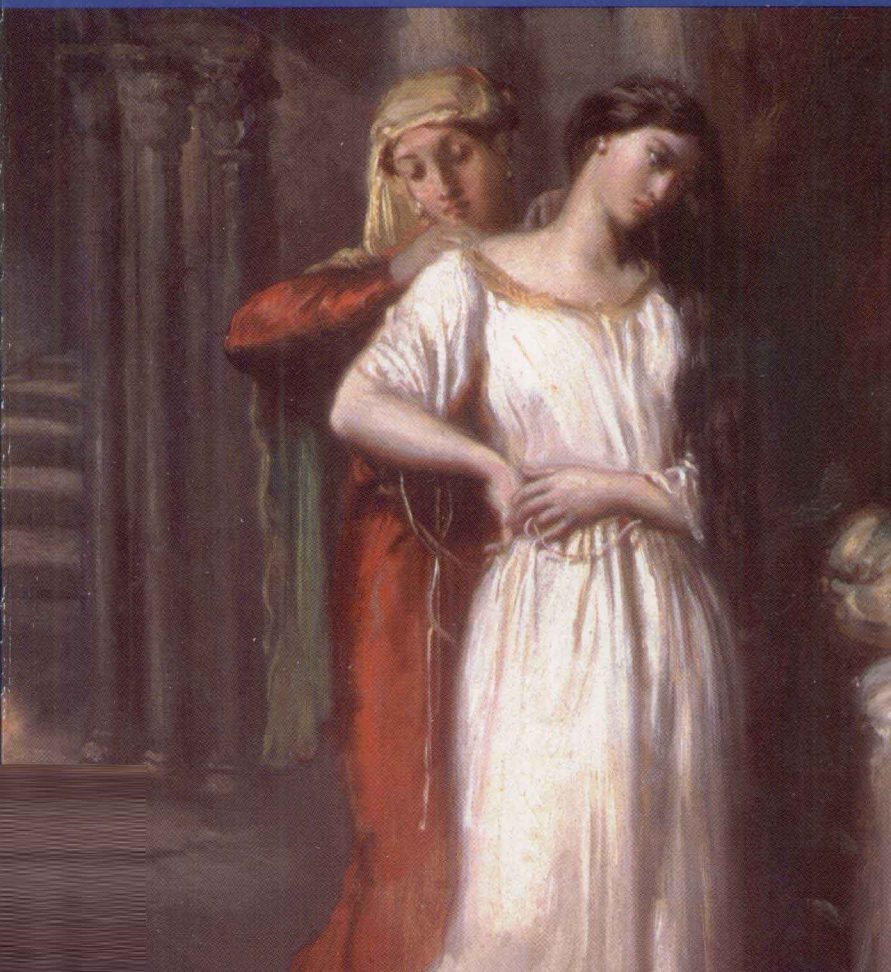


WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

# *Othello*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

## **OTHELLO**



# OTHELLO

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William Shakespeare

*Edited by*  
CEDRIC WATTS



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Wordsworth Classics' Shakespeare Series, with *Henry V*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Romeo and Juliet* as its inaugural volumes, presents a newly-edited sequence of William Shakespeare's works. Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive paperbacks for students and for the general reader. Each play in the Shakespeare Series is accompanied by a standard apparatus, including an introduction, explanatory notes and a glossary. The textual editing takes account of recent scholarship while giving the material a careful reappraisal. The apparatus is, however, concise rather than elaborate. We hope that the resultant volumes prove to be handy, reliable and helpful. Above all, we hope that, from Shakespeare's works, readers will derive pleasure, wisdom, provocation, challenges, and insights: insights into his culture and ours, and into the era of civilisation to which his writings have made – and continue to make – such potentially influential contributions. Shakespeare's eloquence will, undoubtedly, re-echo 'in states unborn and accents yet unknown'.

CEDRIC WATTS  
*Series Editor*





## INTRODUCTION

*Othello* is one of Shakespeare's greatest tragic dramas: gripping, intense, poignant, harrowing; powerfully eloquent and incisively intelligent. The passage of time has actually increased its cogency. In its treatment of racial prejudice, in its representations of gender and class conflict, and, above all, in its rendering of ascriptions of identity, this play seems vividly contemporary. As has been rightly said:

