Race and Patriarchy in *Othello*

Marjorie St Rose

Abstract

This paper argues that both patriarchy and racism shape the dynamics of Othello. Othello's blackness affects his behaviour toward his wife as well as his attitude to himself. Desdemona's pariah status as a result of marrying a black man, partially accounts for her murder. On the other hand, Othello, as oppressed Other, is also, in his role as a male within the patriarchal tradition, the oppressor. Othello's need to establish and maintain hegemony over his wife makes his behaviour no different from that of other men operating in the framework of patriarchy. Ultimately, Othello is as much a man as he is a black man.

Early critics of *Othello* found the question of Othello's blackness so disturbing that a number of them, in spite of the rich textual evidence of the play, sought to deny it altogether or to mitigate the extent of it by arguing about gradations of skin colour in the Moor. Recent criticism has a much more open approach, admitting that race and racism are an inescapable part of the play and have much to do with its tragic outcome. However, even this apparent frankness may be yet another smoke-screen serving to obscure the distrust of women that is at the heart of this and other plays. The question is—is Othello essentially a black man, vilified by white men and the victim of racism, or is he simply a man, obeying the same codes of behaviour towards women that his Venetian counterparts in the play do? It is my contention that the dynamics of *Othello* are shaped by the oppressive ideology of patriarchy no less than by that of racism.

There is ample evidence of the existence of colour prejudice in Shakespeare's England. Orkin (1987) argues that, in *Othello*, it is confined to Iago , Roderigo, and Brabantio—the "villains" of the play. It is true that overt racial insults are verbalized by these three. Roderigo refers to Othello as the "thick-lips" (1.1.67); Iago styles him a "Barbary horse" (1.1.111); Brabantio alludes to him as a "thing" (1.1.171). Nevertheless, though Othello is exonerated in Act 1 and given the blessings of the council, blackness is not. The duke's "your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (1.3.286) merely bestows on the black-skinned Othello a metaphorical patina of whiteness. Hence the

https://doi.org/10.15362/ijbs.v11i0.44

duke's praise is really inverted racism. Othello is an honorary white. Even Desdemona's attitude to blackness is suspect. Her statement that she "saw Othello's visage in his mind" (1.3.248) implies that she is not in love with him because of the totality of whom he is (including his being a *black* man), but that she loves him for the qualities of his mind *in spite of* his being black. Berry sees her statement as "an implicit denial of physical attraction" (1990, p. 321) while Singh (1994) argues that she loves Othello as a fictional character in the exotic narratives he relates, not as a man of colour. So it is not just the villains of the play for whom Othello's blackness marks him as someone set apart. His identity as a black man is inescapable, something that all the characters in the play focus on in one way or another. One has only to look at the numerous references to "the Moor" to realize the extent to which Othello's blackness is a focus for the other characters.

These constant references to racial images, especially those of a negative cast, would have resonated strongly in the world of the Elizabethan audience. Aubrey (1993) subscribes to the view that blacks, though not altogether unknown in the Elizabethan world, would still have been seen as "strange creatures from outside the boundaries of the known world" (p. 222), and that in the popular imagination, blacks were associated with monsters. Iago's descriptions of Othello in the first scene play on these prejudices about blackness as he prepares his audience for the entrance of something not-human. It is clear here that Shakespeare was aware of the response that the audience would have had as he elicits and solicits these responses from them through the agency of Iago.

Iago's abuse in such inflammatory statements as "an old black ram is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.89-90) is certainly directed at Othello's race in an attempt to arouse deeply ingrained fears of miscegenation in the audience. But more than this is operating here. This abuse, though directed at Othello as a black man, is also aimed at Desdemona as a woman. "Tupping" degrades her by figuring her as an object which has something done to it; she is not an equal participant in the act of sex. The identification of her with an object is more clearly seen in "he tonight hath boarded a land carrack" (1.12.50). The extent to which Othello himself subscribes to this philosophy is seen later in the play when he refers to her as "the fountain from which [his] current runs" (4.2.58). She is an object—a fountain—while he is the motive force that owns her (*my* current) and acts on her. As a fountain she is empty until Othello, her husband, fills her up. Thus, Othello is not only acted on (by Iago) as the victim of abuse on the basis of his blackness, but Othello himself, as a male in the patriarchal tradition, acts upon Desdemona in an oppressive way; he sees her as subject to him merely because she is female.

