

Bonn Turkington

Dr. Fazel

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A Christian Allegory

Othello is an allegorical lesson in morality and the dangers of sin. The characters in Shakespeare's work present unique examples of individuals moving from righteousness to villainy and indecency to redemption. This essay will examine the main characters to determine what theological lesson they teach or represent within Christian dogma. Through this assessment, I will show how *Othello* as a complete work is an allegory about the dangers of sin, with each character providing a specific lesson, and Iago and Desdemona providing the roles of Satan and Christ respectively.

Introduction

Christianity was the most common religion in England during Shakespeare's life and is at the focus of the play. But it was not the only religion of the time. "Though Queen Elizabeth's government recognized only one true faith in Shakespeare's England, four distinct religions are discernible in his plays and poems: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and the state religion of ancient Rome," (Cox, 1). Othello's conversion to Christianity marks his Moorish character as both different and unique (even amongst Moors) and provides the lens through which we can assess his actions and the actions of others throughout the play.

Iago and Desdemona stand as the only two characters who begin the play and end the play in the same moral situation, effectively framing and highlighting the transformations of the other characters. Iago functions as the tempter and deceiver parallels the Devil in Christian theology through both his desires and actions. In Christian theology the Devil's goal is to bring about misery for humanity

regardless of color, creed, or station, and this is exactly how we see Iago acting. While Desdemona is the sinless woman, a parallel to Christ. She lives a sinless, spotless life of noble thoughts and deeds. She suffers beatings, humiliation, and ultimately dies a martyr just as Christ did. Through these opposing characters we have a framework to judge the actions of each other character in the play.

Iago

Iago, in this allegory, is the figure of the Devil, or Satan, the great tempter of man. Iago and his hatred for Othello are front and center throughout *Othello*. His violent, sinful behavior is the primary plot of the play. The reason for Iago's bitterness and the impetus for his scheming is missing out on a promotion that he believed he was entitled to. In the first scene of Act One, Iago and Roderigo are together, and we find Iago bemoaning being passed over for a promotion. Hardly 50 lines into the play we find the true character and motives of this villain that will set the play in motion,

In following him (Othello), I follow but myself. Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, but seeming so for my peculiar end. For when my outward action doth demonstrate the native act and figure of my heart in complement extern, 'tis not long after but I will wear my heart upon my sleeve for daws to peck at. I am not what I am. (1.1.64-71).

Iago is battle-hardened and a capable leader, whereas Cassio, the man who received the promotion, is more of an intellectual who is unfit for leading troops firsthand. Iago says of Cassio,

One Michael Cassio, a Florentine, a fellow almost damned in a fair wife, that never set a squadron in the field, nor the division of a battle knows more than a spinster-unless the bookish theoretic, wherein the <toged> counsuls can propose as masterly as he. (1.1.201-207).

It is this denial that sets the plot of revenge and eventual tragedy in motion.

Iago's loss of a promotion is the primary plot point that sets the play in motion, but Iago's actions and desires stretch beyond the confines of the plot. "I am not what I am," (1.1.71) Iago says of himself. His outward appearances and actions as kind friend and confidant belie his motives and motivations; he is the Devil come as an angel of light. There is no redemption for Iago; he is the Devil

come to tempt the characters of the play, attacking their specific weaknesses. He takes advantage of others, "When she is sated with his body she will find the error of her choice. Therefore, put money in thy purse. If thou wilt needs damn thyself, do it a more delicate way than drowning. Make all the money thou canst." (1.3.722-726). He is also paranoid, "I hate the Moor, and it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets 'has done my office.'" (1.3.759-760). Without any evidence, Iago assumes that *his* wife has been unfaithful. And he is cunning, carefully playing each character against the other for his own amusement.

