

‘Othello is an outsider in a closed society.’ To what extent does the opening act of the play support this opinion? – Sophie YM

Othello, as a black man on stage, would have immediately struck an Elizabethan audience as being an outsider. This allocation may have origins in slightly xenophobic attitudes in a contemporary audience. However, Othello’s military success and ambition may have related to many imperialist attitudes of the time, perhaps integrating him into this society more than originally thought. Yet, simply because Elizabethans may hold certain prejudices towards Othello, does not mean these will have translated into the fictional, Venetian society in which Othello resides. The Duke’s poetic last lines in iambic Pentameter in Act I, Scene 3, ‘if virtue no delighted beauty lack, Your son-in-law is far more fair than black’, even equates Othello to his fellow white citizens, implying *his* society may be rather tolerant and accepting indeed.

The character of Othello, even from the opening scene, is forcefully portrayed as an outsider by Iago. His notable lack of presence is unusual for the hero of a Shakespearean play, even his name is not uttered until the startling proclamation of ‘valiant Othello’ in Act 1, Scene 3, a stark contrast to the degradation he had received from Iago and Brabantio. Remarkably, the introduction of Othello’s name by the duke, with the heroic adjective of ‘valiant’, may be the first evidence we see of Othello’s complete submersion in society. The Duke’s attention in scene 3 focuses immediately on Othello, and then, almost as an aside, to Brabantio. The hierarchy of greeting, though a trivial procedure, equates to importance, which would have been almost an insult to Brabantio by the placement of Othello above him.

Nevertheless, by Act 1, Scene 3, a proportion of the characters (and most likely an Elizabethan audience) would see Othello as an outsider, and hence inferior. Arguably, even Othello views himself as an outsider – but as a superior man. G.B. Harrison noted that ‘Othello is no ordinary man, but in his own eyes – and hers – something of a hero of legend.’ ‘Hero of Legend’ is a bold claim. Iago’s ‘epithets of war’ do not nearly resemble the achievements of Othello’s magnitude. Othello’s first major contribution to the play, perhaps rather arrogantly, is a long monologue in blank verse focusing predominantly on his achievements. Othello’s fanciful tales of ‘hair-breadth scapes i’ th’ imminent deadly breach’ win over Desdemona and even the Senate. Perhaps Othello’s real power lies in his ability ‘to exaggerate and to dramatise himself and his own actions’ (G.B. Harrison), with even Desdemona’s heartfelt love pledge relying on Othello’s ‘story’ not himself. Othello’s military prowess is undoubtedly impressive, and the source of envy of Iago, and perhaps even imperialist Elizabethans. Thus, though Othello is considered an outsider, the nature of his subsequent status is disputed by the characters.

Venice is a setting typically used by Shakespeare to explore more liberal ideas, as it lacks the constraints of British monarchy and religion. Venice was under a republic and purveyed stereotypes of hedonism and sexual promiscuity which both fascinated the English and allowed Shakespeare to promote controversial ideas such as feminism and equality without explicitly criticising British society. So with this liberal setting in place, how could Venetian society be depicted as closed? We learn in the opening scene that Othello is not the only outsider, ‘one Michael Cassio – a florentine,’ the thief of ‘Iago’s deserved promotion is held in similar contempt by Iago. Despite Othello being acknowledged as an integral part of Venetian society and state, he may have exacerbated attitudes

towards his outsider status by hiring Michael Cassio as his lieutenant. Michael Cassio, as a white, 'florentine' gentleman, displays chivalrous and gentle mannerisms (perhaps enhanced by his lack of experience in battle), notably in Act 2, Scene 1, whence he shows utmost admiration for Othello: 'And swell his sail with thine own powerful breath'. Cassio's almost hyperbolic depiction, whilst Othello is absent, denotes his gentility. Othello seems to have taken a liking to this attitude and adopted it in hopes of improving his standing – an attitude noted by Kenneth Muir: 'There is much to suggest that Othello is childlike, gentle and pure in heart.' The innocent and 'childlike' analysis is undermined by Othello's possible Cassio-based façade which he uses to win over (or manipulate) the Senate – the façade's evidence lies in the juxtaposition between Othello's gentle external appearance and his military experience, but also may evidence the apparent 'preferment' that Iago resents at the opening.

An irony is presented here given that, in Othello's attempt to implement attitudes the Venetians expect of him, he has only succeeded in isolating himself from his 'honourable Iago' and the liberal, open society most likely to accept him.

Yet, though liberal stereotypes of Venice may have generalised this society and Othello's standing within it for the Elizabethans, it does not address the contempt, pioneered by Iago, directed towards Othello. Compared to a broadly liberal society, this contempt may appear almost out of place. Iago is the first character named, presented and given considerable amounts of lines on stage, and as the play begins in media res, an audience is forced to rely on the words of Iago to initially determine the action of the play. As he proclaims 'I am worth no worse a place', he takes for granted the audience's ignorance and forms a tacit comradeship with them. In addition, the derogatory terms Iago uses such as 'Moor' or 'black ram' would have been commonplace in the Elizabethan era and induce the effect of isolating the audience from Othello by insinuating his inferiority. However, debatably, Iago's views are not commonplace amongst the Venetians. Roderigo only agrees with Iago's views on Othello, with the conditional 'I would not follow him then', after he hears Iago's construction of the Moor and his misgivings. The adverb 'then' denotes Roderigo's conclusion post Iago's explanation. Similarly with Brabantio, the distraught father is only enraged following Iago's brazen description of 'the gross claps of a lascivious Moor', with negative adjectives of 'gross' and 'lascivious' undermining Othello's character for Brabantio and the audience. But one could speculate that Brabantio may not have been as horrified if it wasn't for Iago's falsification of events and may have produced a reaction more akin to the Duke's than Iago's.

Therefore, given Iago's allegiance with an Elizabethan mindset, instead of the tolerant attitudes of his fellow Venetians, may suggest that the 'closed society' is actually Shakespeare's representation of an Elizabethan society (portrayed through Iago's performance). The Venetian society in which Othello resides, has been evidenced to be more inclusive.

Othello's pride and consistent manipulation of his hero-like façade may have isolated him more than Venetian attitudes would have discriminated upon him otherwise. This infers that Othello's hubris has made him an outsider in a tolerant society. However, a closed society is represented in 'Othello' as an allusion to the nature of Elizabethan society, not the one Othello himself experiences. Perhaps Othello's inevitable downfall at the hands of Iago (and hence Elizabethan attitudes) is Shakespeare's allegory for Elizabethan society being backward, closed and destructive.