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CRITICAL HISTORY

Much of the criticism of *Othello* has focused on the two male protagonists and their culpability. Unsurprisingly, there are radically different views of Othello and Iago. Although critics have not dealt so thoroughly with Desdemona's role until more recently, divergent readings of the heroine have also emerged. Race, religion and love have all been considered closely, particularly since 1900. Critics have also explored the tragic vision that Shakespeare presents in this play, comparing *Othello* with the other great tragedies (*King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*), which most have considered to be superior to this 'domestic tragedy'. This section offers an overview of some of the key ideas that have been presented in the past 350 years.

EARLY VIEWS

Thomas Rymer, one of the play's earliest and most negative critics, produced a detailed commentary on *Othello* in *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693). His views are rather eccentric, but entertaining and thought provoking. Rymer considered the plot untrue to life; he could not believe that soldiers would ever behave as they do in *Othello*. Summing up, Rymer suggested that *Othello* was 'the most lamentable [play] that ever appear'd on any stage. A noble Venetian Lady is to be murdered by our Poet, – in sober sadness, purely for being a Fool', 'the tragical part is plainly none other than a Bloody Farce, without salt or savour'. Rymer was disappointed because the playwright did not provide a satisfactory moral for the audience to take home 'for their use and edification'. He suggested (facetiously) that *Othello* might serve only as 'a warning to good housewives to look well to their linen'.

In stark contrast, Dr Johnson (1765) declared that *Othello* was true to life, and that in this play Shakespeare depicted human nature very skilfully. His response to the hero was largely positive; in Johnson's view Othello was 'magnanimous, artless, and credulous, boundless in his confidence, ardent in his affection, inflexible in his resolution,

CONTEXT

Thomas Rymer was equally dismissive of the implausible characters: Othello was a 'Jealous Booby', Iago too villainous to be believed, the Venetians despicable, and Desdemona a woman without sense because she married a blackamoor.

Critical history

and obdurate in his revenge'. He also suggested that the play provided a 'very useful moral, not to make an unequal match'. Finally, Johnson praised the construction of *Othello*, which allowed the drama to unfold with 'scrupulous regularity'.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY VIEWS

Writing at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Coleridge offered a view of Iago's **characterisation** that has proved to be extremely influential. He found the villain's evil inscrutable and argued that Shakespeare presented 'A being next to the devil', driven by 'motiveless malignity'; in other words, Coleridge suggests that Iago operates without adequate motivation; he is bad because he is bad. The critic Hazlitt, whose lectures on Shakespeare and Elizabethan drama were popular, saw Iago in a similar light, referring to him as 'an aesthete of evil' and an 'amateur of tragedy'. Many contemporary critics have taken up these ideas, seeking to explain Iago's motivation and psychological make-up and commenting on his skill as a 'dramatist'. Other nineteenth-century critics shared Rymer's views about Desdemona's marriage to Othello, suggesting that she must be a strumpet who lacks morals and self-respect because she chooses to marry a Moor. At the end of the century Swinburne argued that Othello must be seen as a truly noble hero, 'the noblest man of man's making'.

RECENT VIEWS

Two opposing views of the hero and villain have dominated criticism of *Othello* this century. One school of thought suggests that Othello is a noble hero who is brought down by a devil, whose actions cannot be explained satisfactorily. Some who subscribe to this reading cast Othello as a credulous fool who is out of his depth among the sophisticated Venetians. Opponents of this view play down Iago's cunning, describing the villain as a worldly realist who locates and exploits his general's weak spot; in this reading it is possible to view Othello as flawed and self-regarding, rather than inherently noble.

CONTEXT

The first black actor to play Othello was an American, Ira Aldridge. He performed on English and German stages in the 1830s and 1840s, but not on the American stage.

World events

1592 Plague in London closes theatres

1596 Drake perishes on expedition to West Indies

1603 Death of Queen Elizabeth I; accession of James I

Shakespeare's life

(dates for plays are approximate)

1592 Writes *The Comedy of Errors*

1593 Writes *Titus Andronicus, The Taming of the Shrew*

1594 onwards Writes exclusively for the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Writes *Two Gentlemen of Verona, Love's Labours Lost, Richard II*

1595 Writes *Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Night's Dream*

1596 Hamnet dies; William granted coat of arms

1598 Writes *Much Ado About Nothing*

1599 Buys share in the Globe Theatre; Writes *Julius Caesar, As You Like It, Twelfth Night*

1600 *The Merchant of Venice* printed

1600–1 Writes *Hamlet, The Merry Wives of Windsor*

1601 Writes *Troilus and Cressida*

1602 Writes *All's Well That Ends Well*

1602–4 Probably writes *Othello*

1603 onwards His company enjoys patronage of James I as The King's Men

1604 *Othello* performed; Writes *Measure for Measure*

Literature and the arts

1590 Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*

1592 Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*

1598 Christopher Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*

1599 Translation, by Sir Lewes Lewkenor, of Cardinal Contareno's *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*

1600 John Parry, *History and Description of Africa*

1603 Marston's *The Malcontent* first performed

World events

1605 Discovery of Guy Fawkes's plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament

1609 Galileo constructs first astronomical telescope

1610 Henri IV of France assassinated
William Harvey discovers circulation of blood
Galileo observes Saturn for the first time

1612 Last burning of heretics in England

1618 Raleigh executed for treason
Thirty Years War begins in England

Shakespeare's life

(dates for plays are approximate)

1605 First version of *King Lear*

1606 Writes *Macbeth*

1606–7 Probably writes *Antony and Cleopatra*

1607 Writes *Coriolanus, Timon of Athens*

1608 Writes *Pericles*. The King's Men acquire Blackfriars Theatre for winter performances

1609 Becomes part-owner of the new Blackfriars Theatre

1611 *Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale and The Tempest* performed

1612 Shakespeare retires from London theatre and returns to Stratford

1613 The Globe Theatre burns down

1616 Dies

1623 *The First Folio* published

Literature and the arts

1605 Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*

1607 Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* published

1611 King James's translation of the Bible

1612 Webster, *The White Devil*

1613 Webster, *Duchess of Malfi*

1622 Birth of French dramatist Molière