

‘For a hero, Othello is too easy to pity, too hard to like.’ By considering the dramatic presentation of Othello, evaluate this view.

– Sophie YM

Comments: Use and debate the critics more effectively. Arguing against the critics is just as important as using critics to enhance your own argument.

‘The Tragedy of Othello’ presents Othello as a deplorable character from the opening scene of the play where Iago dismisses the Moors’ dignity and credibility with base insults such as ‘barbaric horse’ and ‘black ram’. From here, we acknowledge that Shakespeare wished to make the audience predisposed to disliking Othello, portraying Iago as the mouthpiece of Elizabethan, xenophobic views to force the audience in alliance with him. This also forces a sense of inevitability of Othello’s downfall, as the villain is established before the hero, inducing pity towards Othello from the first act. Nevertheless, redeeming qualities could be grasped at throughout the play, implying a counter-argument against the scathing analysis of ‘too easy to pity, too hard to like’.

The tale from which Shakespeare drew Othello was ‘The Moor of Venice’ by Cinthio. There are marked differences between the two representations, though, such as Shakespeare’s Othello and Desdemona having a very new, unstable relationship compared to Cinthio’s long-term, established one. Arguably, Shakespeare’s version allows the audience to pity the couple more as the hope and innocence of their love is so easily snuffed out. However, both versions conclude with the tragic murder of Desdemona, highlighting the ‘detestable nature of the Moor’ (Cinthio). The ‘detestable nature’ portrayed in ‘Othello’ could be attributed to Othello’s seemingly superficial preoccupations. In Act 1, Scene 2, Othello is affronted in the middle of the night by Brabantio and some armed men for the apparent crime of bewitching Desdemona. Othello’s honourable, pacifist response is: ‘Keep bright your swords, for the dew will rust them.’ This is a Christ-like allegory, echoes Christ’s standoff with the Romans whence he declared: ‘Put thy swords up to the sheath,’ implying Othello has a dignity and grace to mirror Christ’s. However, this is juxtaposed significantly in Act 2, Scene 3 when he is roused from his bedchamber to deal with a petty brawl: ‘Hold, for your lives’ followed by a menacing threat – ‘He that stirs next...dies upon his motion.’ Othello’s exclamatory line to mark his entrance contrasts the measured tone from the previous act. Furthermore, the commandment of ‘dies upon his motion’ insinuates Othello is taking the godly power of life and death upon himself, with a stature more akin to the angel Lucifer’s than Christ’s. Though his speech still remains blank verse, Shakespeare’s usual choice for heroes, his attitude is changed. Perhaps the move from Venice to Cyprus, away from the dignified Venice in which Othello, as a foreigner and therefore outsider, has tried to integrate himself into, reveals Othello’s true nature. Therefore, Cinthio’s analysis of the Moor ‘as the character conceal[ing] the malice he bore in his heart, in such a way that showed himself outwardly as another Hector or Achilles’, adds to the interpretation that Othello is ‘too hard to like’ for his outward persona is a façade.

Many critics have debated over which hamartia Othello ascertains, but Kenneth Muir made a convincing argument that Othello’s ‘fatal flaw is his credulity.’ Othello, somewhat naively, blindly follows the instruction of Iago, with the ‘certainty’ that Iago is honest. In the ‘Temptation Scene’ (Leavis), Act 3, Scene 3, Othello demands ‘ocular proof’ for the crimes of his beloved. This is subsequently presented to him in Act 4, Scene 1 where he ‘sees’ Cassio with the handkerchief but has been stage-managed by Iago to be out of earshot. The juxtaposition between Othello’s marginalised, frantic lines ‘Now he tells how she plucked him to my chamber’ compared to Cassio’s dismissal of Bianca shows Othello a fool. It is ironic that he asked for ‘ocular proof’ which he sees, but should he have ‘heard’ the interaction between Iago and Cassio he may have dismissed Iago altogether. It is both pitiful and tragic that Othello trusts so easily whilst the truth is so easily

attainable; creating the pathos and anticipation of the play. Perhaps one of Othello's last lines 'of one that loves not wisely but too well' were meant for his 'love' of Iago not Desdemona, an admission of his foolishness. By this, Othello is 'too easy to pity'.

However, perhaps Othello would not be as pitiful if the audience did not have access to Iago's soliloquies, or asides. In Act 2, Scene 1, Othello and Desdemona's joyous reunion is undermined by Iago's aside: 'O, you are well tuned now, but I'll set down the pegs that make this music', a metaphor for the destruction he will bring. Yet, if the audience had been aligned with the inner thoughts of Othello, unaware of Iago's schemes, as Othello was, one could speculate that Othello would be held in higher-esteem and the betrayal of Iago would be much more surprising. Nevertheless, Othello does demonstrate redeeming qualities that could counter the interpretation that he is 'too hard to like'. One cannot easily dismiss the love between Desdemona and Othello as false following their reunion in Act 2, Scene 1, where they complete each other's lines in perfect synchronisation: 'O my fair warrior!' And 'My dear Othello!'. The noun 'warrior' implies Othello views Desdemona as a source of strength, hence the pronoun 'my' whilst Desdemona views her husband as gentle and loving, hence the endearment 'dear'. Upon the assumption that their love is true, Iago's 'lead[ing] by th' nose' of Othello becomes less pitiful. As Dostoevsky puts, '[Othello] had to be led up, pushed up, excited with great difficulty...the truly jealous man is not like that.' Othello's refusal, initially, to adhere to Iago's warnings does appear: 'Nay there's more in this,' and he even comes tantalisingly close to uncovering Iago: 'Thou dost conspire against thy friend, Iago.' Othello cannot be pitied for both trusting a dear friend and challenging reports of his wife's infidelity.

There are many obstacles facing Othello in his quest to be accepted, from fellow characters and the audience. There is evidence of institutionalised racism from Brabantio and other characters, as well as the Renaissance xenophobia, which would stir prejudices and animosity from the first act. Furthermore, 'Othello' is a play of sexual jealousy (alongside *The Winter's Tale* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), where all protagonists are absurdly driven beyond irrationality to madness. The very genre of the play disposes an audience to pity and dislike Othello. Yet, Othello's constant struggle against his outsider status, despite the struggle presenting itself through an element of superficiality, twinned with Othello's true affections for Desdemona, make him somewhat redeemable.