Othello in black and white: Marian Cox provides an account of the kind of contextual material which students could use to deepen and enhance their reading of Othello

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The `Question and Answer' on Othello (pp. 6-9) shows us how Helen, a year 12 student, attempted to meet the assessment objectives required for AS. One of these was AO5, to `show understanding of the contexts in which literary texts are written and understood'. Those students who choose to continue with English at A2 are faced with a slightly more demanding version of the `contexts' objective: AO5ii, to `evaluate the significance of cultural, historical and other contextual influences on literary texts and study'. This article will help students to fulfil this objective when answering questions on Othello.

The Venetian Empire

While most of Europe in Shakespeare's time was ruled by monarchs and feudal lords, the northern part of Italy was uniquely organised into autonomous, self-governing `city-states'. The Republic of Venice was the most celebrated of these. The Venetians elected a Grand Council composed of the most prominent citizens, which in turn elected the Doge (Duke). The first Doge of Venice was elected in 727 and the Republic of Venice survived for more than 1,000 years.

Shortly before AD 1000, Venice began to exploit its position at the head of the Adriatic Sea to found a sea-borne empire which would eventually stretch to the Levant and the shores of the Black Sea (see map opposite). On the death of the Lusignan King James II in 1473, his wife, the Venetian Catherine Cornaro, inherited the island of Cyprus and made it part of the Venetian trading empire.

In 1600, Venice was approximately the same size as London. It was a highly international place: trade links with the East and with North Africa filled it with numerous foreign residents and travellers. The Venetian Republic fell into decline from 1570 onwards after the loss of Cyprus to the Turks. In 1797 all the individual sovereign states in Italy, about a dozen, were defeated and abolished by Napoleon.

The commercially prosperous Venetians were also renowned for their love of art and culture. They built superb buildings in Venetian style wherever they had a permanent presence, which was in many parts of the eastern Mediterranean. They built a fine city wall around the capital of Cyprus, Nicosia, and extensively fortified Famagusta, the principal port on the eastern side of the island, to which the Venetians would have sailed.

Venice and Cyprus

Act I of Othello is set in Venice, but the following four acts take place in Cyprus. The two locations are mentioned many times in the play, and they are not only integral to the plot but also intrinsic to its characterisation and themes. As Shakespeare and his audiences must have known, Cyprus was
definitively captured by the Turks in 1571: for Shakespeare's audience knowledge of this barbarian success must have heightened the play's sense of the fragile boundaries between civilisation and barbarism.

The position of Cyprus, at the crossroads of the eastern Mediterranean, helps to explain its history of invasion and subjugation over a period of 4,000 years. By the end of the classical period, Cyprus was linguistically and culturally Greek, and has remained predominantly so throughout ensuing conquests. The Crusades brought Catholic Christians to the island at the end of the eleventh century, and during the crusading era Cyprus was too important a base not to be controlled by various Western groups.

Questions to be asked are:

(1) What does Venice stand for in the play, and how is it conveyed by characters and attitudes?

(2) What does Cyprus symbolise, given its location, history and atmosphere?

(3) Othello is employed by Venice and sent to Cyprus, nearly being drowned on the way, and never returns. How does the development of his character relate to his movements?

(4) How can Iago's behaviour be interpreted in terms of the shift from Venice to Cyprus?

(5) How are the two locations associated with the main themes of love and war?

The Turkish threat

The Christian world--Europe, North Africa, the Levant and Asia Minor--began to be threatened by Islam almost immediately after its creation in the seventh century. Muslims rapidly conquered all the non-European areas and struck deep into Europe before they were defeated in France. The Christians launched a campaign to win back the holy places of Jerusalem from the Muslims in 1097 and achieved temporary successes. It was these Crusades that brought Europeans to Cyprus, which they colonised as an ideal base for operations in the Levant. The Ottoman Turks mounted increasingly powerful operations against the Christians from the fifteenth century, and in 1453 symbolically conquered Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire. The remainder of Greece and most of the Balkans fell soon after, leaving Cyprus as a dangerously isolated Christian outpost in the Muslim world.

The Turkish invasion of 1570-71, when Othello is set, consolidated Ottoman control of the region and they henceforth dominated the eastern Mediterranean. An attempt to push on towards Italy and Venice, however, was defeated later the same year (1571) at the Battle of Lepanto, one of the great sea battles of history and an authentic turning point: the Turkish fleet thereafter did not dare to venture into Italian waters.