Brabantio

Brabantio represents the dangers of unrestrained wrath. His role in the play ends in the third scene of Act 1. However, we learn that he got along well with Othello before the events of the play. Speaking of Brabantio Othello said, "Her father loved me, oft invited me, still questioned me the story of my life I ran it through, even from my boyish days to th' very moment that he bade me tell it, wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances..." (1.1.478-484). As he wooed Desdemona with his tales of bravery and fortitude, "She'd come again, and with a greedy ear devour up my discourse." (1.3.502-503). Brabantio was equally impressed with stories.

Brabantio is the first example of a good character (good in this case meaning without obvious fault or flaw) who abandons the path of virtue for the road to ruin. At the very thought of Othello marrying his daughter, Brabantio derides the once heroic Othello, "O, thou foul thief, where has thou stowed my daughter? Damned as thou art, thou has enchanted her!" (1.2.286-288). So enraged by Othello's actions is Brabantio that he demands justice amidst a political and military crisis that is developing at night. Says he to the Duke,

Good your Grace, pardon me. Neither my place nor aught I heard of business hath raised me from my bed, nor doth the general care take hold on me, for my particular grief is of so floodgate and o'erbearing nature that it engulfs and swallows other sorrows and it is still itself. (1.2.390-397).

Brabantio's wrath is so immediate and consuming that it blinds him to anything that isn't related. He becomes a narcissistic brute demanding to see his version of justice administered to the exclusion of all else.

Brabantio's sudden change in disposition can be attributed, at least in part, to envy. All seems well with the man initially-his affairs are in order and life is going according to what can be assumed to be his plan. Othello, though he knew and appreciated the man before, represents a sudden upheaval of Brabantio's ideal and threatens (or already has) to take something of great value from the man, and that's Desdemona. Envy is natural, especially when it comes to a change in the family dynamic. But instead of exercising restraint, Brabantio acts on his rage and would rather see Othello hanged than take his daughter. Brabantio is, until Othello's intervention, perceives himself as the owner or ruler of his daughter. Women, in Othello's time, were usually classified according to their marital status, as either maids preparing for marriage or married women (Wells, 413). Women were labeled according to their relationship to men and thought of as subservient to them. Believing her to be a maid, Brabantio felt he retained authority over his daughter. Her marriage to Othello immediately removed that power. Though he manages part of the land, losing control of his daughter is perhaps even more difficult to manage than a loss of power in the government, as it is a more direct loss of control.

Othello

Othello's role in the allegory is to show how even the seemingly pure and incorruptible can be driven to evil ends if they do not constantly guard themselves against sin. During the initial act and when he is pleading his case for marrying Desdemona, we learn that Othello is brave, bold, and loyal to his country and people. And when conflicts arise between characters, he shows his ability to calm the situation and his aversion to needless confrontation. We find his fellows fighting after being duped by Iago in the second act, and Othello responds, "Hold, for your lives...Why, how now, ho! From whence

arise this? Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites? For Christian shame...!" (2.3.1298-1306). Though a military leader who is familiar with battle, he cannot stand conflict even among friends. His aversion to dispute provides a small hint at what makes him a great leader in battle and respected in general; he fights only for what is right *when* it is right.

It is important to understand Othello's actions and eventual downfall from a Christian perspective because his conversion to Christianity was part of what made him both unusual and regarded as something of a spiritual hero. John Cox suggests that "Converting from Islam to Christianity was highly commendable, especially when the convert brought with him the military skills, experience, and qualities of leadership possessed by Othello." (Cox, 2). Because of his conversion to the 'native' religion of Christianity, Othello further strengthens his character.

Othello is not only a wise war veteran, but he is a convert to Christianity. Both attributes show the strength of the man's moral foundation. But like Judas Iscariot in biblical lore, the noblest and chosen are capable of the most dramatic downfall. Unlike Judas, who is persuaded by power and money, Othello's change begins because of envy, jealousy, and doubt. Iago suggests, through subtle manipulation over several acts, that Desdemona has been unfaithful by sleeping with Cassio. By the third scene of Act 3, we find Othello allowing doubts to creep into his mind during an exchange with Iago and Desdemona. "Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?" (3.3.1643) Othello says after seeing Cassio depart from an encounter with Desdemona. Iago fuels the embers of Othello's doubt by replying, "I do believe 'twas he." (3.3.1647). Othello has not sinned of yet, but he has allowed doubt to enter his mind to the point of voicing his concerns, where before they were more internal. Doubt, in Christian theology, is the antithesis of faith. One doubt leads to another, and if a course correction is not made, that path will inevitably lead to ruin, and that is exactly what we see two acts later.

