

Worksheet 4 – Act 1, Scene 1: At Brabantio's Balcony

Review: Lecture 3

In the last lecture, Prof. McRae explore show Iago and Roderigo are introduced to the audience at the start of the play.

- ✓ At the opening of Act 1, Scene 1, what does Iago mean when he says 'I am not what I am'?

Recall: Lecture 4

Answer these questions after watching the video lecture to check how much you remember about the lecture and the play.

1. Why do Iago and Roderigo go to wake up Brabantio?
2. Why does Brabantio not recognise Iago in this scene?
3. What is Iago referring to when he uses the phrase 'changes of vexation'?
4. How does Brabantio's attitude to Roderigo change in the scene?

Analysis

5. In this section of the scene, Iago uses a range of animal imagery to describe the relationship between Othello and Desdemona:
 - a) Reread the dialogue between Iago and Brabantio (lines 91-124) and collect all the quotations you find relating to animals.
 - b) How is Brabantio being manipulated by Iago in this dialogue?
 - c) What image of Othello does Iago create through his use of animal imagery?
6. Choose one of the quotations you collected for question 5 and write a close analysis of the effect of Shakespeare's language choices on the audience. (*Consider features such as: powerful word choices; imagery; alliteration; symbolism; rhythm.*)

Evaluation

7. Prof. McRae begins his lecture by referencing a racist comment Roderigo makes about Othello ('thicklips', line 68). McRae suggests that this comment is 'fundamental' to the play, because it establishes Othello as an outsider.

Other academics have written about the role of race in Shakespeare's plays, and have also engaged with the question of whether his portrayal of Othello is, in itself, racist. These wider arguments are important to consider when approaching *Othello* as a play, both in its context in the 1600s and when it is performed to modern audiences.

Read the blog below by Prof Farah Karim-Cooper about Shakespeare's relationship to race:

- a) Make a note of the key points Prof. Karim-Cooper puts forward.
- b) Reflect on how her ideas are similar to, or differ from, those of Prof. McRae.
- c) Explain how Karim-Cooper's argument might help you understand *Othello* as a play.

When writing about Shakespeare and race as a scholar of colour there are various challenges that perhaps white scholars don't face. The two main challenges are, first, the realisation that the poems and plays that were written in the early modern period were largely written for a white readership/audience, so a scholar of colour might come to it with an imposed sense of alienation; the second is the grief and hurt caused when reading racist language about people of colour. It's hard, people. Whether it is Iago's racist language in Othello or the seemingly out of place racist slurs Lysander throws at Hermia when he rejects her after being bewitched by the flower: 'Ethiophe'; 'Tawny Tartar' in A Midsummer Night's Dream. Each time a scholar of colour encounters such language it stings; it has to be quickly shaken off so that the analysis can take place in spite of this confrontation.

So let's focus on language in order to see how words matter across time and space not just in the moment. 'Words, words, words', as Hamlet says, are the first thing we encounter when reading or listening to Shakespeare. In her ground-breaking study Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England, Kim F. Hall points to the 'polarity of dark and light' created by words in Renaissance texts. She says that:

Descriptions of dark and light, rather than being mere indications of Elizabethan beauty standards or markers of moral categories, became in the early modern period the conduit through which the English began to formulate the notions of "self" and "other" so well known in Anglo-American discourse.

It is a little odd but not perplexing that for years white scholars refused to or did not see the racial meanings behind the language of light and dark or white and black. In Renaissance texts related to beauty, behaviour and courtesy, whiteness is figured as an ideal in interior as well as exterior terms. In the imaginations of Shakespeare's contemporaries, whiteness was linked to a group of qualities associated with virtue and everything that is good. This influenced the ways in which the English began to consider difference. How one appeared in their demeanour, behaviour and physical complexion would have been viewed as a reflection of the inner self. This appears to have been a moment in history when whiteness was being emphatically placed above blackness for all sorts of reasons, skin colour being one tangible way of understanding difference.

The early moderns would have inherited their ideas about the values of white and black from a range of sources: artists manuals that describe the nature and symbolism of colour; poetry of the classical and medieval periods that praised ideals of whiteness; sermons that talked about death and damnation using the language and imagery of blackness and darkness; and religious painting – portraits and frescoes – that emphasised the shimmering divine light of God or Christ and the darkened complexions of devils, demons and death. Kim Hall talks specifically about Royal portraits of the Tudors which showcase the relationship between whiteness and power. Elizabeth I's portraits in particular often show her with a glowing whitened face – cosmetically enhanced in person – meant to remind the viewer of her virgin purity, Christian grace and monarchical supremacy. Many sonnets that Shakespeare would have read and certainly some of the poetry he wrote tended to use imagery associated with whiteness to describe female beauty:

**The Lily in the field,
That glories in his white:**

**For pureness now must yield,
And render up his right:
Heaven pictured in her face,
Doth promise joy and grace.
Fair Cynthia's silver light [the light of the moon that is!]
Compares not with her white...**

This anonymous poem dated around 1593 compares a beautiful English woman to a lily and the moon, suggesting both would be fairly jealous of the lady who is much whiter and shinier than they are – the shine was an important feature since it reflected God's light, showing the lady to have a perfect soul. You get the picture.

If white was considered virtuous then does that mean black was considered bad? Not in every context of course; there was a great appreciation of night by poets (Romeo and Juliet often praise night), even while there was a fear in this period of the palpable darkness of and the 'terrors' of the night, to allude to a pamphlet written by Elizabethan author Thomas Nashe. There was also an appreciation of the melancholy spirit which was produced, according to the ancient theory of the four humours, by a substance in the body known as black bile. Melancholy could be positive- if it was a state of mind held by poets and thinkers in moderation; but it could also be negatively viewed because too much black bile could make an individual excessively melancholic, which, in whacky early modern theory could lead to idleness, villainy or 'madness', characteristics often associated with Black Africans or 'Moors' at the time. Either way it's fairly clear how these concepts are racialised and disturbing to consider the destructive force such language can have.

From looking closely and more deliberately at the language in Shakespeare's England particularly in his own work we can see how binaries of black and white helped create or contributed to concepts of race; we gain a deeper understanding of racial difference today and therefore a deeper awareness of what we are up against in the fight against racism. I think this is one of the chief values of studying Shakespeare and race.

Farah Karim-Cooper, 'Anti-Racist Shakespeare' (26 May 2020), Shakespeare's Globe blog, <https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/discover/blogs-and-features/2020/05/26/anti-racist-shakespeare/> [accessed 10 August 2020].

Glossary

- **Vexation** – irritation; annoyance.
- **Zounds** – an old swearword, which is a shortened form of 'God's wounds'; used to express irritation.
- **Tupping** – having sex with (*used most often to describe rams and ewes mating*).
- **Bestial** – like an animal; savagely cruel.