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Bachelor's thesis

# **Othello, Racial Themes and Public Reception:**

**Analysis of literary criticisms since its release**

**June 2022**

**NTNU**

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**Abstract:**

William Shakespeare's classic tragedy 'Othello' has been the focal point of a large variety of critical literary discussions since its first performance in 1604 due to its complex and nuanced portrayal of humanity. This thesis focuses on the public's reception to Shakespeare's magnetic representation of racial identity and aims to discover if a linear evolution in perception occurs throughout the play's performance history and the critical literary discussions attached to it. By analyzing a variety of reviews and articles written by academics ranging in time from the seventeenth century all the way to the contemporary world, we are able to paint a larger historical picture as well as determine the existence of an evident change in the perceptions of 'Othello' and its protagonist's racial identity over time. The critical reviews analyzed are split into two categories (Traditional and Modern, as suggested by Azmil M. Zabidi's 1990 research comparing two decades of 'Othello' criticisms) based on the factors contributing to their perceptions. The results demonstrate an evident alteration of perception over time as traditional reviews either attempt to ignore the theme of race altogether or reject the play's believability due to representations of people of color. In contrast to the modern perspective always acknowledging race and its implications even when it is not the particular focus of the review.



## **Introduction:**

What is the true reason for the world's intense and continued fixation upon William Shakespeare's 'Othello'?

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William Shakespeare's famed and controversial play: 'Othello' has been the subject of continued interest for critics and scholars alike since its first performance on 1 November 1604. A large variety of essays, articles, and other academic texts written take in-depth looks at 'Othello' regarding its literary accomplishments, Shakespeare's portrayal of its complex characters and the way these fit into the sociopolitical movements of the time. Amongst these, an evident recurring theme of relevance is the one deconstructing the presence and absence of race within the play as well as what role it plays depending on the context provided by critics during different periods of history.

The literary and sociopolitical criticisms reflecting on 'Othello's' merit as a contextually plausible and coherent play can be separated into different perspectives depending on the points they put forward and how they deconstruct the play politically. As proposed by Azmil M. Zabidi's paper reviewing and comparing two decades of criticisms concerning 'Othello' published in 1990 and Virginia Mason Vaughan's 'Critical Approaches to Othello' published in 2016, we can view these perspectives and separate them into groups: Traditional perspectives: covering post-colonial readings and marxist readings and Modern perspectives: including feminist readings.

Zabidi in reference to A.C Bradley's 'Shakespearean Tragedy' (1909) proposes that his analysis may be "subject to limitations of his time". Could we then claim that more modern analyses and reviews of '*Othello*' are more profound, complex and nuanced in their interpretations? Or could we in fact claim that reviews written in closer proximity to 'Othello's' original release date are the interpretations that prove to be more accurate or relevant as they more closely reflect philosophies and morals present during Shakespeare's time?

This thesis will discuss and analyze the extent to which literary and sociopolitical criticisms of William Shakespeare's 'Othello' evolved throughout time and in what ways they did so since its release. Furthermore this thesis aims to consider which of the perspectives presented deserves most merit by means of comparison and consideration based on a range of factors. This evaluation of

evolution will be done by reflecting on a variety of criticisms published between the time of Othello's release in 1604 up until present day in order to contextually determine the reason for its mass gathering of public interest amongst average readers as well as academic critics. Through this, we may also be able to expose historical truths in relation to race as well as track the birth of open-minded philosophies reflecting equal treatment for humans of all ethnic backgrounds by means of continuous critical analysis of William Shakespeare's 'Othello'.

## **Analysis and Discussion:**

### **Traditionalism:**

The first perspective of criticism that will be approached is the Traditionalist view: Tightly connected to Biblical connotations, it is the opinion that rejects Othello's plausibility as a play and character. There is a heavy focus placed on Othello's nobility and his place within the Venetian social hierarchy perceived to be in "violation of the conventions that positions people of color firmly below white Europeans, and non-Christians below Christians" (Slights, 2019).

Via complete dismissal of the play's morals, setting and believability in comparison to realism regarding its source material: Giraldi Cinthio's novel 'The Moor of Venice' (1565), Thomas Rymer's 'A Short View of Tragedy' published in 1693 reflects on 'Othello' and Shakespeare's work as a poet. Slights describes the significance of this review as being the first major published critique of the play thus potentially reflecting this era's morals and conventions. Rymer depicts Shakespeare's alterations of Cinthio's novel to be "for the worse" (Rymer, 1693, p. 1) in a way that he views to be historically impossible and downright unrealistic in regards to military hierarchy. This directly refers to Othello as a character being black and having the title of General in the Venetian army. Rymer explains: "Nothing is more odious in Nature than an improbable lye; And, certainly, never was any Play fraught, like this of Othello, with improbabilities." (Rymer, 1693, p. 2). The improbabilities mentioned are explicitly connected to the racial and social status of the main character this making Rymer dismissive of the complex play's literary merit solely based on racial factors. This level of criticism demonstrates the Traditionalist perspective as one that focuses on Othello's nobility, valid or otherwise. Moreover, Rymer within the first few paragraphs of his review, formulates concluding lessons to take from the fictional narrative by which he targets parental consent within the confines of marriage while fearfully describing the possibility of "Maidens of Quality run[ning] away with Blackamoors" (Rymer, 1693, p. 1). He additionally

