

Explore Shakespeare's presentation of betrayal in Othello.

– Sophie YM

33/35 – marked by MCM

Comments: Requires more literary features in the second half of the essay.

'Othello' is one of Shakespeare's three tragedies of sexual jealousy (the others being *The Winter's Tale* and *Three Merry Wives of Windsor*), all of which see the protagonists divert from irrationality to madness from their 'imagined slights' against those that they love. However, many of the incidents of sexual jealousy in Othello are provoked from, what appear to be, 'betrayals'. Othello is sure, with 'ocular proof' that Desdemona has betrayed his love by sleeping with Cassio and, perhaps, Iago's failed promotion unleashes his repressed homosexual feelings for Othello. It could be argued that betrayal is the 'root cause' of all the tragedies within Othello.

Tolstoy remarks that 'man can endure earthquake, epidemic, dreadful disease and every form of spiritual torment; but the worst tragedy to befall him is; and will remain, the tragedy of the bedroom'. With this interpretation, an audience can begin to sympathise with Othello's outrage towards the discovery of Desdemona's infidelity. In the 'temptation scene' (Leavis), Act 3, Scene 3, Othello begins to deny all attachment to Desdemona, through a synthetic list of farewells: 'O, now for ever, Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content.' The adjectives 'tranquil' and 'content' may refer to Othello's state of mind and therefore may foreshadow his inevitable seizure and loss of control. Yet, to be so easily persuaded of Desdemona's infidelity through the possession of a handkerchief, to modern audience, may seem absurd. However, in Elizabethan England, handkerchiefs were a sign of wealth but also of a wife's loyalty – to be found in the possession of a married woman's handkerchief was deemed 'proof' of infidelity. Arguably, though an audience may perceive that Desdemona has been faithful, with the knowledge of the sentimental worth of the handkerchief, perhaps Desdemona's true betrayal was her carelessness with it. She shows herself to be very attentive to her husband's needs, noting 'Why do you speak so faintly?' Shortly after entering the room. Her question finishes Othello's statement 'I am to blame', reinforcing the synchronised nature of their relationship demonstrated by their union in Act 2. Yet, when '[*the handkerchief falls*]' her attention is lost, causing the subsequent loss of her husband's faith.

Nevertheless, one could argue in a similar manner that Othello 'betrays' Desdemona, both in love and of her trust. It is notable that Othello adheres more to the instruction of Iago than his own wife. When Iago attempts to reason with Othello, he speaks of Desdemona's class: 'May fail to match you with her country forms, and happily repent.' Iago references Othello's outsider status, claiming that Desdemona has begun to reconsider her choice to marry a non-Venetian. As Traub notes, 'Iago's manipulation is so effective because he takes advantage of real, male, social concerns.' Iago's juxtaposition between the pronoun 'you', in a disapproving tone and 'country forms', followed by the oxymoron of 'happily repent' and Othello's insecurities. However, his 'effective manipulation' does not negate the fact that, without hesitation, Othello believes Iago instead of confronting his own wife. Furthermore, at the end of the scene, the stage is set similar to a wedding ceremony between Othello and Iago. The stage directions display the two kneeling, and they exchange vow-like sentiments: 'I greet they love' (Othello) against Iago's final 'I am your own for ever.' It is ironic that we do not see the clandestine wedding between Othello and Desdemona, only this mock wedding – a blatant betrayal of the vows Othello has already undertaken.

The mock marriage ceremony appears to be the pinnacle of Iago's power – the events following denote his downfall – where he stands above a kneeling Othello, gloating with the imperative 'Do not rise yet.' According to David Bell, Iago's hatred of the Moor is a result of his repressed

(unconscious) homosexual feelings for Othello. Bell speculates that, as the play begins in media res, that it is likely that Iago has harboured close feelings for a long time, but the betrayal of Iago's promotion that was given away by 'preferment' provoked his easy betrayal of Othello. As Venice had such a rigid social hierarchy, with a clear class divide between rich and poor, Shakespeare would have sympathised with Iago's plight, given Shakespeare himself rose through the classes. As a result, the 'wedding' serves to amalgamate Iago's achievements of manipulations throughout the play, his satisfaction at achieving as close as possible to a resolution of his repressed feelings and his rise in status militarily, standing above Othello. However, this scene also distorts the natural order of hierarchy (between Othello and Iago's social stature), and in Jacobean tragedy, a distortion of the natural order forebodes destruction. We also see this trope earlier in the play where Othello's subversion of the marriage protocol, where he would ask the permission of the father of the bride, forebodes tragedy for Othello and Desdemona's relationship. This is summarised by Brabantio's parting shot: 'She has deceived her father, and may thee.' This betrayal may have been the first and only betrayal that was not linked to Iago's machinations.

William Hazlitt wrote that 'Iago is an amateur of tragedy' but instead of employing his invention on imaginary characters or long-forgotten incidents...casts the principal parts among his nearest friends. With the exception of Desdemona's elopement, all of the aforementioned betrayals could be traced back to Iago. Othello's perception of Desdemona's betrayal was due to Iago's manipulations, as was Othello's betrayal of Desdemona given her carelessness and Iago's subsequent theft of the handkerchief. The betrayal of Iago's promotion appears to be the source of bitterness towards Othello (with his release of repressed emotions being an unhappy consequence). Iago's orchestrations of the 'betrayals' of his fellow characters encompass the entire theme of betrayal, highlighting Iago as the 'surrogate dramatist' (Graham Bradshaw) within Othello.