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Where Ethics and Drama Meet: Shakespeare's *Othello*<sup>1</sup>

Emma Heflin

Shakespeare is an ideal battleground for the discourse between aesthetics and ethics. His works are regarded as cultural treasures, and as such, it feels as though there is much at stake when they are ethically condemned. Many of his works pull our aesthetic sensibilities in multiple directions; viewers are at once entranced by the beautiful language and repelled by the obvious faults, for example, in the “problem plays” like *The Merchant of Venice*. Yet an ethical criticism need not result in something like censorship, which is undoubtedly an unpopular stance. Instead, unethical works must be sufficiently problematized, preventing the likelihood of perpetuating harmful ideologies. In the essay following, I consider how the experience of *Othello* is one where the ethical problems interfere with aesthetic enjoyment using a theory of ethical value within artworks proposed by A.W Eaton. My goal is not to condemn the work, but to gain a better understanding of what attitudes the play asks of readers and viewers, and how these attitudes affect its aesthetic merits.

*Othello* is particularly suited to this discussion because its obvious aesthetic merits are often at war with its faults. Several black actors have expressed reluctance to play Othello given the “impossibility” of playing the character “if you’re a man and have any pride” (Lennix 404). In other words, it is impossible to enjoy the aesthetic challenge the character of Othello poses without condoning its problematic vision of the hyper-sexualized, hyper-masculine black man. This reluctance was also noted by actor Peter Macon as he took the stage as Othello at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 2016. “There’s a whole group of black actors who won’t do Othello,” not only because of its ethical flaws, but also because of the significance and enormity of the role

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<sup>1</sup> Title inspired by A.W Eaton’s “Where Ethics and Aesthetics Meet: Titian’s *Rape of Europa*”

itself (Conroy). That these refusals are both a condemnation of the play's racial representation and a statement of trepidation at the monolithic task the role requires is emblematic of the power of this play. These testimonies communicate the uneasiness which is typical when beauty and ethics conflict, but also express a sense of respect for the play's well-known aesthetic status. For some actors, the ethically problematic is reason enough to reject the role. They find it impossible to separate the ethical flaw from the aesthetic merit. This inquiry into ethical engagement with art will shed some light on what makes actors, readers, and theatergoers so uneasy about *Othello*, and why nevertheless, the play remains so esteemed.

The reception of the play and its evolution on the stage are so dynamic that an ethical study of *Othello* poses an interesting challenge. It is only relatively new to consistently have a black actor cast in the leading role. Notable productions continued the use of blackface well into the 1980s, and black actors now feel as if it is a real moral challenge to play the role at all. Productions of *Othello* have always been the products of their time. From the belief that Shakespeare could not have meant for Othello to be truly black, to the first multi-racial leading pair, to the prominent blackface production of Anthony Hopkins in 1981, the play has absorbed the ideologies of its time. It is steeped in a performance history which aided the dehumanization of people of color, and this must not be forgotten. But distancing the play from this history, just for a moment, might make its ethical problems clearer if we attend not to how the play has been used to reflect racist ideologies in its performance history, but to what the text alone actually requires of audiences. Treating the text in isolation from its performance history will not give the 'real' version of the play, even if it were to exist, but it will help us to understand what it is about the text itself that represents an ethical challenge to so many actors and readers. To analyze what

ethical attitudes the play requires, I rely on a theory of ethicism proposed by A.W Eaton which I discuss in the next section.

### **Ethicism About Aesthetic Value**

This theory seeks to explain the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, and particularly how ethical value should be considered as a part of aesthetic value. Eaton maintains that ethical values in a work of art should be considered when evaluating the work's aesthetic merits, and that this view can explain why a response to a work of art with an ethical fault might feel conflicted. This concept is presented in A.W Eaton's view that an ethical defect in a work represents an aesthetic defect:

It can happen that appropriate engagement with an artwork requires adopting an ethically defective attitude or perspective. This is an ethical flaw in the work and renders inaccessible those features that depend upon it. In the case where those features are artistically significant, then the work's call for an ethically defective response will impede the work's artistic success in that regard (176).