Purely as a theatrical experience, *Othello* is as rich and satisfying as only the greatest drama can be. But like all great imaginative work, it speaks to us of our own world, even though it came out of a very different one . . . [M]any of the issues the play raises are relevant, with very slight modification, to our own time. Among the major ones are: The way in which stereotypes are created and come to be accepted (*Othello's*, *Iago's*, *Desdemona's*); women's perception of their own role and men's perception of women; the bases on which people make judgements of others, and the extent to which these are influenced by their own needs and interests; and the nature and limits of one's own responsibility for what happens to oneself.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the play also has some oddities and puzzles. The earliest texts differ significantly from each other, and they contain some obscurities which continue to perplex editors.<sup>2</sup> Then there are peculiarities in characterisation. For example, the Clown, who appears in Act 3, scenes 1 and 4, is perhaps the least memorable of Shakespeare's comic characters. In stage-production and films, he is usually omitted; and probably few members of the audience regret his absence. Perhaps Shakespeare was kindly providing employment for the company's comedian. Arguably, however,

the Clown's fleeting presence as a blithe punster usefully relieves the increasing intensity of the tragic action. The play's dramatic rhythm consists of alternations of reflection and violence, argument and uproar, conversation and emotional eruptions; and the Clown's wisecracks about wind instruments and lying form part of the pattern of contrasts, offsetting the sinister exploitation of ambiguous terms ('honest', 'nature', and again 'lying') by Iago.

As for Iago himself: his motives have long been a puzzle for commentators. Coleridge famously claimed that, in him, we see 'the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity'.<sup>3</sup> Commentators who take a relatively sympathetic view of Othello tend to emphasise the destructive brilliance of Iago, whereas commentators who take a relatively critical view of Othello tend to play down Iago's importance. In *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), A. C. Bradley devoted many pages to an elaborate and perceptive analysis of Iago's character, declaring him 'supreme among Shakespeare's evil characters'; but in *The Common Pursuit* (1952), F. R. Leavis remarked dismissively that Iago is 'merely ancillary': 'not much more than a necessary piece of dramatic mechanism' – something needed to help the plot along.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Iago is a layered characterisation of the kind to be scanned in different ways. Considered as a realistic creation, he can be seen to have implicit motivation underlying his mixture of explicit, avowed motives.<sup>5</sup> One of those implicit motives is the desire to vindicate a cynicism antagonised by virtue; another is to fulfil an intelligence which delights in destructively paradoxical transformations of the people around him, a power-seeking which over-compensates for his low rank. It is Iago's more protean jealousy which generates Othello's localised jealousy. Another way of scanning Iago is to see him as a sophisticated development of the ingratiating stage villain, the Machiavellian rogue who (like Barabas in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* or Richard in Shakespeare's *Richard III*) takes us into his confidence and erodes normal ethical responses by making us his accomplices. When he asks, 'And what's he then, that says I play the villain?', he is clearly addressing the audience; and at that point realism modulates into a very traditional surrealism – the surrealism generated when the fictional world openly colludes with the non-fictional.<sup>6</sup>

Iago (as Bradley observed) has intermittent resemblances to his creator, Shakespeare. When Iago says of his scheme, ' 'Tis here,

but yet confused', and when he reflects that whether Cassio or Roderigo dies, 'every way makes my gain', we sense similarities to the authorial mixture of calculation and opportunistic improvisation which a study of textual variations and of Shakespeare's plotting reveals. In the case of *Othello*, the most notorious oddity of the plot is the 'double time-scheme', which was noted as long ago as 1692 by Thomas Rymer in his *Short View of Tragedy*.<sup>7</sup> The gist of this matter is as follows. Iago persuades Othello that, since his marriage to Desdemona, she has committed adultery with Cassio – not once but on numerous occasions. Various 'long-time' references give the impression that an ample period has elapsed for this purpose. On the other hand, close attention to the unfolding events makes evident the fact that only thirty-three hours or so elapse between the arrival of Desdemona on Cyprus and her eventual death at Othello's hands. On the first night, she is in bed with Othello, and their privacy is disrupted by Cassio's drunken brawl; on the second night, she dies. There simply has not been time for the alleged repeated adultery to occur. As Rymer puts it:

The *Audience* must suppose a great many bouts [i.e. adulterous encounters], to make the plot operate. They must deny their senses, to reconcile it to common sense: or make it any way consistent, and hang together.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the plot founders on gross illogicality; or would so founder, if we maintained a precise chronological awareness. As has been often remarked, however, audiences are generally untroubled by the illogicality: being so caught up in the moment-by-moment development of the accelerating drama, the spectators reconcile imaginatively the logically irreconcilable. Subliminally, this may add to our sympathy with Othello: for, as he is fooled by Iago's manipulation of evidence, so we are fooled by Shakespeare's. (Shakespeare was a maestro of the double time-scheme: he uses it in *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Richard II*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*, for example.)

