

Othello - a tragedy of racism, xenophobia and misogyny

Professor Jonathan Dollimore argues that 'political critics' are not imposing their agenda on Shakespeare - political insight is at the very heart of his tragic vision.

In recent years there has been controversy over the claims of the so-called 'political critics' of Shakespeare. One of the charges made against us is that we are anachronistic, using Shakespeare as a peg on which to hang current political preoccupations. Further, they argue that a proper reading of Shakespeare shows how he attains a tragic profundity beyond the mundanely political; the true meaning of his tragedies transcends the political context in which they are played out. I disagree, and, in a close reading of one passage from Othello I want to show how the political issues that concern us really are there, in the text, and remain inextricably at the heart of the Shakespearean vision even, or especially, at its most profound: in short, tragic insight is also political insight. At the same time we will need to extend the meaning of the political, and see how often it is not as rational as people think; in fact, politics is often, and crucially, implicated in fantasy.

One of the most compelling of all scenes in Shakespeare is that in which Iago convinces Othello that his wife, Desdemona, has been unfaithful to him. As a direct result Othello kills her. Iago tells Othello that he (Othello) is so different from Desdemona as to make their marriage 'unnatural'. What are these differences? Othello is black, she is white. Additionally he is older than her, and his cultural history is very different. Early on in the play, Desdemona's father, Brabantio, is appalled when he discovers that she has secretly married Othello, and he too characterises the marriage as 'unnatural'. He had been sufficiently impressed with Othello's military prowess and growing social prestige to invite him to his house for dinner. But for his daughter to marry such a man is terrifying beyond belief. He rages against and abuses Othello who, at that time, appears immune to his insults. But he has subconsciously registered them, and one in particular. Brabantio says - and sincerely believes - that the union between his daughter and Othello is deeply unnatural; for her to so 'err/Against all rules of nature', she must have been seduced with potions; only then could she have been persuaded to desire what she 'feared to look on!' (Act 1 Scene 3 l.98-101). Later, in Act 3 Scene 3, the pivotal scene, Iago undermines Othello's confidence. He knows that if he can break through Othello's defences, deep social and psychological insecurities will erupt as sexual jealousy, with devastating consequences. Othello, increasingly paranoid, finds himself recalling Brabantio's remark - which we weren't even aware of him registering at the time. Perhaps he wasn't aware of it either. But here, now, it surfaces as an anxious half-memory, and, as it does so, Iago pounces:

Othello: And yet how nature, erring from itself

*Iago: Ay, there's the point; as, to be bold with you,
Not to affect many proposèd 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 disproportion, thoughts unnatural!*

Act 3 Scene 3 lines 232

The economy of these lines is extraordinary. If poetry is, in essence, language at its most powerfully concentrated, this is pure poetry. It is also a powerful concentration of diverse prejudices: here, in just a few lines, racism, xenophobia and misogyny are imaginatively fused. But wait: aren't these terms - 'racism, xenophobia and misogyny' - the ugly, anachronistic currency of political criticism, imported by political critics obsessed with race, class and gender? Well, they also happen to be things manifestly there in Shakespeare's text and his culture. Iago is saying that for a woman like Desdemona to spurn the advances of men of her own country ('clime'), colour and race ('complexion') and class ('degree') in favour of one who is none of these things, is unnatural. A misogynistic conception of women is fused with a racist one of Othello and a xenophobic one about who she should 'naturally' desire. And somewhere inside himself, Othello perhaps agrees. And if he does it may be because he has come to identify unconditionally with the society he serves.

Racism, xenophobia and misogyny: the tragedy of Othello, far from transcending these things, is steeped in them. And remember that the society depicted here is anticipating a war against the Turks - the 'barbarians': at such times racism and xenophobia usually intensify. Suppose it were to be established that these social, psychological and political prejudices are precisely not transcended in this play, not even by its main characters. For one kind of critic this would be regrettable, almost an aesthetic failure and probably sufficient to disqualify Othello from being a play of the greatest tragic power. To a political critic, on the other hand, the tragedy is the greater for their being remorselessly exposed but not transcended. There may be less 'pleasure' associated with the tragedy, but by the same token, greater insight. Even a political critic might then contain this painful insight by believing that the racism is entirely down to Iago (that would at least leave Othello and Desdemona to float free into the realms of the truly tragic). In fact, Desdemona's desire for Othello, and his for her, are both inflected with racial idealisations. Each romanticises the difference of the other as a way of escaping the limitations of their own lives.

Only a very intelligent and highly imaginative writer could articulate the fusion of racism, xenophobia and misogyny with such economy and in such psychically plausible terms. For Othello and Iago, though differently, those terms are sexual. Both experience sexual disgust, underpinned by racial and/or social insecurity, manifested as sexual jealousy. Additionally Iago can't help imagining the sexual union of Othello and Desdemona, even while he's disgusted by it. Desire and revulsion: both are there, each feeding the other. That is one of the things which gives this scene its intensity. But the reading here has to be more than 'psychological': we have to recover the protean (or shifting) nature of some of the language used by Iago. The Oxford English Dictionary is invaluable here. Iago's disgust is concentrated in the multiple meanings of 'will' - which in the late sixteenth century could mean volition, sexual desire and sexual organs - and 'rank' - which could mean lust, swollen, smelling, corrupt, foul: 'one may smell, in such, a will most rank'. Such words make for an imagery which is intensely voyeuristic even as it is so dense as to be beyond visual realisation. Compressed in the next line is a pornographic fantasy of 'Foul disproportion': the monstrously phallic black man violating the white woman. Again there is an allusion here to Iago's earlier taunt: 'an old black ram/Is tugging your white ewe' (Act 1 Scene 1 l.88-9). If Shakespeare dramatises a kind of pornographic imagination in and

through Iago, it is also as dramatist that he reveals how central is that imagination to a certain kind of ambivalent racism in which disgust conceals ambivalent desire. We might say, following a famous formulation, that 'disgust bears the imprint of disturbed desire'. If it is disgust which licenses him to imagine - to 'smell' - the scene of sex between Othello and Desdemona, it is frustrated identification with that scene which leads him to demonise both Othello and Desdemona, and get him to kill her.

We might recall in passing that sexual disgust is central, not only to this play, but others by Shakespeare: Hamlet and King Lear being the most obvious. It has led some to attribute to Shakespeare a lurking psychosexual neurosis. Call it what one will, its experience and articulation here is devastatingly insightful for that sexually charged racism violently triangulated between the black man, the white man and the white woman, and which will become increasingly widespread in later centuries: the lynched, castrated black man is prefigured here, in this scene from Othello. Might it be that this 'neurosis' of Shakespeare's, rather than an unfortunate character-weakness essentially irrelevant to his creative insights is, in fact, central to them?

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