advises husbands to have impenetrable proof before letting their jealousy be the cause of tragedy, implicitly undermining the malice and relentlessness behind Iago's manipulation tactics and thereby portraying Othello to be not only dull, but savagely emotional. The focus applied on the improbability of the social status given to characters by Shakespeare, appears to overshadow Rymer's analysis in a way that does not grant him to pose further questions regarding Shakespeare's intentional literary choices, but rather advances his claim that the play is withered by absurdity.

Despite his distasteful comments touching on racial identity and social status, Rymer also makes sure to make a compelling note of the way Othello is able to court Desdemona away from Brabantio through language, the only positive attribute he offers Othello, making it evident that he is effectively siding with Brabantio. Thus, we are able to interpret his acknowledgment of Othello's beautiful language symbolically if one associates Othello with the Biblical devil tricking the naive Eve with the power of persuasion enforcing the Traditionalist view applied.

Biblical implications take on a different role but are nevertheless present in Paul Siegel's review titled 'The Damnation of Othello' from 1953. Opinions and criticisms including Biblical connotations directly connected to the Traditionalist outlook are displayed as Siegel compares Othello's tragedy to Adam's fall from grace thereby assigning him ultimate nobility. Siegel points out the link between Christianity and the characters depicted in Othello would have been evident to the Elizabethans as Desdemona's "divine goodness" and the martyred nature of her death are strongly reminiscent of Christ while Iago's diabolical and malicious intentions would be linked to Satan himself. According to Siegel, our famous protagonist Othello, representing Adam, was positioned to make a choice between Christian and anti-Christian values (Desdemona and Iago) and it is Othello's surrendering to the devil that leads him to experience a tragedy parallel to Adam's.

While racial identity does not play a significant role in Siegel's article, it maintains its Traditionalist classification due to its focus on Othello's lack of responsibility for the tragic events that plague the last Acts of the play. Iago takes the position of the devil here while Desdemona remains to be perceived as ultimate goodness. This distinction of a white man taking the role of the devil makes Iago a large focus for where responsibilities lie in the tragedy that unfolds and entirely excuses Othello from fault in his own narrative promoting the traditionalism classification given. Siegel's article being published in 1950s signifies an important historical period in the United States when the Civil Rights Movement emerged to end systematic discrimination leaving his omission of racial

issues as an intentional choice potentially showcasing the nuanced view of race present during this time.

The significance of this historical event can also be felt and seen in Philip Butcher's review titled 'Othello's Racial Identity' published in 1952 making a detailed effort at exploring Othello's true ethnic background implying a certain ambiguity found in the text as well as past performances. Simultaneously acknowledging the large number of critics and scholars that haven't taken written descriptors like: "black" and "thick-lipped" and asserting claims that neither Shakespeare nor Elizabethans "made careful distinctions between Moors and Negroes" (Butcher, 1952, p. 1), Butcher details the history discerning which race of people is being spoken about when "Moors" are mentioned concluding the term's vast coverage of different racial ethnicities ranging from Arabs and Berbers to Syrians and "Negroes"<sup>1</sup>. Using Shakespeare's quarto to support and guide his research, Butcher pulls a handful of quotations spoken by characters describing Othello's appearance. In addition to the two descriptors exemplified above, Iago employs the words "old black ram" (I.i.88) and "black Othello" (II.iii.33) as well as Othello's own words "I am black" (III.iii.263) (Shakespeare & Sanders, 2018) all of which Butcher recognizes while maintaining that Shakespeare never explicitly describes him as being dark in complexion.

However, these observations essentially proving Othello's legitimacy as a black man make no attempts at understanding in what ways concepts of racial identity could be responsible for the way the story develops and concludes. He adds that while "Negroes, and many Moors, were enslaved in Elizabethan days, [...] a king does not lose his royal lineage, simply because he and his people happen to be slaves" (Butcher, 1952, p. 243) implying Othello's nobility as an unchanging factor in his analysis of racial identity. Butcher chooses to apply nuance solely to the probability of Othello's blackness rather than apply that same nuance to his social standing and position in Venice amongst Venetians.

