Bloom's Literature

Othello Difficulties of the Play

The play addresses the theme of racism, but in a complicated way that can be difficult for us to grasp today. The title of the play states that Othello is a Moor, and he is referred to as "the Moor" many times during the play, even by Desdemona. Is "Moor" a derogative label for Othello? Moors were Muslims from North Africa who had conquered much of Spain and who originally spoke Arabic rather than Spanish. In 1492, the Spanish forced the final Moorish ruler from Granada. In Shakespeare's time, the term Moor held a variety of meanings. It might refer to a dark-skinned person from anywhere, even the New World, or it could specifically mean a Muslim; also, the group includes "white, tawny and black Moors," writes Michael Neill (46). Neill adds that a Moor might be seen as a heathen enemy of Christianity or as a potential ally with England against Catholic Spain (47).

In 1525, the Spanish king forced Moors to convert to Christianity, leave Spain, or become slaves. Jews were in a similar position under pressure of torture and execution by the Spanish Inquisition. In the 16th century, Christians suspected converted Moors and Jews of being infidels because forced conversions were not necessarily believed to be sincere (Hecht 127). In fact, many Moors and Jews continued to practice their traditional religions in private while publicly conforming to Catholicism. Anthony Hecht argues that the Elizabethan audience of Othello would have suspected that Othello's Christianity was merely a pose; in addition, the audience would not have been surprised when Othello murders his Christian wife, as it confirms their negative stereotypes of Moors (128–129).

A particular difficulty of the play is that students sometimes say that in depicting Othello as easy to fool, Shakespeare affirms racist views of dark-skinned people as stupid and gullible. However, Iago also deceives all the other major characters—Cassio, Desdemona, Emilia, and Roderigo; Othello is no more gullible than the rest. Harold C. Goddard notes that Othello is at times criticized for being deceived by Iago when they spy on Bianca and Cassio, and Othello mistakenly thinks the two are speaking of Desdemona; however, Goddard points out that Othello had just had "an epileptic fit and is in no condition to exercise his critical faculty" (93).

Finally, students may also be surprised that multiple versions of Shakespeare's plays exist, and they may wonder how to figure out which version is the best one. Denise Walen's 2007 article about the First Folio (1623) versus the quarto (1622) versions of 4.3 in Othello offers an excellent example of the performance and textual history that has long preoccupied Shakespeare critics. Walen contends that the longer Folio (F) version of Othello was performed before the shorter quarto (Q) version. Walen notes that in the Globe Theatre, where Othello was initially produced, no intermissions occurred; hence, 4.3 served an important function of slowing the action and inserting pathos when Desdemona sang her "Willow" song at the end of the fourth act. But when Othello began to be performed at the small, indoor Blackfriars Theatre some years later, musical interludes were inserted after each act. Hence, there was no longer a need for the slowdown function of 4.3 or for the novelty of having Desdemona sing; instead, a cliffhanger was desirable at the end of each act so the audience would return to their seats after the intermission. As a result, 4.3 was abbreviated in Q, with the unfortunate result that Desdemona and Emilia became flatter characters. Until the 1930s, performing short versions of 4.3 continued, and often the scene was omitted entirely, including Emilia's speech about husbands prompting their wives to fall. Walen observes: "The history of this scene in performance shows an unnerving disposition to still the female voice, which makes it all the more remarkable that Shakespeare wrote the scene at all" (508).

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