Despite his good heart, by the beginning of Act 4, we find the once noble Othello embracing Iago's manipulation with greater passion as he expresses his anger through abuse. He says to Desdemona, "Devil!" (4.1.2648), then strikes her in public. She pleads and says she does not deserve such treatment, which indeed she does not. We get a glimpse of Desdemona's parallel to Christ in this scene as it matches His march to Calvary to be crucified where he was beaten and spit upon and said to be filled with the Devil, when he himself was spotless. As a precursor to Christ's crucifixion, so too is this a precursor to Desdemona's innocent death.

In Act 5 we see Othello's paranoia and fears finally consume his entire rational being when the tragedy reaches its climax. The final moments the couple share are both poignant and damning for Othello. Sin is at the heart of their final discussion, and Othello is too blinded by his transgressions to understand that he is the one marred by sin, not she. "Think on thy sins," (5.2.3294) Othello says to Desdemona, as the Jews in Jerusalem said of Christ during his trial. She admits only that she is guilty of loving him immediately after. She too identifies that Othello has been consumed with passion and succumbed to the sins of envy and wrath, "Some bloody passion shakes your very frame." (5.2.3299).

What Othello says next is possibly his most damning act of all the play and the moment he steps beyond reason and commits the eventual murder in his heart. After Desdemona's statement Othello says, "Peace, and be still." (5.2.3302). Othello's words almost perfectly mimic that of Christ's. In the fourth chapter of Mark in the New Testament, we find Jesus with his disciples on a boat. It was late at night when a terrible storm began to strike the ship and all besides Jesus feared for their lives. Rousing Christ from slumber and imploring him to help, Jesus arose and uttered the famous words, "Peace, be still." (*King James Bible*, Mark 4.39). Immediately after the storm stopped and in the same verse we read that there "was a great calm".

Christian theology is full of instances of possession, where an individual loses their faculties to a demon or the devil who inhabits their body for a short or lengthy time. It is not uncommon for Satan to use words and phrases that sound like Christian gospel to trick people into doing his bidding. In this instance we find Othello uttering the same lines as Christ, only he does so before causing destruction, not stopping it. We know from the early parts of the play and those mentioned in looking at Brabantio that Othello was good. He wasn't just good; he was good enough to overcome the public perception of otherness and skin color through the sheer weight of his good deeds to become a respected commander in the military. But here we find him possessed by a devilish spirit. The doors to his spirit were opened to demonic acts through frequent doubt and subsequent sin. Envy and wrath started as little doubts and frustration with Desdemona. But with each expression of sin he opened the doors of his soul more and more until, in time, he was fully turned in. "It is too late," (5.2.3350) Othello says as he smothers his dear Desdemona. It is a statement meant as much for himself as it is for her.

Desdemona fulfills her representation of Christ in her final moments before being smothered. As Christ hung on the cross at his crucifixion, he uttered the words, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." (Luke 23.34). Desdemona, before her last breath, says, "A guiltless death I die." (5.2.3396). Then, her last words again mimic that of Christ on the cross. "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit," (Luke 23.46) Christ says as he offers his spirit to his Father. Desdemona, at her last, says, "Farewell. Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell." (5.2.3398-3399). She then gives up the ghost and dies, sealing her fate as martyr as did Christ.

