



## OTHELLO: A REVIEW OF ITS FAULTS AND PROBLEMS

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### ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare's *Othello* is indubitably one of his most popular and successful plays. Nevertheless, like his other great works, it suffers from some literary and stylistic faults and problems. Several eminent critics such as Thomas Rymer, Samuel Johnson, A. C. Bradley, Harley Granville Barker, and J. Dover Wilson have dealt with this issue. Some of the most important faults they have found in this play include the question of time, the improbability of the events, the inconsistency of characterization, moral defects, and the absence of poetic justice. In some cases, the faults attributed to this great play are the result of misguided and wrong-headed criticism; in others, however, they are real deficiencies resulted from Shakespeare's carelessness or his concern over the success of his play in performance rather than its plausibility and critical correctness as a literary text. In the present article, these problems are discussed, and it is explained whether they are serious problems diminishing the value of the play as an artistic work or strategies adopted by the author intentionally to serve some higher purposes.

**Keywords:** *Othello*; Shakespeare; faults; problems

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The play *Othello* is one of Shakespeare's great tragedies. Since its first performance in 1604 (Kermode 165) the play has always held immense appeal for all its audience. This appeal is partly due to the relative simplicity and tangibility of its plot and argument (It is the least philosophical and the most domestic of Shakespeare's great tragedies; it has a linear and unified plot; it has no subplot.), partly due to its beautiful poetry (Othello's speeches, before he is "possessed" by Iago, exemplify the splendor of the English language at its most sublime.), and, last but not least, due to its enigmatic and diabolical villain, Iago. Among all Shakespeare's tragedies, *Othello* seems to agree most with Aristotle's definition of tragedy. The Aristotelian concepts of *hamartia*, *peripeteia*, and

*anagnorisis* are more easily applicable to this play than the other Shakespearean plays. All these virtues notwithstanding, *Othello* is not a perfect drama; it has its own peculiar flaws. The following section deals with some of these flaws and the literary critics who brought them to light.

### 2. Review of Literature

The first literary critic who began to pay any serious attention to the so-called weaknesses of *Othello* was Thomas Rymer, the dogmatic and narrow-minded neoclassical critic of the Restoration period, who in his *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693) launched a savage attack on that lovely play. Rymer was a man of remarkable learning, but as George Saintsbury puts it, "learning alone does not make one a great critic. He lacked true critical judgment and this faculty of

critical judgment is an inborn faculty" (qtd. in Tilak 175). In the words of Thomas Babington Macaulay, he is "the worst critic that ever lived" (qtd. in "Thomas Rymer"). Of course, these deprecating remarks should not blind us to the important place Rymer occupies in the canon of Shakespearean criticism. It was he, after all, who for the first time attracted the attention of the critics of *Othello* to the problems of that play.

Franca Rossi (92) summarizes Rymer's criticism of *Othello* in the following paragraph:

Appealing to the reader's common sense and in close adherence to French formalist theory, Rymer criticizes the play for being "full of improbabilities", with an "unsubstantial" plot, unnatural characters, vulgar, bombastic language, and utter disregard for the principles of poetic justice, eliciting not pity and fear but horror and disgust. He ends by pouring scorn on the role that such an insignificant item as a handkerchief performs in a play that would be more appropriately entitled *The Tragedy of the Handkerchief*.

In Rymer's opinion, it is ridiculous that Desdemona, a "supersubtle Venetian," should fall in love with a "black-amoor" and still more ridiculous that she should be attracted by the stories of his adventures (Rymer 133-34). What makes the play most absurd is that the civilized Venetians have chosen a "Negro to be their general" and "defend them against the Turk"(134). Taking into consideration the classical notion of the "universal character" which says, for instance, that "a soldier must behave like a soldier," he finds the characterization of Othello problematic, because, unlike a soldier, he does not undertake to fight with Cassio himself and "sets Iago to the fighting part," while he himself, in a cowardly manner, chooses to kill "the foolish woman his wife" (134). Besides, love and jealousy are not appropriate feelings for a soldier. On the same grounds, he blames Shakespeare for his characterization of Iago. Iago is a soldier, and a soldier must be honest by nature, but Iago is the epitome of dishonesty. To cut a long story short, he finds faults with almost all of the characters of the play. Then he proceeds to

comment on the other elements of the tragedy. When he comes to the language of the play, he makes one of his most idiosyncratic comments:

In the Neighing of an Horse, or in the growling of a Mastiff, there is a meaning, there is an lively expression, and, may I say, more humanity, than many times in the Tragical flights of Shakespeare. (136)

He finds the plot of the play very improbable. Especially, he considers the handkerchief episode quite unconvincing. He also refers to the unacceptability of Othello's suspicion against Cassio and Desdemona. After all, Cassio and Desdemona came to Cyprus in two different ships. The first night in Cyprus, also, Othello and Desdemona slept together. When did Cassio and Desdemona have any opportunity to commit adultery?