It is puzzling that in Act I Scene iii there are three references to the Greek island of Rhodes as if it were a potential target for the Turkish invasion fleet, when the actual successful invasion of the island by the Turks took place nearly 50 years earlier, in 1522. Shakespeare may have realised Rhodes was already under Turkish rule but he needed an alternative Mediterranean destination to Cyprus to create doubt for the Venetians about the Turkish goal.
The Siege of Famagusta 1570-71

The Turkish invasion of Cyprus began on 1 July 1570 when Lala Mustafa Pasha landed at Larnaca. He waited to assemble his entire force of 50,000 soldiers before advancing inland. The Cypriots, no friends of the Venetians, offered no opposition and in some cases welcomed the Turks. Nicosia was besieged first and fell on 9 September. The remainder of Cyprus, including the fortified garrison of Kyrenia, promptly surrendered to the Turks—with the exception of Famagusta. Lala Mustafa Pasha immediately moved his forces to Famagusta but did not begin the siege in earnest until the arrival of spring and reinforcements in April 1571. The city finally surrendered on 1 August 1571, but the agreement was broken by the Turkish commander who tortured and killed the Venetian commander, Marc Antonio Bragadino (by flaying him alive and then decapitating him), despite his surrender.

The part of the fortifications of Famagusta now known as Othello's Tower acquired this name many centuries later, by association with the Shakespeare play, but there were two Italians living in Cyprus in the first half of the sixteenth century who may have contributed to Cinthio's source story for Othello, `El Capitano Moro'. Christophoro Moro was the Venetian Lieutenant-General of Cyprus between 1506 and 1508. His coat-of-arms was three mulberries sable; 'Moro' can mean both mulberry and Moor. There are said to be rumours that he returned to Venice without his wife. A generation later, a Calabrian soldier named Francesco de Sessa was posted to Cyprus. He was known as 'Il Moro' or 'Il Capitano Moro' because of his dark complexion. He was tried and banished from the island in 1544 but there is no record of his crime.

`Moors and Muslims

`Moor' and `blackamoor' (a contraction of `black as a moor') were used very loosely in Elizabethan England to refer to any person of dark or black skin, but correctly referred to those Muslims, originating in Morocco, who had conquered and settled in Spain from the seventh century AD. Parts of Spain remained Muslim and many Moors from North Africa settled there until the Moorish Kingdom Granada was finally defeated by the Christian Spanish kings in 1492. The large Moorish population was initially allowed to retain its religion, but by 1526 Islam was outlawed and all Moors had been forcibly converted to Christianity as 'Moriscos'. Many fled the country both before and after this, and there were Christianised Moors throughout Europe by the end of the century.

There were two distinct ethnic groups involved in the Muslim conquest of Spain, who hence came to be known as `Moors': Berbers and Arabs. The Berbers were the original inhabitants of the Barbary Coast, the Mediterranean shore of northwest Africa (the word Barbary is used three times in Othello). They were conquered and converted to Islam by Arabs in the seventh century AD. The Berbers typically have much darker skins than Arabs, although not as dark as those of Negroid Africans. Moors and Moriscos could be either Arabs or Berbers, and although it is uncertain which kind of Moor Shakespeare had in mind for Othello, the repeated references to blackness would hardly describe an Arab. In August 1600 the ambassador of the king of Barbary and his retinue visited London and caused a stir with their appearances in public over the next 6 months. A contemporary audience would have been familiar with Berbers, but much less so with Negroid Africans. It is therefore likely that Othello is being depicted by Shakespeare as a dark-skinned Berber, though the Arden introduction suggests there is ambiguity about Othello's ethnicity.

`Blackamoors' were considered a problem in England in 1601, when it was decreed that too many
had `crept into the realm', were depleting England's relief resources and had become an
`annoyance'. Elizabeth I issued two edicts of deportation for their return to Barbary. (Berber
Moriscos were expelled from Spain and hence adopted Christians. However, because England at
this time was anti-Spanish, the English were anti-Morisco too.)

Race and otherness

For an Elizabethan audience the mixed-race marriage between Othello and Desdemona would
have been a matter of contention. Black people at the time were either represented as savages and
monsters, fit only to be slaves (see Caliban in The Tempest) or as mysterious and exotic chieftains,
oxymoronic aristocratic barbarians. But whether menacing and repulsive heathens or romantic and
heroic warriors, they were still considered dangerous and unnatural because they were foreign.
Thomas Rymer's interpretation of the play in the late seventeenth century as a condemnation of
women who run away with `blackamoors' shows how a black general being permitted to elope with
an upper-class white woman `upset all contemporary notions of decorum'.

