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Practice exam question

Shakespeare on page and stage

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Guidance for the question on p. 28 of the magazine.

The opening of an answer

Shakespeare is doing something more complex with Othello than his presentation of another Moor, 'the saturnine Aaron', in his earlier tragedy *Titus Andronicus* (1593–94). Othello is made an outsider by the entrapping structure of the play, from the sexually explicit and racial shouts of Iago and Roderigo ('Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/ Is tupping your white ewe' (1.1.89–90)) to Othello's suicide in Act Five, when he destroys himself as the alien he imagines he has become: 'I took by th' throat the circumcised dog/ And smote him — thus' (5.2.357–58). What Karen Newman identifies as Othello's 'complicitous self-loathing' dominates the play from the pivotal central scene of 3.3. The conversation between Iago and Othello reveals how Othello's view of himself has been transformed from the confident Venetian general of Act One, into one who agrees with Iago's lying slur 'She did deceive her father marrying you;/ And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks,/ She loved them most' with four short words of capitulation 'And so she did' (3.3.208–11).

Productions explore this 'terrible psychic vulnerability of being an outsider' (Smith) by interrogating the idea of race. The internalisation of racist norms in Venetian culture is revealed in Othello's equation of black skin with moral failure. Iqbal Khan's 2015 RSC production, according to Michael Billington, 'made us see a familiar tragedy from a totally fresh perspective' by casting two black actors as Othello and Iago. What was striking here was Hugh Quarshie's characterisation in his role as Othello as someone who is 'settled in his identity and the relationship with Desdemona has completed him' (Quarshie). The tragic corollary of this 'assimilationist position' (Billington) is that when that relationship is broken up by Iago, it destroys him and his sense of identity — he is totally isolated in the final scene and made a petitioner to the Venetian court rather than its prime asset.

If the opening act of the tragedy consisted only of the scene in the senate presided over by the duke and senators of Venice, then Othello might be perceived as an insider. He is welcomed by the duke to the emergency night-time meeting, who momentarily ignores Brabantio ('I did not see you') to greet the figure who provides an immediate solution to the terrifying and confusing reports from Cyprus. The duke names him 'Valiant Othello' and immediately commissions him, 'we must straight employ you/ Against the general enemy Ottoman' (1.3.47–48). There is no sense of him being an outsider here but rather one of them, leading the military campaign against their common enemy. The uproar that Brabantio causes by his protest at his daughter's marriage to Othello is soon squashed and ends with the duke's conciliatory, yet othering, rhyming couplet: 'If virtue no delighted beauty lack,/ Your son-in-law is far more fair than black' (1.3.289–90). Yet the violence and extremity of the voices that denounce him as an outsider, who is driven by foreign lust, swarm around him: 'These Moors are changeable in their wills ... the food that to him is as luscious as locusts shall be to him shortly as bitter as coloquintida' (1.3.14–18). He is not yet subject to Iago's poisoned 'motiveless malignancy', as

Shakespeare fragments the scenes in this act, making the audience alone know his full intent. Iago's soliloquy dominates the end of the act in a disturbing way, making Othello's 'free and open nature' central to his plan: 'I have't. It is engendered' (1.3.401). In terms of dramaturgy itself, Othello is made an outsider.

Shakespeare creates Othello's outsider status by giving him the language of medieval romance to characterise his love for Desdemona and how he courted her. As Sean McEvoy explores, 'This is a love from the world of stories and legends, an idealized version of courtly love in feudal chivalry.' It is a world that the lovers share, as Othello explains to the duke and senators:

She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
And I loved her that she did pity them. (1.3.181–82)

The trouble with their love being based on fantasy and storytelling, the play suggests, is that it is vulnerable to the Machiavellian Iago, whose cynicism sees love as merely lust ('Our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners' (1.3.320–21)) and shifting political and military circumstances as the ideal opportunity to create chaos. As McEvoy explains, 'Both lovers become dupes of the worldly Iago. Othello is an outsider in Venice and unsure of its ways.'

As well as this opposition of naïve credulity and opportunist strategy, Emma Smith detects how the play is 'fascinated and disturbed by its own spectacle of interracial sexuality as it homes in on the ultimate object of its erotic obsession, that bed'. In addition to this voyeuristic perspective (in Iago's invented account of Cassio's sexual fantasies, and the 'monstrous' act of murder of Desdemona in the marital bed that dominates the stage), is the physical difference of how Richard Burbage would have played Othello on stage in the first production, with 'various prosthetics...to create the illusion of blackness'. These elements would have marked out Othello as 'racially different from the rest of the cast on stage', making explicit in visual terms how Iago (and the rest of Venice) regard him. Smith sees Othello's final speech ('Soft you, a word or two before you go...' 5.2.347–65) as a 'rhetorical performance that encapsulates Othello's estranged position as both a Moor and "of Venice"'. This 'cognitive dissonance' destroys him, as his identity is impossibly split.

Commentary

The introduction tackles Othello's outsider status in the play directly by showing a grasp of the contrast between his identity as a general in the senate in the first act, and his total subjugation to Iago's corrupting words at the heart of the play in 3.3. Its discussion of the entrapping structure of the whole play, which starts with Iago's abusive shouts to stir up Brabantio and ends with Othello's vision of himself as the alien who must be destroyed, provides the reader with a bold overview. The opening of the answer reveals a confident and detailed knowledge of the play, and it sets up a sophisticated argument, identifying 3.3. as the turning point in Othello's outsider status.

The opening point is bold, as it suggests that the early scene in the senate might be read as proof of Othello's prowess and insider status in Venice. It goes on to explore how the structure of the act prevents the audience from believing the stability of such a reading, as it opens and concludes with Iago holding the cards. Perhaps some reflection on conflicting early-modern perceptions of Venice, as explored by Ania Loomba in the *Shakespeare Critical Anthology*, might have given this section greater contextual weight.

The answer demonstrates a confident handling of a range of different critical readings that are used to good effect to sharpen the argument. The reference to the 2015 production is helpful. It could even

have compared this with another production to develop the response further, as demonstrated in John Doy's article in *English Review*.

The focus on the lovers' language from medieval romance in the senate scene allows the answer to see how trapped Othello is in an imaginary world vulnerable to Iago's hard-headed Machiavellian scheming. The variety of approaches to the central question is a strength of this opening.

The final point considers the play's obsessive focus on interracial sexuality by exploring the way it views desire voyeuristically, with an undertow of racial fascination that even Desdemona is prey to in the banter on the quayside in Cyprus at the start of Act Two. This is an imaginative, fresh point and the way it combines this with a discussion of how Burbage would have looked on stage anchors the discussion in the early-modern experience of watching the play. The reference to 'cognitive dissonance' (Emma Smith's phrase) might have led to a more detailed discussion of how the tragedy unfolds as the exploration of a mind in psychic crisis, by looking closely at how Othello's language changes under the influence of Iago's verbal poison.

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