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Othello and the question of race: a review of two decades of criticism

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Othello and the question of race:
a review of two decades of criticism

by

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of race is something which cannot be ignored in interpreting the tragedy of Othello. This thesis examines the presence or absence of racial issues by investigating the opinions of critics of the 1950s and contrasting them to critics of the 1980s (mostly from the United States) in order to bring about an understanding of how the tragedy was seen before and after the Civil Rights Movement. Aside from criticism of the two decades in question, I have also included references to relevant criticism from other periods whose authors' expertise were germane to the issue of race and racism. Certain Shakespeare critics, A. C. Bradley, for instance; was of great importance to my efforts because even though his criticism was written well before the earlier period I examined, Bradley set the tone for much of the criticism which followed. Including Bradley in this thesis also provides insight on how the play was viewed during an earlier period in Othello criticism.
This thesis is divided into three chapters, and each of the first two chapters examines different approaches in assessing the play. Chapters one and two are devoted to the assessment of criticism of the 1950s and the 1980s, respectively, while the third chapter serves as a conclusion in which the ultimate objective is to analyze the data already presented in the previous chapters. Questions I investigated during the progress of this thesis included, but were not limited to, the following:

1. How is Othello's racial identity seen by critics?
2. How is Othello's race identified with his weaknesses?
3. How important is the issue of race in Othello's downfall?
4. How important are racial issues to the critics?

The main objective of this thesis is to see how critics, being representative of their respective cultures and times, react to *Othello* and its protagonist especially in light of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The Civil Rights Movement, in this case, acts as a point of departure (on both sides in terms of time), since it came to be known as a time for enlightenment for racial equality and awareness. I must emphasize also that this thesis did not study the effects of the Civil Rights Movement on the play, but how it is significant as an intervening factor in the course of *Othello* criticism, and how criticism of the two decades differs in terms of interpretation and approach. Materials I discussed in this thesis included a number of articles and essays, as well as a handful of monographs. Articles and essays were selected from several periodicals,
for example, *Shakespeare Quarterly, Shakespeare Studies, Shakespeare Survey*, while monographs were selected by means of months of research which gave me the opportunity to decide which ones were relevant to the writing of this thesis. Works which totally ignore the issue of race and are dedicated to examining other aspects of the play and have no relevance to my efforts were discarded in the process of selection.

Beyond doubt, *Othello* can be regarded as quite an unusual, perhaps unorthodox, work for its time, bearing in mind the identity of its protagonist and how he fell from his glory. The task in writing this thesis is not to examine the play for its own sake, nor in its historical setting (although both have been touched on), but rather, to see how important racial issues appear to its viewers in the middle to late twentieth century and whether or not these issues were even important to some. Aside from this, it also gives a better view of how reactions might portray the consensus of the two decades in question.
CHAPTER 1. THE 1950s

Of all Shakespearean critics, one who deserves most attention in view of this thesis would be A. C. Bradley whose knowledge and expertise will be the basis of comparison and analysis for much of the criticism which will be under scrutiny. Although *Shakespearean Tragedy* dates back to 1904, Bradley's work is crucial as an underpinning for my remarks on criticism of *Othello* in the 1950s and the 1980s. Bradley's open treatment of aspects such as race seems to be limitless and each major character is brought almost to life as if he or she existed. Bradley's description of Desdemona's suffering, for instance, brings to light the emotion of the character and brings credibility to the situation. The play is given extra meaning as Bradley views it from many different angles even though his opinion might be subject to the limitations of his time. Bradley could be called a traditionalist in his views on *Othello*, although he does assert several comments to the contrary. Traditionalist, here, means that his
view of Othello is that the Moor is essentially noble, but falls from his high position not by his own fault or doing, but by the plotting of another. Bradley's term, "noble barbarian," for instance, is quite an oxymoron and tends to give us the feeling that he sees the Moor as having the quality of both nobleman and barbarian.

In Bradley's lectures on Othello, what is prevalent, though, are certain conceptions about "Oriental" peoples which he takes for granted. His lectures must be understood as reflecting the time and place in which he lived, bearing in mind the strength of the British Empire, and the distance that racial equality had yet to travel. However, being an expert on the subject of Shakespearean tragedy, compounded by his aptitude for analysis and discourse, Bradley's works have come to be known as a source of illumination for later Shakespearean critics.

According to the critic, Arthur Eastman, in a 1968 evaluation of Bradley's criticism,

No work [since] has so perfectly combined the enthusiasm and vision of the romanticists with the common sense and exactness of the scientific method, has so perfectly fused wide philosophic outlook with grasp of the detail, and synthetic power with analytic. (186)
Bradley's criticism of Shakespearean tragedy, or in this case, Othello, invites the reader to share the experience of examining the tragedy through a detailed and succinct analysis. Eastman further asserts that

Bradley's characteristic style is aggregational, his characteristic rhetoric is calmly rational. "Let us reason together," he seems to say, "Let us examine the plays, consult our own experience, and arrive at judicious conclusions." He speaks from something of the authority of a great popular preacher whose gift it is to articulate the common experience by articulating his own. (191)

Bradley's views regarding Othello have come to be known to most critics as of the traditional kind, maintaining that Othello remains noble through the course of the play. However, Bradley makes several comments proving his opinions quite the opposite, that Othello's downfall is a result of his own doing. To a certain degree, Bradley also justifies Iago's actions as those of a man who has been unjustly wronged. In this way, Eastman's claims on Bradley's views of Othello seem rather simplified and fail to show the ambiguity of some of Bradley's comments regarding the play and its protagonist. As a firm proponent of the traditional view of Othello, Bradley's views appear ambivalent when he claims with conviction that Othello is primarily a study of a noble barbarian, who has become a Christian and has imbibed some of the civilization of his
employers, but who retains beneath the surface the savage passions of his Moorish blood and also the suspiciousness regarding female chastity common among Oriental peoples, and that the last three Acts depict the outburst of these original feelings through the thin crust of Venetian culture.

(156)

Certainly, these are not the words of a man who views the Moor as noble all through the play. Beneath his traditional view of the protagonist, there exist certain stereotypes and generalizations which indicate that the Moor is not essentially noble and that the "savage passions of his Moorish blood" are responsible for his self-destruction. It is on the basis of this dialectic that this chapter will maintain its arguments in order to see how the play and its protagonist are viewed during the decade of the 1950s. Essentially, there are two views of Othello in the 1950s. The first, which I have termed, "traditional," only sees the Moor as noble and asserts that his downfall is a result of circumstances beyond his control. Conversely, the second view, one which sees Othello as the master of his own destiny, I will refer to as the "modern" view. This view sees Othello as fully responsible for the way he falls from his glory due to one reason or another. However, it is the traditional view of Othello that this chapter will turn to first.

Contrary to his traditional views of Othello, Bradley suggests that there is something quite mystical about Othello in that his most valuable asset does not consist of his stature in society or his might in the field of war, but rather, his tongue. His way with words has not only pacified the
Venetian senate in the first act but has also won him the heart of a gentle Venetian maiden (157), whose alleged infidelity was to lead him ultimately to his downfall. Othello's ability to speak his mind with such eloquence is not viewed by Bradley as simply a polished human trait which could come about as a result of years of training and assimilation to the particular culture. Instead, the element of mysticism associated with "Oriental peoples" is brought into the picture as the source of such refinement. What this assumption suggests is that for Bradley, "Oriental peoples" are incapable of cultivating or learning the finer art of communication, and that if there were any possibility of such an occurrence, some sort of magic would almost have to be involved.

