

OTHELLO (1604)



DATING THE PLAY

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- There are **two versions of the play**, both printed after Shakespeare's death: the **in-quarto edition (1622)** and the **First Folio edition (1623)**. The text we read now is a «collation» (collazione) of them. Why two versions?
 - The **Act to Restrain Abuses of Players** (1606) prohibited spoken profanity in any dramatic production; it was the most precise and sweeping piece of censorship addressed to the theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. **Blasphemous oaths were forbidden.**
 - S. had to re-write many parts of the first play-text using **a higher register**. The previous rhetorical design (especially based on the exchanges Othello-Iago) and full of swear/blasphemous words was changed. One hundred and sixty new lines for Othello, Desdemona and Emilia.
 - Example of blasphemous oath: "Zounds!" (euphemistic shortening of God's wounds)

THE END OF 1604: DATE OF THE FIRST OFFICIAL PERFORMANCE

- The In-Folio edition, the one with the «higher register» will be the basis of Giuseppe Verdi's opera, *Otello*, based on Arrigo Boito's libretto (Theatre La Scala, Milan, 1st performance 1887).
- The 1st performance was at the court of King James I to inaugurate the activity of Shakespeare's company, the King's Men. It was recorded in the official book kept by the Master of Ceremonies, with the title *The Moor of Venice*.
- Probably written between 1603-4 (Melchiori).
- Another possibility: written in 1601-2 (Honigmann), performed in public theatres in 1603. Then theatrical activity is suspended for the queen's death and the plague the queen dies, theatrical activity is suspended. In this period *Measure for Measure* (a «problem play») was first performed, a play inspired by another of Giraldi Cinthio's novellas
- *Hamlet* 1600, *Othello* 1604, *King Lear* 1605

WHY A BLACK MAN, WHY A MOOR AS A PROTAGONIST?

SOURCES OF INSPIRATION FOR SHAKESPEARE

- English commercial interests in the Mediterranean Sea fosters knowledge of the Muslim world. Publication of books such as *General History of the Turks* (1603) by Richard Knolles and translation of the treatise *A Geographical History of Africa* by Leo Africanus (a Muslim scholar converted to Christianity). **Leo Africanus** (pseudonym for al-Hasan al Wazzan) is «a man between worlds» like Othello.
- Delegation from Morocco, to propose a military alliance between Queen Elizabeth's Anglican Britain and Muslim Morocco against the Catholic Spain allied to the the Church of Rome (and its secular «arm»).
- The Moroccan Ambassador Abd el-Ouahed ben Massoud ben Mohamed Anoum attracted the attention of London people.



A DIRECT SOURCE

- Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi. Ovvero Cento Novelle* (1565). Gli *Ecatommiti* had been translated into French in 1584. In the 7th novella of the third deca Disdemona marries a Moor against her family's consent. He is convinced by an ensign (alfiere) that she is unfaithful to him and he kills her suffocating her with a stocking full of sand. Her family will then take revenge and execute him.
- Another novella by Giraldi Cinthio, a writer and scholar from Ferrara, is the source of *Measure for Measure*.

SETTING

- Act I: Venice; Act II, III, IV, V: Cyprus
- The Aristotelian **Unities of Place and Time are not respected**
- **Unity of Time:** 1) the action of the play should occur in one day or 2) better the time of the performance and the action should coincide (as in *The Tempest*)
- Venice is similar to 16th-century London: a «metropolitan» city with overseas possessions, a port, the centre of an «empire». However a Republic, the Duke (Doge) is «primus inter pares» in the Council of Senators. Venetian women were well known for their beauty and corruption.
- Cyprus's nickname is «**the island of love**», because in Greek Mythology Aphrodite /æfrəˈdaɪtɪ/ (Venus) was born from the foam of the sea in Cyprus, a Venetian colony until 1570. Here, it becomes a place of disgregation, disorder, conflict and death.

THEMES IN THE PLAY

- 1) The ambiguity and the power of words
- 2) The condition of being a «foreigner», the «stranger», the «other»
- 3) Female submission to men in a patriarchal world.
- 4) The relationship between private sphere and public life

I) THE POWER OF WORDS IN *OTHELLO*

- The problem of language, the power of words to create reality: centrality of the word in the play, the tragedy of words (Agostino Lombardo).
- Evil enters the world through the word
- This is a play that analyses all the possibilities of words, anatomises (examines in great detail) the word.
- The word is the archetype of evil also in the Bible (Satan, disguised as serpent, induces Eve to eat the forbidden fruit).
- Iago = the serpent
- Jealousy = a green-eyed monster (III, iii, 168-170) [p. 164].