Zabidi adds: "[Butcher] asserts that since many Negroes were made into slaves during Elizabethan times, Othello could very well have been noble originally." (12) keeping Othello's genuine nobility in the forefront and placing questions regarding Shakespeare's intention with his use of race as a theatrical device in the background all while theorizing that "it is likely that Shakespeare made

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<sup>1</sup> Referencing Sub-Saharan Africans

Othello a nobleman merely to suit the convention that considered people of noble blood the only proper heroes for the stage or to eliminate disparity of rank as a disputing factor in the tragedy” (Butcher, p. 245). Racial identity is validated but only with the goal of proving its potential irrelevance as we have established the traditional perspective will do. This review published in 1952 can reinforce the racial polarity felt during the start of the Civil Rights Movement in which the Traditionalist perspective could reflect confederate ideals in the 1950s in the United States.

The Traditional perspective is further evidenced and elaborated by A.C Bradley’s critical review: *‘Shakespearean Tragedy’* (1904) as he describes the titular hero as being a “noble barbarian” (p. 156). This contradicting set of words reflects Bradley’s traditional mindset maintaining Othello’s nobility whilst acknowledging the “savage passions of his Moorish blood”(p. 156). If viewed in a simplified manner, this narrative concludes that because Othello’s nobility is secured, the reason for his tragic fall is due to Iago’s villainous plotting geared toward Othello’s weakness as a Moor: His “suspiciousness of female chastity” as an “Oriental” man. However, this particular traditional review of Othello recognizes the protagonist’s ethnic background as being significant and the source of complex human behavior while still upholding the belief that Othello is noble and experiences tragedy due to outsourced villainy from Iago. Bradley’s language displaying Othello to be a noble man also includes a certain ambiguity implying the way his ethnicity could have potentially played a role in his demise instead focusing his analysis on Iago and his role. While Bradley evidently paints Iago to be the villain, *Shakespearean Tragedy* does not precisely propose that the root of Iago’s ill-will has any direct correlation to Othello’s ethnic background. In his meticulous analysis of Iago’s malicious motives toward Othello, Bradley approaches prior attributions of hate to Iago as inaccurate by which he refers to Iago’s unreliability as the narrator of his own thoughts. Meaning that despite his usage of the word “hate” aimed specifically at Othello, Bradley insists Iago does not show or behave in a way that reflects passionate hatred considering “a man moved by simple passions due to simple causes does not stand fingering his feelings, enumerating their sources and groping about for new ones” (p. 183). What we can grasp from this is Bradley’s evident humanization of Iago and his evil prowess, going on to describe him as an artist of tragedy with what he believes are significant similarities to Shakespeare himself. The remaining question poses itself: Why not apply the same efforts and tools in order to advance the humanization of Othello? Zabidi astutely describes Bradley’s opinion as being: “subject to the limitations of [its] time” in reference to Bradley’s generalized comments toward people of color as well as his omission of Othello’s psychological character analysis. However, to what degree can we

deconstruct historical criticisms in order to find their meaning without implied racism? Does the perceived racism then not take part of the criticism itself?

An appropriate follow-up example of this conservative outlook is eloquently pointed out by Jessica Slight's 'A Survey Of Criticism' (2019) when she mentions the German poet and translator August Wilhelm Schlegel's approach to 'Othello' at the start of the nineteenth century. Schlegel's beliefs reflect Bradley's in that he sees Othello as a barbarous man in nature whom was superficially civilized to achieve high ranking.

Schlegel explains:

"We recognize in Othello the wild nature of that glowing zone which generates the most ravenous beasts of prey and the most deadly poisons, tamed only in appearance by the desire of fame, by foreign laws of honour, and by nobler and milder manners. His jealousy is not the jealousy of the heart, which is compatible with the tenderest feeling and adoration of the beloved object; it is of that sensual kind which, in burning climes, has given birth to the disgraceful confinement of women and many other unnatural usages. A drop of this poison flows in his veins, and sets his whole blood in the wildest ferment. The Moor seems noble, frank, confiding, grateful for the love shown him; and he is all this, and, moreover, a hero who spurns at danger, a worthy leader of an army, a faithful servant of the state; but the mere physical force of passion puts to flight in one moment all his acquired and mere habitual virtues, and gives the upper hand to the savage over the moral man." (August Wilhelm Schlegel, as quoted by Slight, 2019) - This quote guides our interpretation toward the belief that Othello's nobility is nothing but a learned facade and with enough external pressure applied (especially pertaining to matters of sexuality), he will return to his "Moorish nature" tightly tied to barbarian stereotypes. This way of perceiving Othello makes it evident of white Europeans place within the context of social hierarchy in comparison to foreign people of color as is elaborated by Slight: "As socially constructed notions about race, religion, nationality, gender, and class came to be presented instead as the product of an unalterable "nature" that recognized the inevitable superiority of a white, Christian, European, male elite, readings of *Othello* as a literary confirmation of this hierarchical view began to gain ground." (5)

Does the Traditional perspective of Othello in which he is assumed to be genuinely noble and at times almost perfect justify Iago's actions as we are able to his feelings of envy and inferiority?