John Money, in his 1953 article entitled "Othello's 'it is the cause;" discusses this very aspect of Othello's eloquence. Though Othello claims to be unpolished in the ways of speech in the first act, all through the play, his very poetic quality seems to contradict this very notion. In defending himself against the charges brought forth by Brabantio, Othello asserts, "Rude am I in speech, and little blessed with the soft phrase of peace,..." (I,iii,81-2), and yet, as Money points out, the implications of each of Othello's utterances are saturated with deep and penetrating meaning, exhibiting in him a mastery of the language of his employers. There is really no way of establishing whether such elocution on his part has its roots in some form of magic, as Bradley seems to suspect. Though Bradley makes this assertion, Money does not, however, speculate on the source of Othello's eloquence. Clearly, Money sees Othello as noble, not so much stressing his noble lineage, but rather, the nobility of his character. In the
service of his adopted country, he has become not only fluent in the language of his employers, but has become extremely eloquent -- his tongue being an instrument of success in various ways.

Very much like Money, Helen Gardner, in a 1955 essay entitled "The Noble Moor," sees Othello as an extraordinary man, born to do great deeds and live in legend (4). She argues that Othello's alien race shows the strength of his character. In a white early modern society, he succeeds to the pinnacle of his profession, and does not equate his magnificence with the supernatural. In contrast to Hamlet whose nobility is inherited, Othello’s position in Venetian society is earned during a time when Moors occupied positions of slaves rather than leaders. Very much in the traditional view, Gardner seems blinded by the glare of Othello’s earned nobility and achievements. She does not question aspects of the Moor which might have led him to his own destruction. Instead, Othello is given a god-like persona with an inability to inspire in his audience any feelings but positive ones. Although the traditional view of a noble Moor is understood by some as a viable way of looking at the play, in this case, Gardner goes a little too far, discounting negative facets of the hero in an effort to only glorify him.

In somewhat a different light, the traditional view continues with Paul Siegel, in a 1953 essay entitled "The Damnation of Othello," who compares the fall of Othello with that of Adam’s fall from grace, where Iago represents the devil and Desdemona the divine goodness. "The choice that Othello had to make was between Christian love and forgiveness, and
satanic hate and vengefulness" (1068). Bradley also mentions something to this effect when he compares Iago with Mephistopheles in Goethe's Faust. However, Siegel's claims run deeper than mere comparisons as he writes,

\[ \text{Othello is not a retelling of the story of man's fall in} \]
\[ \text{allegorical form; it is the a drama of human passion which is} \]
\[ \text{given deeper significance by the analogies that are suggested} \]
\[ \text{in the course of its action. (1068)} \]
\]

The biblical overtones of Siegel's article may have some credibility within the realm of temptation, sin, and retribution, if indeed these are important issues in the play. Since Iago is associated with the devil, the issue of race is given a somewhat different meaning. Siegel stresses the volatile nature of human character and its "proneness to self-destroying sin" (1070). What is seen quite clearly here is that Othello is a man, a noble man, compared with Adam, "the noblest of men." Othello's fall from glory is compared to the fall of Adam, both men resorting to the alluring nature of sin instead of good, implying the equality of man's nature, regardless of race. Siegel sees the black man as having a white soul as he falls from glory as a result of the manipulative nature of Iago, a white man who is given a black soul. The devil, or satan, in this case, is depicted in a Venetian, and the notion of racism is hidden in the form of Biblical associations. Siegel does not offer further explanations for his claims and in the end questions regarding the nature of the play are left unanswered. Siegel simply supplies associations for the protagonist and the antagonist in a biblical sense without much regard for racial issues.
For Siegel, the full blame for the way the tragedy unfolds is put solely on the shoulders of Iago, the white devil. Siegel recognizes the nobility of Othello's character but does not question it any further. He does assert, however, the "volatility of human nature" and also claims that human nature is vulnerable to error. In Siegel's view, Iago acts as the perpetrator of Othello's errors, and in the end, he sees Othello as entirely innocent. The black man, then, is totally innocent of evil, while the white one is associated with the devil. As far as Othello is concerned, he is free from any sort of guilt for the way the tragedy unfolds. And again, the traditional view is endorsed through another interpretation. This view of Othello ignores very important aspects of the protagonist which are in part responsible for his downfall. Instead, blame is situated elsewhere.

In another essay which obscures racial issues, "Othello's Racial Identity" (1952), Philip Butcher examines Othello's race at great length. He claims that Othello's African birth does not establish his race or color (245), considering that there is a wealth of different types of peoples in the African continent. Aside from race, Butcher also asserts that Othello's royal birth does not constitute Shakespeare's confusion on the subject of color, and albeit many Negroes and Moors were made into slaves during Elizabethan times, it does not mean these people could not have once been of royal lineage, hunted down and incarcerated by white slave traders.

His [Shakespeare's] frequent use of "Moor" as the equivalent of "Negro" accords with the practice of his time and his fellow
dramatist ... in a drawing from a scene from *Titus Andronicus*, evidently made in 1595, shows Aaron as coal-black and leaves little room for doubt that the character was portrayed as such on the Elizabethan stage. So certainly was Othello. (246)

Although Butcher's essay addresses race as the issue in identifying the hero, he, nevertheless, does not question how race is responsible for the way the tragedy unfolds. He asserts that since many Negroes were made into slaves during Elizabethan times, Othello could very well have been noble originally. Since this is the case, there is little evidence showing whether Butcher sees the Moor in a negative light. His essay simply deals with identity and does not venture to answer any questions regarding the presence or absence of race as a reason for the tragedy. However, he does maintain that Othello's nobility is genuine and that Shakespeare did not give the Moor such a noble identity in order to suit popular conventions of the stage hero's rank. Bradley does argue that geographical names can tell us nothing of how Shakespeare might have intended for Othello to be, and the Othellos that we have come to know in recent years are quite a new innovation (166). There is no doubt that Othello is black as can be clearly detected in the play itself: "an old black ram" (1,i,88), "Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (1,iii,290), "the sooty bosom/Of such a thing as thou" (1,ii,70-1), and Othello's self admission, "Haply, for I am black" (III,iii,263). While Butcher's essay does stare at the issue of race, its involvement is only with the protagonist's identity and does not venture any
further than the identification of Othello and blackness. Butcher maintains that Othello's nobility is genuine and is not simply a theatrical device.

In contrast to the traditional view of Othello, the modern view recognizes the hero's character as human and often places it under scrutiny. Perhaps his volatile behavior results from insecurities stemming from his race, and perhaps it is solely his personal nature. Proponents of the modern view examine the Moor's behavior in quite a number of ways and bring to light issues which believers of the traditional seem to ignore. The modern view ignores Othello's nobility, and ranks him just as any other man. In order to add credibility to Othello's situation, proponents of the modern view do not ignore the fact that Othello is black, subject to the weaknesses and insecurities of a black man in an attitudinally archaic white culture. Different views of his character associated with his color are brought to light and it is his character which is seen as being at least partially responsible for his destruction.

