

Class Eight - Othello

Philosophical Perspectives II - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Some Context

- **Shakespeare:** Needs little introduction, but here's some facts anyway.
 - Lived from 1564-1616 in England.
 - Moved to London in the 1580s and began writing and putting on plays. Built the Globe Theatre in 1599 (of which the theater in the production linked on the syllabus is a recreation).
 - Widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language. Most famous works are his tragedies which include:
 - * Romeo and Juliet
 - * Macbeth
 - * Hamlet
 - * Othello
 - * Kind Lear
 - His writings had a huge impact on the English language, and countless words and phrases currently part of ordinary English are owed to Shakespeare.
- **Othello:** Written in 1603 by Shakespeare. Based on the Italian collection of short stories *Gli Hecatommithi* by Giovanni Battista Giraldi published in 1565.
 - **The Setting:**
 - * Set during the the Ottoman-Venetian War (1570–1573), which was very recent history at the time, which was fought for the control of the Cyprus.
 - * Venice was it's own country at the time, and was fighting against the Turkish Ottoman Empire.
 - **The Characters:**
 - * **Othello:** A military general working for the state of Venice in the war, but not actually from Venice, but, rather North Africa.
 - * **Iago:** One of Othello's chief officers
 - * **Desdemona:** Daughter of Barbantio, a senator. Secretly married to Othello before the play begins.
 - * **Rodrigo:** A rich guy who loves Desdemona.
 - * **Cassio:** A young lieutenant of Othello who has a position coveted by Iago.

2 The Problem(s) of Other Minds

- **Barbantio:** "Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds / By what you see them act," (1.1.168-9).
- **The Restricted Conception Again:** Recall once again Descartes's restricted conception of sensory experience.

“I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called ‘having a sensory perception’ is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking,” (24).

We considered an analogous conception for videos last class, given the presence of deep-fakes. We now have another version of the same idea to consider.

- **A Structurally Analogous Problem:** Suppose I see you frown and look terribly distressed upon receiving some news. We’re naturally inclined to describe what I see by saying “I see that you’re sad.” It’s possible, however, that you’re not actually sad, and you’re just acting that you are. So I can’t *really* see that you’re sad. All I really see, it seems, is your behavior, and this leaves open what you’re actually feeling or thinking on the inside.
- **The Radical Version of the Problem:** Just like Descartes’s restricted conception of experience permits the possibility that there’s no external world at all, the restricted conception of the experience of others (where we can only really see the behavior, and not the mental states of which the behavior seems to be a manifestation) permits the possibility that there’s no minds of others at all.
 - Our concern in studying Othello will not be with this very radical form of skepticism about other minds, but still the quite radical idea that we really don’t what the mental states of others actually are, given that all we have to go on is their behavior, and behavior can be deceiving.
- **Question:** Before we jump into the play, what are our thoughts about this sort of skeptical worry. Are we more troubled by it than the skeptical worry advanced by Descartes? Does it seem like we can easily discount this form of skepticism?

3 Appearance, Reality, and Deception

- **Appearance, Reality, and Deception:** We’ve considered the question of the appearances being misleading, with the reality underlying the appearances being radically unlike the way things appear. But now there’s a new dimension to this idea: active deception on the part of other people. And a new kind of reality that we’re considering skepticism about: not *physical* reality, but *social* reality.
- **The Initial Raising of this Theme:** Barbantio explicitly raises this theme first with respect to Desdemona:
 - “Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters’ minds / By what you see them act,” (1.1.168-9).
 - “Look to her, Moore, if thou hast eyes to see: She has deceived
 But it is ultimately Iago who is the “evil demon” here.
- **Iago:** Systematically deceives literally every character in the play, weaving a “net [of illusion]/ That shall enmesh them all,” (2.3.357).
- **Who Is Iago, Really?:** He is repeatedly referred to as “Honest Iago” (e.g. by Othello: 1.3.295, by Cassio: 2.3.330) yet famously says, “I am not what I am” (1.1.64).
 - **The (Straightforward) Epistemological Reading:** This is simply a fancy way of saying “I am not what I appear to be.”
 - **The (More Interesting) Metaphysical Reading:** There is a sense in which Iago himself is *mere appearance*, lacking any essence underlying those appearances that is who he really is.
 - * Consider, by contrast, in Exodus, when Moses asks God what he should be called, God simply replies “I am what I am.” God has, in some sense, the purest essence that there is, being just who he is: unchanging, eternal, *true*.

- * There is devilish and demonesque imagery throughout the play, associated with Iago (for instance, Cassio talks about alcohol as “the devil drunkenness” (2.3.291) when really we know it is Iago who is the devil here). Sticking with the biblical theme, there is a sense in which demons are associated with multiplicities, as contrasted with the unity of God. For instance, in Mathew, there is a man possessed by a demon and the following dialogue ensues: “What is your name?” “My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.”
- * Like the demons of the Bible, Iago is not one but many—different images to different people—and, plausibly, lacking any essence at all that underlies these manifold images.
- **Iago’s Lack of Regard for “Reputation”:** “Reputation is idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving,” (2.3.264). For Cassio, one’s reputation is (or at least ought to be) a genuine reflection of actual character. Iago seems to lack such a conception of “reputation” entirely.
- **Question:** What are Iago’s motives, really?
 - **Possible Motive One:** Was passed over for promotion. Othello chose Cassio for the role instead (1.1.7-32).
 - **Possible Motive Two:** Suspects Othello slept with his wife: “And it is thought abroad that ‘twixt my sheets / He’s done my office,” (1.3.387-8), though immediately admits that he doesn’t know if it’s actually true.

It’s not at all clear that these are really what’s motivating Iago, or whether, he’s rather just saying things as part of the manipulation of Rodrigo.

4 Other Questions

- **Question:** What do we make of the character of Othello? Does he fit the idea of the “tragic hero” considered last quarter?