

ENGL 1102

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Othello's Journey of Identity

In *Othello*, William Shakespeare creates a character who struggles continually with maintaining his identity in a society of critics. As a foreign "Moor" in Venetian society, he is branded as an outsider by his fellow citizens. Daniel J. Vitkus calls Othello a "walking paradox" (161), because he is a purified version of something considered unclean. His journey is a balancing act between the life that he was born into and the Christian military path that he has chosen for himself. Another critic, Julia Lupton, argues the importance of Othello's religion and how this leads to his constantly striving for redemption. External expectation based on Othello's race and religious conversion, largely caused by the historical European fear of the Ottoman Turks, leads him to be trapped between two clashing aspects of his identity. These pressures are especially reflected in his constant struggle for redemption as a new Christian.

Othello is socially and psychologically trapped between his cultural roots and his newfound identity as a Christian military leader. Although we cannot be sure exactly where "Moors" come from, we know that Othello is foreign to Venice and was raised in a "pagan" religion, possibly Islam. The beginning of the play suggests that he did convert to Christianity. When referring to Othello as "the Moor," Iago says that he loves Desdemona so much that she could even cause him "to renounce his baptism, / All seals and symbols of redeemed sin" (2.3.300-301).

The fact that he was baptized shows us that Othello has converted by taking the necessary steps to become a Christian and attempted to integrate into this new society. He now carries the symbols of redemption. However, we can also see that even though he now practices Christianity, other characters still identify him as distinctly different; even Iago, whom Othello trusted, still calls him “the Moor.” Religion played a major role in every aspect of life during this time, which made it increasingly difficult for Othello, whom Vitkus calls a “purified and Christianized Moor, converted to whiteness” (161), to define himself. Although it seems that he has become like a white Venetian man, he still embodies some aspects of his old identity, which are manifested in the murder of his wife. The murder exemplified the violence and fear that was often associated with “Moors.” This is also why Vitkus refers to Othello as “a walking paradox” (161). He is purified through his religion and newfound social status, but he will always be a Moor, which labels him as unclean. When he married Desdemona, Othello brought himself “into the ranks of Venetian citizenship” (Lupton 108). He literally entered “into the ranks” of the military, and also into society, by marrying into a prestigious family. However, when you are raised in a certain culture and religion, those values prevail to a certain extent throughout your life. This becomes the source of Othello’s struggle. When he converts to Christianity and joins the Venetian military, he redefines himself, but he is not stable. Vitkus says he is “suspect and liable to relapse” (162) into his old life. This is demonstrated as Othello declines into a period of jealousy, vulnerability, and violence.

The internal and external pressures that Othello experiences reflect the European fear of the Ottoman Turks invading Christian territories. Shakespeare uses a lot of historical background that audiences today may not understand. However, when this play was being performed, European audiences would have been able to grasp the fear associated with the Ottoman Turks, who are “conquering and colonizing Christian territories” (Vitkus 145). The Turks are first mentioned in the play when the Duke and Senator are discussing the “general enemy Ottoman” (1.3.49) who are threatening to attack Cyprus. Othello is called to lead the defense against them. The Turks come to represent the darkness of Othello’s past and the paganism in which he was raised. Because of external pressures for Othello to rise up and defeat this enemy, along with the continuing resistance to his origins, Lupton claims that the Turks are both “*inside* Othello as the past he has abjured as well as *outside* Othello as the enemy he fights” (112). Many characters see Othello as an evil force in the beginning when he marries Desdemona; in this way, Othello begins to represent for them the Turks, while Desdemona represents a pure and Christian Cyprus. The fear of these foreigners is illustrated when Othello appears and begins to integrate into this seemingly pure Venetian society. Vitkus claims that a conflict develops “between the Turkish threat to Christian power and the contamination of female sexual purity” (169). This “Moor” is now corrupting Desdemona’s feminine purity, as the Turks contaminate lands with their pagan religious ideas. Othello wages battle with two different aspects of himself, and we see it reflected in this “global struggle between

the forces of good and evil” (Vitkus 145). As Othello tries to grasp the internal conversion that he has undergone, he is surrounded by an environment full of transformation and uncertainty, “from Christian to Turk, from virgin to whore, from good to evil” (Vitkus 145). He no longer knows whom to trust, who is good, and who is the enemy. The instability in his environment makes it increasingly difficult for him to maintain his own identity and eventually causes his downfall when he reverts to his old self.

Othello’s internal identity crisis is portrayed as a constant struggle for redemption as a new Christian. Although it is evident that Othello has in fact become a Christian, he is constantly alienated by members of his society, including his father-in-law, Brabantio. When Brabantio discovers that his daughter has married a “Moor,” he is outraged and accuses Othello of “enchant[ing]” his daughter (1.2.63) because Desdemona would never “run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou” (1.2.70-71). Othello is not welcomed into his new family; instead, his intentions are challenged, even in front of the Duke. The external pressure of never feeling like he truly belongs gives Othello an internal need for redemption, which plays out over the course of the story. Vitkus observes, “His race and his religious identity, his nobility and his Christianity are all questionable” (162). In a time when nothing is stable, Othello searches to prove his worth and identity by being a Christian husband and leading the Venetian military; however, this struggle for acceptance makes him increasingly vulnerable to the opinions of others. Iago uses this weakness to his own advantage, as he “plots

the tragic pattern of the play" (Lupton 115). When Iago suggests that Desdemona is cheating on him, the thought immediately begins to develop in Othello's mind. Jealousy defeats rationality, and he makes a rash judgment before considering the consequences. In losing Desdemona, he would be losing a part of the new identity he has found, but he falls into Iago's trap, letting jealousy cause him to act rashly.

Because he believes that Desdemona has been unfaithful, Othello concludes that he is serving a kind of religious justice by killing her. Her life has been sacrificed for his mistakes and an attempt to prove his worth as a Christian. This act of violence is a relapse into the old identity that society had constructed for him as a "heartless," barbarian "Moor." Before he kills her, Othello explains, "Thou dost stone my heart, / And mak'st me call what I intend to do / A murder, which I thought a sacrifice" (5.2.63-65). He asks Desdemona for her confession, but ultimately declares that this is what he must do. Thus, the murder of his wife becomes a source of redemption for Othello's own self as he continues to struggle with identifying himself. Othello's last act is his tragic suicide. This, too, is an attempt at religious redemption, which Lupton calls the "cut of circumcision" (120). Circumcision is the ultimate identification in the Old Testament, serving as an outward sign of an inward commitment to God. Lupton also says that "[i]n death, Othello becomes both saint and citizen, both true Christian and acknowledged member of the Venetian Republic" (121). Indeed, Othello hoped that this final act would prove his dedication to this Christian society, but sadly he did not leave the legacy of a saint. He begs his fellow citizens, "Speak of me as I am.

Nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice" (5.2.342-343). He wants to be remembered as a true Venetian citizen and as someone who fought against the Turks. In the end, his ongoing struggle for identity is concluded when he fulfills the stereotype of a "Moor" that he had worked so hard to avoid.

Throughout *Othello*, Shakespeare plays upon true historical and social pressures to evoke emotion in the character of Othello. His background and race are looked down upon in Venetian society, but that is something he cannot change. He embarks on a journey to redefine himself and become the respected member of society that he has always wanted to be. As he follows Christianity, he finds an internal need for some kind of redemption for his past. The immense external pressures that society puts on him result in a battle between the two aspects of himself. This struggle manifests in a final attempt at identification: the murder of his wife and a "circumcision" through suicide, which serve as the tragic ending to a vicious struggle for identity.

Works Cited

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