Bradley blames Othello's insecure behavior on his suspiciousness stemming from his ignorance of female chastity among European women. Robert Heilman, in a 1956 work, *Magic in the Web*, asserts that Othello's highest point of security can be seen in the first act, when he is confident in both his position as general and in his relationship with Desdemona. At this point in the play, he is guaranteed of both. However, later, when his relationship with Desdemona begins to fall apart, the secure and confident general commences to fall apart himself. He certainly sees his position in the Venetian army and the love that Desdemona has for him as pillars of
strength in a society which he considers himself inferior (140). The symbols which identify him as equal to other Venetians are his achievements regarding his leadership and the woman who is to share his life with him. This is probably not the way Venetian society sees him, but the way he thinks the society sees him.

In investigating the nature of the protagonist, Hoover Jordan, in an article entitled "Dramatic Illusion in Othello" (1950), discusses Othello's character. Although Jordan's work does not address the question of race specifically, certain issues related to race do surface as an afterthought. He asks blatantly, "is Othello stupid?" Putting so much trust in Iago so freely (who turns out to be the very wrong man to trust), Othello's error does not consist of a failure to recognize evil, but rather, his failure to see it in Iago (147). Can this trait, then, be regarded as racially-based -- the inability to recognize danger? Bradley suggests that it is not a sign of stupidity on Othello's part. Further, he claims that Othello's opinion of Iago is the same as everyone else's, the idea that he is nothing but "honest" (160).

Through the course of the play, Othello sees in Iago only his "honest" self and cannot see the scheming and manipulating side. Iago recognizes this aspect of Othello and takes full advantage of it and executes his plot. Bradley suggests that through the play, all the twists and turns happen totally by chance. In a way, "fate takes sides with villainy," he adds (152). Even if Othello can be viewed as stupid for not questioning the truth of Iago's claims, there is virtually nothing he can do to avoid the fate already
in store for himself. Although Jordan goes to great length expounding on Othello's character, there is, however, no mention of the nature of his characteristics attributable to his race. His essay almost seems to ignore the fact that Shakespeare's hero is a black man. Rather, the energy directed toward the protagonist is concentrated on his stupidity and failure in recognizing Iago's plot in the making, and the ease with which Iago makes him an active partner in the plot. It is also rather ironic, as Jordan claims, that a military general of such repute in the field of war does not see the truth about Iago especially after having won so many battles for Venice. It is not clear whether Jordan sees this simply as a planned irony on Shakespeare's part, or whether this feature of Othello matches Bradley's claims about "Oriental peoples" and the suspiciousness regarding female chastity. Othello's position as military governor of Cyprus indicates, beyond a doubt, his aptitude in the field of military tactics and strategy, and yet, when it comes to his personal life, he is truly inept. In Heilman's view, Othello has a "fine but simple 'extrovert' nature, suited for action but not for perception and reflection" (138). Surely, this can simply be considered as a human trait and not dependent on his African birth, as Jordan fails to distinguish. Some people might be "book smart," and yet, "common sense stupid." But as Heilman further writes, Othello's behavior as a result of Iago's instigations in the third act can be attributed to many reasons, and cannot be blamed simply on his alien race although his alien race might indeed be an important reason. Heilman sees Othello's race as a disability, considering societal attitudes regarding Blacks at the time, but he does not believe that the play should be seen only through racial terms.
Another side of Othello which cannot be overlooked in considering his personality is his military training with all its implications regarding honor, duty, and dignity. In a 1958 article by John Arthos, "The Fall of Othello," this is precisely the focus of discussion. Being outside Venetian culture, Othello’s achievement of a high rank must have been a difficult, if not a virtually impossible, task. However, in achieving such a high position of responsibility, we can also assume Othello’s high sense of self-pride and self-assurance.

In thinking of the downfall of Othello, one is drawn to consider certain matters concerning the role of honor in this play, and also to contemplate something that is in a certain sense prior to that, the idea of the integrity of the self. (95)

Perhaps the issue of race is not discussed in its strictest sense in this essay, but the implications brought forth by the idea of a black general in a white culture in antiquity is quite a provocative one. As Arthos further claims, "there is egotism, here, too, and a selfishness that makes Othello’s love less pure than Desdemona’s . . . . " (98) Upon the slightest suspicion that his livelihood is being threatened, Othello rushes to fight the source, quickly trying to save face when so much is at stake. Othello’s view of his reputation encompasses not only his popular image as a leader, but especially his love life with Desdemona. In his assimilation into Venetian culture, Desdemona acts as the final touch, and this love is proof positive of his victory not only in the fields of battle, but especially when his alien race is called to question.
Othello's reasons for his marriage to Desdemona cannot be determined with any degree of certainty, but if his marriage were based on love, such a quick and uninvestigated suspicion could not have occurred, and Iago's plot would have been foiled from the very beginning. As Heilman claims, this is not to say that he had no feelings for Desdemona, but he singularly reminds us of the actor falling in love with his audience: he played his "dangers," she loved "him" for them, "And I lov'd her that she did pity them." (141)

In essence, the reason that he loves Desdemona is because she pities him. And if this is the case, the impetus for both his and her love is utterly ridiculous, even pathetic. Heilman also points out that "there is a hint of latent self-pity" prevalent in Othello. Thus, the love between them is, at best, questionable. Instead of questioning the problem at the source of suspicion, Othello is quick to believe wholly in his ensign and closest confidant, the only one who even knows of the crisis, keeping the knowledge well to himself. Arthos argues that in order to maintain utmost privacy in the matter, Othello rushes to "cut off the cause of the pain" (100) as swiftly and as privately as possible. Further, Arthos does not see Desdemona's alleged infidelity as the sole cause of Othello's pain. Rather, her alleged infidelity acts as an assault on his honor. "The confusions of jealousy and lust contribute to the cruelty of his treatment of Desdemona, but the impetus is originally soldierly and sacramental" (99), and "folly and jealousy and hurt corrupt his love as ambition never corrupts his other
obligations, but it is not the vices finally that led him to think of killing Desdemona even though he loathes her, but honor. . . . " (103) The "honor" that Arthos is alluding to here may take the guise of one of two things, either the honor of a military leader, or the honor Othello achieved as a black man among white men and white values. Although it is not mentioned outright, Arthos' essay leads me to believe the latter of the two. If Desdemona is seen as a prize possessed by a black man, then, Othello's honor is insulted as soon as his right to this "possession" is threatened.

Through a drastically different analysis of Othello's character, "Diabolical Images in Othello" (1952), S. L. Bethell discusses the imagery in Shakespeare's writing which brings the reader back and forth between hell and darkness in an effort to make us see the true characters of Othello and Iago. Bethell argues that the hero, "Othello, is a black man, as calculated, in those times, to inspire horror as Iago to inspire confidence" and that "Othello and Iago are in appearance the exact opposite of their natures" (72). Although Bethell goes on to defend Othello, claiming that even though Iago does say, "I am yours forever," to Othello in the third act, it is Othello, ironically, who hands his soul to Iago for keeping (75) -- reminiscent of Bradley's claims about the similarity between Iago and Goethe's Mephistopheles. Othello is a governor of a Venetian colony with Iago not as a lieutenant, but rather, an ensign -- a mere servant to the great general. Although Iago plays the part of the subordinate ensign, he nevertheless has Othello as his servant. What does this say about Othello? Bethell obviously recognizes the evil in a white man in the part of Iago and good in a black character, but what about the gullibility on the part of the
hero? Is this, then, a sign of weakness as a result of race? Bethell does not address this issue directly although he is quick to imply an answer.