In a similar way, she is "a fair paper.../Made to write upon" (4.2.70-71). Her potential to convey meaning lies dormant until a lover inscribes that meaning on her. Again that image underlines her passivity, her lack of self-determination, and Othello's implicit sense of hegemony over her. According to Danson (1993), Othello's language recognizes that the source of Desdemona's ignorant sin—the fountain or cistern within her female body—is the product of his own "readerly creation" (p. 72). Though Othello may not consciously recognize it, he is subliminally aware that he is the one who has made her into what he conceives her to be, using the imaginative power of his own mind. If she is a whore, he made her one.

Othello also addresses the sleeping Desdemona as having skin which is "as smooth as monumental alabaster" (5.2.5). As Bate (1989) affirms, she has been "metamorphosed into an object" (p. 139). Unfortunately, Desdemona herself reinforces this view of her womanhood when she calls herself "a vessel" (4.2.82), though this may be an attempt at appeasement and self-preservation. At this point in the play, Desdemona is willing to subscribe to any view of herself that will enable her to regain Othello's love and save her life. All these images—of Desdemona as fountain, as paper, and as alabaster—operate in a way which implies Othello's masculine control of his wife, a control based on his status as a man rather than as a black.

Yet Othello's blackness cannot be ignored in the play—nor is it. Othello is certainly the victim of racist attitudes as exhibited in the third scene of Act One. Brabantio, in particular, persists in viewing him in racial terms; he sees his daughter's love for this black man as an aberration and is astonished that she could "fall in love with what she feared to look on" (1.3.98). For him, Othello is a "what"—a something not-human. For his daughter to reject him for the Other is intolerable; once she pledges allegiance to the Moor, he casts her away, as his refusal to offer her accommodation while Othello goes to war graphically illustrates. The brevity of his "I'll not have it so" (1.3.237) dramatises the brutality of his rejection. With so few words are the bonds of years broken!

Brabantio's behaviour exposes the patriarchal underbelly of the play. As MacEachern (1988) avers, Shakespeare's fathers have "a real difficulty accepting their replacement in their daughters' affections and as a result, they abuse their political power over their daughters...behaving coercively and destructively" (p. 288). Though, as she says, Shakespeare does not authorize patriarchal power, the latter is very much in evidence in the relationships of women with their fathers and husbands.

If, then, Othello is the victim of racism, Desdemona shares his fate; her alliance with the Other makes her a pariah in the eyes of her father and of her society, thereby leaving her totally in Othello's power. As Vanita (1994) notes, society's covert condemnation of Desdemona for choosing to marry a black man reinforces the prejudice that what happens between them is a private, domestic matter for which society takes no responsibility. Othello's blackness in no way diminishes his power over Desdemona—in an almost perverse way, it increases it. Desdemona's pariah status leaves her totally unprotected by the patriarchal power of Venice, her father, or her kinsmen. She is therefore totally at the mercy of Othello, to whom she has given absolute power to decide her fate by the rebellious act of marrying him.

It is ironic that, like her father, Othello demands absolute loyalty from Desdemona, and once he imagines this is not the case, he, too, is prepared to cast her out, as is seen when he states:

> If I do prove her haggard,
> Though that her jesses were my dear heartstrings
> I'd whistle her off and let her down the wind
> To prey at fortune. (3.3.262-265)

The image is of Desdemona as a hawk, subject to the control of her tamer, Othello. If he is unable to retain sexual control over her, he is prepared to

assert his superiority by throwing her out "to prey at fortune." He is well aware of his masculine power over her, as her father is. Cohen (1987) has commented on an image Othello uses in reference to his jealousy. This image reveals his deep psychological need to control "his" woman; he refers to her as "a cistern for foul toads to knot and gender in" (4.2.60-61). Cohen points out that "images of jealousy tend toward the diminutive" (1987, p. 209). He argues that Othello's toads are small and controllable, thereby implying the power relationship between men and women in the play.