One of the most serious problems Rymer finds in *Othello* is the absence of poetic justice in that play (Actually, it was Rymer who for the first time mentioned the idea of "poetic justice" and coined the term.). According to the proponents of this theory, poetry is "an ideal realm of its own" in which there should exist a kind of justice absent "in the actual world" (Abrams and Harpham 299). The death of the innocent Desdemona is a violation of the law of justice, for which reason the tragedy of *Othello* fails to fulfill its cathartic function. As a result, the audience of the play tend to leave the theater in gloomy moods.

After enumerating all of these faults, Rymer ends his treatise with the following unkind lines:

There is in this Play some burlesk, some humour, and ramble of Comical Wit, some shew, and some Mimickry to divert the spectators: but the tragical part is, plainly none other, than a Bloody Farce, without salt or savour. (164)

Rymer was probably the first and last critic who launched such vitriolic attacks on *Othello*. The other critics were much more rational judges of this play, lauding it for its many beauties, yet not failing to perceive its literary faults and problems. Dr. Samuel

Johnson, for instance, while praising the play for its skillful characterization and its other virtues, finds the last scene of the play “unendurable” (Muir 13). Considering the “unity of time” as a virtue (not a necessity) for a play, he comments that if the first scene in Venice had been reported rather than represented on the stage, “there had been little wanting of a drama of the most exact and scrupulous regularity” (Jonson 200). The main criticism Johnson levels at not only *Othello*, but all Shakespeare’s plays, however, is that his plays are morally weak, and his language is frequently obscene. According to Johnson, Shakespeare is “much more careful to please than to instruct that he seems to write without any moral purpose” (Tilak 205).

Nicholas Halpin and John Wilson, two Victorian critics, were the first scholars who discussed the double-time scheme in *Othello* systematically (Orgel 108). They started a topic which was later adopted and expanded by a line of illustrious literary critics including A. C. Bradley, Harley Granville-Barker, and J. Dover Wilson. These critics’ general argument is that there are two chronologies functioning simultaneously in the play. If we exclude the first act and begin the play at the scene of the arrival of the three ships in Cyprus, the time that actually passes between the beginning of the play and its end (i.e. Othello’s suicide) does not exceed thirty-three hours (Salgado xviii). The ships arrive on Saturday afternoon; a feast is held the same evening during which Cassio gets drunk and consequently loses his favor with Othello; next morning, Cassio meets Desdemona and asks her to plead his case; the temptation scene occurs almost at the same time, because at the end of that scene, when Othello is getting back home, he sees Desdemona and Cassio together; Desdemona loses her handkerchief a little later; the handkerchief is seen in Bianca’s hands a few hours later; and the murder of Desdemona and Othello’s suicide take place the same midnight. “But,” asks Salgado, “if the events on the island of Cyprus take place within some thirty odd hours, how can Cassio possibly have committed adultery with Desdemona, in Cyprus or anywhere else?” (xviii). Neither in Venice nor during their voyage to Cyprus (they travelled separately) could they

possibly commit adultery. During the thirty-odd hours in Cyprus, also, such a thing was quite impossible. Therefore, unless we presume the existence of another time, a much longer one, in *Othello*, we have no alternative but declare Othello to be an utter lunatic for giving the least credence to Iago’s accusations.

There are many other examples, throughout the play, of the existence of a longer time scheme than the actual thirty-odd hours: Roderigo having almost spent all his money (II.iii.343), Iago’s reference to Cassio talking in his sleep (which could not have taken place in Cyprus, since Cassio only spent one night there, during which he hardly slept at all) (III.iii.411-423), Iago’s telling Emilia “a hundred times” to steal Desdemona’s handkerchief (III.iii.291-292), Bianca’s mention of not seeing Cassio for a week (III.iv.173), Othello saying to Gratiano and others that “she with Cassio hath the act of shame / A thousand times committed” (IV.ii.209-210), etc.

It should be reminded, however, that these time “problems” in *Othello* are so subtle that they invariably fail to be noticed by the audience present at the theater, and very few readers are careful enough to notice them while reading the text of the play. Whether the existence of these inconsistencies is due to Shakespeare’s carelessness or it is a strategy consciously adopted by him in order to achieve some effects is a matter which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

A. C. Bradley in his enlightening book, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, discusses the problem of time in *Othello* in detail. After proving, through citing several examples from the text of the play, the existence of two “times” in *Othello*, he proposes some justifications for these two different chronologies. He argues that Shakespeare wanted the spectators of his play “to feel a passionate and vehement haste in the action,” but also he wanted them “to feel that the action was fairly probable.” He picked the “short” time for the former purpose and the “long” one for the latter. Of course, he goes on to explain that the short time is equally necessary for probability, because “it is grossly improbable that Iago’s intrigue should not break down if Othello spends a week or weeks between the successful temptation and his execution of justice” (Bradley).