Emilia enters Desdemona's bed-chamber shortly after the smothering and Othello denies he was the murderer, "You heard her say herself, it was not I" (5.2.3403). In the fifth chapter of Mark, we find Jesus casting out an unclean spirit from a man. Jesus addresses not the man, but the demons inside. When Christ asks the demon its name, we find a haunting reply, "My name is Legion: for we are many." (Mark 5.9). The voice of the demon and the voice of the man mix during the conversation and such

occasion happens frequently in Christian tradition. Was Othello's statement the last admission of the pure and true Othello, not the one possessed by an unclean spirit? It cannot be a coincidence that Christian tradition supports the idea of possession and that that possession can come by way of sin. Likely, Othello had indeed become possessed, and this was perhaps one of the last moments of honesty in admitting he did not kill her, but the demon inside him had.

Shortly thereafter he admits he was indeed the killer and does so with sadistic joy. It's obvious any traces of the noble Othello are once again gone, and we are left with the sin-laden demoniac. Though he knows he murdered her, he is completely consumed with what Iago has said and believes everything. "She did gratify his amorous works," (5.2.3499) he says of Cassio, fully believing it to be true.

It isn't until Emilia confronts Iago, who subsequently confesses to his role in poisoning Othello's mind that he briefly returns to his senses and tries to, if not right the wrong he has done, at least put an end to the source of his downfall. To Iago, he says, "If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee." (5.2.3583). He then stabs Iago. One of the most interesting points in this encounter is that Iago does not immediately die from the thrust. If Iago was a devil, Othello could not kill him. And that is exactly what happens-Othello only wounds the man. Iago is the orchestrator of Othello's downfall and the devil who possesses Othello's mind and body. This statement and connection are both intentional and symbolic in showing Iago as the representation of the Devil and Othello as a man possessed.

When Othello murders Desdemona he is no doubt out of his mind with rage and has lost control of his sensibilities and faculties. At that moment it might as well have been Iago killing Desdemona, as Othello was an extension of Iago's rage. However, the sin ultimately rests with Othello; it was he who gave place for doubt in his heart, and that doubt led to envy and eventual murder. The mightiest of all was guilty of the greatest Christian crimes of all-murder and suicide. Iago knew that an all-out assault on Othello would not succeed; the man was too good, too brave, too noble to murder on command. But

using techniques attributed to Satan, Iago instead uses subtle lies and temptations that Othello will believe and continued to do so, working one lie after another, until Othello was capable of murder and falls from grace.

Roderigo

Roderigo is an example of what happens when someone acts on their inappropriate passions and lusts. He lusts after Desdemona, and by entertaining that desire he eventually meets a tragic end.

Roderigo's downfall begins with his association with Iago. This connection represents the association all individuals have with evil in the world. There is no avoiding evil and sin in the world, but it is possible to avoid being a part of it. Roderigo attempts to fight against Iago's evil but ultimately has a moment of weakness which brings about his downfall.

During the very first scene wherein Iago complains about Cassio receiving the promotion he deserved (in his mind), Iago pushes Roderigo to confront Desdemona's father, Brabantio, in the middle of the night. "Call up her father. Rouse him. Make after him, poison his delight, proclaim him in the streets." (1.1.74-76). Iago, as always, wants others to do his bidding and take the blame for any offense (in this case potentially upsetting Brabantio). And later we learn that Iago is using him for his money, "Put money in thy purse. Follow thou the wars; defeat thy favor with an usurped beard. I say, put money in thy purse." (1.3.711-713). Iago repeats the phrase six times in that short discussion, then follows with, "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse." (1.3.755). The relationship is toxic, much as sin is to the divinity of the human mind, and initially, Roderigo does his best to ignore the problem that he can't physically escape.

Roderigo is also in love with Desdemona, Othello's wife. He knows the situation can't resolve itself and laments his fortune by saying he should drown himself and then continues, "What should I do? I confess it is my shame to be so fond, but it is not in my virtue to amend it." (1.3.688-689). He has no

way of fulfilling his needs until Iago begins to carefully tease his passions. Iago says, "It is merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will," 1.3.706-707). Yet shortly thereafter Iago plants a seed of hope in Roderigo's mind and begins a plan that will help him find hope in his passion.