Like Bradley who sees Mephistopheles in Iago, Bethell argues that there is a transfer of evil from Iago to Othello. At the outset of the play, Iago engages many of the diabolic images in his own speech. Bethell claims that in the first act, Iago uses eight such images and Othello uses none, and in the second act, he uses six while Othello only uses one. The actual change occurs in the third act, where Iago uses only three and Othello employs nine diabolical images. Further, in the fourth act, Othello uses six and Iago uses none. What these statistics serve to suggest is a transference of the diabolical from Iago to Othello, who, by believing the deceit of Iago, becomes himself like Iago, if not more corrupt. Bethell does not make a judgment as to whether this was part of Shakespeare's teleological design when he wrote *Othello*, but the point worth noting is the ease with which Iago executes his plot and destroys a man whose years of military expertise are, it seems, in vain. Othello is not the same character as the dupe, Roderigo, whom Iago cheats with great ease and eventually kills. But Othello seems to possess the same gullibility as Roderigo in that he is willing to believe anything uttered by Iago. We understand Roderigo as a fleeting character, as Iago's "gofers," a nobody, whereas, Othello, occupies a position of high rank and respect. Bethell's essay might be an excellent survey of interpretations of metaphors in *Othello*, but it also unconsciously equates a great black man with a lowly white one, and it fails to recognize, in a way, a key factor which implies the ease with which Othello is cheated out of his reputation by the very same
man he trusts the most, his "honest" ensign. This leaves the image of the black man in a very bad light indeed, at best, equivalent to an inferior man in social standing in terms of intelligence, and at worst, assuming the place of the diabolical Iago.

Very much in a modern way, Bethell says that Othello is vulnerable to the manipulations of Iago, that after all, Othello is human. However, he does not see Othello as being at fault, and the blame is situated wholly in Iago. The problem which comes to mind, however, is the ease with which Iago executes his plot, considering the social position of his Othello in relation to the dupe, Roderigo. In essence, Othello's gullibility is equated with Roderigo's, where Iago stands well above the two, and in a way, rules them both. If indeed Bethell is correct when he says that Iago is totally responsible for the tragedy, what are the reasons for such malevolence on Iago's part?

In a section almost entirely dedicated to the villain Iago, Bradley considers the reasons behind Iago's actions, claiming that Iago is simply a man who is out to do himself justice for maybe a number of reasons (174). In a work by Bernard Spivack of 1958 entitled Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil, Iago is identified as a romantic who should have a place in our hearts. There should not be any difficulty in finding a foundation for his actions (4). Bradley and Spivack agree that Iago's desire for justice is the rationale for his malicious plot. For one thing, Iago's suspicion of Othello's affair with Emilia is sufficient for such strong hatred, although as Spivack points out, Iago does not question Emilia herself. Therefore, it is based on
hearsay. As to the lieutenancy, according to Bradley, there is nothing tangible that shows Cassio's superiority over Iago except for what is said by Iago himself (176). In essence, his hatred toward both Othello and Cassio (the former even more so for passing him over for the lieutenancy), really has no foundation and may be a simple case of envy with regard to Cassio, and anger with regard to Othello. In the end, the reasons for such a profound hatred are rather weak and do not have any real foundation, if indeed a strong foundation is really what is needed for immense hatred.

Spivack claims that Iago's revenge is put into action at the slightest hint of dishonor to his reputation (one which he has fought hard for), which also agrees with Bradley's claim that whatever disturbs or wounds his sense of superiority is received with great irritation and contempt (183). Whatever Bradley or Spivack might have to say about the "honest" Iago, they do not suggest that any of his malice is related to Othello's racial identity. His hatred toward Othello cannot be construed as anything but the natural impulse of any man who has been wronged or thinks he has been unjustly treated. Both Spivack and Bradley seem to agree on this point and fail to see Iago's malevolence as being attributable to Othello's alien race.

However, we must not overlook the racist insults of Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio toward Othello at the beginning of the first act and Iago's admission of his intense hatred toward the Moor even before the discovery of his reasons. This is a point which both Spivack and Bradley seem to have overlooked in their analyses. As Heilman points out, and rightly so, "Othello's scope is lost sight of if we can understand him only by racial
psychology" (139). After all, the slander against Othello in the first act by Iago cannot be construed as anything but the rantings of a man who feels himself badly treated and who believes that he is justified in his actions. However, what excuse can there be for a man who, through his manipulations, brings another man to the verge of insanity, murdering his wife, and in turn, killing himself? Justifying Iago's actions would be synonymous with justifying the actions of a self-confessed serial killer! By ignoring Iago's actions and by giving them justification, Othello is seen through the modern view in an extremely negative sense. Aside from saying that Othello is responsible for the way the tragedy unfolds, insult is added to injury by insisting that Iago is justified in his actions.

The decade of the 1950s indicates that there are two schools of thought on the subject of Othello. The first, the traditional, is that he remains noble all through the play and that his color serves as an endorsement of his nobility. The only thing he is guilty of is perhaps his innocence. The second view, the modern, sees the reasons for his downfall as a result of serious defects in his character such as his habitual flights from reality, and, of course, his immense sense of pride. Race is acknowledged as a partial reason for some. Heilman claims that his initial study of Othello yielded the traditional view, but upon closer examination of the play, the second view became more apparent for him. This came about, if by nothing else, as a result of seeing Othello's behavior in dealing with his shortcomings and his rapid personality changes. Heilman insists, commenting on the nature of the hero, that "there is no master term for Othello -- "nobility" or "simplicity" or "passionateness under control" or
"pride" or "romantic idealism" (138), all of which cannot possibly be rendered into either a positive or a negative category alone, but each having its own personality without even resorting to the question of race. Therefore, one salient feature of Othello's downfall, in a modern view, is the fallibility of human nature.

Clearly, followers of the traditional view of Othello seem to ignore Othello's race in an effort to equate him with perfect nobility in every sense, where he is not subject to the diverse implications human nature. This is a rather idealistic way of looking at the hero or even the play, for that matter. Since Othello is perfect in every way, issues stemming from human nature and race are obscured, even dismissed, and what results is a view which sets him in an almost god-like category. We must not forget that Othello is, after all, supposed to be human, and subject to the weaknesses of human nature in a white society during a time when blacks were viewed only with contempt. This gives the character an added disability. The modern view ignores the Moor's nobility and investigates his vulnerability as a black man in a white, early modern culture. This is indeed a more sensible way of looking at the play and its protagonist, considering the circumstances surrounding the tragedy.
CHAPTER 2. THE 1980s

Though a great deal of criticism on the subject of Othello did come out of the 1950s reflecting in some degree the protagonist's race and racial identity, a great deal more criticism can be found on other aspects of the Moor. Most criticism in the 1980s has concentrated on the subject of race, and even critics who do not focus on race engage the question of race as an aspect of Othello's character which cannot be ignored. While criticism in the 1950s deals with the hero through both the traditional and the modern view, criticism in the 1980s ignores the traditional view of Othello altogether. Not one essay even appears to equate the Moor with the idea of perfect nobility of character. It is his behavioral characteristics which are the subject of scrutiny in the criticism of the recent decade. Apparently, 1980s criticism dispenses with the unfeasible notion of a noble Moor, ideal in every way. In 1980s criticism, the issue of race is dealt
with directly and openly and it is this aspect of the play where we will now turn our attention.

Through the modern view, there are two fundamental ways of looking at the tragedy. One way is to look at the play itself and to consider the implications of such a tragedy as some critics of the 1980s have elected to do. The second way is to scrutinize the protagonist himself in a way which examines virtually every aspect of the Moor's personality and behavior.