In addition, the Traditional perspective recognizing Othello as a barbarian savage may in fact prove to be one in which the critic has fallen for the manipulation set in place by Iago to alter the perception of Othello. As can be seen in Bradley's interpretation, the focus placed on the psychology of Iago and the need to understand the source of his malice turns into an effort to paint his character as more human than devil. The villainous and manipulative actions performed by Iago are placed on a separate playing field to Othello's violent end despite both seemingly coming from places of jealousy within the characters' hearts.

### **Modern:**

Thomas Rymer's rigid and classical opinions were not the only ones present during his time period. As the eighteenth century progressed, a new wave of criticisms entered the scene giving Shakespeare's 'Othello' newfound merit. Samuel Johnson published 'General Observation on Othello' in 1765 and as one of the most prominent essayists of his time, his defence of Shakespeare's presentation of characters engaging in intricate human behavior came as a breath of fresh air for eighteenth century critics and readers. He reflected on Othello as a character by expressing his admiration for the way he was skillfully written by Shakespeare: "magnanimous, artless, and credulous boundless in his confidence, and ardent in his affection, inflexible in his resolution and obdurate in his revenge" (1). No particular mention of his racial ethnicity is put on display by Johnson, who instead focuses on the significant character development done by Shakespeare. While this cannot be explicitly categorized as criticism coming from a Modern perspective due to its lack of acknowledgement of racial issues having direct effect on the story and its development as we witness with later critics, it is not explicitly from a Traditionalist perspective either. The merit Johnson awards Shakespeare for his realistic human depiction could be associated with his understanding of all characters including Othello being no more than a representation of the impact powerful human emotions can have especially in the presence of complex social dynamics. This could also comprise of the ways insecurity can impact humans behavior in relation race but this is not explicitly said.

The theme of insecurity takes the forefront as one of the characteristics that represent the Modern perspective. This is explored in great detail in Robert Heilman's '*Magic in the Web*' (1956) as he discusses the changing levels of confidence and security Othello experiences throughout the

duration of the play. His identification of Othello as “the least heroic of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes”(166) although seemingly hostile, paints the protagonist fairly considering his emotional victim-like state due to social isolation.

Heilman distinguishes Othello’s standing within the military in Venice as well as the love he shares with Desdemona as the essential “pillars of strength in a society which he considers himself inferior” (140). This opinion gives race a significant meaning in the story as it enforces Othello’s social isolation as a foreign character craving the validation of the society he is a part of. This perspective is supported by John Arthos’ review published two years after Heilman’s named ‘*The Fall of Othello*’ (1958) as a direct response to Heilman’s work in which Arthos depicts the concepts of nobility, honor and duty as the cause of weakness for the titular hero. Arthos asserts that Othello’s achievements in the Venetian army had to be the source of great effort as it realistically would have been almost impossible for a man of Othello’s ethnic background to overtake such a prestigious role during the time of the play’s release. Arthos creates an inherent connection between this great effort and the amount of pride and self-assuredness Othello may feel but does not specifically address the role race plays in this dynamic surrounding pride and insecurity.

Zabidi provides commentary on this by adding that “in his assimilation into Venetian culture, Desdemona acts as the final touch and this love is proof positive of his victory not only in the fields of battle but especially when his alien race is called into question”(16). While this may apply, the opinions discussed are framed in a more traditional manner with the use of the word “assimilation” by Zabidi as we revisit the viewpoint proposed by Schlegel that Othello’s civilized appearance is nothing but a facade which he will come to drop for the reality of his savage character as a ‘Moorish’ man. What we can determine from this is that while the Modern perspective attempts to humanize Othello as a character and provide reason for his behavior, it can also intrinsically attach harmful racial stereotypes to him.