In Act 2 we see a scene in which Iago, Roderigo, Othello, Cassio, and Desdemona are present. Shortly after the group departs leaving Iago and Roderigo alone, Iago continues to nurse Roderigo's hopes of fulfilling his desires, "First, I must tell thee this: Desdemona is directly in love with him." (2.1.1015-1016). Roderigo expresses his disbelief that Desdemona is in love with Cassio and suggests that she is too "Blessed" (2.1.1048) to love another than her husband. Iago works on this doubt and helps it grow in Roderigo's mind by suggesting simple touches between the pair were, in fact, more sinister.

After lying about Cassio's character, Iago suggests Cassio be "Removed" (2.1.1077). The Roderigo we see at the beginning of the play would have likely imagined getting rid of Cassio and triumphantly wooing Desdemona, but that would have remained an internal fantasy. Already Iago has broken the man; Iago's suggestion leads to a heated exchange between Roderigo and Cassio which sees Cassio hitting the man.

Roderigo feels beaten and is penniless (thanks to Iago) and decides to return to Venice. However, Iago convinces him to remain. Roderigo is jealous, angry, and hopeless. Praying on this, Iago reminds Roderigo that Cassio, "Hath beaten thee." (2.3.1517).

By Act 4 Roderigo is fed up with Iago's constant manipulation. Roderigo derides Iago saying that he has had enough of his pestering, "You have told me she hath received them, and returned me expectations and comforts of sudden respect and acquaintance, but I find none." (4.2.2920-2923). But Iago will not stop just because Roderigo has yet to see any truth in Iago's suggestions. A tender nerve of lust has been exposed by Iago's constant pestering. Roderigo tries to hide it, but Iago continues his

attacks. And by the end of Act 4, Iago has so relentlessly attacked Roderigo's senses that Iago's suggestion to end Cassio's life by "knocking out his brains" (4.3.2964) is met with acceptance. "I will hear further reason for this." (4.3.2977) Roderigo replies.

The combination of Roderigo's jealousy for Cassio's supposed relationship with Desdemona and grief over a one-sided love that he feels is truly lost leads the man into a fit of wrath against Cassio. "I know his gait. 'Tis he!-villain, thou diest!" (5.1.3119). Roderigo then attacks Cassio. Cassio returns the thrust with his own and stabs Roderigo. Roderigo meets his end moments later when a cry of murder is heard and Iago returns under the guise of ignorance and stabs the man before Roderigo can say more.

Roderigo's actions teach readers the dangers of entertaining sinful thoughts. It is not the thoughts one has, but what one does with those thoughts that separate the good from the evil. Imagine his plight if he had not given himself to Iago's temptations. From what we read he could not directly sever his relationship with Iago, much like Christianity believes one cannot be removed from sin in the world. But just because someone is in a sinful world does not mean they need to be a part of it. Roderigo lusted after another man's wife and grieved over his inability to have her-it would be hard to argue he was a virtuous man from the beginning. But even after constant harassment, Roderigo was willing to give up his desires and return to Sicily, showing that for all his lust and grief, his heart was pure enough to not act on his desires. Iago, however, provided tantalizing ideas and encouragement that all was not lost. And Roderigo decided to entertain Iago's suggestion combined with his lust and remorse that led to his physical and spiritual demise. His literal death then serves as an example of the spiritual death awaiting those who cannot always control their passions and thoughts.

Emilia

Emilia represents the ability for individuals to correct their behavior and denounce evil in all its forms. Though she dies a martyr and is friends with the spotless Desdemona, she also blindly enables her husband's schemes at first.

