has not entirely outgrown some pagan superstitions.” This handkerchief with its reputedly magical properties is the object which releases Othello’s fury against his wife. Finally, Othello becomes so deluded that he regards an act of savage barbarity—the murder of Desdemona—as a religious duty.

Although Shakespeare draws from stage tradition in his portrayal of Othello, he also transcends it. He has created a character with whom audiences in his day and ours share a common bond of humanity and to whom they extend compassion for his plight. Certainly their sympathetic response to his deeply moving tragedy and final repentance is in no way similar to the stock responses of amusement and ridicule usually evoked by stage Moors during the Renaissance.

From the premiere performance of Othello on Nov. 1, 1604, featuring Richard Burbage in the title role, through the mid-19th century, the role of Othello was represented onstage by white actors in black face paint. The first black man on record in the role of Othello is Ira Aldridge, who was also the first great black Shakespearean actor. Aldridge debuted in England as Othello in 1826 and performed the role to critical acclaim for 40 years. He also appeared as Aaron the Moor, Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth, Shylock and Richard III.

As the movement for the abolition of slavery escalated during the 19th century, the image of Othello onstage changed. He came to be represented most often in copper-colored makeup as a modern Moor, or one who hailed from North Africa but remained in Spain after Islam had been officially overthrown there. Turkish trousers and turbans complemented the concept of Othello as an Arab.

Some of the most renowned 20th-century productions of Othello featured black actors in the title role. Most notable among them were Paul Robeson’s moving performances beginning in 1930 and James Earl Jones’ beginning in 1982. In deference to the modern distaste for cross-racial casting, white actors today almost always represent Othello as a tawny Moor or Arab rather than a black man. 😎

Dr. Lonnie Polson, who played Othello in 2002 and Iago in 2012, opposite Dr. Edward Panosian as Othello. Dr. Polson portrays Othello as a northern African Moor rather than a black man, taking some of his clues for the exotic elements in Othello’s character from a painting of an ambassador from Barbary who spent six months at Queen Elizabeth’s court in 1600. Dr. Polson emphasizes Othello’s ‘otherness’: He is an “alien” in “a culture that he does not fully understand and that does not fully accept him.” Dr. Polson interprets Shakespeare’s text to mean that Othello is a Christian. Thus he does not wear the Islamic robes and turban portrayed in the ambassador’s portrait.

Bob Jones University’s Classic Players have staged 13 productions of Othello, the first in 1930. In nine of them, Bob Jones Jr., the troupe’s founder, played the role of Othello, experimenting with both the black Moor and white Moor character types from the Renaissance. During the 1944 and 1947 runs, Dr. Jones alternated the roles of Othello and Iago.

Bob Jones Jr. as Othello and Corretta Grass as Desdemona, 1973

Jane LaMee as Desdemona and Bob Jones Jr. as Othello, 1936

Don Wells as Othello and Robert Jones Jr. as Iago, 1944

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Iago’s Tangled Web

Iago
- Uses as an instrument of his villanies
- Innocently hastens Desdemona’s end by procuring her handkerchief
- Destructive passions in

Brabantio
- Father of Desdemona
- Seeks assistance in regaining Othello’s favor from

Desdemona
- naively sets up conversations between Desdemona and Cassio
- Envy professional promotion of

Cassio
- Father of Cassio
- Deceives her father by eloping with

Roderigo
- Has formerly rejected as his daughter’s suitor

Emilia
- Murders for disloyalty his own wife

Othello
- Despises
- Envisage the professional promotion of
- Seizes the opportunity to rid himself of his enemies
On Credulity

“The only disadvantage of an honest heart is credulity.”

— Sir Philip Sidney

Although jealousy is the character weakness that usually comes to mind when we hear the name Othello, for 17th-century audiences credit might also have seemed a prominent negative trait in the Moor.

A credulous person is one who too easily believes what others tell him. One of the most credulous characters created by Shakespeare is Rodrigo, a man whose extreme gullibility makes him an easy pawn. Regarding the figure known as “honest Iago,” all the characters in Othello are credulous. Renaissance writers also associated creditability with trusting too easily in what one sees—or thinks he sees.