Barbara Everett, in a 1982 essay which investigates the origin of Shakespeare's Moor, claims that the true racial identity of Othello really does not matter since the identification of Othello as black was not clearly seen until after the Romantic period (106). Prior to this period, he was any color anyone pleased, as long as the character permitted isolation, a foreigner. She further argues that "the Moor is, of course, neither an African nor a Spaniard, but an actor on stage portraying the experiences of any colored Everyman ... our interpretation of those experiences will depend on how we read the words, and what presuppositions we bring as we begin" (107). Eldred Jones, in *Othello's Countrymen* (1965), argues in the same vein:

The poet used this background sensitively, exploiting its potentialities for suggestion, but at the same time moving away from the stereotypes, so that in the end Othello emerges, not as another manifestation of a type, but as a distinct individual who, typified by his fall, not the weaknesses of
Moors, but the weaknesses of human nature. (87)

The arguments of both Jones and Everett indicate the nature of Shakespeare's work and that it is not merely a play which portrays negatively the image of a human being, regardless of his racial origin. The play is really much more complex than what meets the eye and encompasses all aspects of human nature, which is probably the most reasonable way to interpret the play. Everett's assertion that the play is about any colored "Everyman" and Jones' claims about the "weaknesses of human nature" lead us to believe that Othello's nobility was incorporated into his character simply as a token, not representing much else. It is not important whether he is savage or noble since the main issue is not his nobility, but his alien race, endorsing the notion that human nature exists in all races.

With much the same sentiments as Everett and Jones, Martin Orkin, in a 1987 essay entitled "Othello and the Plain Face of Racism," gets right to the heart of racist attitudes in the play. In Orkin's opinion, Othello is a play which continues to oppose racism, the salient point being that "nobility and valor, like depravity and cowardice, are not the monopoly of any color" (166). Agreeing with both Jones and Everett, Orkin asserts that it is "the absence or presence of racist attitudes" within a culture which "inevitably determines one's response to Othello ... " (166). By ignoring racial issues in Othello, we are led to believe that such issues remain hidden and a latent form of racism prevails.
Orkin discusses the issue of racism in *Othello* and the characters who actually portray such racist behavior. Only three characters are mentioned, Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio. However, Orkin argues that where Brabantio is concerned, although Iago and Roderigo successfully manage to expose an element of hidden racism, the father's grief is mixed. His problem is as much to come to an understanding of the fact of his daughter's disobedience as it is to cope with his misgivings about his son-in-law's color.

(169)

Iago holds a different place. Orkin believes that Shakespeare reverses stereotypical associations attached to color and "it is Iago, the white man who is portrayed as amoral and anti-Christian, essentially savage towards that which he envies or resents, and cynical in his attitude toward love" (170). In essence, Orkin surveys the issue of color which he claims as Shakespeare's tool in assessing his countrymen, making clear that the way the tragedy unfolds is not as a result of any fault of Othello, but rather, a fault of his ensign. Though we cannot tell that this was actually Shakespeare's design, however, the play does show a tendency for the protagonist and the antagonist to portray behavioral characteristics in opposition to their physical appearance.

In a 1988 illustrated essay by Paul Kaplan, physical images of the play are examined. Kaplan asserts that Europeans tended to portray Othello in paintings of the murder scene in order to emphasize the hatred in the
Moor, rather than his ability to love (185). Othello's ability to love is ignored as paintings of love scenes are very scarce indeed. However, in a painting by an Italian Renaissance painter, Capello, Othello is seen in a positive light, and the painting shows the true measure of his experience as a cause for instruction to Desdemona. Kaplan adds that even though the painting cannot be identified with a particular scene from the play, the correspondence between Capello's painting and the play could not possibly be coincidental. No other text of the time has an intimate meeting between an older black man with a younger white woman, believed to be husband and wife in a bedroom. Although the source could have been Cinthio's narrative, there is no mention of a bedroom scene in Cinthio's tale. As Kaplan suggests, Othello, in most paintings, can only be seen in a negative light, since portrayals of love scenes are seldom the subject of art depicting scenes from the play. Most painters have chosen to portray images of the murder scene in order to emphasize the harsh realities regarding Othello's barbaric nature in order to enforce certain stereotypes about black people.

Michael Neill's essay of 1989, entitled "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in Othello" investigates, among other things, the idea of the bed as a source of anxiety about sex and race prevalent in white culture. In many cases, the bedroom scene has been omitted from the play in order to avoid offending the viewing audience. However, as Neill claims, the curtain that hides the bed is opened at the very last scene exposing Desdemona's corpse in a way which would "grant the audience's terrible curiosity about absent love scenes that dominate so much of the play's
action” (390). This can be compared to Kaplan’s claim about European portrayals of the play in the form of paintings, that only the hideous is exposed to the viewer, hinting at the barbarous side of the black hero instead of his capacity to love. The deliberate omission of bedroom scenes in the play, as Neill further adds, avoids “ocular proof of all that the audience has most desired and feared to look upon, exposing to cruel light the obscure erotic fantasies that the play both explores and disturbingly excites in its audience” (390). In this way, Neill does not address the issue of race as far as Othello is concerned, but his argument includes all mankind, emphasizing that love, as much as hate, cannot be designated to individual race groups. Both love and hate exist in all. His article does not venture to make claims about Othello or his nobility or vulnerability, but his comments are directed towards the play’s audience, and how the play was viewed in the context of racial issues.

Neill goes on to look at the two extremes of Othello criticism, examining a wide range of opinions on the subject of race. At one extreme, Neill sees Coleridge who once wrote of Othello that “the idea of a black hero was unacceptable because blackness was equivalent to savage heroism an intolerable oxymoron” (392). Coleridge actually thought of gradations of skin color as representative of different degrees of “barbarity,” “animality,” and “primitive” emotion, recalling Bradley’s claim that the “assimilated” Moor “relapsed” into his original condition of savagery while under great stress. Neill opposes Orkin’s views, claiming that the play does not oppose racism as Orkin insists, and asserting that “Shakespeare would surely have been puzzled to understand this claim,” as “it would no
more have been possible for Shakespeare to oppose racism in 1604 ... than for Marlowe to oppose anti-Semitism in 1590" (393). What *Othello* seems to incite, Neill suggests, is a rethinking of racial values, "perhaps the first work in English to explore the roots of such feeling." Neill's article considers questions about race in terms of love, and how love is seen when it is shared by a black man and a white woman.

Developing the topic of miscegenation, Karen Newman, in a feminist critique of *Othello*, claims that criticism from Coleridge, for instance, does not come from simply an intense hatred of colored people, but rather, from the mingling of a black protagonist with the white purity of Desdemona, stemming from "the white man's fear of the union of black man with white woman" (144). Newman observes that critics like Coleridge do not differ much from the vulgar characters of Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio at the beginning of the first act, viewing such a marriage as unthinkable, and tarnishing the purity of such a union with verbal obscenities. As a precaution devised by the patriarchy, blacks were identified with the monstrous -- an idea which was endorsed by the emergence of travel literature prevalent at the time and from distorted stories claimed to be derived from holy scripture. As such, this racist attitude was "assimilated into the drama and culture of early modern England" (149).