Furthermore, Othello’s marriage to Desdemona is viewed differently with the consideration of this perspective. While the concept of love within their marriage cannot be discarded with any level of certainty, the narrative supporting honor and insecurity as Othello’s vices has the potential to view the alliance Othello makes to Desdemona as a strategic one in order to further his climbing of the ranks as a foreigner within the respects of his new home: Venice. Arthos elaborates on this interpretation by bringing awareness to the fact that Desdemona’s infidelity may be more of an attack on Othello’s honor: “it is not the vices finally that led him to think of killing Desdemona



even though he loathes her but honor...”(103). Heilman claims in relation to Othello and Desdemona’s feelings for one another: “[Othello] reminds us of the actor falling in love with his audience: he played his ‘dangers’, she loved ‘him’ for them, ‘And I lov’d her that she did pity them’” (141). This description implies Othello’s love for Desdemona stems from her pity of him “leaving their love questionable at best”(17). In his analysis, Zabidi proposes two ways of interpreting this loss of honor in which the first: Desdemona is seen as a prize owned by a black man thereby having Othello’s honor be put into question as soon as the right to his property is threatened. This would represent the case in which honor has been achieved through many efforts as a black man among white men and their values. The other scenario would be in which Othello’s nobility is entirely legitimate as a military leader and his fear of losing honor comes solely from the need to protect his position as a man worthy of respect in this world. The first interpretation includes the existence of a certain racial insecurity within Othello leading him to behave aggressively as a response to his fear of losing all he has worked so hard to achieve. This serves as an appropriate representation of what we are referring to as the Modern perspective. The second interpretation acknowledges Othello’s fear of losing power but in a way that reflects entitlement to honesty from his ensign as well as ownership over his woman as his nobility is being seen as genuine creating a clear reflection of the Traditional perspective.

A crucial aspect of the Modern outlook is the scrutiny of the character as a human and the behaviors that reflect Shakespeare’s possible intent with the creation of a foreign protagonist as Eldred Jones exemplifies this clearly in his 1965 book *Othello’s Countrymen*. Jones acknowledges the Traditional perspective in passing as he refers to Thomas Rymer as the critic: “who so frequently brings up the right questions but supplies the wrong answers”. This sets the tone for the rest of his literary and historical analysis as he creates a large focus on the perception of Africans during the Elizabethan era and how these impressions align with the dramatic literary writing of African characters. Jones brings up the way in which European poets were writing about Africa during this time whilst considering their high level of curiosity and interest by its “strangeness” including aspects such as: its environment, its animals and its humans (whom they considered subordinate). Moreover, he adds that although playwrights having access to travel writing as source material or inspiration would have had a certain awareness of the skin color variation seen in African people, they would still assign Moors a darker skin tone for dramatic effect. Jones aligns himself perfectly with our understanding of the Modern perspective as he explains: “Because of his isolation in Venetian society and the prevailing attitudes, Othello puts himself into the hands of Desdemona, the

one who really belongs to the society. Hers is the stronger position socially, and this is the potential source of difficulty in the match. This is a factor which Othello's mind is quick to seize upon, and which consequently Iago can exploit" (95). Jones views Othello's racial identity as a vulnerability in the environment he is placed in all while withholding simplistic blame on neither Othello nor Iago. This vulnerability is seen clearly through the comparison in social standing to Desdemona's as well as the disapproval shown in their pairing by surrounding local Venetians. While one may be tempted to attach this vulnerability specifically to Moors, Jones comes to a much more neutral conclusion: "The poet used this background sensitively exploiting its potentialities for suggestion, but at the same time moving away from the stereotypes, so that in the end Othello emerges, not as another manifestation of a type, but as a distinct individual who, typified by his fall, not the weaknesses of Moors, but the weaknesses of human nature" (87). This conclusion signifies a compelling addition to the analysis given by Jones in the way that it somewhat rescinds previous claims made discussing racial identity by declaring that Othello's race may in fact not be as relevant as many modern scholars allege but may just be a dramatic tool aiding in the storytelling of human psychology and tragedy rather than the psychology of a specific black protagonist. The focus lies in the isolation of the character; a universal human experience.

This idea is substantiated and examined further by a 1982 essay studying the origin of Shakespeare's Moor in which Barbara Everett considers the theory that Othello's racial identity may in fact be entirely irrelevant with the recognition that Othello's blackness was not evidenced with certainty until after the Romantic era when the play was performed more regularly. Insisting that it was Othello's identity with isolation that made him such an impactful character as he was primarily perceived as a foreigner, Jones reminds us: "The Moor is, of course, neither an African nor a Spaniard, but an actor on stage portraying the experiences of any colored Everyman..." (107). This theory enforces the belief that the nobility appointed to Othello by Shakespeare was nothing but a small symbol of success and not a reflection of his character. Through this we are able to conclude that his nobility or lack thereof becomes inconsequential all while the strangeness of his ethnicity sustains that human nature pertains to all races.

