Othello: Features Of Early Modern Period In A Play

The play that shall be used as a case study in this essay is the Shakespearean tragedy, Othello. Written in 1603, the first performance was recorded a year later in the newly ordained king James I's court. Whilst the play is set in 1570, and focuses on the war between Venice and the Ottoman empire, at the time it was performed, it was a crucial year for people: Queen Elizabeth had died only months before James was crowned king, and this intersection between Elizabethan and Jacobean contexts is refracted into the subtext of Othello, adding a political over tone to the play. (Shakespeare and Bate, 2009).

It is important to identify and define the Early Modern period, specifically the time around when Othello was both written, and set. Early Modern History, generally, is the period between 1500-1700, spanning 200 years, and if we were to translate this into eras, it follows the late Middle Ages of the post- classical era. Contextually relevant to Othello, the Early Modern period incorporates the art period of the Renaissance, and this time resulted in a cultural advance from the much earlier Middle Ages. (Early modern Europe, 2020).

To delve into the cultural context of Othello, would reveal the split in settings- Venice and Cyprus- and as an extension, a split in tone within the narrative. As noted in the introduction of the RSC's edition of Othello, the duality of the two settings holds significance for an Elizabethan audience- "For Shakespeare's original audience, the title 'The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice' would have instantly suggested a meeting of the familiar and the strange, of East and West.". (Shakespeare and Bate, 2009, Pg.1) The first act situates itself in Venice, Italy. To an Elizabethan audience, Italy, and Venice specifically, was synonymous with European sophistication: a sentiment of mysticism. In '"The Italianate Englishman:" The Italian Influence in Elizabethan Literature', Maureen Fox explains the role of the Italian renaissance in England's Elizabethan literature and culture- "When England was first exposed to the Italian Renaissance, the country was impressed and inspired by Italian literature, and Elizabethan writers show their support for Italian culture by mimicking Italian literary structure and promoting Italian ideals, particularly those of love in their texts." (Fox, 2011, pg. 2). We certainly see this in writings from Sir Thomas Wyatt, known for his translations of Italian poetry on the conventions of love. Shakespeare, too, had a passion for Italy, and set many of his plays within the country. Specifically, in Othello, Venice serves as the setting of order and democracy, contrasting with the chaos of Cyprus, where Othello's marriage with Desdemona is pleasant, and he is a respected general. Another angle to the culture of Italy, however, reveals the hatred England started to harbour for the country. The Italian Renaissance encapsulated the idea of humanism, in which, man is the centre of his own universe. (Italian Renaissance, 2020). Emphasis on individual expression and physical beauty, infamous artists such as Michelangelo and Da Vinci created visions of nudity and ethereality, which was highly controversial to a Christian empire such as England- "Venice was notorious for the number and openness of its courtesans, and the laxness of its wives. It was the pleasure capital of Europe, a city of sexual tourism." (Shakespeare and Bate, 2009, pg.1) For a Shakespearean audience, the character of Desdemona would subvert their cultural expectations of a Venetian lady. We see her not motivated my sexual desire for Othello, but rather for his good qualities. Like both Iago and Othello, Desdemona is written in a way that contrasts with Early Modern cultural experience.

Religion plays a large part in the thematic arc of Othello and is rooted into the psyche of both the protagonist and the antagonist. The religious themes saliently engage with the Early modern discourse of Christianity and the religion of Islam which it felt threatened by. To historically pinpoint Othello within the Early Modern period, would reveal that the play is situated during the time that Venice was at war with the Ottoman Empire, a war which took place between 1570 and 1573. The Ottoman empire was a state that controlled much of South-eastern Europe, Western Asia and Northern Africa between the 14th and early 20th centuries, and so envelopes the whole of the Early Modern period. In Othello, the Ottoman empire is identified within the label of 'Turks', - they were mainly of the religion of Islam. The Turks posed an immediate threat to Venice. Certainly, in 1602 when the play was performed, there was a collective anxiety of conversion from Christianity to Islam. (Cassia, 1986). The term 'Moor' is used to describe Othello throughout the play, during the whole of the first scene he is labelled through this and nothing else. In Early Modern language, 'Moor' had a dual meaning, one was specifically racial and geographical, however, the primary use of the word was as a religious identification. 'Moor', as an extension, meant 'Mohamedan', or Muslim. An aspect of Othello as a character is rooted in conversion of religion, and a strong metaphorical theme is his 'damnation' from Christianity, a reversal of his initial conversion. "… exhibits a conflation of various tropes of conversion-transformations from Christian to Turk, from virgin to whore, from good to evil, and from gracious virtue to black damnation." (Vitkus, 1997, pp.1). His transformation from respected Christian soldier to murderer of his Venetian wife translates into this notion and theme of conversion. Iago acts as the catalyst of this conversion, which is "dramatized as a fall into a bestial, sex-obsessed condition." (Vitkus, 1997, pp.156). One of the most striking aspects of Othello as a written character is that he is a committed Christian, as Iago notes here in Act 1, Scene 1- "And I- of whom his eyes had seen the proof/ At Rhodes, at Cyprus and on other's grounds/Christened and heathen…" (Shakespeare and Bate, 2009, pp.26). This aspect of his character would controversially engage with Early Modern discourses of religion, subverting expectations of an Elizabethan audience. Othello's Christian language would be a paradox for Shakespeare's audience- "Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that/ Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites? /For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl!" (Shakespeare and Bate, 2009, Act 2, scene 3, pp. 63). Certainly, it was far more common to be converted from Christianity to Islam, rather than the other way around in Othello's case. We also see other elements of conversion within Othello. Within the play, the audience sees, through Iago and Othello's language, the change of Desdemona from virtuous maiden to a "whore". From "soul's joy", she becomes a "fair devil". In the final act of Othello, the audience sees the extent of Iago's evil as he appeals to a "Divinity of hell", and we see the re-workings of real history dramatized in Shakespeare's writing. In 1571, Cyprus was an important Christian outpost against the fight with the Turks, but instead of having an external enemy to bring ruin, Shakespeare creates an internal, domestic collapse of Christian society (Shakespeare and Bate, 2009), as Iago destroys the Christian values, and we see irony in his remark here from act 2, scene 1- "Nay, it is true, or else I am a Turk" (Shakespeare and Bate, 2009, pp. 52). Othello's demise marks the finality in the religious tragedy- "In smiting himself, Othello recognizes that he has now become the Turk. By killing Desdemona, he has renounced his Christian civility and damned himself. He symbolically has turned Turk." (Shakespeare and Bate, 2009, pp.7).

