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Othello and the Seven Deadly Sins

Few characters in *Othello* are without sin. This analysis will examine how each character's tragedy is directly caused by their inability to control their passions and their subsequent turn from the path of virtue to embracing vice. This essay will analyze the actions and thoughts of the characters from the perspective of classical Christianity to understand which of the seven deadly sins leads to their specific downfall. I posit that the origin and primary cause of all tragedy in the play is the sin of envy, but the essay will also explore which other sins the individual characters are guilty of.

Introduction

Iago and his hatred for Othello are front and center throughout *Othello*. His violent, sinful behavior is the primary plot of the play. In the first scene of Act 1, Iago and Roderigo are together and we find Iago bemoaning being passed over for a promotion (which was given to Cassio) and forming his plan for revenge through manipulation,

"In following him, 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).

And confirming his intents he utters these words two scenes later, "I hate the moor." (1.3.737-738).

However, Iago isn't the only miscreant we encounter. Brabantio, the senator, quickly turns from confidant of Othello to a racist slanderer. Roderigo, the man whom Iago uses like a toy or puppet, lusts after another man's wife and winds up attempting to murder that man. And Othello himself is guilty of jealousy-driven murder. Though Iago proclaims himself a villain, *Othello* is full of evil men whose sins

create the tragic situations throughout the play. Here is a brief look at supporting characters and an analysis of their behaviors in the context of the seven deadly sins.

Brabantio

Brabantio's role in the play ends in the third scene of Act 1. However, we learn of the man's change of behavior through Othello recalling how he was once in the man's good graces. Othello says, "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).

Before Othello's marriage to Desdemona, it seems Othello held high regard in Brabantio's court. 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.

But at the very thought of Othello marrying his daughter, Brabantio immediately 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 doesn't care what worldly business is keeping the Duke up or commanding his attention, only his matter, the fate of his daughter is important.

What is the cause of this sudden change? Brabantio lives in a time when cultural and racial identity was paramount. Othello, a dark-skinned Moor, is an 'other' culturally and racially. Brabantio can

accept (and even embrace) that initially, but envy gets the better of the man and leads to his outbursts. He is envious of Othello for taking his place as the ruler over Desdemona. Envy leads to hate, hate leads to wrath, and wrath leads to an attempt to prosecute the just Othello. The racist comments are the vehicle for his envy and wrath, not the origin of his feelings.

Othello

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 a needless confrontation which takes place later after Iago has tricked his fellows into fighting, "Hold, for your lives...Why, how now, ho! From whence ariseth this? Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites? For Christian shame...!" (2.3.1298-1306).

But after just a few discussions with the serpent that is Iago, Othello's mind is slowly poisoned. Iago suggests, through subtle manipulation over several scenes, 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).

At the beginning of Act 4, we find the once noble Othello fully embracing Iago's manipulation and reduced to an abuser (both physically and verbally). 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.

In Act 5 we see Othello's paranoia and fears finally consume his entire rational being when the tragedy unfolds. "It is too late," (5.2.3350) Othello says as he smothers his dear Desdemona. After Emilia

enters the chamber shortly after the smothering Othello denies he was the murderer, "You heard her say herself, it was not I" (5.2.3403). Shortly thereafter he admits he did it with a sadistic joy. Though he knows he murdered her, he is completely consumed with what Iago has said, "she did gratify his amorous works," (5.2.3499) he says of Cassio. Confronted with his guilt and full of anguish, Othello then stabs himself, leading to the conclusion of this tragedy.

Once again, we see envy at the heart of evil and tragic actions. Othello allowed himself to be beguiled by Iago. Jealous of what he thought others had and was taking from him, Othello decided the only way to fix the situation was to put an end to that which he envied, that which he already had but felt he had lost-Desdemona. And when he learned of the truth that Iago was the orchestrator of the events, he killed himself, which act was considered a crime against God by Christians.

Roderigo

Roderigo attempts to murder one man to win another man's wife; but as with most characters in the play, he does not start as a murderer, but becomes one by turning from a path of virtue and giving in to the sin of envy. Were it not for Iago, Roderigo would merely be passionate about another woman that he could not have, a small matter of internalized lust.

Roderigo is also in love with Desdemona. 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). Roderigo lusts after Desdemona and has no way of fulfilling his needs. That is until Iago begins to play on 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 by suggesting Cassio is the only thing keeping him from Desdemona, "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.

Iago suggests getting rid of Cassio to allow direct access to Desdemona. After lying about Cassio's character, Iago suggests Cassio be "Removed" (2.1.1077). Thanks to Iago's constant pestering, Cassio and Roderigo have a heated exchange that sees Cassio hitting the man.

Roderigo feels beaten physically and mentally. Thanks to Iago pressuring him to spend his money to win Desdemona, he's poor as well. With nothing left for him, Roderigo decides to return to Venice. However, Iago convinces him to remain, that something more can be done. 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 (the jewels) and returned me expectations and comforts of sudden respect and acquaintance, but I find none." (4.2.2920-2923). But by the end of Act 4, Iago has thoroughly convinced Roderigo that the only solution to his problems is to end Cassio's life by knocking out his brains (4.3.2964). Roderigo's reply is damning to his reputation, "I will hear further reason for this." (4.3.2977). In other words, he's convinced it's the only option left.

In Act 5 Roderigo snaps. The combination of the desire for Desdemona and manipulation by Iago leads him to a fury when he sees Cassio coming. "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 then

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 were guided by two great sins. Envy of Othello and then Cassio sparks the feelings of lust that lead to his death. Were it not for this profound lust he likely would not have met his end by the blade of a perceived foe. He too is guilty of envy—he is envious of Cassio's perceived connection to Desdemona. His connection to Iago suggests that he would have been a pawn in Iago's greater plans no matter his feelings for Desdemona—Iago seeks weakness in others and manipulates those weaknesses for his ends. But would that have ended in his death? In this case, he would likely have survived were it not for lust and envy.

Conclusion

As with every complex work of Shakespeare's, Othello is full of rich and complicated characters. While some characters are without blame, nearly every character is guilty of grievous sins. Envy and lust drive the characters; each character wants what another has. Iago wants a promotion, Barbantio is envious of Othello taking control of his daughter through marrying her, Roderigo wants another man's wife, and Othello is envious of what he believes others have (his wife). Each one acts out in wrath with the results ranging from racism to murder. Murder, wrath, and lust are all products of a single vice. Remove envy and you remove the tragedy and have a completely different (and much less tragic) play. And in that case, all you have is a sociopathic Iago trying to ruin lives. Through the varying degrees of disgrace and tragedy, Othello presents readers with a strong example of the dangers of envy run rampant.

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