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OPINION | COMMENTARY

What 'Othello' Can Teach Us All

Its treatment of race is uncomfortable but helps my students learn compassion.

By Paula Marantz Cohen

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An illustration of "Othello" by Robert Dudley. PHOTO: UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

For many years, I avoided teaching "Othello." I believed that the play, riddled with ethnic slurs and slights, was too much of a land mine and risked distracting students from Shakespeare's genius.

In recent years, however, "Othello" has become one of my favorite plays to teach. I've come to see that the uncomfortable elements don't reduce but support the author's greatness. I can think of no better way for members of our polarized society to achieve a more compassionate view of each other, and of history more generally, than by reading this play with care and attention.

I was reinforced in this belief recently while teaching "Othello" in a Side-by-Side course, in which Drexel University students learn alongside community members from West Philadelphia. I was curious how the group would react to a play in which a black man is both the central character and the dupe of a malevolent white man in a racist

society.

My younger students were shocked. The older community members—predominantly African-American women—were not. They had experienced a racist culture firsthand, growing up in America in the 1950s and '60s, and they were able to separate racism from other aspects of the play.

Though they knew how difficult it must have been for a black man in the Venetian society Shakespeare depicts, they understood that the other characters were also struggling with unfairness and limitations. Iago, the great villain, is propelled not by racism (though he invokes racist ideas at intervals) but by bitterness at being passed over for promotion. Othello had promoted the young and stylish Cassio as his lieutenant instead. Iago bemoans that seniority no longer means anything: “ ’Tis the curse of service, / Preferment goes by letter and affection, / And not by old gradation, where each second / Stood heir to the first.” Cassio had the right pedigree and appearance but had never proven himself in battle. My older students understood Iago’s resentment.

They saw Brabantio, irate at his daughter for running away with a Moor, as a bigot—but also as a father, like any other. They too were parents and had experienced the frustration of having children act against their wishes.

We discussed how Shakespeare dramatized the ways in which racism can distort the viewpoint of both victim and victimizer. Othello’s extreme language and emotion, and his paranoia and jealousy, are, at least in part, byproducts of his outsider status. At one point, Iago convinces Othello of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness by arguing that it was “unnatural” for her to be attracted to him in the first place. Othello accepts this argument, an indication of his “low self-esteem,” my students noted. Similarly, Desdemona’s father could not imagine that Othello would fall in love with—and be loved by—his daughter. Thus can prejudices blind us to what’s happening in front of our eyes.

But prejudices are not always so clear-cut. What we see about other people is almost always partial, the result of a complicated network of preconceptions. The unpolished Iago was invisible to Othello as a potential lieutenant for his troops just as Othello, a black man, was invisible to Brabantio as a potential suitor to his daughter.

“Othello” is a cautionary tale. It prompts us to check our reflexive feelings and to be fairer and more generous toward those whom we might dismiss or pigeonhole. It also encourages us to be more forgiving of others’ trespasses. I wish more people had the benefit of reading Shakespeare to learn about the limitations, complexities and veiled injustices of life. We would be a better nation for it.

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