

Racism is Nothing New

The concept of race, along with the brutal impacts of racism, should be obvious to the contemporary reader. However, racism is not a strictly modern phenomenon. As Marjorie Garber argues, “Shakespeare’s time—like ours—was one of great historical changes and social abnormalities. There were black men and women living in London … but the slave trade between the West Indies and Africa had already begun.” (589). While Garber’s assessment of the Renaissance world displays the contradictions apparent in racist decision making, it fails to explain how Shakespeare’s characters use stereotyped understandings to base their opinions of each other. That being said, the dialogue of various characters in Shakespeare’s *Othello* reveals that their opinions of each other are informed by caricatured images.

Take, for instance, Cassio, the Florentine. He says of Iago, “I never knew / A Florentine more kind and honest” (3.1.44-45). Iago is a Venetian, but Cassio is calling him a Florentine. In this way, he is comparing Iago to the people of Florence. Utilizing the words “kind and honest,” Cassio highlights his utmost regard for his fellow Florentines. Conversely, the lines in their entirety indicate the expectation that a Venetian could never live up to the sincerity of a Florentine, but also that Iago is the exception to the rule. The fact that Cassio relays these lines to the audience after Iago exits proves that he truly believes this of Iago. With no one but the audience hearing Cassio’s proclamation of Iago’s honesty, there is no reason for Cassio to lie at this moment. Ironically, this interaction takes place after Iago has successfully assassinated Cassio’s character by “making him egregiously an ass” (2.1.331). In the previous Act, Iago convinces Cassio to consume alcohol while on watch and commands Roderigo to pester and prod him to the point of attacking Montano, a local Cyprian official. Iago continually exacerbates the situation until Othello takes charge of the uproar and demotes Cassio. All the while, Iago

maintains his image as the refined Venetian with the kindness and honesty of a Florentine. At this point, the vast majority of Iago's colleagues see him in this image, Cassio included.

On the other hand, Iago's opinion of Cassio is not so rosy. Moreover, Iago despises Cassio for receiving the promotion to lieutenant that Iago felt was rightfully his. Early on, Iago tells Roderigo that Othello instead promoted "a great arithmetician, / One Michael Cassio, a Florentine, / A fellow almost damned in a fair wife, / That never set a squadron in the field, / Nor the division of a battle knows / More than a spinster" (1.1.20-25). Essentially, Iago argues that Cassio is nothing more than a mathematician, the Renaissance equivalent of an office worker. By comparing Cassio's knowledge of warfare to that of a spinster, Iago reveals his belief that Cassio knows less about commanding an army than an old, unmarried woman would know. Using these lines, Iago portrays Cassio as an educated Florentine who lacks the practical experience of a soldier. As Garber's analysis highlights, "Cassio is a Florentine, and Florence was for the English Renaissance a center of culture and courtship" (594). After all, Florence was where brilliant artists such as Michaelangelo and Da Vinci created the timeless works now commonly associated with the Renaissance. Having lived through this period of artistic and academic revival in Florence, Cassio is influenced by Renaissance ideals that push him to become cultured and courtly. However, Iago uses the image of the cultured Florentine to the detriment of Cassio, upholding the idea that Cassio is well educated and tied to a beautiful wife, traits that discredit his position of lieutenant, according to Iago. Furthermore, Cassio's image as the courtly Florentine marks him as the perfect scapegoat for adultery. Seeing his lieutenant as the courtly Florentine, Othello rejects Cassio's honesty and instead accepts that Cassio's charm and charisma could convince his otherwise faithful wife to act unlawfully.