The pathos of Desdemona's position is that she has simply exchanged one sort of dependence on a man for another. In the same way that her father abandons her when she disobeys him, Othello is willing to make a Bianca of her if she goes against his authority. This is another instance of the way in which the behaviour of the black Othello is virtually identical with that of the white Venetian Brabantio. Their common ground is their male gender.

Othello's concern for his manliness is expressed in the revealing words, "She loved me for the dangers I had passed/And I loved her for she did pity them" (1.3.166-167). Othello's love for Desdemona is bound up in his love for himself, or for the image of himself that she reflects back to him—the image of the great warrior that informs his public persona and gives him a sense of self-worth in spite of his apparent hatred of his own blackness. Cantor (1990) reads Othello's longing for the domestic and Desdemona's longing for the heroic as "a source of conflict" (p. 302). Othello is torn between his longing for roots in Venice and his devotion to the world of warfare. His implicit association of the two is illustrated in his rationally indefensible cry, when he suspects his wife of infidelity—Othello's occupation's gone (3.3.357). In other words, his ability to maintain control over Desdemona is essential to his psychological well-being. If he cannot count on her fidelity he is unable to see himself functioning in the world of men as a competent warrior.

Othello sees his blackness and his age as weaknesses in the cultural world of Venice/Cyprus. His self-deprecation is seen when he bemoans his blackness and age in:

> Haply for I am black
> And have not those soft parts of conversation
> That chamberers have, or for I am declined
> Into the vale of years... (3.3.265-68)

Cohen, however, views Othello's focus on these weaknesses as a kind of rationalization when he says Othello "takes his cue from his otherness, his social marginality" (p. 212). So in Othello's case, blackness and age may be simply the excuse for misogyny. Be that as it may, though, Iago adroitly plays on these fears, affirming his superior knowledge of Venetian customs—"I know our country disposition well" (3.3.203)—and therefore his qualified status as Othello's adviser. He also capitalises on Othello's status as a racial outsider when he affirms Desdemona's "unnatural" behaviour in not accepting "Many proposed matches/ Of her own clime, complexion, and degree" (3.3. 231-32). In all of this, it is Othello's sense, not only of racial inferiority, but also of masculine and professional inadequacies, that contribute to his fears of Desdemona's unfaithfulness. His absolute control over her is essential to his maintenance of a feeling of personal worth. The loss of this sense unleashes a veritable flood of violence against his wife.

The woman's unfaithfulness, per se, is not the point; what is important is what it reflects about the man—as Othello exclaims, "Cuckold me!...with mine officer!" (4.1.189-90). The stress is on the possessive "me" and "mine." It is the implied insult to his manhood that Othello cannot abide. Also, the idea that Cassio may have possessed his wife sexually may have played on Othello's fears of impotence due to old age, or of undesirability due to his blackness. Yet, Berry theorises that there is also a sense in which Othello's embracing the image of himself as a cuckold helps him to transmute himself from an alien into a noble Venetian (1990, p. 328). He now becomes one of many noble, but cuckolded, Venetians. The need to identify with Venetian patriarchs, even by way of transforming himself into that most ridiculed of men, a cuckold, tells us how deep is Othello's need to belong.

Othello's attitude to marriage may be compared with that of the other men in the play. Othello expresses a typically chauvinistic attitude early in the play as he tells Iago:

> But that I love the gentle Desdemona
> I would not my unhoused free condition
> Put into circumscription and confine
> For the sea's worth. (1.2.25-28)

Othello conceives of marriage as a sort of prison to which he has been sentenced by love of a woman. It is secondary to the real business of men—war and service to the state. This attitude is not confined to the black Othello; it underlies the action of Act One, Scene Two in which the important business of the state is interrupted by Brabantio's complaints about the marriage of Othello and Desdemona. Brabantio recognizes the relative unimportance of his concerns about the marriage by apologizing for raising it—"O pardon me" (1.3.52)—and the Duke only allows him to speak of it as a special favour to a member of the military elite. Also, Othello's punishment may have been severe if his services had not been required in Cyprus.

