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## ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ | RESEARCH ARTICLE

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### DISCREPANCY BETWEEN APPEARANCE AND REALITY IN SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO*

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#### Abstract

As one of the greatest tragedies of Shakespeare, *Othello* (1622) sheds light on the darkest corners of the human psyche in that it shows the way in which powerful emotions such as love, hatred and jealousy blur the distinctions between a loving husband and a cold-blooded murderer. Having based his play on the discrepancy between appearance and reality, Shakespeare warns the reader/audience against the dire consequences of taking everything at a face value. Therefore, rather than interpreting the characters from a restricted point of view, it is attempted to see through the stereotypical images ascribed to them. Accordingly, instead of seeing Desdemona as an obedient, silent and passive figure, it is argued that she is a courageous woman that can defy her father Brabantio, for she manages to marry the man of her own choice. On the other hand, just like Iago, Desdemona is aware of her physical and emotional influence over her husband since she promises to use her charms on Othello so that Cassio will regain his position. In this regard, it can be said that Desdemona is a woman that knows how to move through the strict regulations of the patriarchy that is represented by her father and her husband, respectively. However, she cannot escape her tragic death because Othello is too blind to see Desdemona's true self. Hence, for the aim of this paper it is intended to illustrate the importance of seeing through the binaries, and of welcoming alternative interpretations that reveal the complexities pertinent to the characters in the play.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, *Othello*, Shakespearean tragedy, Desdemona, Appearance, Reality

## SHAKESPEARE'İN *OTHELLO* ESERİNDE GÖRÜNEN VE GERÇEKLİK ARASINDAKİ ÇATIŞMA

### Özet

Shakespeare'in en önemli trajedi oyunlarından biri olan *Othello* (1622) insan ruhunun en karanlık köşelerine ışık tutarak, aşk, nefret ve kıskançlık gibi güçlü duyguların eşini seven bir koca ve soğuk kanlı bir katil arasındaki ayrımı nasıl ortadan kaldırdığını gözler önüne serer. Görünen ve gerçeklik arasındaki çatışma üzerine oyununu inşa eden yazar, okuyucu/seyirciyi her şeyin sadece görüldüğünden ibaret olduğu yanılsamasının sebep olabileceği olumsuz sonuçlara karşı uyarır. Dolayısıyla, oyundaki karakterleri görüldüğü gibi ele almak yerine, onlara atfedilen basmakalıp imgelerin ötesini görebilmek amaçlanmaktadır. Bu bağlamda Desdemona'yı itaatkâr, sessiz ve pasif bir figür olarak görmekten ziyade, onun babası Brabantio'ya karşı gelişi ve istediği adamla evlenmeyi başarmasından hareketle cesur bir kadın olarak da görülmesi gerektiği tartışılacaktır. Ayrıca, tıpkı İago gibi, Desdemona da kocasının üzerindeki fiziksel ve duygusal etkisinin farkındadır ve bu sebeple Cassio'yu kaybettiği pozisyona yeniden getirmek için kocasını ikna edeceğine dair söz verir. Bu bağlamda, Desdemona'nın babası ve kocası tarafından temsil edilen ataerkil düzenin katı kuralları içerisinde nasıl hareket etmesi gerektiğini bilen bir kadın olduğu çıkarımında bulunmak mümkündür. Ancak, Desdemona kendisini bekleyen trajik sondan kurtulamaz, çünkü *Othello*'nun gözleri Desdemona'nın özünde nasıl biri olduğunu fark edemeyecek kadar perdelenmiştir. Tüm bunlardan hareketle bu makalede ikiliklerin ötesini görebilmenin ve karakterlere özgü çok-boyutluluğu değerlendirme imkânı sunacak farklı yorumlara da açık olmanın önemi vurgulanacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Shakespeare, *Othello*, Shakespeare trajedisi, Desdemona, Zahir, Gerçek