One one hand, as art appreciators, we feel called to respond positively to what is skillfully done, even when it requires a faulty ethical stance. Yet, one also feels that one must disavow the ethical flaws. This creates a serious conflict of interest between the aesthetic appreciator and the moral being, and this conflict prevents us from fully appreciating an ethically defective work.

Ethical flaws in the work are particularly created when a morally defective attitude is called for by the work itself. For example, A.W Eaton argues that in Titian's *Rape of Europa*, the sensual colors, textures, and formal qualities which are erotically charged combined with the scene of impending rape asks viewers to have an unacceptable attitude which eroticizes rape. The artwork calls for an erotic response, but this erotic response is a morally defective attitude to

have towards violence against women. Thus, though Titian must be praised for his skill, this ethical flaw in the artwork prevents a full engagement with the work's vision. Because the work calls for an unethical attitude as an appropriate response, if one is not willing to take on this attitude, it is impossible to appreciate the traits which depend on this response. The ethical flaws prevent viewers from appreciating the meritorious ones.

Eaton calls this the "interference model" and believes that "when a work strikes us as ethically flawed, the ethical failing interferes with our appreciation of the work's other praiseworthy features" (172). In other words, when an ethical element of a work disturbs us, it becomes unsettling to appreciate the aesthetic object without reservation. I believe this is what actors who have played Othello and find it impossible to do with dignity are trying to express; it is a play which tears apart ethical and aesthetic sensibilities. It feels impossible to engage in aesthetic pleasure of the work with such glaring ethical flaws. The ethical paradox I will later propose exists within *Othello* hinders appreciation of the play's other extremely meritorious qualities.

The interference model is just one theory on how to give force to ethical criticism in the realm of the aesthetic, but it is particularly suited to analyzing theater, where responses from the audience are at the forefront of the different genres. For example, the attitudes which tragedy requires are quite different from what a comedy would require, and the success of the drama depends on how well these genre-dependent attitudes are instilled in the audience. Eaton's focus on the attitudes which certain works require for full aesthetic engagement suits these differences in genre much better than the opposing view of separatism, which I will briefly describe.

Those who call themselves separatists in reference to the relationship between ethics and aesthetic value would squarely reject an ethical reading of Shakespeare. Their view might be

summarized thusly: let Shakespeare be Shakespeare and keep morals out of it. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to soundly argue against such a response, I will briefly say that, in the realm of theater, where art is invested in the bodies of living performers and is not simply a painting or sculpture being apprehended by a viewer, there is more at stake when ethical attitudes are relegated to a separate realm. Ethical defects become magnified and consequential; they are directed at people, namely at other actors and at those in the audience. They are active and visceral in a way that the ethical defects of something like a painting are not. If we separated these two realms, an Othello who appears on stage in blackface would be unproblematic. After all, it would be more authentic to the original Shakespeare: let Shakespeare be Shakespeare and keep your modern moral sensibilities out of it. Such attitudes, however, when represented shamelessly on stage, cannot be stopped at the theater door. The separatist view also fails to account for something I take to be extremely important when engaging with *Othello*: the sense of aesthetic pleasure mitigated by the ethical problems of the play. At once one feels the aesthetic merit of the work, yet also feels called to condemn it. Such a response would not be possible if one could simply remove morality from the appraisal of art. The interaction and conflict created between these two responses is best explained by Eaton's form of ethicism.

In my analysis of *Othello*, I often refer to "unacceptable moral attitudes" which the play requires of readers and viewers. The task, then, for those who would wish to preserve the aesthetic merit of Shakespeare, is to stage the plays in such a way that unacceptable moral attitudes are not required to engage fully with the work. In this regard, theater has a substantial advantage over other mediums. Each production of a Shakespeare play has an illimitable opportunity to reinterpret and reframe the narrative. Even so, the text of *Othello* is itself still a

veritable minefield of difficulty, and I will now explore some of these ethical complexities, keeping in mind what ethical attitudes are required by the text itself.