The strength of patriarchal bonds is also signified in Othello's apparently total reliance on Iago. He allows his attitude to Desdemona to be shaped, not by her demonstrable loyalty to him in leaving father and homeland to marry and be with him, but by his implicit faith in Iago, whom he ironically considers "a man...of honesty and trust" (1.3.280). It is incredible that he would rather trust a male friend than his own wife or her personal attendant. Iago's perception of how to manipulate the "old, black ram" is also an expression of his understanding of how Othello's mind works. Since they are united by neither race, culture, nor class background, it can be posited that their commonalities rest on the twin bases of their profession and their identity as men.

However, Othello's distrust of his wife is not just a construct forced on him by Iago. He is an active participant in his own tragedy. As has been shown, he views his marriage, from the very beginning, with reservations. Iago's dislike of women is of a much more unsavory nature, but they share the same fundamental attitude. Iago's hatred of women is demonstrated in the animal images he uses to describe them—"Ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea-hen, I would change my humanity with a baboon" (1.3.315). It is ironic that in the final scene, the "erring barbarian" expresses very similar attitudes to women and to Desdemona. The Moor and his arch-enemy, Iago, are united in their basic distrust of women.

This unity is further seen in the similarities between Iago and Othello when they express distrust of their wives for reasons which seem to arise out of their own fevered imaginations rather than from any external reality. Iago suspects Emilia of cuckolding him with Othello; likewise, Othello suspects Desdemona of dallying with Cassio. Neither has any "ocular proof" of the unfaithfulness of their wives. What Othello thinks of as proof is simple stage management by Othello. The "reality" of the women's unfaithfulness is really a structure created in their own imaginations. Iago creates his own fantasy of Emilia's unfaithfulness. In the case of Othello, this structure is skilfully erected by Iago's mixture of innuendo, suggestion, and brutal word images. When asked for proof, Iago retorts:

> But how? How satisfied, my lord?
> Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on?
> Behold her topped? (3.3.383-5)

The total absence of proof of infidelity in both cases shows up the similarities between white Venetian and black Moor based on their insecurity as men.

Iago's—and ultimately Othello's—misogynistic attitude to women—provides interesting overtones in the scene of Cassio's imagined coupling with Desdemona:

> Sir, he would gripe and wring my hand,
> Cry, "O, sweet creature!" and then kiss me hard,
> As if he plucked up kisses by the roots
> That grew upon my lips; then laid his leg
> Over my thigh, and sighed, and kissed, and then
> Cried, "Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor. (3.3.421-26)

Cohen (1987) argues that though this description purports to describe a heterosexual act, it actually portrays a homosexual fantasy of lovemaking between Cassio and Iago and that it is an act that fires the imagination not only of Iago but of Othello, who is described as a "willing voyeur" (p. 205) as both men enjoy the spectacle of a man making love to another man. I think this interpretation is probably right. The homosexual fantasy is really an expression of the male bonding that is present, in a perverted sort of way, between Othello and Iago . Though Iago hates him, he knows Othello very intimately. This is why he is able to work on him with such deadly proficiency. They are bound together as closely as Iago and Cassio are in the alleged sexual encounter in the bed. These bondings suggest a yearning for closer male ties and, by extension, a need to sever connections with women. This is accomplished by their construction of unfaithfulness in their wives. It allows them to destroy these wives while at the same time feeling justified in so doing.

It is therefore significant that this homosexual fantasy is soon followed by what Little (1993) calls Iago's "parodic marriage" to Othello as Iago pledges, "I am your own for ever"(3.3.480). It is important to note the context of this "marriage"—it is not a pledge of love and procreation between man and woman; it is instead a pledge of death and destruction between man and man and is couched in appropriately military terms in Othello's "Now art thou my lieutenant" (3.3.479) as the two men vow to destroy Cassio and Desdemona. This "marriage," for me, is a misogynistic statement. In this alliance with Iago, Othello associates himself with the destructive power of an arch-villain rather than with the generative potential of Desdemona, ensuring his own destruction as well as Desdemona's.