Martin Orkin's *Othello and the Plain Face of Racism* was published five years later in 1987 making us witnesses to apparent developments made in the conversation of racial identity relating to the writing and interpretations of 'Othello' as he states in his introduction: "the absence or presence of racist attitudes inevitably determines one's response to Othello". While this quote

retains a level of truth, it can also be interpreted as the utterance of one making exceptionally careful attempts to be perceived as someone without racial bias and thereby unlikely to create literary discourse in a racist manner. While efforts not to interpret literature in a racist manner can certainly be of value, the importance of understanding the roots of the play and the era in which it was written remain of utmost importance when it comes to understanding the creative intention Shakespeare infused in his the characters he wrote and the reason for the events that led to such a tragedy.

Orkin suggests the play is one that makes conscious efforts to dispute racist ideals whereupon he points out the clear oppositions in Othello and Iago's physical appearances and their morals/ personal characteristics: "It is Iago, the white man who is portrayed as amoral and anti-Christian, essentially savage towards that which he envies or resents and cynical in his attitude toward love" (170). What can be established through this suggested opposition and reversal, whether it was intended by Shakespeare or not, is that color is not a determining factor as it pertains to judgement of character further enforcing the ideal that acts stemming from human nature are applicable to all, regardless of race. Despite this analysis being in accordance with Jones and Everett's depictions of human nature and behavior in the play prompting an independent characterization of Othello in contrast of the stereotypical generalizations of all Moors. Shakespeare's intention with the racial contrast shown in Iago and Othello cannot be verified and claims asserting Shakespeare was disputing racist concepts are very unlikely to be factual if one considers his previous negative depictions of Jewish characters exemplified in the play *The Merchant Of Venice* written in the same era.

A discussion looking at the omission of the bedroom scenes throughout performance history is introduced in Michael Neill's 1989 publishing of '*Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in Othello*' where he effectively launches an investigation into the bed scenes as a prominent source of anxiety surrounding sex and race in white cultures. Neill opens his thorough analysis looking at the viewing audience's perception of Othello by quoting Dr. Johnson regarding the final moments of the play: "I am glad to have ended my revisal of this dreadful scene, it is not to be endured" (Neill, 1989, p.1) serving as an undeniable representation of the shocking sentiment felt by fictional Venetians in the play as the protagonist's murder and suicide are followed by comments of disapproval and disgust from the remaining characters. This proves especially evident in Lodovico's reflecting comments: "The object poisons sight: /Let it be hid" (Shakespeare & Sanders, 13

2018, 5.2.347, p. 212) and works to assert the level of anguish and anxiety felt throughout the long performance history the play has seen. Neill further supports this with a quote from Emilia signifying outrage at the idea of being murdered in one's bed specifically. The source of this anguish begins to be uncovered as Neill recalls the words of a critic from the Melbourne Argus reviewing the play negatively in 1855: "[The] consummation should take place behind the curtain and out of sight". Neill places a focus on the use of the word "consummation" that he then pairs with the scandalization of the bedroom scene concluding and making it evident that the bed was innately tied to such powerful negative sentiments concerning race and sex that had to be hidden from the public. Carefully taking the readers through the play's performance history, Neill evidences further the outrage viewers around the world felt watching Ira Aldridge's performance as Othello, the first black man to assume this role on stage. Neill depicts a nineteenth century Russian literary critic reviewing Aldridge's appearance and the play as "[exhibiting] nothing less than the symbolic rape of the European "spirit" by the "savage, wild flesh" of black otherness" (Neill, 1989, p. 391).

In his comprehensive dissection of various commentary and criticisms made during the play's history of performance, Neill also adds his remarks to Modern interpretations of the play through his mentions of Martin Orkin, mentioned previously with his claims that Shakespeare's presentation of racial matters worked to "oppose racism". Neill contradicts this opinion whilst also giving it merit for its attempt at literary appreciation by means of exposing racist philosophies which had been largely dominating the extensive critical revisions of the play at the time: "Shakespeare would surely have been puzzled to understand the claim that his play "opposes racism," cast as it is in a language peculiar to the politics of our own century" substantiating this with the knowledge that the word 'racialism' dates from 1907 and 'racism' from 1936. While ideologically, this could be possible, the argument simply could not be stated nor understood using these specific terminologies.

What remains then of Neill's actual literary analysis of the play? Reflecting on the casual nature of the racism and prejudices that flows out from Iago's dialogue throughout the course of the play delivered in such a manner that felt improvised by the character, Neill guides his readers to interpret Iago as one the leading forces asserting this racially motivated fear. This can be demonstrated as Neill harks back to Iago allowing disastrous events to occur and his clear showing of enjoyment in being a witness whilst bringing the audience with him, following the thread of morbid fascination and scandalization he leaves behind. Regarding the source of the anxieties in connection to the bed

and race, Neill poignantly points out the difficulty in knowing “whether its racial anxieties are ones that the play discovers or implants in an audience as to say whether jealousy is something that Iago discovers or implants in Othello” (Neill, 1989, p. 14). The way in which we can clearly identify Neill as being a critic with a Modern perspective can be based on this quotation alone as it really puts into question to whom the blame should be assigned for the tragedy that develops. He determines that the performance of the play, as well as the omission of the last scene indicates that his ‘discovery’ theory is the answer which resonates best. However, this conclusion creates further questions regarding Iago’s role as a villain. Could then Iago not only be Othello’s manipulator but also the audience’s?