Iago constantly pressured Emilia to steal Desdemona's napkin that Othello gave her. Iago never made know why he wanted it, only insisting that he have it. When the handkerchief was dropped, she found it on the ground and picked it up. "I am glad I have found this napkin. This was her first remembrance from the Moor. My wayward husband hath a hundred times wooed me to steal it...What he will do with it heaven knows, not I. I nothing but to please his fantasy." (3.3.1937-1946). We learn from this scene that Emilia is willing to take something that a friend cherished and not return it. She asks Iago why he needs it and suggests that Desdemona would be heartbroken to lose it, but when Iago refuses to answer and says only, "I have use for it. Go, leave me," (3.3.1970) she does so without further question. Were Emilia loyal and loving towards her husband this scenario would be easy to explain as marital love. However, there are hints throughout the play that she is dispassionate and unhappy with her marriage. She calls Iago during the same scene her, "Wayward husband," (3.3.1939). Why then would she give up the napkin? Based on her comments about Iago, it might be a mix of fear or apathy-fear that Iago will turn angry if pressed or apathy towards a friend's feelings.

In the following scene, we see Desdemona and Emilia together. The former asks the latter where her handkerchief might be found. After giving the object to her husband, this is Emilia's first chance to make things right and admit her deed. But instead of making light of the situation and explaining she gave it to her husband and offered to retrieve it after finding more evidence of Desdemona's desire for the object, she lies yet again. Her response to Desdemona's inquiry is, "I know not, madam." (3.4.2173). While the lie is not tremendous sin on par with others in the play, it does represent another instance of moral apathy.

Emilia further complicates her situation in the second scene of Act 4. Desdemona is distraught at Othello's growing anger and violence, and when Iago and Emilia return, she laments her fate. Iago admits he has no idea why Othello called his wife a whore, and then Emilia adds, "I will be hanged if some eternal villain, some busy and insinuating rogue, some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office, have not devised this slander. I will be hanged else." (4.2.2854-2857). One act earlier she was witness to the scene where the napkin was the subject of Othello's frustration. But more interestingly, she states exactly what has happened as if she knew exactly what Iago was planning. Not only does she call him a villain and scoundrel earlier, but he was plotting to "get some office" that he felt deserved. It's impossible to think that Emilia was ignorant of Iago's plans. By stating his exact intent and being privy to his desire for her to steal the napkin, she had to have known what he was doing.

Emilia shows a slow but steady course towards greater sin. It's logical to assume that, under normal circumstances, she will continue down this path of spiritual apathy. Desdemona, who by now is resigned to her impending fate, asks Emilia if *she* would abuse her husband (or if any other women would) for all the world? Desdemona says she would not for all the world, while Emilia replies that, "The world's a huge thing. It is a great price for a small vice," (4.3.3056-3057). Alone, Emilia's remarks could hardly be construed as more than hyperbolic musings between friends, but considering Emilia's dishonesty in the past, it becomes more meaningful. She goes on to blame any issues on husbands in general.

Shortly after this exchange is when we see Emilia's spiritual course change. The catalyst for this change is the murder of her lady, Desdemona. She panics and has a breakdown when she realizes her friend is dead, "Out, and alas, that was my lady's voice! Help! Help ho! Help! O lady, speak again Sweet Desdemona, O sweet mistress, speak!" (5.2.3393-3395). After finding out about Desdemona's murder she is intent on reporting the truth. She first chastises Othello for killing her but soon learns of her husband's involvement in the scheme. When Iago tries to silence her, she replies, "No, I will speak as

liberal as the north. Let heaven and men and devils, let them all, all, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak." (5.2.3507-3509). The double blow of her friend's death and her husband's involvement is enough to shock the apathy from her soul and set Emilia on a noble course of seeking justice. And as the ultimate sacrifice for her willingness to see justice done, she dies by her own husband's hand.

Conclusion

Bookended by pure evil and perfect sanctity, each character represents a specific lesson in guarding one's self against sin. Iago represents the devil walking among men, Othello the righteous man who looks incorruptible but slowly gives in to sin, Roderigo the man who lusts and allows that desire to turn to evil action, Brabantio the man who allows wrath to consume him, Emilia the woman who is morally ambiguous, to begin with, but finds redemption through martyrdom, and finally Desdemona, the antithesis of Iago and representation of Christ's life and purity. Individually the characters are micro-lessons; together they form a Christian allegory about good, evil, and the gray paths between them.

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