The scene makes it clear that in spite of Iago's racist attitude to Othello, and his self-confessed hatred of "the Moor," the two men are united at a profound psychological level. Even Cassio, a "supersubtle Venetian," shares this masculine kinship. Cassio, too, is abusive to the women in his life. He treats Bianca with ill-disguised contempt when he asks her, in the presence of Iago, "What do you mean by this haunting of me?" (4.1.142). He is unwilling to have Othello see him "womaned," a sentiment reminiscent of Othello's own unwillingness to be a married man. Cassio's incipient abuse of Bianca in this scene is paralleled by Othello's brutal "Out of my sight!" (4.1.237) addressed to Desdemona.

Vanita (1994) has remarked on the curious correspondences in the behaviour of the men toward their wives. She rejects the argument that Othello's behaviour arises from his insecurity as a black man in a racist society and asserts that Othello behaves no differently from any white husband. She sees the fates of Desdemona and Emilia as intimately bound up with their status as wives. Whereas erring males are protected by the masculine code of honour—even Iago's death at the hands of Othello is prevented by the other males present—Iago is allowed to kill his wife for her mental unfaithfulness in speaking out against him, just as Othello is allowed to kill Desdemona for her alleged sexual infidelity. Vanita presents a cogent argument in support of her thesis of the primacy of patriarchy over racism in the play. Orkin (1987), too, argues that the smothering of Desdemona does not confirm in Othello a special form of barbarism from which European peoples are immune. I do not agree with Vanita that patriarchy takes primacy over racism; I think the two are inextricably bound together in such a way that it is impossible to state that either one has supremacy. Orkin's comment is relevant here as it emphasizes that Othello's action is human rather than culturally specific.

The conflict between the two opposed worlds of Othello—the world of domesticity and that of warfare—plays itself out in the horrific climax of the play in which the killing of Desdemona fuses violence with sexuality. Cohen (1987) sees the "sinister delight" (p. 216) Othello takes in the site of the killing as savoring of sexual excitement—"the justice of it pleases"(4.1.209)—and expressive of a re-attainment of control over her sexuality. Bradshaw (1992) reads the murder as "a ghastly parody of an erotic 'death' " (p. 228). I agree that Othello's emotions are peculiar. He attempts to see himself as fulfilling some divine "cause" in killing Desdemona. There are sexual overtones in:

> When I have plucked the rose
> I cannot give it vital growth again.
> It needs must wither. (5.2.13-15)

Also, his statement, "I'll not shed her blood" (5.2.3), suggests the deflowering of a virgin. When he speaks about how "heavenly" his sorrow feels, and how he strikes where he loves, one gets a definite sense of something either confused or perverted. It is also interesting to note his awareness of the whiteness of her skin as he contemplates her sleeping form. This awareness of colour is an awareness of the racial distinction between them, but may also be an implicit understanding of her innocence.

Little (1993) argues that in killing his wife, Othello fulfils the audience's allegorical presumption about his metaphorical as well as literal blackness (p. 322). He further states that the scene can also be viewed as a "symbolic rape" (p. 321) that ties the issue of race together with that of male abuse of power

over women. The murder scene brings to a climax these two elements of the play.

Othello's status as an outsider is emphasized in the final scene. The extent to which he has internalized what Berry (1990) calls the "poisonous image of the black man" (p. 319) is dramatized in his identification with that other outsider, the "malignant and... turbaned Turk" (5.2. 349) whom he kills in killing himself. It is fascinating, too, that in this act, Othello simultaneously rewrites his persona as a Venetian. Berry notes that in killing himself, Othello becomes the Venetian hero serving the state (p. 329).

Othello, though, is ultimately alone, as, unlike the other tragic heroes, according to Bate (1989), he "composes his own funeral oration" (p. 141). Neill (1989) also focuses attention on the contrast between the ending of this play and that of the other tragedies. In place of the reassuring processional exeunt announced by the usual removal of the tragic bodies, we get only Lodovico's curt order to close up the scene of butchery: "The object poisons sight/Let it be hid" (5.2.360-61). Berry (1990) also sees Lodovico's response as a racist one (p. 321). This ties in with the views of Little (1993) who has written about this scene as "the primal scene of racism" in which the visions of the sex act between Othello and Desdemona become invested with cultural anxiety about miscegenation. For Neill, this scene would have "exposed ...the obscene erotic fantasies" of the audience (p. 390). Shakespeare does not seem to privilege either race or patriarchy in the action though they are intimately bound together in Othello's tragedy. To use Riefer's term, "victimized tragic women" (1984, p.169) become more likely the stronger the forces of patriarchy, and Othello, the wife-abuser, is himself victimized by the ideology of racism. In this way, he becomes "a double victim of the early colonial imagination, an alien to himself and others" (Berry, 1990, p. 329).