*“IAGO: Even now, now, very now, an old black ram Is tuppung your white ewe. ... you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse. . the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.”* (Shakespeare & Sanders, 2018, 1.1.93, p. 85)

Neill remarks that since the audience is made to listen to this crude and improper dialogue before having the chance to meet either Othello or Desdemona on stage yet, the dialogue actually serves to plant the suggestion that the way they present themselves publicly is nothing but a mask hiding the crude and unspeakable nature of their private affairs. Iago’s attempts to control the narrative as well as the way others perceive Othello and his partnership with Desdemona expose more about Iago’s moral nature than Othello’s. Despite there not being a concrete connotation to race in this regard, Neill guides readers to conclude that jealousy, hate, manipulation as well as love and kindness are not traits reserved to any one race group and can be applied to all depending on context.

Zabidi’s thesis supports Neill’s claims about fears regarding miscegenation as he procures an argument presented by Karen Newman in a feminist critique of ‘Othello’ stating potential sources for racist ideologies portrayed in the play coming from popular travel literature at the time as well as “distorted stories claimed to be derived from holy scripture” (Newman as quoted by Zabidi, 1990)

“We can re-read Othello from another perspective... that seeks to displace conventional interpretations by exposing the extraordinary fascination with and fear of racial and sexual difference which characterizes Elizabethan and Jacobean culture.” (Newman as quoted by Zabidi, 1990). This idea puts in perspective that Othello’s tragedy may not be due to racist ideals and

insecurity but patriarchal attitudes connected to miscegenation. In this way, we are presented with a version of the Modern perspective that proposes and insists that Othello is not a play about race or the isolation of a black man in a white society but is actually a major centerpiece for the feminist movement.

This is examined further in Celia R. Daileader's intricate book *'Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth: Inter-racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee'* (2005) as she approaches the story of Othello not from the perspective of the black hero but from the perspective of the woman he murders. She opens with: "[Othello] is the story of a woman killed - smothered in her bed - for having sex. Which particular man she is killed for having sex with matters less to me than the sexual nature of the transgression she dies for: that is, her 'innocence' of the charge of adultery with Cassio strikes me as immaterial, as from the standpoint of masculinist - racist hegemony it is her defiance of paternal authority and the miscegenation taboo that results in her death" (Daileader, 2005, p. 2). Daileader wastes no time asserting her stance and belief that Desdemona's story of systematic limitations as a woman is one of more importance than Othello's battle with foreign isolation at this historical turning point in the play's critical history. She explains that while most political and critical reviews of 'Othello' have made Shakespeare's treatment of racial issues a point of focus, there has been a great lack in the discussion of domestic violence in the play making it worthy of comment. Daileader does not necessarily undermine the progress made from discussing race as a recurring theme in the play but instead questions the reason for its dominating and continuous presence in the critical analysis space noting its impact being tied to the literary merit of the play, the fact that it was written by Shakespeare as well as its ability to predict its modern yet offensive ideals toward racial differences. In order to exemplify this focus on the question of female mistreatment, she reminds readers Iago does not deem adultery in his own marriage as a reason for murder and that the violence experienced by Emilia at the hands of Iago is practical in order to prohibit her from incriminating him as opposed to the symbolic murder performed by Othello.

This analysis is a major guiding point in order to determine the evolution and reason for said evolution taking place within the contents of the 'Othello' reviews published since its release. While race issues continue to be a topic worthy of comment and expansion, by 2005 when Daileader published her complex psychological review, the conversation surrounding the role race plays or does not play in 'Othello' had already been ongoing and appeared to have peaked at a certain point between the 1960s and 1990s.

One of the principal keys in critical literary discussion is to somewhat bring a new perspective to the table especially when reviewing a classic literature written by Shakespeare already known and adored by many. Daileader strives to add a innovative perspective regarding gender issues and feminism in which she perhaps inadvertently forecasts an entirely new topic of focus for critics discussing 'Othello' to delve into for the next few decades until another seemingly disregarded subject matter or theme takes its place.