### **The Ethical Paradox of *Othello***

The genre of *Othello* already places a requirement upon audiences in that tragedy demands sympathy. Sympathy demands active participation by the audience; namely, the taking on of moral attitudes. It is fair to say that one has not engaged fully with a work of tragedy if it does not call upon our preconceived notions of justice. If a character's downfall is deserved, it is not tragic. As such, tragedy is a powerful way to engage the ethical sensibilities of the audience, but this is not always an ethical sensibility oriented towards the good. It is certainly possible for tragedy to represent immorality in such a way that we are called to approve or sympathize with it. This, I believe, is evident in the case of *Othello*, and why it is so necessary to sufficiently problematize the idea of having sympathy for either Desdemona or Othello.

The two directions in which the play pulls our sympathies each represent their own ethical shortcomings, creating an ethical paradox. Othello himself represents just one of the challenges; he is at once both victim and villain. *Othello* provides no stable place for the sympathies of readers and viewers to rest, yet they must rest somewhere, or the play fails at its tragic project. Its tragedy is an essential aesthetic quality of the play, and if it cannot be fully realized in the responses it engenders, this represents a severe aesthetic defect. In early modern England, the most obvious candidate for sympathy certainly might have been the pure and angelic Desdemona. Yet, central to more modern interpretations of the play is an uneasy feeling about the obvious stereotypes to which Othello is reduced, and an additionally uneasy feeling about the misogyny which adds fuel to the fire of tragedy. As Marjorie Garber notes, when we try to answer the riddle the play poses, "whatever 'answer' we come up with turns out to be

wrong” (155). In this case, when we try to answer the riddle of the play with sympathy for either character, both options result in unacceptable moral attitudes. The tension between sympathies creates a paradox in which when we sympathize with a character, we must take on an unacceptable moral attitude: one that is permissive toward racism or misogyny.

The play calls upon us to have a sympathetic attitude towards Desdemona, and if this attitude is morally reprehensible, this must represent an aesthetic flaw in the play, according to the view of ethicism I have cited. But first, I must make it clear that the play does clearly call for a sympathetic attitude towards Desdemona, and that this attitude is morally objectionable. First, Desdemona is meant to inspire sympathy because she, in the whole play, is the only truly innocent party. In fact, her main shortcomings seem to be that she possesses an *excess* of virtue, rather than a deficiency of it. Othello, Iago, Cassio, and even Emilia engages in acts which are ethically problematic. In the conversation with Emilia before her death, Desdemona reveals her utmost innocence by her disbelief that there are “women [who] do abuse their husbands” through infidelity (4.3.61). Desdemona cannot even conceive of a world in which women are unfaithful. Additionally, though Desdemona does hasten her own demise, she does it only through her refusal to speak up to her husband, her refusal to contradict him, her general obsequiousness, and even unto the point of death, her refusal to admit he has killed her. She lies and says that she has killed herself, asking Emilia to “commend [her]” to the very man who has murdered her (5.2.123). In other words, it is an excess of feminine virtue, represented by her meekness, obedience, and unwavering loyalty, which hasten the plot towards her death. The pitiful spectacle of wifely duty Desdemona creates undoubtedly asks for a sympathetic attitude, and fueling it is the knowledge that she dies not because she has made mistakes, but because her nature is simply too good for the world in which she lived.

Already, there is an ethical issue at hand. Sympathy for Desdemona originates with the attitude that a woman who is obedient and loyal to her husband at any price is ideal.

Desdemona's perfection as a wife is the reason the play calls for sympathy, and the characteristics making Desdemona the perfect wife are the only relevant ones. Sympathizing with Desdemona, which is an attitude the play clearly demands from viewers, is based in misogynistic imaginaries of the ideal woman. She is a woman who can't imagine lustfulness, who never contradicts her husband, and who never points out her husband's faults even to the point of death. Audiences are asked to pity Desdemona because she is the perfect wife; this requires a shared ethos of what the perfect wife represents. Sympathizing for Desdemona is ethically problematic because it asks us to participate in the misogynistic ideology which promotes virtues which are most convenient for men.