I) THE POWER OF WORDS. IAGO: A MASTER OF «FAKE NEWS»?

- He brainwashes Othello little by little. He undermines people's defences, damages their rationality, changes their point of view by instilling doubts, reinforcing suspicion and mistrust, He manipulates the others.
- He plays with words (instils doubts), is reticent when it is needed, (prepare the terrain and rouses anguish), repeats an allusion (increases anxiety): he is a master of rhetoric.
- **Antiphrasis** (figure of speech): the use of a word in a sense opposite to its normal one, antiphrastic examples: "Take your time, we've got all day", meaning "hurry up, we don't have all day" or "Great" an exclamation uttered when something unpleasant had happened or is about to happen. Generally for comical or ironic effect.
- A gap between Iago's words and what they really mean. Allusive language.
- Answering a question with another question. He avoids answering and increases uncertainty. He is able to magnify the problem.
- Metaphors, similes and parallels (As she has deceived her father, so she can deceive Othello)



I) THE POWER OF WORDS: OTHELLO IS A RHETORICIAN, TOO

- He convinces the Duke and senators by showing respect towards them.
- **Understatement** «Rude am I in my speech / And little blest with the soft phrase of peace» (I, iii, 82-4) [p. 44]. «Yet, by your gracious patience, / I will a round unvarnished tale deliver / of my whole course of love, what drugs, what charms, /, what conjuration and what mighty magic» (90-95) (p. 46).
- An understatement is a figure of speech in which the writer intentionally downplays or minimizes the significance or intensity of a situation, often to be rhetorical or satirical or to create emphasis.
- The effect of the power of words on Desdemona: she fell in love by hearing about Othello adventures and misadventures, suffering, slavery.

I) THE POWER OF WORDS: DESDEMONA'S LOVE FOR OTHELLO

The magic of words has conquered her: (I, iii, 90-95) [p. 46].

Othello too, like Iago, has exercised the power of word (I, iii, 129-172). «She'd come again, and with a greedy ear / devour up my discourse» [p. 51].

- TODAY'S FOCUS: Were women happy to be the “fixed foot of the compass?” (John Donne, “A Valediction”)
- She feels compassion. But is there a projected desire of a life she cannot live as a woman? She gives a “world of sighs”, “she swore, in faith, ‘twas strange, ‘twas passing strange, / ‘Twas pitiful, ‘twas wondrous pitiful;” (161-2) [p. 50]. Prova compassione (Pagetti); Commovente (Lombardo)
- Read I, iii, 160-170 [p. 53]:



2) OTHELLO: THE OTHER

- At first Othello seems authoritative, dignified, self-assured.
- He is calm and wants to confront Brabantio and the Duke (I, ii, 18-28) [p. 27].
- He recalls the high rank of his family without boasting it, and his condition of free unmarried man. He renounced his freedom for Desdemona's love. [p. 27].
- He is sure that: «My part, my titles, my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly» (I,ii, 31-33) [p. 29]

2) OTHELLO: THE OTHER

- In Act I, ii Brabantio calls him «Oh thou **foul thief**» (line 62) , «**damned** as thou art, thou have enchanted her» (63) «the sooty bosom of a such a **thing** as thou» (71-2) [p. 32]. Othello is **not human** in the eyes of Brabantio and **foul** (dirty, sozzo), Othello is compared to «bond-slaves and pagans» (99) [p. 36].
- Caliban «thing of darkness» in *The Tempest*. But also described as an animal or a monster
- Iago refers to Othello as a «barbary horse» covering Desdemona (I, i, 107-112) [p. 19]. Roderigo as the «lascivious Moor» (I, i, 124) [p. 19].
- Loving Othello is «Against all rules of nature» says Brabantio (I, iii. 101-2) [p. 46].
- Othello's **blackness** equates evil, dirt, immorality, corruption, crime, dishonesty (Desdemona has been stolen, abused and Othello is a thief)
- Connected to **magic**, «an abuser of the world, a practiser of arts inhibited and out of warrant» (78-79) [p. 34], he must have practised «foul charms, / abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals / that weakens motion» (74-75) [p. 32].
- Brabantio: «She is **abused, stolen** from me and **corrupted** / by spells and medicines bought of **mountebanks** (ciarlatani)» (63-4) [p. 42].