### INTRODUCTION

As it has been put forward by various scholars, *Othello* holds a peculiar place among the major tragedies of Shakespeare. For Ridley, even if it is not the greatest work of the playwright still it is “his best play” because “its grip upon the emotions of the audience is more relentless and sustained than that of the others” (1967: xiv). On the other hand, for Leavis, of all Shakespeare's tragedies *Othello* is “the simplest: the theme is limited and sharply defined, and the play, everyone agrees, is a brilliantly successful piece of workmanship” (1994: 120). Another characteristic which sets *Othello* apart from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear* is that it is “the only one with a contemporary setting” (Green, 1992: 319) as Shakespeare incorporates the Turkish attack on Cyprus – which took place in the summer of 1570 – into the fictional atmosphere of his work, and he portrays Venice as a “relatively late sixteenth-century” city state (Nostbakken, 2000: 31). Accordingly, while shedding light on the deepest corners of the human psychology since the play centres around such universal themes as love, betrayal, trust, jealousy, hatred, honesty and revenge, Shakespeare also provides an insight into the social, political and economic aspects of the period in which the play was written.

In its full title, *Othello, the Moor of Venice* was first performed in 1604. It was printed in the First Folio in 1623; however, “there was a separate edition, in Quarto, brought out by Thomas Walkley in 1622” (Wain, 1994: 11). This separate edition has been rejected by some critics because they consider it as a corrupt version, yet for the others it is the initial text which was revised and reprinted in the First Folio. While the full title of the play draws the reader's attention to the presence of a black hero and raises questions concerning Shakespeare's main intention behind choosing such a figure, it should not be forgotten that Shakespeare was simply following the story line of the source book. As Mangan states Shakespeare “found the story for the play in a collection of Italian tales called *Gli Hecatommithi* by Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio (published 1565), which he may have read in the

original Italian” (1991: 153). In the Italian story only Desdemona is named, and the remaining characters are addressed according to their titles. There, the Ensign (Iago) is in love with the Moorish Captain’s (Othello) wife, but his love is not reciprocated. Therefore, the Ensign wants to take revenge on Desdemona and convinces the Moor of her infidelity. Having been deluded, the husband plots with the Ensign to kill his wife, and they make it seem like an accident. Later, the Corporal (Cassio) accuses the Moor of his wife’s murder, but the husband denies his crime. In the end, the Moor gets sentenced to a perpetual exile, and he gets killed by Desdemona’s relatives.

In addition to the source tale, “*Othello* seems to owe a large debt to an early comedy by Shakespeare’s great contemporary Ben Jonson” (Mangan, 1991: 160). While the tragic aspect of the play is obvious; it should also be noted that the first three scenes have clear parallels to the plot of Roman comedies where two lovers defy all the obstacles and they manage to get united in the end. In *Othello* Desdemona goes against her father’s disapproval concerning her marriage, and Othello convinces the Duke of Venice and the senators of the fact that it was Desdemona who came to him by her own will – “For she had eyes, and chose [him]” (Shakespeare, 1967: III.iii.104). As Golden also states: “Desdemona speaks in Othello’s favor when she announces that she saw ‘Othello’s visage in his mind’ and fell in love with his deep graces in spite of all the external reasons that might have been expected to keep them apart” (2009: par. 20). Having overcome all the obstacles, the lovers both sail off to Cyprus to live happily ever after. However, “[t]he rest of *Othello* is about the way in which that ‘happy ever after’ fails to work out” (Mangan, 1991: 149). Regarding the influence of Ben Jonson on *Othello*, Mangan reminds us that Jonson’s “*Every Man in His Humour* was first performed in 1598 by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, and was revised for a court performance just a few months after the first known performance of *Othello*, and we know that Shakespeare acted in it” (1991: 160). Although Jonson rewrote the play in an English setting, it was originally set in Italy. “[I]n this ‘Italian’ version one of the story-lines concerns a jealous husband called Thorello” whose name is transformed into Othello in Shakespeare’s play (Mangan, 1991: 160). Having been inspired by *Gli Hecatommithi* and Jonson’s comic plot, Shakespeare creates a harmonious body out of the various source materials that he has come across, and he presents them in a different context. In contrast to Jonson’s play where the jealous husband Thorello achieves reconciliation in the end, *Othello* ends with the tragic deaths of Othello and Desdemona.