Despite these justifications, it is obvious that Bradley does not feel at ease with the double-time scheme of *Othello*. He conjectures that perhaps someone has tampered with the text of the play and has caused the existence of the double-time problem. Perhaps in Shakespeare's original manuscript "there was a gap of some weeks between the arrival in Cyprus and Cassio's brawl, or (less probably) between the brawl and the temptation" (Bradley).

Both A. C. Bradley and Harley Granville-Barker found *Othello* depressing and devoid of sufficient cathartic effect. According to the latter critic, the murder of the innocent Desdemona is not the real problem of the play – after all, in the other tragedies by Shakespeare, we can see other examples of the murder of innocent women (e.g. Lady Macduff and Cordelia) or their unjust treatment by men (e.g. Ophelia) – but the real problem is that "the hero himself is degraded and destroyed by the villainy of his subordinate" (Muir 13).

In this section, a brief survey of a few critics' views concerning the faults and problems of *Othello* was offered. The next section will supply an analysis and assessment of these problems in order to ascertain to what extent they are real problems diminishing the value of the play as a literary work.

### 3. Discussion and Analysis of the Problems of *Othello*

All of the faults and problems enumerated and discussed in the preceding section can be roughly classified into the following five categories:

- 1) Improbability of plot
- 2) Inconsistency of characterization
- 3) Immorality and obscenity
- 4) Lack of poetic justice
- 5) The question of time

A brief explanation of each of these five categories comes below:

#### 3.1. Improbability of Plot

In *Othello* there are a number of improbable events, events which depend too much on chance and coincidence, and hence are not compatible with the laws of logic and common sense. Of course, chance and coincidence are not faults *per se*. Just as they exist in life, they can exist in literature. The problem is with their overuse or abuse at the expense of a plausible (i.e. convincing) plot. In some parts of *Othello*, the abuse of these elements is very conspicuous. One of the most notorious examples of this kind of "plot manipulation" occurs in the episodes related to the handkerchief. In the famous "temptation scene," Desdemona loses her handkerchief. Coincidentally, Emilia is there. She finds the handkerchief and gives it to her husband, Iago, because "My wayward husband hath a hundred times / Wooed me to steal it" (III.iii.291-292). Just a few lines after that (358), Othello asks Iago for an "ocular proof" against Desdemona. Iago takes maximum advantage out of this newly-gained prize. He places it in Cassio's lodging. When Cassio finds it, he gives it to the courtesan, Bianca, to "copy" it. In Act 4 Scene 1, Iago persuades Othello to hide and watch him (i.e. Iago) and Cassio as they are engaged in a conversation about Desdemona. Actually, they do not talk about Desdemona; rather, they talk about Bianca. But Othello, who cannot hear their words, misinterprets Cassio's bawdy gestures as referring to Desdemona. Suddenly, by sheer coincidence, Bianca appears with the handkerchief in her hand, yielding the "ocular proof" Othello has demanded, and thereby transforming his doubt into certainty. How unlucky Desdemona is! It seems that all of the forces of the universe have joined hands with each other to ruin her.

Since the days of antiquity, improbability has always been deemed as a vice. "Stories should not be constructed from improbable parts," comments Aristotle in his *Poetics*, "but above all should contain nothing improbable" (113). However, we should not forget that the rules of poetry are not always the rules of life. In many cases, poets have a kind of "license" to deviate from "the ordinary norms not only of common discourse but also of literal and historical truth" (Abrams and Harpham 271). Therefore, with a little leniency, we can easily

condone Shakespeare's "offense" and instead applaud him for the so many obvious virtues he has.

### 3.2. *Inconsistency of Characterization*

The inconsistency of characterization is a more serious problem in *Othello* than the improbability of plot. We have many examples in the play in which the characters act or behave in a way that contradicts the previous impression they have left on the audience. For instance, Othello, who is a noble and guileless gentleman, instead of openly asking for her hand, makes a secret marriage with Desdemona. Another example of his inconsistency is the relative simplicity with which he is deceived by Iago. The first glimpse we have of him is that of a calm man who is in complete control of himself. At the beginning of the second scene, when Iago warns him of an imminent danger, he does not become embarrassed a bit. A few minutes later, when Brabantio and his little army come to arrest him, again Othello, without betraying the faintest sign of fear or discomposure, brings the strife to an abrupt end by saying "Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them" (I.ii.58). It is really wonderful – and unacceptable – that a man blessed with so much wisdom and self-control, can, later on, be reduced to such a state of agitation and jealousy so quickly!