Women who transcend the norms of society, however, are bound to suffer, much like Desdemona who is "punished for her desire" (152), by a patriarchal society which condemns desiring women. In essence, Newman's opinion of *Othello* takes a similar stand to that of Neill in that she believes that
we can reread *Othello* from another perspective ... that seeks to displace conventional interpretations by exposing the extraordinary fascination with and fear of racial and sexual difference which characterizes Elizabethan and Jacobean culture. (157)

What Newman insists is that Othello's ruin is not simply a result of racist attitudes, but rather, of patriarchal attitudes concerning miscegenation. What seems to incite anxiety in the white man is not just the image of a black man, but also the unacceptable notion of miscegenation. Othello's downfall, then, is not as much the result of his racial difference, as it is his marriage to Desdemona, who has rejected Venetian suitors only to end up with a black man.

Feminist criticism of *Othello* is given another dimension through the work of an Indian professor, Ania Loomba, in her recent book, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (1989). In a chapter titled "Sexuality and Racial Difference," Loomba addresses an idea also mentioned by Newman, that is, the subject of desiring women. In emphasizing similar patriarchal sentiments of modern day India, she asserts that college women are not allowed to deliberate reasons for "Desdemona's silence in the face of her husband's brutality," because they could not understand the heroine's predicament as they had never been in love (39). Further, "*Othello* thus became a sort of universal text of love, and love implied female passivity" (39). If a woman is not passive, then, she falls into the category of disorderly women and in terms of social standing, belongs in the same class
of people as that which she terms "racial others." Loomba draws also from two characters in Titus Andronicus where there are representatives of both in the characters of Tamora, "barbarous, most insatiate and luxurious woman," and Aaron, the "irreligious Moor." Both are "embodiments of pure evil," and sex becomes the sole motivation of their "sordid" relationship (47). Loomba concludes that in Titus Andronicus, as well as in Othello, the central conflict of the play ... is neither between white and black alone, nor merely between men and women -- it is rather between the racism of a white patriarchy and the threat posed to it by both a black man and a white woman. But these two are not simply aligned against white patriarchy, since their own relation cannot be abstracted from sexual or racial tension. (49)

In a patriarchal society, women are either understood as submissive or wanton, rendering them at one of two extremes. "Racial others," on the other hand, only belong to the negative side. For Loomba, one way of looking at Othello, then, is not simply through conflicts associated with race, but includes the undermining autocracy of patriarchal society.

On the subject of patriarchy, Naomi Scheman, in an essay entitled "The Engendering of Scepticism" (1987), claims that Othello's sex, rather than his race, seems to be the central cause of his downfall. Agreeing with Loomba, Scheman shows that understanding Othello is not simply a question of understanding race, but also of understanding the patriarchy (in
this case, Venetian patriarchy). Scheman takes a somewhat different viewpoint, designating Othello’s maleness and the egocentricity attached to it as the cause of his doom rather than the patriarchal values of his employers, as Loomba suspects. As Scheman writes, “it is the fear or pain of victimization on the part of the man that leads to his victimization of women. It is those who perceive themselves to be powerless who may be incited to the acts of greatest violence” (125). Essentially, when Othello discovers his powerlessness, his propensity for violence increases, especially in view of being humiliated by a woman. This is indeed a feminist way of looking at Othello’s behavior, but unfortunately, it cannot possibly be construed as the ultimate reason for his destruction. Othello is simply blinded by romantic love and his case cannot be made exemplary of all males in the same predicament, as Scheman seems to be convinced. As Bradley asserts, sexual jealousy “brings with it a sense of shame and humiliation” (149). The rage which stirs in Othello upon his discovery of Desdemona’s alleged infidelity is not simply a matter of the breach of his sexual superiority over his wife, but a culmination of several reasons of which Scheman’s assertion might only be a minor point.

Regardless of how the play has been assessed, the common denominator is that many critics have come to the conclusion that Othello is not simply a play about race or the prevailing attitudes towards blacks in England during the Renaissance. Rather, their views on why Shakespeare elected to color the protagonist such a negatively connoted color bear little relevance to why the tragedy unfolds the way it does. There are many more complex reasons. Very much in the same light as both Jones and Everett,
Peter Davison, in a book simply entitled, *Othello* (1988), argues that the hero could have easily been made white and the only reason Shakespeare gave him such a color was to add an element of intrigue to the play and an exotic touch to the hero. Davison further claims that the main reason for Othello's downfall is as a result of an age difference between him and his bride, and that society shuns such a union (63). By adding color to such a marriage, Shakespeare simply touches sensitive nerves in his viewing audience in order to bring about a higher degree of awareness within the biases of his culture. As such, Othello's blackness serves only as a secondary issue rather than the primary issue itself, which is age.

The idea of the mismatched marriage (due to such a vast difference in age) may be an interesting proposition, but James Driscoll, in *Identity in Shakespearean Drama*, agrees with Davison when he argues with slight variation that the key reason for Othello's ultimate destruction is indeed attributed to the age difference. "Old men are jealous of their young wives, because they fear in some important ways they are unworthy of them" (71). It does not matter whether Desdemona really thinks Othello unworthy of her love; what matters is social opinion. "If society deems the husband unworthy in any significant way, its negative evaluation will linger in the shadows of his mind waiting for trying circumstances to call it forth." And it is this "shadow" which makes the hero susceptible to "doubt, jealousy, and violence" (71). Both Driscoll and Davison emphasize the role of age in the conflict in the play, and assert that the issue of race is "secondary," but this is a rather unrealistic way of looking at *Othello*. Perhaps there is some credibility to the significance of the age difference,
but by avoiding such a salient feature as Othello's color, and deeming it a "secondary" issue, a very important factor in determining the hero's downfall is neglected. As Orkin mentions in his essay, the lack of literary criticism about prevailing racist attitudes today actually supports "racist doctrine and practice." The issue of age difference may be valid for some people whether characters in a play or in reality, but in terms of the character of Othello, it is merely a small feature.

In an essay by Janet Stavropoulos entitled "Love and Age in Othello," much attention is centered around the issue of age. She argues that, in the first place, neither one of them understands the other (126). The marriage between Othello and Desdemona is against all traditional custom, and she further claims that "they have spurned nature's procedure for matching suitable partners both in terms of their age difference as well as their race" (126). Albeit society might shun such a matrimonial union according to customary tradition, however, saying that it is against "nature" is something that needs a great deal more substantiation. (Of course, Stavropoulos does not make explicit her meaning of "nature.") As long as there might be an element of love involved in the relationship between the two characters, the age difference should not matter. But to say that it is against nature is to assume that one party to the marriage is human and the other is not. Stavropoulos further suggests that, in a sense, this might be Shakespeare's way of endorsing traditional Renaissance values regarding parental choice for marriage. Regardless of what this claim might entail, Stavropoulos appears to be against the idea of miscegenation. Her attitude in determining the nature of Othello all through her essay is
nothing but that of condemnation. What is not determined, however, is whether her negativity really stems from his race or from his age. As Driscoll points out, Othello is noble, an egotist, and his emotional explosion stems from his fear of being cuckolded. Being cuckolded is a strong enough reason for him to erupt into a jealous rage. As Driscoll also claims (endorsing the weakness of the age difference theory), Othello, by marrying Desdemona, succumbs to Venetian culture, the culture of his employers. As such, in his own mind, he becomes an "honorary" white by the very act of marrying a white woman. "His intense attraction to her expresses, in part, then, an attraction to Venetian society that honors his nobility and heroism while abhorring his person" (81). Thus, Desdemona, to the eyes of Driscoll, is merely a symbol of Venice whose love is seen by the Moor as a means of recognition and very little else. This claim in itself is one which could be examined as racially based. Why would Othello want to become an "honorary" white if he does not feel himself inferior? Yet, by this very claim, another cause emerges as to why the play evolves the way it does, hinting at the fact that the true reason for the union is not based on mutual love, but some other complicated psychological reason.