Credulity goes hand in hand with the theme of appearance versus reality in Othello. Othello’s acceptance of Iago’s accusations and circumstantial evidence against Desdemona is just one of many appearances versus reality motifs that run through the play. In all the comedies and many of the tragedies Shakespeare invites audiences to explore the contrast between what a person or situation may seem to be on the surface and what it is in reality.

A familiar literary genre in Shakespeare’s day that warned against creditability was the emblem poem. This three-part work consisted of an allegorical picture, or emblem, representing a moral principle; an adage, or motto, that stated that principle tersely; and an epigram, or poem, that elaborated on it.

Andrea Alciato’s collection of emblem poems, first published in 1531, was very popular and influential in 16th- and 17th-century England. Alciato was an Italian legal scholar who was well-versed in Greek literature. His emblem poems are derived from Greek poetry and fables.

The emblem below warns the reader to be sober and cautious and to avoid being overly credulous, or believing too readily what he hears and sees. The image of a hand with an eye suggests the habit of believing what one sees. The herb pennyroyal, which appears beneath the hand, was known as the herb of ancient sobriety that could calm and charm the troubled human mind.

Although no known link exists between Alciato’s emblem and Othello, many members of Shakespeare’s audience may have recalled the warning it conveys as Othello succumbed to Iago’s treachery.

The type characters from medieval drama to whom Iago bears the most resemblance are the Vice and Devil figures. The Vice is a seducer and a hypocrite; a man who is dedicated to evil-doing and, more specifically, to the undoing of virtue. His atrocities are completely unmotivated; his victims, often unknown to him. His evil is so extreme that it may bring laughter to the audience. Leah Scragg describes the Vice as “a gay, light-hearted intriguer, existing on intimate terms with his audience, whom he invited to witness a display of his ability to reduce a man from a state of grace to utter ruin.” Further, he appears “to devote himself to his friend’s welfare” while he entices him into depraved acts.

Iago, in describing his hypocrisy to Rodrigo in the play’s first scene, refers to himself in a phrase that also identifies him as a great undoer: “I am not what I am” (I.i.65). His words mock the God of the Old Testament, Who is known as “I AM THAT I AM” (Exodus 3.14). Whereas God created all things and saw that they were good, Iago is an anti-God who delights in undoing that which is good, most notably the virtuous love of Othello and Desdemona.

The Devil is in many ways similar to the Vice. Both characters delight in destroying human victims. The Devil is primarily a tempter who would ensnare souls to enlarge the kingdom of his lord, Lucifer. His chief method is verbal, and his hatred is more extreme than the Vice’s. He presents his amoral view of life persuasively.

Iago is just such a serpent. Emilia compares his crime, the slander of Desdemona, to the serpent’s in the garden of Eden. He refers to himself as a devil (II.iii.351-53) who, like Satan, appears to be an angel of light. He articulates a view of life that debunks all traditional values—religion, love and friendship. He denies the doctrine of original sin and maintains that man can become—in and of himself, without the aid of any supernatural power—the complete master of his own body and will.

He pours venomous lies into Othello’s ears. He is a calculating villain who deceives character after character to bring
The word “tragedy” ranks high on the list of terms students of literature are expected to master, yet the characteristics of the category of drama it designates are subjective, usually fashioned according to the playwright’s own conception of the genre. In fact, the only universal quality of tragedies is that they all have unhappy endings. Even so, in many cases such endings are fashioned to be uplifting.

Shakespeare experimented with the concept of tragedy throughout his career. For example, Romeo and Juliet, an early work in the genre, purports to be a tragedy of fate—one in which the main characters suffer and die from no fault of their own. Yet Shakespeare clearly weaves free will choices and character weaknesses into the script as well.

In the more mature, so-called tragedies of character—Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Coriolanus and Antony and Cleopatra—Shakespeare’s concept of tragedy seems closer to the ideal set forth by the classical literary theorist Aristotle. We cannot be certain, however, that he was familiar with the treatise called Poetics which sets forth Aristotle’s view of the genre.

Othello is the play in which Shakespeare comes closest to meeting Aristotle’s criteria for an effective tragedy of character. To begin with, Othello is a man of high position, heroic reputation and royal heritage. He is respected for his accomplishments and his character traits, which include integrity, reason, honor, generosity and self-control. His character is primarily made manifest by his speech, which reveals his composure and passion for truth. As the Christian commander of the Venetian military, Othello is indispensable to Venice.