2) LESLIE FIEDLER, *THE STRANGER IN SHAKESPEARE* (1972) (AMERICAN SCHOLAR)

- He turns his critical eye on what he calls the “borderline figures” in Shakespeare’s plays and poems.
- Fiedler concentrates on four key representations of the stranger in Shakespeare’s work: the stranger as Woman, as Jew, as Black, and as New World savage.
- *Henry VI* (Part I) for women, *The Merchant of Venice* (Shylock) , *Othello* (black man), *The Tempest* (Caliban, the “savage”)

«Fiedler argues, reflects not only Shakespeare’s own values, but those of his audience as well. Fiedler further suggests that in this archetypal underworld we may find a mirror for viewing ourselves and our own times, forcing us to face unpleasant attitudes that we may have been unprepared or unwilling to acknowledge—including, perhaps, the internalized stranger».



3) WOMEN AND PATRIARCHY: DESDEMONA

- The magic of words has conquered her: (I, iii, 90-95) [p. 46].
- Desdemona has a «earnest (appassionato) heart» (I, III, 153) [p. 51].
- Desdemona, like Miranda in *The Tempest*, passes from her father's rule to her husband's rule. But she does not ask for his father's permission.
- She takes the initiative twice: by deciding to follow Othello against her father's will and by helping Cassio to reconcile with Othello: «Do not doubt, Cassio, / But I will have my lord and you again / as friendly as you were» (III, iii 5-7)[p. 147].
- Desdemona is determined: she becomes Cassio's advocate (read III, iii, 19-28) [p. 149.]

3) DESDEMONA: WOMEN AND PATRIARCHY

- D. is by Brabantio who considers her «dead» because she did not marry who he wanted (he even regrets not having «given» her to Roderigo).
- Desdemona **does not conform to the rules of patriarchy**. **Before** the «fall», she is described by men as belonging to the female canon: a fragile, naive, shy, reserved woman . **After** challenging her father and choosing independently she is equated to Othello the black other, by Iago: an erring barbarian and a super-subtle Venetian (I, iii, 355) [p. 69].
- Desdemona is mature, intuitive, and determined but trapped by men who use her (Othello needs a woman who listens to him and his stories of suffering and war; Brabantio wants a submissive and acquiescent daughter; Iago uses her to outlaw Cassio and take revenge on Othello; Roderigo wants to marry her and becomes an instrument of Iago's wickedness.
- Desdemona's destiny is in the hands of men. **Static condition, no mobility, no self-determination.**



MYSOGINIST STEREOTYPES/GENERALIZATIONS

- Emilia «talks too much» says Iago who humiliates her in public. Desdemona defends Emilia II, i, 103 and 114 [p. 87].
- Iago generalises concepts: **women are cunning and false**: «In Venice they do let God see the pranks (sozzerie) / they dare not show their husbands; their best conscience/ Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown.» (III, iii, 205-7) [p. 168].
- Iago: Desdemona has deceived her father and can deceive Othello, too. (III, iii, 209-16) [p. 169]. Also Brabantio had expressed the same idea (I, iii, 293-4) [p. 63].
- When Othello was still rational he had said: «She had eyes and chose me». He recognised her free will and independence (III, iii, 179-195).

4) PRIVATE SPHERE- PUBLIC LIFE

- It is the nearest approach of Shakespeare to a domestic tragedy (M.R. Ridley)
- Private obsessions can affect public role, status, and duties.
- Erotic fantasies induced and magnified by Iago in Othello's mind, the pleasure and torment of sexuality.
- Centrality of the body: to love means possessing a body

OTHELLO MIXES ELEMENTS OF COMEDY AND TRAGEDY

- Grotesque characters of the comedy:
- A senile father, round the bend, that does not notice his daughter's disappearance;
- Roderigo, silly and credulous, who is a puppet in the hands of Iago;
- Cassio, a vain and pompous philanderer, who turns into a drunkard after a glass of wine and mistreats a prostitute who loves him, Bianca;
- Finally Othello, ingenuous and insecure, although capable of valorous deeds on the battlefield, cannot stand the (false) idea of being a «cuckold».

ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY

- Othello the hero who can stand watching his brother's death during a battle but loses his mind for his jealousy.
- Words lose their meaning, become «relative» and undermine reality: Othello realizes the fragility of existence, experiences «nothingness». As Pagetti underlines, «the awareness of nothingness is articulated (Pagetti), as in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.
- The senses are no more reliable (sight, hearing)
- This leads to Othello's folly

IAGO

- Great manipulator of allusive language and of the flaws, weaknesses and prejudices of the others.
- He shows and emphasises the **dark side** of every character under the mask. «He is the **master of the parallel universe of 'also'**» (Pagetti) In the end, Othello is *also* a barbarian who comes from faraway lands; Desdemona is also a super-subtle Venetian; Cassio is also a pompous womanizer who likes courting and seducing women.
- A director that rewrites the life of each person in the play, builds alternative narratives, distributes different roles to the characters. Metatheatrical function.
- **Strategic opacity** (Stephen Greenblatt).