

Othello as the Colonial Discourse of Blackness

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Abstract

“*Othello as the Colonial Discourse of Blackness*” investigates how the play reproduces the colonial discourse of blackness commonly found in the Renaissance travel books about African people through the triangle relationship between Othello, Iago, and Desdemona. The paper examines how Iago and Desdemona’s views of Othello correspond to two aspects of the black stereotype of being dangerous yet fascinating. In his pursuit of self-definition, Othello also refashions himself between these two opposing aspects.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความซึ้นนี้มุ่งวิเคราะห์ว่าบทละครโศกนาฏกรรมเรื่อง โอทेलโล ของวิลเลียม เชคสเปียร์ ทำหน้าที่ผลิตข้าวاحتกรรมอาณานิคมว่าด้วยความเป็นคนดำซึ่งพบได้ทั่วไปในงานบันทึกการเดินทางที่เกี่ยวกับแอฟริกาและคนแอฟริกันในยุคฟื้นฟูศิลปวิทยา โดยพิจารณาจากความสัมพันธ์สามเส้าระหว่างโอทेलโล อิอาโก และเดสดิโมนา ดังจะเห็นว่าทั้งคู่ติของอิอาโกและเดสดิโมนาที่มีต่อโอทेलโลนั้น สอดประสานกับทวิลักษณ์ของภาพเหมารวมเกี่ยวกับคนดำในยุคนั้นว่าเป็นคนน่าอันตรายและน่าลงสนเท็จ ในขณะเดียวกันความพยายามที่จะนิยามตนเองของโอทेलโล แท้จริงแล้วเป็นการปูรุ่งแต่งตนเองตามแบบฉบับของภาพเหมารวมดังกล่าวเช่นกัน

When the Duke in *Othello* consoles Brabantio for the loss of his daughter with inane advice, Brabantio bitterly responds “But words are words. I never did hear/That the bruised heart was pierced through the ear” (1.3.215-16).¹ Ironically, the audience is well aware that words are not just words in this “trial scene” (1.3). Words are the only weapon all parties involved in this scene use to attack the other or defend him/herself. Brabantio accuses Othello of seducing his daughter, Desdemona, by witchcraft. For lack of any concrete proof, Brabantio reasons that his virtuous daughter would never “fall in love with what she feared to look on” (1.3.98) unless Othello had used black magic on her. Similarly, Othello defends himself by telling “a round unvarnished tale” of his courtship with Desdemona. When asked to choose her loyalty to either her father or her husband, Desdemona has to rely on well-chosen words to resolve her “divided duty.” She pledges a daughter’s duty to her father but at the same time implores him to accept her loyalty to Othello, her husband, by evoking her mother’s choice of “preferring you before her father” (1.3.185). The Duke himself also has to employ diplomatic speech to placate Brabantio, a noble Venetian senator, and to please Othello, an army general, whom he expects to help defend the city against an imminent threat of Turkish invasion. More than any of Shakespeare’s other tragedies, *Othello* is a play in which words are very powerful and play significant roles in shaping the lives of major characters. It can be said, without exaggeration, that *Othello* is a play on the power of words. What is meant by words here is not just a collection of

¹ All citations from *Othello* are from Shakespeare, W. (1963). *The Tragedy of Othello: The Moor of Venice*. (signet classic edition). edited by Alvin Kernan (New York: New American Library).

isolated words but words put together to form a meaningful narrative. Two key characters who stand out as word-masters are Othello and Iago, each of whom weaves a powerful narrative of himself and others. Othello wins Desdemona's love by telling her his exotic tales of past sufferings and adventures. He, furthermore, as seen in the trial scene, obtains the Duke's approval of his marriage-elopement with Desdemona partly by retelling the tales of his life and love. Iago, likewise, succeeds in bringing about Othello's downfall and degradation by “abus[ing] Othello’s ears” (1.3.386). In both cases, the power of their narratives relies on colonial discourse, in particular stereotypes of the black people.

Homi K. Bhabha suggests that the main characteristic of colonial discourse is “its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition” (Bhabha, 1994: 66). He further points out that “likewise, the stereotype which is [colonial discourse’s] major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated . . . as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved” (Bhabha, 1994: 66). The key idea of stereotype extrapolated by Bhabha that is most relevant to Shakespeare’s *Othello* is the paradoxical nature of knowledge and identification of Othello as a black stereotype. While traditional readings of *Othello* tend to see the downfall of *Othello*, along the line of a conventional

tragic hero, as a result of certain tragic flaws, I would like to propose that Shakespeare's *Othello* demonstrates how the colonial discourse of "otherness" has interpellated Othello as a black stereotype and the tragedy of Othello is a tragedy of the black man who wants to be white.