Nevertheless, a sympathy for Desdemona is somewhat intuitive, as she is the innocent party in the action of the play. Yet, this requires another ethically problematic attitude, even beyond the misogyny I have already discussed. Another problem becomes evident when the idea of sympathy is itself examined. To sympathize with Desdemona is to express a feeling such that we are sorry that Othello murdered her, we are angry with his brutality, we wish she had never married him, and so on. A key aspect to this, however, is that we must also desire justice for her, and relief for her pain. Importantly, to engage fully with the tragic death of Desdemona, our perspective is shifted from her to the cause of her death and grief in the character of Othello. Othello, to meet the emotional demands of the audience and fulfill the tragic nature of the drama, must die. This is what a sympathy for Desdemona requires. The attitudes which I have identified with "sympathy" are all quite natural things to feel, perhaps, at the murder of someone innocent, yet, through the representation of Othello, they are made insidious.

To reveal this insidiousness, it is enlightening to focus on how Othello is portrayed in the final action of the play. Of course, jealousy is the main force behind the murder of Desdemona. Brutality is another central element: Othello first recommends the killing of Desdemona in response to Iago's confirmation of her infidelity. He pronounces that Desdemona "shall not live," without the suggestion from Iago, who in fact, though ironically, cautions him against such drastic action (4.1.179). Though spurred on by Iago, Othello is to blame for his descent to murder and brutality.

In addition to jealousy and brutality, lust is an essential element to the tragic fall of Othello. His lust is revealed through the method and place of Desdemona's murder. He instructs Desdemona to go to bed and dismiss her attendant. Of course, we know that this is a matter of wanting a private murder scene, but it certainly hints at sexual activity. Desdemona predicts that "he will return incontinent," playing on her expectation that he will both return soon and return with a lack of control over his sexual appetite (4.3.10). He comes upon Desdemona asleep in her bed, a very intimate setting, and strangles her on their nuptial sheets, sheets that she later requests Emilia use to "shroud [her]" (4.3.22). These choices again implicate the sexual nature of the murder. Depending on the production, the sexual overtones of this violent murder can vary, but the facts remain. Othello murders his wife surrounded by references to their sexual union. Whether this is an intentional choice made by Othello is irrelevant. These choices by the playwright make it clear that the lustfulness of Othello is put on display. His sexuality is made into something bestial and violent. So bestial, in fact, that a murder scene might be confused for a sex scene. So, to summarize the characterization of Othello in these final scenes, jealousy, wrath, and lust are foregrounded.

Briefly reviewing, a pity for Desdemona implicates a hatred for and an accusation of Othello, even to the point of his death feeling like an attainment of justice. This hatred is based on the three central characteristics Othello possesses in the final action of the play: jealousy, rage, and lust. Therefore, the ethical question hinges on whether we can separate these characteristics from Othello's race. In pitying Desdemona, we must hate these characteristics, and therefore Othello. It must therefore be argued that these characteristics are not due to Othello's race to save this particular response to the play from charges of racism.

Unfortunately, in early modern England, jealousy, brutality, and lustfulness were all deeply associated with blackness. The association of blackness with jealousy was essential to Giraldi Cinthio's story from the *Hecatommithi*, a source for Shakespeare's *Othello*. In the story, a Moor stages the death of his wife for her adultery. Generalizations about Africans also appear in texts which were meant to be read as factual. *A geographical historie of Africa*, written by Joannes Leo Africanus, a kidnapped North African who was converted to Christianity, makes several claims about how the men of barbary are "wonderfully addicted to wrath" (155). He additionally spends much time describing their sexual deviancy through several charges such as acting like women by spinning and treating concubines as if they were a "lawful wife" (156). This text was highly influential and widely acknowledged as a source of definitive truth about the African continent. Well-established tropes of literary and artistic representation prevent Othello's traits from being separated from his blackness, and Ania Loomba concludes that "Othello ultimately embodies a stereotype of Moorish lust and violence" (95). It is impossible to separate a pity of Desdemona from hatred and condemnation of the actions of Othello. Neither is it possible to separate Othello's race from his actions. The combination of these impossibilities results in the unfortunate reality that when the play provokes sympathy for Desdemona as the

tragic victim of Othello's wrath, it asks us to participate in the stereotypes it unfairly perpetrates against blackness itself.