In "The Rhetoric of Character Construction" (1981), Giorgio Melchiori, discusses the symbol that Desdemona represents to Othello. Melchiori points out that "... the Venetian Republic, which he [Othello] had the honor of serving and of which Desdemona had become the living emblem [was] his personal conquest. Desdemona's supposed betrayal was the betrayal of Venice .... " (65) Looking at Othello and Desdemona's relationship through Melchiori's view, Desdemona appears as nothing but
chattel which reassures Othello's honorary position in Venetian society. This may be relevant in the case of Othello, the black man in a white society. According to the black psychiatrist, Franz Fanon, who has done much study in the scope of cross-cultural marriages and also writes from personal experience,

I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white ... who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me, she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man ... I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine. (63)

If the marriage between Othello and Desdemona were based on mutual love, many problems could be avoided. However, if the element of mutual love were missing from the very beginning, then, the marriage was doomed even without the necessary manipulations of Iago. Of course, the elopement brings us toward an interpretation of their marriage as one of freely determined love; but with such great odds against them (one could be the age difference, and the other, race), it could not possibly last longer than it does. On the other hand, according to Eldred Jones, Othello and Desdemona's love is one with deep-rooted feelings (95). This may be so, but what was the impetus of the love between the two characters? According to Othello, "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd/And I lov'd her that she did pity them" (I,iii,167-8). And according to Desdemona,
"That I did love the Moor to live with him/My downright violence and storm of fortunes/May trumpet to the world" (1.iii.250-2). It appears that their love towards each other is for different reasons. Othello's love is one of Desdemona's acceptance of him as a husband, and Desdemona's love is a kind of proud hero-worship of Othello. The reason behind Othello's love is, at best, questionable and its existence depends on her showing her affection first. Without her initiating it, the relationship could not have developed. Perhaps there is some credibility in Brabantio's claims regarding Othello's magic in winning his daughter's heart in the first act.

Instead of accepting that his daughter falls in love with the Moor through usual means, Brabantio is quick to conclude that the Moor "has practiced on her with foul charms ... " (1.ii.73). And yet, all through the play, Othello "practices" nothing but the sharpness of his tongue in all his affairs. As Bradley points out quite astutely, Othello is the true Shakespearean poet, regardless of how he acquired his eloquence. It is through this ability to speak proficiently that we are able to better understand the inner thoughts and feelings of the Moor. It would not be too presumptuous, then, to conclude that his "magic" lies with his ability to articulate his feelings.

Antoinette Dauber, in "Allegory and Irony in Othello" (1988), agrees with the idea of the sharpness of Othello's tongue, especially in his defense of himself in the first act. But in terms of Desdemona, both Othello and Cassio go a little too far in their description of her and their compliments to her. Through their words, Desdemona is somewhat mystified, making
her too good to be true, and thus vulnerable to the evil of Iago (125). Othello's tongue does not serve as a positive instrument, but rather, the contrary. It is almost as if the true value of Desdemona in Othello's mind is not her actual virtue, but the virtue which he himself makes up in his own mind. Thus, when the totality of the virtuous woman is threatened by the charges of Iago, then, all is bleak for Othello. As Dauber asserts,

Othello keeps nothing in reserve, his faith riding on Desdemona alone. Just as her virtue is taken as a sign of heaven's goodness, so her dishonesty must point to its falseness. The formulation is devastating, because it holds the universal moral order hostage to Desdemona. If she proves false, good will be proven evil .... (131)

In this sense, Othello's eloquence acts as one of his enemies. His ability to express himself is also, in a way, his ability to imagine Desdemona as a woman of highest virtue, incapable of being flawed. Perhaps it is his tongue which wins him the heart of the gentle maiden, but by the very same token, it is his tongue which robs him of this very same entity.

In a 1987 essay entitled "Speech and Self in Othello" by James Calderwood, the focus of attention is also on Othello's speech, from the outset of the play till the very end. He surveys Othello's patterns and quality of expression, stating that ever since the second scene of the first act, Othello puts full faith in his words in order to steer his way through the ups and downs of life. Othello is able to pacify the Venetian senate
upon Brabantio's charges. Through the course of the play, Othello's eloquence weakens commensurately with his unsoundness of mind as a result of Iago's instigations. Othello's great faith in words is peculiar in that he believes words must be exact and must bear truth. As long as there is doubt, he insists on ocular proof (297). His trust in the "honest" Iago is total and unshakeable. If Iago is "honest," then, by his reports, the affair between Desdemona and Cassio cannot be anything but true. By the time he is granted ocular proof of his wife's infidelity, his eloquence slips from the usual poetic form to mere babbling (297). At the death scene, he dismisses Desdemona's words by answering her prayers with "Amen" several times so that the deed of killing her could be done, each "Amen" acting as a period so as to expedite the matter of her punishment. Though Calderwood's essay examines, the true virtue of Othello through what he utters, it is one of the only essays in the 1980s which does not directly address racial issues. Perhaps Calderwood sees Othello's African race as simply a "given," and takes it as a fact which is responsible for the hero's actions. However, Calderwood does assert that words are so important to Othello because he is, after all, a stranger and "not privy to the world shared by Venetians; the social order, habits, standards, expectations. "... Perfectly natural, then, that he should situate as much meaning as possible in words ...." (301) Melchiori agrees with Calderwood in that Othello's decline in eloquence represents a decline in his state of mind (68). Upon his first appearance in the play, he seems a man of great words, although he denies his true verbal abilities: "Rude am I in my speech/And little blest with the soft phrase of peace." Melchiori says:
Othello had been a master in the rhetoric of speech-making: his speeches were perfectly constructed, not the artificial exhibitions of the courtier wanting to show off his accomplishments, but the natural expressions of a believer in the art of rhetoric as the only means of civilized communication. (64)

Calderwood believes that Othello's speech fails as soon as his suspicion of Desdemona's infidelity is activated by Iago, but interestingly enough, in the last act, when he discovers the true virtue of his wife, his speech becomes as eloquent as it was in the first act. Melchiori claims that Othello's intermittent eloquence portrays the two sides of his character, the noble prince and the savage Moor (68). Iago, of course, serves to awaken the savage, who himself (Iago) is a savage in disguise. Much in the same way as Orkin, Melchiori seems to be convinced that the whole moral behind the tragedy of Othello can be summed-up in view of the roles that both the protagonist and antagonist play.

The color paradox extends beyond the ethical field to become the expression of the ambiguity of human nature within the context of the dialectical contrast between seeming and being, appearance and reality, which is the central theme .... (72)

In this manner, the play is not one which identifies the hero as either a noble Moor or the master of his destiny (traditional or modern view) as many critics of the 1950s are convinced. In contrast, the subject of nobility is not even mentioned here. Instead of pondering the question of
the Moor's nobility, critics of the 1980s seem to believe that the play
deserves much more credit than simply being interpreted in two
fundamental ways. Many other facets such as Othello's age and male
egocentricity are called to question as many other aspects of the Moor are
examined. And one aspect of Othello which is never neglected is his color.
CHAPTER 3. CONCLUSION

What can we learn from a review of the critical climate surrounding *Othello* in the two decades separated by social changes? And how do social changes which emerge from the Civil Rights Movement bear on the play in question? Though some criticism of *Othello* did come out of the 1950s, a great deal more was written and published in the 1980s. Although this could be construed as nothing more than a statistic, interest in *Othello* has grown as Shakespearean criticism partakes in recent trends in social and cultural history. Discussion of race *per se* has gained acceptance in literary criticism.