Race plays a hugely salient and pivotal role in the narrative of Othello, and Shakespeare writes a complex, multi- dimensional black protagonist, as opposed to the singularity of character represented in preceding portrayals of black characters, the most notable of which would be Titus Andronicus, portrayals in which encapsulated the discourses of race. Through the

language Iago and other characters use to describe Othello, it reveals the racist, animalistic notions about people from Africa, and this mirrored how an Elizabethan audience felt. Not only from an angle of his ethnicity, but his original religion, Islam, assumptions of sexual depravity and “lasciviousness” are used to identify Othello. However, there are more specificties to Early Modern understanding of race, and specifically people from Africa and to fully capture these discourses, it is important to understand the geography of the rapidly expanding world of the time. Queen Elizabeth I spearheaded sentiment of suspicion and hostility towards the increasing number of African people who were being brought back to England due to the rapidity of colonialism- “Her Majesty understanding that several blackamoors have lately been brought into this realm, of which kind of people there are already too many here… her Majesty’s pleasure therefore is that those kind of people should be expelled from the land.” (Shakespeare, 2005, pp.19). Emily C. Bartels in her critical essay ‘Othello and the Moor’ seeks to understand the Elizabethan notions of different ethnicities from Africa. Othello throughout the play is predominantly called the ‘Moor’ which in Early Modern English had a duality of meaning. Whilst one was a religious identification, as mentioned above, the other specifically, in this context, meaning someone from Morocco, in North Africa. As Bartels highlights in her critical essay “In the Renaissance… Africa was understood rather as a set of discrete domains.” (pp.141) and she goes on to add that North Africa was seen with an air of fantastic mysticism and exoticness. This exact sentiment is caught in Act I, Scene 3, as Othello tells the story of his life to the Duke of Venice and the senators, he describes his childhood with mystic realisation- “Rough quarries, rocks, hills whose head touch heaven… And of the cannibals that each other eat… The Anthropophagi and men whose heads grew beneath their shoulders…” (pp.40). This monologue certainly engages with the Elizabethan discourse of a globally connected Moor. A popular book on Africa circulating in England in 1600 was ‘The History and Description of Africa’ by ‘Leo Africanus’, who was a Moor himself, and a converted Christian. It is insinuated that Shakespeare engaged with this literature, mirroring a protagonist, poised on the intersection of European and African cultures, resulting in the deliverance of a rich cultural vision of the globe, and this certainly engages with what the Renaissance expected of a centrally positioned Moor such as Othello.

Through the device of Iago, we see Elizabethan suspicions of the New World, but does Shakespeare challenge the racism and prejudice? And does he evoke sympathy for a black protagonist, something which would have been unprecedented for an Elizabethan audience. In ‘” Othello” and Race Relations in Elizabethan England’, Rudolph Shaw argues this case. “In creating a Moor who was black in the face yet white and noble in the spirit, Shakespeare had the perfect character to astound and perplex the already bloodthirsty Elizabethan audiences.”. Creating Othello’s tragic fall, through the evil of Iago, but also through the protagonist’s own hubris, Shakespeare invoked sympathy in the Elizabethan audiences, and allowing them to question their own place in the New World.

Undoubtedly, Shakespeare was an important figure in the Early Modern Period. His contribution to the renaissance literature was important, with merging of both tragic and comedic writing and creating a new style. His intricacies of language and character development in Othello allowed a multi-faceted story of racial integration, religious metaphor and cultural divide to be spotlighted whilst also being challenged through the tragedy of Othello as a narrative arc. Instead of creating an animalistic and volatile black character, he creates one who is written much more humanely. “He illuminates later times as well as his own. He helps to understand the human condition.” (Shakespeare and Bate, 2009, pp.16). He thoroughly engages with the notions of culture and religion, which sit at a cross-section in Othello. When the tragedy was written,

Othello was acted in the King’s men, the exclusive acting company to which Shakespeare belonged. This pinnacle of recognition and influence ensured that Shakespeare’s Othello fused with the Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Renaissance contexts within the Early Modern Period.