It is widely known that the main source of Shakespeare's *Othello* is taken from one of a hundred tales collected in Giraldi Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi*. Although there was no English translation of Cinthio in Shakespeare's time, it is believed that Shakespeare either read the original Italian or the French translation of Gabriel Chappuys. While Cinthio treats the Moorish protagonist as a typical black stereotype—hot tempered, jealous, barbarous, vengeful, and cowardly—Shakespeare endows Othello with a certain noble stature. Scholars have pointed out that, in creating Othello, he also drew information about black people from Leo Africanus's book entitled *Geographical Historic of Africa*, which was translated into English by John Pory and was published in London in 1600.² Commenting on this book, Berry notes that "in an Elizabethan's context it represents a progressive movement away from medieval stereotypes to recorded experience. Leo's varied and balanced view of the people of Africa made possible a composite far more complex and balanced than that provided by negative stereotype" (Berry, 1990: 317). More balanced than the medieval view as it may seem, nonetheless, the Elizabethan concept of the black is not without racial bias. As a matter of fact, in his study of the black in Tudor England, Habib has commented that "the numerous Tudor travel

² For more details on this, see Whitney, L. (1922). Did Shakespeare know *Leo Africanus*? *PMLA* 37: 470-483 and Berry, E. (1990). Othello's alienation. *SEL* 30(2): 315-333.

accounts of Africa and Africans fantasize the otherness of blackness into something that is dangerous and fascinating" (Habib, 1998: 20). This seemingly contradictory view of the black as being desirable yet dangerous is most relevant to the depiction of Othello as a black stereotype. Shakespeare's *Othello*, in fact, situates this double-sided view of the black through a triangle relationship between Iago, Desdemona, and Othello.

Iago's reactions to Othello best represents how the black is perceived as being dangerous and repulsive. The opening scene shows Iago's attempts to evoke racial hostility toward Othello by constructing the narrative of Othello as a negative black stereotype. Iago and Roderigo are expressing their disgust and hatred of Othello with a series of racial slurs and insults such as "the thick-lips" (1.1.63) "an old-black ram" (1.1.85) "a Barbary horse" (1.1.108), and "the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" (1.1.123). Iago is not alone in seeing Othello as nothing but a beastly black. Most white characters in the play are quick to judge Othello by the color of his skin. As mentioned earlier, Barbantio bases his accusation of Othello's "crime" on a common Elizabethan stereotypical notion of the black as a practitioner of black magic. The Duke may find no legal faults in Othello's marrying Desdemona; it is doubtful if he approves of such miscegenation. In his response to a romantic tale of their love, although the Duke admits that "this tale would win my daughter too" (1.3.170), he immediately advises Brabantio to "take up this mangled matter at the best" (1.3.171). Such advice clearly implies the unnaturalness, if not perversity, of the marriage. The Duke's apparent approval of the racially mixed marriage between Othello and Desdemona, thus, demonstrates how he makes the best out of "the mangled matter." As much as he may find

such a marriage, in a normal circumstance, unnatural, he cannot afford to displease the city's prime and only defender.

Desdemona may, on a first reading, appear to be the only white character who never sees Othello as a dangerous and lustful brute as other Venetians do. Moreover, she must have loved him passionately to decide to marry him, violating her father's prohibition and defying a social taboo against miscegenation. One might even go further to suggest that her tragic death can be attributed to her insistence on seeing Othello as he is, not as a black stereotype. Because of her color blindness, Desdemona fails to see Othello's transformation from the "noble" Moor to the black stereotype and cannot comprehend his violent sexual jealousy and his racial anxiety. However, one cannot help but asking: does she really love Othello as he is? For one thing, in Othello's tale of their love, he reveals Desdemona's reason for loving him: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed" (1.3.166). Looking at Othello's exotic tales of adventures and sufferings, it is obvious that what Desdemona loves is not Othello *per se* but the fantastic aspects of the black stereotype.

Wherein I spoke of the most disastrous chances,
Of moving accidents by flood and field,
Of hairbreadth scapes I' th' imminent deadly breach,
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence
And portance in my travel's history,
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,
Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven,
It was my hint to speak. Such was my process.
And of the Cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
Grew beneath their shoulders. These things to hear
Would Desdemona seriously incline; (1.3.133-45)

Here we can see how Othello draws on all elements of exotic and fantastic adventures associated with the black people, which was commonly found in the travel writings in this period. Like Elizabethan audience, Desdemona is more fascinated by this adventurous recorded experience in an exotic land than by Othello himself.