The fusion of patriarchy and racism is suggested in Danson's comparison of the male appetite for conquest of a woman with the goal of colonial exploitation (1993, p. 71). He points out that Othello is the only one of Shakespeare's jealous husbands who has himself been the property of another person, and has thus been subjected to something comparable to the status of a married woman (p. 69). This accounts for Othello's recognition that man "can call these delicate creatures [theirs]/And not their appetites." Othello is as unable to escape from his blackness as from his "man-ness." His insecurity as a black person in a white world has as much to do with his behaviour in the play as his insecurity as a man uncertain of his place in his wife's affection. Out of these feelings of inadequacy arise the need to assert himself through violence, which is the way men in a patriarchal system are socialized to behave.

Perhaps the best way forward is suggested by Jeanne Roberts in an article about teaching Shakespeare in schools, when she says, "We must examine closely the racist, sexist, chauvinist, elitist world of the plays" (1986, p. 368). The power of Shakespeare lies in his ability to expose, undermine, and critique all these pernicious ideologies, apparently without subscribing to any of them.

References

Adler, D. (1987). The rhetoric of black and white in *Othello*. Shakespeare Quarterly, 25, 248-257.

Aubrey, J. R. (1993). Race and the spectacle of the monstrous in *Othello*. CLIO: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History, 22 (3), 221-238.

Bate, J. (1989). Ovid and the mature tragedies: Metamorphosis in *Othello* and *King Lear*. Shakespeare Survey, 41, 133-144.

Berry, E. (1990). Othello's alienation. Studies in English Literature, 30 (2), 315-333.

Bradshaw, G. (1992). Obeying the time in *Othello*: A myth and the mess it made. English Studies, 73 (3), 211-228.

Cantor, P. (1990). Othello: The erring barbarian and the supersubtle Venetians. Southwest Review, 75, (3), 296-319.

Cohen, D. (1987). Patriarchy and jealousy in *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*. Modern Language Quarterly, 48 (3), 207-223.

Danson, L. (1993). The catastrophe is a nuptial: The space of masculine desire in *Othello, Cymbeline,* and *The Winter's Tale*. Shakespeare Survey, 46, 69-79.

Grennan, E. The women's voices in *Othello*: Speech, song, silence. Shakespeare Quarterly, 38 (3), 275-292.

Little, Arthur. (1993). The primal scene of racism in *Othello*. Shakespeare Quarterly, 44, 304-324.

McEachern, C. (1988). Fathering herself: A source study of Shakespeare's feminism. Shakespeare Quarterly, 39 (3), 269-290.

Neill, M. (1989). Unproper beds: Race, adultery, and the hideous in *Othello*. Shakespeare Quarterly, 40 (4), 383-412.

Orkin, M. (1987). *Othello* and the 'Plain face' of racism. Shakespeare Quarterly, 38 (2), 166-188.

Riefer, M. (1984). The constriction of female power in *Measure for Measure*. Shakespeare Quarterly, 35 (2), 157-169.

Roberts, J. (1986). Making a woman and other institutionalized diversions. Shakespeare Quarterly, 37 (3), 366-369.

Singh, J. (1994). Othello's identity, postcolonial theory, and contemporary African rewritings of Othello. In M. Hendricks & P. Parker (Eds.), Women, Race, and Writing in the Early Modern Period. London: Routledge.

Vanita, R. (1994). "Proper men and fallen women": The unprotectedness of wives in Othello. Studies in English Literature, 34 (2), 341-356.

MARJORIE ST. ROSE has been a lecturer at the College of The Bahamas since 1985. She has held the post of coordinator of Technical English, served as Assistant Chairperson of the Humanities Division and is currently Head of the Department of English. She holds a Master's degree in Literature and Curriculum and her research interests include portfolio assessment and cooperative learning strategies.