Anyone who doubts Shakespeare's creative and transformative genius need only look at the source-tale for *Othello*, Giraldi Cinthio's story (in *Gli Hecatommithi*, 1565) of a Moorish captain and 'Disdemona', his bride. Cinthio's narrative is straggling and episodic; Shakespeare has compressed and co-ordinated the material,

breathing radiant life into drab clay. Cinthio offers a sordid crime-story; Shakespeare has created an eloquent and intense tragedy. When Shakespeare's vengeful Moor advances on his sleeping wife, musing 'It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul', he attempts to convert a murder into an act of justice, and his will poignantly flinches before her serene beauty. In Cinthio, we find a contrastingly sordid situation. There, the Moor conceals his accomplice, the Ensign (who is armed with a sand-filled stocking), in a closet opening on the bedchamber. He orders his wife out of bed to ascertain the cause of a sound there.

The unfortunate Disdemona got out of bed, and as soon as she was near the closet, the Ensign came out and, being strong and muscular, he gave her a frightful blow in the small of her back, which made the Lady fall down at once, scarcely able to draw her breath. With the little voice she had she called on the Moor to help her. But he, jumping out of bed, said to her, 'You wicked woman, you are having the reward of your infidelity. This is how women are treated who, pretending to love their husbands, put horns on their heads.' <sup>9</sup>

She calls on God to witness her fidelity and to help her; but to no avail, as the Ensign continues to bludgeon her to death. The Ensign and the Moor then pull the ceiling down on her, so that she seems to be the victim of an unlucky accident; and for a while their ruse is successful. The Moor's death occurs long afterwards (as a result of further intrigues by the Ensign): 'he was finally slain by Disdemona's relatives, as he richly deserved'. Still later, the Ensign, having hatched a different plot, is tested by torture and subsequently dies 'miserably' at his home.

Where the Moor is concerned, Cinthio's narrative carries a partly-racist warning which is voiced by Disdemona: 'Italian ladies will learn by my example not to tie themselves to a man whom Nature, Heaven, and manner of life separate from us.'<sup>10</sup> G. K. Hunter comments on Elizabethan attitudes:

They had, to start with, the basic common man's attitude that all foreigners are curious and inferior – the more curious the more inferior, in the sense of the proverb quoted by Purchas: 'Three Moors to a Portuguese; three Portuguese to an Englishman.'

They had also the basic and ancient sense that black is the colour of sin and death, 'the badge of hell, The hue of dungeons, and the Schoole of night' (as Shakespeare himself says). This supposition is found all over the world . . . from the earliest to the latest times; and in the West there is a continuous and documented tradition of it.<sup>11</sup>

Devils were often depicted or described as black-faced; paintings of the scourging of Christ sometimes included a black scourger; and, in folk-drama, St George's enemy is termed 'Black Morocco Dog' and 'Black Prince of Darkness'. Aaron, the villain of Shakespeare's first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, is a 'coal-black' Moor who delights in adultery, rape, mutilation and murder: 'Aaron will have his soul black like his face', he gleefully declares.<sup>12</sup> Even in *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Portia assures the Prince of Morocco that she has no prejudice against his skin-colour, she privately declares:

If he have the condition of a saint, and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me.<sup>13</sup>

In 1601, Queen Elizabeth proclaimed her discontent at 'the great number of "negars and blackamoores" which are crept into the realm . . . to the annoyance of her own people', these aliens being 'mostly infidels' who consume 'relief'; and she appointed Caspar van Zeuden, a merchant, to deport them.<sup>14</sup>

Against this background, Shakespeare's depiction of Othello offers a remarkably thorough subversion of racial prejudice. From the very start of the play, such prejudice is being evoked: Iago and Roderigo yell to Brabantio that his daughter is being 'tupped' by 'an old black ram', by 'the devil', 'a Barbary horse', 'a lascivious Moor', an 'extravagant and wheeling stranger'. Later, the horrified Brabantio declares it so unnatural for Desdemona to seek 'the sooty bosom of such a thing' that Othello must have used black magic, witchcraft, 'practices of cunning hell'. In the opening scenes, then, a familiar gamut of prejudicial attitudes is being evoked: the black man is a suspicious outsider, an immigrant guilty of evil practices, a devil or an associate of devils, and a beast driven by lust; so that his union with a young white woman must be hideously unnatural. In utter contrast, we are shown, and hear, Othello himself. He is more civilised than the white representatives of European civilisation

around him: poised, even majestic (for he is of royal line), cool, steady, doughty, equable, rational, fair-minded; the general whom the Venetian empire trusts for its safety.<sup>15</sup> When all around him are ready for a battle in the streets, he responds: 'Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.' In response to racist provocation, he remains unruffled. His address to the Signiory is a compellingly authoritative and persuasive feat of reasoned rhetoric. In response to the charge that he used black magic, he calls in Desdemona to speak, and she testifies with moving lucidity:

I saw Othello's visage in his mind,  
And to his honours and his valiant parts  
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.

As for the notion that he may be lust-driven, he protests (probably too much) that he is not governed by 'the palate of . . . appetite', the 'young affects' being in him 'defunct'. In short, the love of Othello and Desdemona is established as a superb triumph of mutuality over the cruel, barbaric and sexually-obsessed forces of racial prejudice.