### **OTHELLO AS A SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY**

At this point it is necessary to reflect on the aspects that make *Othello* a tragedy. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that to speak about tragedy is not an easy task because “the term can be vague and broad or very personal” (Nostbakken, 2000: 2). In contrast to Aristotle’s definition of tragedy that mainly focuses on plot or action, Shakespeare puts emphasis on the psychology of the characters – which is directly related to “the growing Renaissance interest in humanism, individualism, and self-expression” (Nostbakken, 2000: 3). Thus, it is not surprising to come across various labels that try to ascribe a certain definition to the work itself such as the “tragedy of passion,” (Bradley, 1965: 142) “love tragedy,” (Bates, 2013: 195) “revenge tragedy” (Mangan, 1991: 142) or “tragedy of misunderstanding” (Wain, 1994: 12). While it is possible to increase the number of these definitions, in order to have a better understanding of the work it is necessary to designate an umbrella term – that is Shakespearean tragedy. As Bradley asserts: “Shakespearean tragedy as so far considered may

be called a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in a high estate” (1965: 6). It is not difficult to apply Bradley’s definition to the play as Othello is not an ordinary man but the General of the Republic who is entrusted with the governorship of Cyprus, and he undergoes an internal conflict that not only turns him into a murderer but also costs his own life. The exceptional calamity stands for the conflict that the hero experiences both on an internal and an external level. In other words, this eternal struggle taking place in the hero’s *soul* not only affects his outward position in the society such as his rank, dignity but also his *life/body*. Nevertheless, what is peculiar about Othello is that his conflict is not internally fuelled – at least for the start – but is imposed by an outward force. Motivated by personal reasons, Iago sets off to revenge himself on Othello, and he gradually blurs Othello’s vision by planting the seeds of doubt in him so that Othello starts questioning the fidelity of Desdemona. In that sense, the “action and catastrophe of *Othello* depend largely on intrigue” (Bradley, 1965: 145). Iago, as the master of language, holds the power of words in his hand. By pulling “the puppets’ strings,” he makes “the honest fools dance to his tune towards their own destruction” (Ridley, 1967: lxi). Therefore, it can be said that Iago is not only the master of language but also that of “destiny” (Ridley, 1967: lxi). To say it more precisely, he is the power that leads the whole action towards Othello’s undoing in the play.

### **IAGO: “I AM NOT WHAT I AM”**

Still, it would be wrong to assume that Othello is simply controlled by Iago, and he is not responsible for his actions. On the contrary, in order to be a truly tragic hero, Othello “must bear some blame for his own ‘error or frailty’ ” (Nostbakken, 2000: 3-4). His first and foremost error lies in the fact that Othello is not able to distinguish between appearance and reality. Hence, he “foolishly trusts all men” (Jordan, 1950: 146). His mind basically operates in accordance with concrete terms, and this may be associated with the nature of his profession. As a general Othello must be repulsive and quick in taking action. Yet, it causes Othello never to “embrace the ‘whole’ woman” inherent in Desdemona; since for him she is either “all good or all evil” (Ancona, 2005: 58). On the other hand, Othello is also susceptible to the power of imagination as it easily influences his emotional state and dulls his intellect. Despite the fact that Othello is the one who has moved Desdemona with the story of his life so that she will come again with a “greedy ear” to devour up [his] discourse,” (Shakespeare, 1967: I.iii.29), in the end Othello’s “witchcraft” (Shakespeare, 1967: I.iii.31) turns against him, because now it is Iago’s story that “moves him as deeply as Othello moved Desdemona” (Pryse, 1976: 466). Othello is moved to such an extent that he cannot even make a definite distinction between dream and reality, which is evident in the way he reacts to Cassio’s obscene dream as if it really took place. Ironically enough, it is Iago who feels the need to remind him that “[n]ay, this was but his dream” (Shakespeare, 1967: III.iii.119). Furthermore, self-reliant as Othello is – which is obvious in the way he tells the Duke that Desdemona’s presence in Cyprus will have no negative impact on his military duties, “his ‘normal’ capacity for separating his domestic and military lives [...] cannot operate where Desdemona is concerned” (Kliger, 1951: 223). All these factors come together to show that Othello’s tragedy is rooted in his total alienation from his true self. Entrapped in an imaginary story that he has formulated, he cannot bear to see it crumbling into pieces. This is the reason why he desperately tries to *rewrite* another story – notwithstanding the fact that it will transform him into a murderer in the end:

OTHELLO. Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,  
Made to write “whore” on? ... What, committed!  
Committed! O thou public commoner!  
[...] What committed!  
Heaven stops the nose at it, and the moon winks,  
The bawdy wind that kisses all it meets,  
Is hush'd within the hollow mine of earth,  
And will not hear't. ... what committed, ---  
Impudent strumpet! (Shakespeare, 1967: IV.ii.154-155).