The action of the play depicts the tragic downfall of Othello, which is irremediable and irreversible. Although Othello is outwardly in conflict with Iago throughout the play, the ultimate cause of his tragic fall lies within himself. Some “tragic flaw” causes him to act in a manner that brings about his own suffering and death.

In Othello’s case this innate flaw is a fierce jealousy that is purposely aroused by Iago. It is aggravated by Othello’s secondary weaknesses: his insecurity as a man who has married out of his cultural element and his overly trusting nature that ironically causes him to snatch at Iago’s “proofs” of Desdemona’s infidelity.

In the character of Iago, one of his greatest dramatic creations, Shakespeare pursues the whole truth about the nature of evil.
Desdemona: Victim or Vixen?

Although Aristotle does not comment on the innocent victims in a tragedy of character like Othello, such figures are ubiquitous in the genre. Desdemona is usually regarded as a “suffering innocent,” but Shakespeare makes her a complex character, not merely a pathetic victim. The Desdemona of Act I of Othello is so different from the Desdemona of Acts II through V that she almost seems to be two different characters.

When the action of the play begins, Desdemona has already deceived and dishonored her father, Brabantio, by secretly marrying the black Moor Othello, his friend and presumably a man much older than she. According to Brabantio, by so doing she has subjected herself to “general mock.” Worse yet, her gross violation of filial duty will contribute to the tragic end of her marriage.

In both substance and style Desdemona’s speech to the Venetian senate in defense of the elopement is assertive, sophisticated and willful. She says, for example, “That I did love the Moor to live with him,/My downright violence and storm of fortunes/May trumpet to the world” (I.iii.245-47). Although her love and loyalty to Othello are clear and moving, especially to modern audiences, Shakespeare’s audience would have found her boldness surprising if not shocking.

Desdemona’s private behavior with Othello and her public renunciation of Brabantio bring on her father’s death. Gratiano reports in the play’s final scene that Desdemona’s marriage “was mortal to” Brabantio, for “pure grief” has “shor[n] his old thread in two” (V.ii.204-05).

Although Desdemona is often portrayed onstage as “a meek and passive beauty,” as Peter Quennell points out, “[s]he is a sophisticated, witty woman of the world,” a Venetian who enjoys bantering with Iago and Cassio while they await the arrival of Othello’s ship in Cyprus. Yet Shakespeare depicts Desdemona as a faithful wife who is also tender, loving, forgiving and protective of her husband—the ideal of femininity and virtue.

Given Desdemona’s boldness through Act II, scene i, it is surprising that in the scenes which follow she proves to be entirely lacking in worldly wisdom and sophistication. As the action progresses toward its tragic end, naivete becomes her most prominent character trait. It is this quality, however, that makes it possible for the villain Iago to “turn her virtue to pitch.” In other words, he uses her innocence to make her look guilty, in his image, black like tar.

When Cassio has disgraced himself with Othello, he turns to Desdemona, asking her to intercede with her husband on his behalf. Their innocent conversations and her subsequent remarks to Othello about Cassio are transformed from virtue into sin in Othello’s mind through the catalyst of Iago’s insinuations. Once Othello begins to perceive his wife’s pure relationship to Cassio as impure, he becomes increasingly jealous to the point of losing all reason.

In addition, it is out of naivete that Desdemona fails to guard carefully an heirloom handkerchief, Othello’s first gift to her and an object that he superstitiously holds in high regard. When it comes into Iago’s possession, it becomes in Othello’s diseased mind the tangible proof of Desdemona’s infidelity and thereby the determinant of her death.

In the words of Quennell, Desdemona’s “chastity is undeniable, but her background and her independent wilfulness make her act in a manner that Iago is able to exploit.” After Act I “[s]he is essentially blameless, but her small faults and indiscretions do contribute to the tragedy.”

As Othello’s character degenerates, Desdemona’s goodness becomes a prominent theme of the play. She stands firmly for marital purity when Emilia defends adultery. Her vision of Othello’s inner worth never dims. Even after she recognizes her husband’s ignoble demise and becomes the victim of his brutality, she reacts with unconditional love and loyalty. Her goodness shines even more brightly in the context of Iago’s malevolence.

Emilia’s epitaph for her dead mistress sums up Shakespeare’s final image of this complex character. It is the image of Desdemona that will live in playgoers’ memories: “O, she was heavenly true!”