While most of the white characters in the play insist on seeing Othello as a black stereotype, Othello seems to consistently deny his blackness and tries to identify himself as a commanding officer with full authority and complete self-assurance. Entering the stage to intervene the fight, the very first sentence he speaks is, “ ’tis better as it is” (1.2.6). In the context of the story, he, in effect, tells Iago to shut up and to stop bragging about his bravery. The line, however, is very revealing. It indicates his self-satisfaction, if not self-complacency, in his authority. When dismissing Iago’s advice to hide himself, Othello interestingly proclaims that “Not I, I must be found. / My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly” (1.2.29-31). Here we can see that the self Othello is proud to display to the public eyes is confined to “my parts, my title, and my perfect soul”. There is no mention of his being black at all in this line. Similarly, in the “trial scene” when pleading with the Duke to let Desdemona accompany him to Cyprus, Othello explains that this is not “To please the palate of my appetite, / Nor to comply with heat—the young affects / In my defunct—and proper satisfaction” (1.3.257-59). Greenblatt suggests that these lines reveal Othello’s sexual anxiety and his attempt to dismiss it. (Greenblatt, 1980: 250). What’s more, when considering Brabantio’s accusation based on racial prejudices, I would like to add that these lines reveal Othello’s defensive attempt to counter the stereotypical notion of black people

being sexually potent. This notion goes far back to “the wide spread belief in the legend that blacks were descendants of Ham in the Genesis story, punished for sexual excess by their blackness” (Cowhig, 1985: 1). Thus, it can be argued that these lines express not only Othello’s sexual but also racial anxiety. Though admitting that he has “appetite”, Othello claims that this is not because he is black but rather because he is an old man getting married to a young woman. Hence, Othello, though well aware of how the black is perceived, defends himself not by explaining away the stereotype but by denying his own blackness.

When comparing another Shakespeare’s black characters, Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*, Berry makes the interesting comment that, unlike Aaron, “Othello never defends his blackness; nor does he defend the religion or culture that lies behind him” (Berry, 1990: 323). However, while Berry sees Othello as an alienated figure—a complete stranger among the white who tries to assimilate to the white by cutting off his own black root—I think Othello is trying to write himself as a white man. By denying to identify himself as black, Othello fits what Fanon calls “black skin with white mask”. In discussing Fanon’s concept of the positioning of the subject in the stereotyped discourse of colonialism, Bhabha notes that various narratives of a colonial culture posit a primordial Either/Or to a subject. “Either he is fixed in a consciousness of the body as a solely negating activity or as a new kind of man, a new genus.” (Bhabha, 1994: 75) This is precisely what Othello is attempting to do: writing himself as a new kind of man—a white man, to be precise.

Ironically, it is Othello’s racial anxiety that leads him to become what he denies—a black stereotype. Othello’s suspicion of

the racial prejudices makes him vulnerable to Iago's plot of rewriting him as a beastly black. "Jealousy" in Shakespeare's time means "suspicion" as well as "sexual jealousy," both of which are used by Iago to manipulate and control Othello. If Othello's tales of his suffering fascinate Desdemona "to come again, and with a greedy ear / Devour up my discourse" (1.3.148-49), Iago's racist and misogynist discourse, arousing Othello's jealousy in both meanings, also devours Othello and transforms him from a noble and brave general to a hateful and murderous Moor, a negative stereotype of the black. In fact, Othello's transformation is a perfect example of Althusser's concept of "interpellation." In discussing how Ideological State Apparatuses constitute individuals as subjects that are subjected to the State, Althusser perceptively points out that "ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals . . . or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects . . . by the very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing . . ." (Althusser, 1998: 301)

Iago does not coerce nor convince Othello into admitting that he is black. Instead, he simply weaves the tales based on racist and misogynist stereotypes until Othello, who previously denies his own blackness, finally proclaims out of his own will: "Haply for I am black" (3.3.262). He exploits Othello's racial and sexual anxiety in order to interpellate Othello as a black subject. When Othello repeatedly asks what Iago thinks about Cassio, he keeps echoing Othello's words (3.3.100-104) till Othello begins to doubt his own thoughts:

Othello. Is he not honest?
Iago. Honest, my lord?
Othello. Honest? Ay, honest,
Iago. My lord for aught I know.
Othello. What dost thou think?
Iago. Think, my lord?
Othello. Think, my lord?
By heaven, thou echoest me,
As if there were some monsters in thy thought
Too hideous to be shown. Thou dost mean something.
(3.3.106-108)