As Michael Mangan aptly argues: “Much of the action of the play involves demonstrating how people can be turned into the opposite of what they seem, or what they believe themselves to be” (1991: 148). In this respect Iago is the only character who – if not to the others – is honest to his own self; as it is evident in the way he openly states: “I am not what I am” (Shakespeare, 1967: I.i.8). It gives him the power to work on the weaknesses of other characters and to use them according to his own interest. In relation to Iago’s function in portraying the discrepancy between how a character sees his own self and how he may find himself in a completely different situation that contradicts with his former perceptions, Mangan states:

Cassio *sees* himself as a man of moderation and virtue – and so he is until Iago’s machinations turn him into a drunken brawler. Othello *sees* himself as a fond husband and generous lover – and so he is until Iago’s plotting turns him into a murderously jealous tyrant. It is Iago’s peculiar function to liberate in other people the suppressed ‘other,’ that opposite of their constructed ‘selves’ which is also a potential self of each of them. (1991: 148-149, italics mine)

In this way Shakespeare also warns the reader/audience against taking everything at a face value. Instead of limiting the characters to a stereo-typical frame, it is important to be able to see through the surface and accept the grey areas. While for most of the readers Desdemona embodies the ideals of beauty, purity and innocence; at a second thought one starts questioning the validity of these powerful notions that are ascribed to her. As opposed to Bradley who interprets Desdemona as a “helplessly passive woman” who can do nothing just because “her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute,” there are also alternative interpretations that try to reveal the possible ambiguities in her character (1965: 145).

### **DESDEMONA: “I DO BEGUILLE / THE THING I AM, BY SEEMING OTHERWISE”**

It would be a reductionist approach to comment that Desdemona is a helpless woman. On the contrary, she is the one who elopes with Othello while her father is fast asleep. It shows that Desdemona is able to plan her actions beforehand, and she is able to act upon them. Not yet able to see the power inherent in his daughter, however, Brabantio tries to come up with reasonable arguments to accuse Othello for deceiving Desdemona:

BRABANTIO. O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow'd my  
daughter?  
Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her,  
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,  
(If she in chains of magic were not bound)  
Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy,  
So opposite to marriage, that she shunn'd  
The wealthy curled darlings of our nation  
Would ever have (to incur a general mock)  
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom  
Of such a thing as thou? to fear, not to delight. (Shakespeare, 1967: I.ii.19)

Here, just like Othello who *writes* and *rewrites* Desdemona in the way he wants/prefers her to be, Brabantio – as the patriarchal figure – projects the image in his mind onto his own daughter only to realise that he will be proven wrong. Far from the image of an obedient, silent, passive woman, Desdemona is powerful enough to defend her cause, and she asks the Duke to allow her to go with her husband to Cyprus. Thus, Desdemona proves herself as a courageous woman that can speak up her mind. Furthermore, upon her arrival on Cyprus, Desdemona is quickly engaged into lively conversations with Iago and Cassio. Her action may be criticised on the grounds that she is supposed to be worrying about Othello since his ship is still on the sea. Perhaps as an attempt to discard such thoughts she says: “I am not merry, but I do beguile / The thing I am, by seeming otherwise” (Shakespeare, 1967: II.ii.55). In this regard, it can be said that just like Iago, Desdemona is not what she appears to be. She is well aware of the discrepancy between being and seeming. Then, one can easily wonder whether she uses it as a tool to increase her power on the patriarchy – which is now represented by the husband figure. Is she the one who is lulled by the stories that are told to her, or the one who *chooses* the stories that she likes to hear? After all, is not she the “captain’s captain” (Shakespeare, 1967: II.i.52)?