While Florentines are viewed as educated and cultured by the Venetians, outsiders of Muslim descent are looked down upon. Throughout the play, Venetians use language to consistently alienate Othello, who is a Moor. From the start, Iago uses animalistic language to describe Othello. He appeals to Othello's father-in-law, Barbantio, by shouting at his balcony, "you'll / have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse, / you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have / coursers for cousins and jennets for germans" (1.1.124-127). At this point, Barbantio first learns of Othello's marriage to his daughter. He becomes enraged, both by Iago's desecration of the peaceful night, and his daughter's marriage to a Moor. By comparing Barbantio's future descendants to horses, Iago plays into Barbantio's fear of Othello as a Moor, whom he believes has no business marrying his daughter. Additionally, these animalistic descriptions highlight Barbantio's fear of his bloodline being soiled by the blood of a black man. Ultimately, Barbantio wants his children to look like upstanding Venetians, which means he wants his children to be of Western European descent. On another level, Iago's image of Othello as inhuman adds further to the fear of Othello as a foreigner. As Philip Butcher finds, "Iago's reference to Othello as a 'Barbary horse' supports the view that he was from northern Africa" (245). Building on Butcher's claim, the idea that Othello originates from the Barbary coast supports the image of Othello as a barbarian. Traditionally, Greeks used the term *bárbaros* to refer to all foreigners (Britannica). Possibly from the same root, Iago's use of the term "Barbary," referencing a horse from the Barbary coast, doubles as an insult to Othello as a barbarian. This isn't the only time Iago paints Othello as barbaric, as he later refers to him as an "erring barbarian" (1.3.398), or an outsider who doesn't understand local customs. These comments make Iago's inner feelings especially clear, as Othello has already proven himself to be assimilated into Venetian culture. He speaks the language, follows the religion, and is familiar

with the customs of the people of Venice. Under these assumptions, it should not matter to the people of Venice where Othello comes from. After all, he is a successful general working for the Venetian government. Despite this, no matter how Venetian-like he becomes, Othello's dark skin marks him as an outsider to Iago.

Later on, Iago villainizes Othello when he tells Roderigo, a fellow Venetian, "O, no. He goes into Mauritania and (takes) away / with him the fair Desdemona" (4.2.257-258). This performance that Iago puts on for Roderigo plays into the latter's fear of dark skinned men. Simply put, Roderigo is afraid of Othello because he is a Moor, and because Roderigo has ingrained in him the assumption that black men are savages. Similarly, the idea that Othello would steal Desdemona plays into the idea that darker skinned men are undeserving of light skinned women. Conversely, Desdemona is lawfully Othello's wife, so the two of them leaving for any destination together would not normally be considered theft, even under the archaic institutions of the Renaissance. Despite this, Iago crafts an image of Othello as the savage Moor. In particular, the word "fair" provides a deeper understanding of this image. Fair can mean beautiful, pale, or lawful, all of which are qualities that Iago attributes to Desdemona and contrasts against Othello, whom he views as ugly and unjust. Roderigo accepts this duality between the fair Desdemona and unfair Othello as fact, as he ultimately takes Iago's bait and is caught up even further into the chaos. In this moment, Roderigo's vision of Othello is of a pirate stealing away the woman of his dreams, an idea that continues to play into the destructive stereotype of black men as predators to this day. Roderigo's fear of the Barbary pirate drives him to assist Iago in the murder of Cassio. Roderigo's hate for Othello the outsider, in conjunction with his infatuation with Desdemona, outweighs any respect he may have had for Cassio as a Florentine.

Othello himself, strong willed as he is, uses the image of himself as a foreigner to his benefit. When Barbantio accuses Othello of using witchcraft to ensnare his daughter, Othello responds, “Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances: … Of being taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence, / And portance in my traveler’s history … She loved me for the dangers I had passed” (1.3.155-193). In his response, Othello explains that the very things that mark him as an outsider are the characteristics that Desdemona fell in love with him over. While the dangers that Othello represents are the basis of Barbantio’s fears, the dangers of Othello’s past are the basis for Desdemona’s love. Othello claims that his background as a former slave accounts for some of the caring love that Desdemona harbors for him. The play’s Florentines and Venetians, borne of wealth and white skin, do not have backgrounds as slaves, a possibility unique to Othello. In his Venetian-like charisma, Othello asserts to his noble audience that he is both lovable and successful because he is a foreigner, not despite it.

Throughout the play, various characters use stereotyped caricatures to influence their opinions of their colleagues. Typically by Iago, images of the cultured Florentine, the refined Venetian, and the savage Moor are used, often to detrimental ends. For Cassio, the image of the cultured Florentine marks him as the perfect scapegoat for adultery. As for Othello, the image of the savage Moor initially intrigues Desdemona’s loving heart, although the image ultimately pushes the Venetians, Iago and Roderigo, to act against him. In the end, the depiction of Othello as an outsider trumps the reputation he attempts to cultivate for himself as an assimilated Venetian. Unfortunately for Iago, his image as the refined and upstanding Venetian lasts only until the final Act’s resolution, when his colleagues finally realize his manipulations. Unfortunately for his audience, Iago’s last moments are marked by his silence and refusal to explain the basis for his authentic image: the image of the villain.

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