This particular scene signaling the beginning of Othello's submission to Iago's narrative power of the black stereotype serves well to demonstrate how Iago interpellates Othello as a black subject. In this example, by echoing Othello's own words, Iago turns himself into an empty sign to be interpreted—"Thou dost mean something." Othello reads the sign into his own racial and sexual anxiety. Thus, without making any explicit accusation of Cassio's dishonesty, Iago manages to make Othello begin to suspect Cassio. More importantly, Othello believes that his suspicion of Cassio comes from his own thought and is not manipulated by Iago. In other words, Iago simply acts as if he were a mirror reflecting Othello's monstrous thoughts. By trying to read Iago's tales and to reveal the monsters in Iago's thoughts, Othello, in fact, is written by those monstrous tales. This is precisely the power of interpellation as Althusser describes it: "the individual is *interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection*, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection 'all by himself'" (Althusser, 1998: 303). Hence, it explains many critics' puzzlement as to why Othello, without any concrete evidence, is so "gullible" and so much convinced of Desdemona's infidelity.

What Iago does is not to provide evidence of Desdemona's infidelity but to inscribe stereotypical blackness on Othello and to rewrite the marriage between Othello and Desdemona as monstrous miscegenation. Interpellated as a black subject, Othello both literally and metaphorically echoes Iago's words. He repeats Iago's misogynist views against Desdemona and Emilia, accusing Desdemona of being a whore and Emilia a brothel-runner. His "tale" no longer represents his individuality but confirms the black stereotype he earlier denies. He speaks of a magic power in a handkerchief, echoing Branabantio's accusation of his witchcraft practice against Desdemona. His language, moreover, changes dramatically and very often is prompted by Iago's sexual and racial innuendo as it has been since the beginning of Act 3. Like the travel writings of this period, Iago reshapes the noble characters of black people into the black stereotypes of ugliness and brutality, distorting the pictures of blacks in their native land. Identifying himself as a black man marrying a white woman, Othello is more than ready to believe in a miscegenation taboo. Iago rereads Desdemona's love of Othello, which crosses over the racial boundaries, as deception and sexual perversion. "She deceive her father, marrying you; / And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks, / She loved them most" (3.3.206-208). He also uses this point to suggest the unnaturalness of their marriage:

Not to affect many proposed matches
 Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
 Whereto we see in all things nature tends—
 Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank
 Foul disproportions, though unnatural. (3.3.229-33)

The lines quoted here reveal how Iago transforms Desdemona's racial indiscrimination into sexual perversity. He points out that

Desdemona's rejecting the white suitors is unnatural and her loving Othello must derive from her excessive sexual desire. Iago's racist underlying argument is that black people are unnatural sexually potent; therefore, Desdemona's love for a black man reveals her own sexual perversity. The use of the words "smell," "rank," and "foul" in these lines further emphasizes not only Desdemona's perversity but also the stereotype associated with blacks.

Othello appears to regain his identity only when Iago's vicious tales are disrupted and exposed by Emilia. Before he kills himself, Othello attempts to retell his life, incorporating both versions of his life: the one told to Desdemona and the other reshaped by Iago.

Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
 Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
 Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
 Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdu'd eyes,
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,
 Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
 Their medicinable gum. Set you down this,
 And say besides that in Aleppo once,
 Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
 I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
 And smote him—thus. (5.2.338-52)

Habib sees this death speech as the way Othello "challenges the play's teleology by reversing the marked down narrative of the lapsed noble savage in a moment of discursive seizure in which the inscribed colonial black writes himself" (Habib, 1998: 25). True that Othello

here is trying to write his own tale, however, ironically, what he is writing here is not himself but a black stereotype of an exotic and dangerous other. The first part (ll. 340-347) embodies elements of romance, arrogance, and self-glorification similar to his exotic tales of past sufferings told to Desdemona. The image of “the base Judean”³ who “threw a pearl away” clearly reiterates the Elizabethan’s stereotypical notion of the black as an ignorant and ignoble barbarian who knows not what he has. The second part (ll. 348-52), on the other hand, portrays Othello as a dangerous black stereotype who, like the Turks, threatens the white Christian society.

More importantly, contrary to Habib’s suggestion, Othello writes himself as a divided self: a black man who wants to be white and hates his own blackness. The consistent use of the third person singular pronoun (“one”, “he”) further emphasizes Othello’s rejection of his blackness. “I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog / And smote him-thus.” This is the only time in this section that Othello uses the first person pronoun “I” to refer to himself; however, it is not “I” a black Othello but “I” a colonial officer who kills his own blackness—the “circumcised dog.” In this respect, it is conceivable to go even further in saying that the tragic moment in this play is when Othello finally erases his blackness and writes himself as a white man.

³ For detailed discussion of the discrepancy between “the base Indian” (Q1) and “the base Judean” (F), please see Joan Ozark Holmer, “Othello’s Threnos: ‘Arabian Trees’ and ‘Indian’ Versus ‘Judean.’ ”

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