This would be implying that whichever social and philosophical factors contributing in the narrative's end result within Othello's story the previous generation intentionally or unintentionally avoids discussing by filtering out as normal behavior (within bounds of what is deemed historically accurate), the newer and coming generations will apply focus on deconstructing and understanding for the general betterment of human kind. Discussions stemming from classic literature and the way these stories and characters are perceived being a certain force to apply change in our treatment of minorities.

### **Discussion and Conclusion:**

Given the variety of critical sources spread throughout the play's performance history examined closely in this thesis, we are able to conclude with a relative amount of precision that analytic reviews of William Shakespeare's famous tragedy 'Othello' follow a line of chronological evolution. Meaning that this thesis proves to a certain extent the existence of a linear progression as it pertains to appreciation for the role race issues play in order to further the narrative and character development. Azmil M. Zabidi's 'Othello and the question of race' (1990) in which he compares literary reviews approaching Othello from the 1950s and 1980s works as a guide for the classification system used in this thesis by separating reviews spread over time into two groups: Traditional and Modern.

The Traditional perspective, seen predominantly in closer proximity to the play's release, serves to directly or indirectly reject the theory implying Othello's perceived racial identity plays a significant role as a theatrical device driving actions made by characters. This is identified through observation of some striking and recurring characteristics including: Dismissal of the fictional world's believability, prevalent Biblical connotations, and the maintained belief in Othello's genuine nobility denying him equal treatment to other characters. Exemplified strongly in Thomas

Rymer's 'A Short View of Tragedy' (1693), we are witness to a certain contempt against people of color as he believes them to be of a 'savage' nature.

It is important to note that traditional perspectives of 'Othello' cannot and should not necessarily be directly associated with proximity to Shakespeare's original release of 'Othello' despite the fact that within the confines of this thesis these associations can be a helpful guide. Historical factors such as the ethnic background, gender and general status of the influential literary voices creating discourse surrounding human social issues must be considered as a great majority of the analyses published in close proximity to the play's first performance were largely written by white men of a higher sociopolitical status. Similarly to analyses published more recently, they not only function to criticize the play from a literary standpoint but also communicate a personal philosophy whereas the contemporary critical analysis space allows and encourages people from all backgrounds to comment on the play resulting or at least nearing a state of equality in important philosophical discussions such as race and gender equality portrayed in literature.

Critical reviews of 'Othello' coming from the Modern perspective approach the play in a way that attempts to uncover and expose deeper more abstract human social dynamics implied within Othello's narrative inclusive of modern political movements. Race as a factor is consistently mentioned although it does not always operate as the centerpiece of all modern 'Othello' critique. Rather, we see the discussion of race taking the position of a catalytic component motivating most recent Shakespeare enthusiasts and academics to discover new themes of interest that had been seemingly neglected as is exemplified by Michael Neill in 1989 and Celia R. Daileader in 2005.

Following the American Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, as action against systematic segregation was taking place and developing, literary critical analyses being written about 'Othello' increased in complexity and depth. No longer focusing on the rigid binary system attempting to determine the potential validity or invalidity of the Moor's nobility, perspectives broadened with the addition of feminist readings. As exemplified with Martin Orkin and Michael Neill's texts approaching 'Othello' from an angle that not only acknowledges the role race plays but also attempts to go into further detail with reference to the implications apparent racial issues in the play impact the audiences watching them. These analyses and close readings (especially Michael



Neill's) of 'Othello' function to include the variety of changes made over the history of performance by directors as a direct response to the public reception of the play thereby reflecting on Shakespeare's original piece and creating an angled discourse of racial issues that continue to echo in perpetuity according to sociopolitical context. Celia R. Daileader, in her book analyzing the phenomenon of race and eroticism in literature, following a similar style of analysis to Neill and Orkin provides superb insight with her discernment of the position race occupies within 'Othello' and reflects on significant previous attention brought to the play as a result of its representation of race by expressing: "One could even say that in the official discourse of post-modern, white democracy, the devil is racism itself. That is why so many scholars, theater-goers, and readers have been struggling, for so many years, to prove that Othello either is or is not racist, either is or is not "about race" (6).

In order to get a more precise image of the linear evolution occurring with the public reception of 'Othello' and its multifaceted understanding of racial issues which this thesis proves, one would need to increase the quantity of sources examined as to represent each century with a high level of accuracy. In addition, the diversity in the writers of the sources examined would need to be carefully considered as to represent perspectives from all backgrounds.

The conclusion found in this thesis exposes known facts about a lack of diversity throughout history regarding influential literary analysis. In this way, we may predict perspectives surrounding 'Othello' and other classic pieces written by William Shakespeare including 'controversial' themes will only continue to broaden with time, not necessarily due to the literary merit of the works but instead the ever-changing historical and sociopolitical contexts driving these academic interpretations.

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