It would be a somewhat naïve attempt to think that Desdemona is ignorant of her influence over Othello; she is quite conscious of it. When Cassio loses his position, due to his getting drunk while on duty, Iago recommends him to ask Desdemona to talk to Othello on his behalf, because he, too, is aware of Desdemona’s charms over her husband. Unsurprisingly enough, Desdemona quickly accepts Cassio’s appeal and promises him to change Othello’s judgement:

DESDEMONA. Do not doubt that: before Emilia here  
I give thee warrant of thy place: assure thee,  
I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it  
To the last article: my lord shall never rest;  
I'll watch him tame, and talk him out of patience;  
His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift;  
I'll intermingle every thing he does  
With Cassio's suit: therefore be merry, Cassio,  
For thy solicitor shall rather die  
Than give thy cause away. (Shakespeare, 1967: III.iii.94-95)

It might not be noticed at first; however, when we take Desdemona's speech and put it out of the context we can easily hear Iago's words in her tone. It is as if he is speaking through Desdemona. Just like Iago who promises himself to take his revenge on Othello, Desdemona, too, sounds determinate in her plot. Nevertheless, her determination is somewhat problematic and ambiguous in that just the day after her wedding night she "swears to her husband's second-in-command to regard his defence as being more important than any other matter, to use every opportunity, including that of conjugal intimacy, to obtain from her husband the rehabilitation of a man whom he has punished" (Green, 1992: 335). In parallel to Desdemona who plans to use her beauty as a weapon to dull Othello's judicial capacity, Iago, too, uses every opportunity to abuse Othello's ear, mind and heart alike so that he will be the ultimate controller of them all:

IAGO. I'll pour this pestilence into his ear,  
That she repeals him for her body's lust;  
And by how much she strives to do him good,  
She shall undo her credit with the Moor;  
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,  
And out of her own goodness make the net  
That shall enmesh them all. (Shakespeare, 1967: II.iii.88)

As Ancona argues in her article, the common reader would feel happy and perhaps relieved to see Desdemona as a "doll wife" that is blindly in love with her husband – such that she is more than ready to forsake her identity before him (2005: 61). Still, what makes Shakespeare such a great playwright is his ability to frustrate our expectations so that we can see through what is obvious. This is the reason why his works are constructed upon various layers that wait to be revealed. Accordingly, it can be argued that neither Desdemona nor Othello are truly in love with each other; on the contrary, they are in love with the promises that love is to offer them, thus they misunderstand it. As Othello says: "She lov'd me for the dangers that I had pass'd, / And I lov'd her that she did pity them" (Shakespeare, 1967: I.ii.31). Then, it would be wrong to conclude that they loved each other unconditionally; in contrast, they assumed as such – and that was their tragedy.

Yet, "tragedy as a dramatic form may be said to fulfil a cognitive function in so far as it offers us a knowledge of ourselves" (Drakakis, 1992: 2). By problematizing the discrepancy between binary oppositions such as love/hate, trust/deception, black/white, friend/enemy, truth/lie, reality/appearance *Othello* shows how easy it is to transgress the boundaries which – ironically enough – have been already constructed in the first place. In other words, Desdemona has to violate the image of the selfless, passive, angel-like woman that has been ascribed to her so that she will come to the realisation that she has been living a lie. Likewise, Othello has to look inside and see how weak and insecure he is – no matter how strong he appears to be from outside.

It is also challenging and somewhat confusing to see how love, which is an important instrument that brings people together, turns into a destructive cause paving the way for the ultimate separation of two lovers through a tragic murder in the end. In relation to this Bates asserts that "[i]n tragedy things by definition go wrong but in love tragedy what goes wrong are the very best things – goodness, mercy, and love" (Bates, 2013: 195). By showing the grey areas where love and hate intermingle into

one another, "Shakespeare deepens the tragic potential considerably. Here love is not merely a good in an evil world. It is shown to contain the seeds of evil within itself" (Bates, 2013: 205).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Othello* turns the world of appearances upside down and lends itself as a work of tragedy not simply because it closes with the deaths of Othello and Desdemona. Here we see lovers turned into murderers, enemies into friends, dreams into reality, and good into evil. The play also brings an awareness regarding the interchangeability between the binary oppositions and the importance of one's being true to his self. As Shapiro also contends: "*Othello*, like Shakespeare's other tragedies, presents man as a creature groping in the darkness of self, misconstruing the motives of others, stumbling over unforeseen, fatal consequences" (1997: par. 22). In this scheme, it is Iago who acts as the medium that takes wo/man deep into the heart of darkness so that s/he will confront her/his own shadow. Having completed his mission, Iago chooses to keep silent and leaves the interpretation to the reader: "Demand me nothing, what you know, you know, / From this time forth I never will speak a word" (Shakespeare, 1967: V.ii.194).

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