In the characterization of Desdemona, also, a kind of inconsistency is perceptible. Desdemona is depicted as an extremely innocent and naïve girl (almost to the point of foolishness, as Rymer puts it). Whenever she mentions Cassio's name, she notices her husband's anger, but she does not understand that she ought not to continue pleading for him. In a conversation with Emilia, she manifests her radical innocence when she says, "I do not believe there is any such woman" (IV.iii.84), signifying that she thinks there is not any woman in the world who betrays her husband. Later, she allows her husband to kill her almost without any resistance. This innocent, naïve picture is completely at odds with the portrait Shakespeare has drawn of her in the first part of his play. Gamini Salgado brings several examples from the play to show this inconsistency. "Her oblique hints to Othello about 'a friend that loved her' (I.iii.164) suggest that she is

not entirely free from feminine wiles" (xxxvi). She engages in a kind of flirtatious conversation with Iago while waiting for Othello's arrival (xxxvii). Her "skill in presenting a case" (xxxvi) is also clear in the following passage:

You are the lord of duty.  
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband,  
And so much duty as my mother showed  
To you, preferring you before her father,  
So much I challenge that I might profess  
Due to the Moor my lord.  
(I.iii.183-188)

There is a big difference between these two Desdemonas: the shrewd, sociable one in the first half and the meek, sheepish one in the second half of the play. This manner of characterization may, of course, be justified by arguing that inconsistency is what makes characters round and, consequently, lifelike. It is argued that human beings in real life are inconsistent, and since literature is a reflection of life, the inconsistency of characters in literary works is completely acceptable. This claim is only partly true. After all, there is a difference between the norms of literature and the norms of life. Literature is more unified and less chaotic than life. Therefore, the characters in literary works had better not be inconsistent.

### 3.3. *Immorality and Obscenity*

Immorality and obscenity is – or rather "was" – one of the charges against *Othello*. Iago's speeches – and Othello's too, in the parts where he is "possessed" by Iago – are rife with sexual images. In the past, when people and the standards of taste were more prudish than now and the main function of literature was didactic, immorality and obscenity were highly objectionable. But today they are not considered very serious matters any more. Modern literary criticism tends to evaluate the works of literature based on their aesthetic value rather than their ethical principles.

### 3.4. *Lack of Poetic Justice*

As for the charge against *Othello* of not observing the principles of poetic justice, it should be pointed out that the very insistence on the necessity of poetic justice for tragedies demonstrates a lack of sound knowledge about the spirit of that dramatic genre. After all, what makes a play a tragedy is the absence of an ideal type of justice in it. In all tragedies, the punishment exceeds the crime; if it is not so, "pity," one of the feelings associated with tragedies, is not achieved. On the other hand, the play *Othello* is not entirely devoid of justice. Even Desdemona, whose unjust death by the hands of Othello disturbs the most sophisticated critics, is at least partly responsible for her own miserable end. First of all, she is to blame for her elopement and secret marriage with Othello, a man belonging to an alien culture, against the consent of her father. Secondly, she is directly responsible for her own death by her too much insistence on pleading with Othello for Cassio's restoration to his previous post.

### 3.5. The Question of Time

The so-called "double-time" problem of *Othello* has aroused the highest amount of controversy among critics. On the one hand, it is a gross violation of rationality and verisimilitude. On the other hand, it is so skillfully handled that it often escapes the attention of the most perceptive viewers and readers of the play. In the words of Gamini Salgado:

The important point to realize is that both time-schemes are necessary for the play and that Shakespeare has made what would be an obvious contradiction and therefore an "impossibility" in real life triumphantly successful in the theatre. (xix)

Kenneth Muir looks at the matter from another perspective. Citing the following lines from one of Iago's soliloquies, "Yet that I put the Moor / At least into a jealousy so strong / That judgment cannot cure" (II.ii.291-293), Muir argues that Othello has been really put into that jealousy (28). He has lost his judgment so much that he cannot understand the baselessness of Iago's accusations. After all, as it has

already been explained, it is not possible for Desdemona and Cassio to have committed adultery even once. The interesting point is that not only the deranged Othello, but even the "mentally sound" audience of the play fail to grasp the inherent impossibility of Iago's accusations on account of the question of time. Therefore, the so-called problem of the existence of two "clocks" in *Othello* is not really a serious problem reducing the value of the play.

### 4. Conclusion

In this article, several faults and problems imputed to Shakespeare's play *Othello* were enumerated and discussed. The most important of these faults are those related to the improbability of plot, inconsistency of characterization, moral defects, the lack of poetic justice, and the existence of a double-time scheme in the play. A careful analysis of these faults led the author to the conclusion that the majority of them are not serious flaws diminishing the value of the play as a whole. If these faults occur in the works of less talented writers, they may become unjustifiable. But Shakespeare's genius has the rare ability of metamorphosing vices into virtues.

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