Shakespeare was fascinated by the figure of the charismatic but vulnerable martial hero: the man of courage, hardihood and prowess who may prove impetuous rather than prudent; the glamorous, larger-than-life figure who is manipulable by the crafty. A famous example is Harry Hotspur, honour-driven, who can be manipulated by Worcester and Northumberland; another is Antony, 'triple pillar of the world', out-manoeuvred by Octavius; and yet another is Coriolanus, doughty on the battle-field, inept in the world of politics. Othello is, arguably, the most attractive and impressive of this line of martial figures. What, then, of his downfall, and of his hideous murder of Desdemona? F. R. Leavis claimed that the seeds of disaster lay far less in Iago's machinations than in Othello's egotism. Othello, this critic argued, has 'a habit of self-approving self-dramatisation': he is blinkered by concern for his own reputation; and if (as Bradley had said) his trust, where he trusts, is absolute, it must be invested in the fellow-soldier, Iago, rather than in his own wife. Certainly, that preoccupation with reputation and self-image is a recurrent characteristic, from his address for the Signiory to the final speech before his suicide. But

Leavis did not make sufficient allowance for what Othello's blackness constantly suggests: namely, the cultural insecurity of someone who is subject to explicit prejudice; the understandable insecurity of one who comes from an exotic background, has become a Christian and a redoubtable servant of a European city-state, but whose otherness is conspicuous, and whose eminence and marriage may engender vicious hostility.<sup>16</sup> It is that insecurity which Iago ruthlessly exploits, most craftily when he suggests that Desdemona's very transcendence of racial prejudice may be construed as treachery – treachery to family, country, race and the conventional world of prejudice; so that betrayal of her husband would be consistent with a deep-seated perfidious tendency. After all, had not Brabantio said: 'Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee'? That insecurity is symbolically resolved in the manner of Othello's death.

... 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!

The stabbing of the imagined enemy of the Venetian state becomes the stabbing of the defender of the state. The image of the exotic foe, and the contrasting image of the defender of European civilisation, suddenly merge. Aggressor and defender, Muslim and Christian, 'barbarian' and Venetian, fuse in death, impaled on one blade.

In their love, Othello and Desdemona seemed to have transcended racial and sexual stereotyping, the imposition of reductive notions upon reality. But the stereotypical habit of mind helps to ensnare them; and that habit insidiously re-appears. Consider the speech I have just quoted. The Turk (in Aleppo, a Syrian city within the Turkish empire) may have beaten a Venetian and 'traduced the state', but did he deserve death? We are told he is 'a malignant . . . Turk': is he malignant and a Turk, or deemed malignant *because* he is a Turk? What's so wrong about wearing a turban, a sign of faith like a cross on a Christian's neck-chain? Again, if he is 'circumcised' (circumcision being a religious rite for Muslims), what's so bad about that? And, last in the sequence of pejoratives, this human being is referred to as a 'dog': so Othello himself upholds that system



of demeaning stereotyping (depicting human beings as less than human, merely as animals) of which he – formerly termed ‘ram’ and ‘Barbary horse’ – had been a victim. After Othello’s death, the supposedly civilised Christians will subject Iago, that ‘damned slave’, ‘dog’, ‘demi-devil’ and ‘hellish villain’, to barbaric tortures: ‘any cunning cruelty / That can torment him much and hold him long’. Once Othello, saying ‘Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them’, had seemed urbane superior to the notion that differences should be resolved by a prompt recourse to violence; but that primitive ‘virile’ notion ensnares him and others, and destroys Desdemona.

As for Desdemona: who knows her best? Not her own father, who is incredulous on learning that she has eloped with the Moor. Not Othello, whose personal insecurity leads him to trust Iago rather than her. It may be tempting to propose Emilia, that forerunner of feminists. Emilia tries to console and sustain Desdemona after Othello becomes jealous and violent; and it is she who advocates equality of desire between men and women.

Let husbands know

Their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell,  
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,  
As husbands have. What is it that they do,  
When they change us for others? Is it sport?  
I think it is. And doth affection breed it?  
I think it doth. Is’t frailty that thus errs?  
It is so too. And have not we affections,  
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?  
Then let them use us well; else let them know,  
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.

It’s a strikingly radical speech at this juncture in a drama which has repeatedly displayed patriarchal dominance. In its postulation of equivalence in affections, desires and fallibility between men and women, Emilia’s argument seems positive and progressive. Its tone is not quiet, intimate and conversational; markedly towards the end, the tone is that of public address: one can imagine the speaker turning in admonition to the men in the audience. As a defence of people who are the uncomprehended victims of stereotyping, it ranks with Shylock’s famous vindication (the speech beginning