There were many Moors in plays in the 1590s, and this stock stage character was usually given the
standard costume of turban and scimitar to indicate his religion and temperament. The four Moors
in Shakespeare are, in chronological order, Aaron in Titus Andronicus (1593), the Prince of
Morocco in The Merchant of Venice (1596), Othello, and Caliban in The Tempest (1611), whose
mother is from Algiers. All the plays refer to the fear of forcible miscegenation (cross-breeding); a
child born to a mixed marriage in Titus is described as `loathsome as a toad' (IV.ii.67), one of the
`black' bestial references also used in Othello to express disgust at the act of engendering. But
whereas Aaron and Morocco are stereotypically evil or undesirable characters, Othello, like
Caliban, is much less definable and his portrayal questions the conventional racial prejudice, as
well as reinforcing and perpetuating it if one sees him through the eyes of the Venetian characters
and as presented to us by Iago.

An `other' is defined as someone who is somehow separated, stigmatised or noted as being
different from the mainstream ideal. The literary stereotype of the alien has been much explored
through the ages; in Shakespeare's time Jews and Moors fulfilled this role. Europe's response to
the `other' has traditionally been racism, misogyny and religious persecution, all of which are issues
in this play. An awareness of `otherness'--be it because of gender, race, religion, class, appearance
or origin--often manifests itself by the outsider's intense desire to convert to and be accepted by the
norm, and to prove a worthiness to belong.

As a Moor and a newcomer in Venice, Othello is twice an outsider to them. His non-whiteness is
the main issue, but his lack of familiarity with Venetian customs and the ways of peace are
aggravating factors in his downfall; a world of courtiers and courtesans is incomprehensible to a
man who has been at war since the age of seven, and he seems oblivious to the scandalous nature
of his secret marriage. Lago not only resents the way Othello speaks bombastically and
romantically about war, but that he did not listen to the `three great ones of the city' whom Iago
hired to procure him the lieutenancy. Othello seems to be trying excessively hard to prove he can
make measured and elaborate speeches in their language, which ironically has the effect of further
differentiating him from the rest of the characters.

Questions to be asked are:
(1) All the characters call Othello `the Moor', even Desdemona does sometimes. In what ways does Othello appear to conform to a racial stereotype?

(2) Why do you think that Othello's appearance in the play is delayed until three hostile characters have given their views of him?

(3) Who uses racist insults in the play and what form do they take?

(4) How does Shakespeare discourage a one-sided interpretation of Othello as a warning against mixed marriage or a condemnation of Moors?

(5) How might Othello's consciousness of his race, and of how others feel about it, affect his character and behaviour?

(6) Some critics and directors have seen Iago as a victim of `otherness'. What is the evidence and do you believe his attitudes can be attributed to this?

Turning white into black

In literature and folklore, black has always been the colour of the devil and of death, stemming from Biblical, classical and medieval sources. The fear of black is still evident in modern language usage, as in `blackmail', `blacklist', `black magic', `black hole' and `black mark', whereas acceptability is indicated by such phrases as `whitewashed', `white lie' and `whiter than white'. Black and white images, moral and visual double faces, dominate the play of Othello and are used by all the characters as semantic clusters signifying good or evil. This gives the impression that the world is painted black and white to represent its binary structure, but that one can't be sure who is which.

In a game of draughts or checkers, a counter which manages by cleverness and stealth to get to the other side is promoted in status and increased in power; pawns can become queens in chess. Both games consist of a battle between black and white pieces on black and white squares, whose aim is to infiltrate enemy ranks, wreak havoc and steal an advantage through surprise, cunning and skill. Shakespeare was familiar with both of these games (and draughts is coincidentally thought to be of thirteenth-century Moorish-Spanish origin). There is also a modern board game called `Othello' in which the counters are black on one side and white on the other and change colour during the course of the game. The winner is the player who can do the most turning of counters.

Questions to be asked are:

(1) How many examples of `turning into opposites' in the play can you think of?

(2) Which characters do you associate with `turning'?

(3) What point do you think Shakespeare is making by his use of binary opposites?

(4) In what ways is black stronger than white?

(5) How does Othello denigrate (literally `blacken') himself?
(6) How does the idea of two-sided counters link to the play's main themes?

Reference


Marian Cox is a teacher, examiner and author living in Cyprus. This material is adapted from the A-level English literature resource pack Othello, published by Philip Allan Updates.

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Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)


Gale Document Number: GALE|A99908883