What is apparent is that there were two schools of thought regarding the Moor during the decade 1950s and the decades prior to it. The first school, which I have termed, "the traditional," can only see the Moor as noble, incapable of any such behavior that would indicate otherwise. Seen in this light, Othello represents pure good and his nobility of character
cannot possibly be responsible for his misfortunes. His blackness is ignored and any identification of his color is viewed positively, interpreting his rise to power as an incredible achievement for a black man. The turn of events which destroys him is regarded as external to his knowledge or design, situating the cause or causes elsewhere. Exemplary of an extreme traditionalist critic of the 1950s is Helen Gardner whose opinion of the Moor does not once question his personal inner conflicts and insecurities which might stem from his race. While it is true that Othello’s position of power does indicate his professional aptitude, rendering him totally innocent of his unknowing duplicity with Iago’s plot would be quite an idealistic way of looking at the Moor and the way the tragedy unfolds. At any rate, the Moor’s racial identity, if seen at all, is seen only in a positive light and Gardner’s treatment of this aspect of the hero is minimal.

The second view of the Moor which I have termed, “the modern,” takes quite a different stand in interpreting Othello’s actions. In the modern analysis, Othello is seen as the master of his destiny. His nobility is ignored and what becomes the object of scrutiny is his behavior and how it is important in his self-destruction. The modern view addresses realistic issues about the Moor which encompass the realities of human experience. This view treats the Moor as if he were to actually exist, subject to thoughts and emotions, especially in relation to his race, his age (in comparison to Desdemona’s), and his pride as a black general among white subordinates. In this way, Othello is seen in a much more realistic light.
Sitting on both sides of the fence, however, is Bradley who is basically a traditionalist in his views on Othello, but who, nevertheless, makes several assertions about the Moor which would indicate his prejudices about the hero’s racial identity. His claim that *Othello* is essentially “a study of a noble barbarian ... who retains beneath the surface the savage passions of his Moorish blood ...” (156) serves only as a puzzle, especially in view of other assertions he makes about Othello that would confirm his essentially traditional view. Seeing this aspect of Bradley’s argument on the surface would yield the opinion that Bradley sees the Moor through a dialectic, concluding that neither the traditional, nor the modern view of the play could be construed as entirely correct. Instead, the hero should be seen through the eclectic integration of both views. However, upon closer examination of his position between the two views described here, several questions emerge. The term, “noble barbarian,” when seen in its literal sense is a contradiction. “Nobility” implies a sense of gentility and breeding, while “barbarian” implies quite the opposite, the lack of refinement, learning, and culture. How, then, can these two words complement each other when describing the same entity? Another question involves the meaning of Bradley’s phrase, “the savage passions of his Moorish blood.” What can be deduced from this observation? A literal interpretation would include certain attitudes inherent in Bradley’s criticism, that the Moor is essentially a savage, and beneath the “thin crust of Venetian culture,” all the lustful, barbaric passions manifest themselves at the slightest threat. However, if Othello is noble, how can he be a savage or a barbarian? A viable way of looking at this question would be that Bradley meant this in a “tongue in cheek”
manner probably to hide the truth of his sentiments by claiming the nobility of the Moor, thus, rendering himself in the category of traditionalists.

Critics must come to terms with the most obvious possibility for Othello's downfall, which is, complications arising from his insecurities as a black man in a white early modern culture. The implications of such a notion are far too strong to ignore. In contrast to 1950s criticism, most criticism of the 1980s does address the issue of race. Even those which do not, acknowledge Othello's color and racial identity as an integral part of the play. Some criticism of the 1950s totally ignores his racial identity as if his blackness is something which could be overlooked in analyzing the tragedy. As most critics of the 1980s would agree, racial identity should be the basis of analysis of the character of Othello and the way the play unfolds, bearing in mind the time that the tragedy was written, the time frame in which it was meant to have occurred, and the societal attitudes regarding race of both periods in question. A significant feature of 1980s criticism is the ease with which the issue of race is addressed, and even for the few essays which do not address the issue of race, Othello's racial identity is often taken as a fact which cannot be overlooked. Some, if not most, criticism of the 1950s implies that Othello's race is rather insignificant, and there are more important issues which deserve attention. As such, 1950s criticism on race is scant, suggestive of the way the play must have been viewed during the 1950s by its critics. In contrast, 1980s criticism does not hide racial issues which are brought to light much more freely, regardless of whether such issues are dealt with in a positive or a negative sense.
Unlike his contemporaries, Heilman is possibly one of the only critics of the 1950s who takes a rather sensible and balanced view of Othello, whom he sees as partially responsible for his downfall and partially victim. The blame does not wholly rest on Iago or Othello, for that matter, but a combination of both. Compared with other critics of the 1950s, Heilman's treatment of the play does not appear superficial in dealing with racial issues, and in many ways, his criticism has proven to be more valuable to me than most. Eldred Jones, too, blames the unfortunate series of events of Othello on the fallibility of human nature, and the hero's race should not be seen as the sole reason for his downfall. If the play is only seen through a race-based study, Othello loses its integrity because race is then taken to stand for all that makes Othello human.

Critics of the 1980s, however, are more staunch in their convictions. What is common among criticism in the 1980s is that the notion of the noble Moor (which some critics of the 1950s go to great length to endorse) is all but ignored. Virtually every recent examination of the play investigates the causes for his erratic behavior. In essence, critics of the 1980s treat the Moor through the modern view, placing great importance on aspects of human nature and culture which dictate his actions. As much as the modern view of the play or its protagonist ventures to address issues associated with human nature, there are several critics whose efforts appear rather futile. Instead of addressing more obvious assumptions about the Moor's actions (namely, his racial identity), a handful of critics
tends to address issues which appear meaningless in assessing the way the Moor reacts to his shortcomings.

In many cases, mostly through criticism of the 1980s, Othello is seen not without emotions and feelings. His racial identity might hold the key to much of the turmoil that exists within his thoughts. Some critics may choose to blame his insecurities on his advanced age while others elect some other reason, but the most important aspect of the man, aside from all other reasons which might have been presented or yet will be, is the indisputable fact that he is a black man who lives in a white early modern culture with all its inherent views regarding foreigners, especially those with a different skin color. There is very little point in analyzing any aspect of the man without first realizing the possibility of his race as being an added disadvantage in even his daily undertakings. On the other hand, it is easy to equate Othello’s shortcomings with his color, situating the blame of his downfall on the hue of his skin, calling him a noble savage. But even the term, “noble savage,” or “noble barbarian,” seems like a terrible contradiction and, at best, only show certain unsavory tendencies in the person who utters them. What is clear is the tendency for the more recent critics to deal with the issue of race openly much in contrast to those of the 1950s. Most 1950s critics totally ignore Othello’s blackness, directing attention to other aspects of the play which hold very little importance in interpreting the tragedy. 1980s criticism, on the other hand, deals with Othello, the black general who marries a young Venetian aristocrat. Although the Civil Rights Movement did not drastically change the way Othello is viewed, the effects of are rather significant.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