Of course, a construction of blackness as lustful, wrathful, and jealous would not be possible without an equally constructed whiteness. Pity for Desdemona is problematic not only because it sets up convenient equivalencies between blackness and evil, but also between whiteness and goodness. Blackness and whiteness are juxtaposed throughout the play, and often take on double meanings in relation to virtue. Desdemona's fairness is inextricably connected with her innocence, and blackness with a lack of virtue. Iago claims he will turn her "virtue into pitch" (2.3.355). Even Othello participates in this imagery. He says that Desdemona's "fresh... visage" has become "black as [his] own face" through her alleged infidelity (3.3.390). These two instances support this simplistic association between fairness and whiteness as morally upstanding and blackness as something perverted and foul. To engage in a strong emotional attachment to Desdemona's innocence is to engage in a strong emotional attachment to her whiteness. Just as Othello's rage cannot be separated from his blackness, Desdemona's innocence cannot be separated from her whiteness: a view that must be recognized as irretrievably racist. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that a sympathy for Desdemona entails an unacceptable moral attitude.

One facet of the paradox is now complete. The other is found when we consider what a sympathy for Othello entails. Desdemona is not the only character worthy of sympathy in the play; there is also a strong sense of regret about Othello's demise. This sympathy is different in that Othello is the perpetrator of the crimes; even if Othello incited his jealousy, there is no doubt who is truly responsible. A sympathy for Othello entails the idea that it is truly terrible for a man to go from such a high status—being a general in the army, being the husband of a noblewoman,

being well-spoken and respected—to committing a murder followed by a shameful suicide. Othello is sympathetic because he goes from having everything that even a white man could ever want, to being a dead murderer. A sympathy for Othello means that we feel regret for his loss of status and his degradation, and the play calls for this attitude just as it calls for sympathy for Desdemona. I have already shown how a sympathy for Desdemona requires an unacceptable moral attitude which therefore must be considered an aesthetic flaw. But what about Othello? Is a sympathy for Othello subject to similar criticisms?

A more modern interpretation of the play, one might think, would engage in a sympathy for Othello and the ways he becomes a victim of stereotypes in a white society. However, the paradox arises in that a pity for Othello engages a different kind of ethical fault. Othello's disenchantment with Desdemona stems from underlying misogyny promulgated by both Iago and himself. Iago tells him that Desdemona is likely to be a false and treacherous creature because the women of Venice are inclined to infidelity. He reveals supposedly insider knowledge that "in Venice they do let God see the pranks they do not show their husbands" (3.3.205). In *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, Loomba notes that generalizations about Venetian women having loose morals abounded in England at this time; something the play oddly refutes (Desdemona is innocent). However, Othello is so easily taken in by this snare of Iago, it must be as Loomba says: "ideologies, the play tells us, only work if they are not entirely external" (91). Othello is predisposed to distrust women, and specifically seems predisposed to believe that Desdemona, a woman he should know well, is betraying him. Through Othello's engagement with misogynistic tropes, he begins to make tragic errors.

However, the case for sympathizing with Othello may not be as hopeless as the case for sympathizing for Desdemona. In Othello's particular case, his jealousy is aroused not only by a

general suspicion of women, but by insecurities about his race. If this is the case, aligning oneself with Othello while reading this play seems less of an ethical defect. “Haply for [he is] black,” he cannot satisfy Desdemona’s need for pleasant and relatable company (3.3.267-70). He names his race as a primary source of his insecurity and dismisses a similar concern about his age. This insecurity has previously been encouraged by Iago, who calls their union the product of “foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural” (3.3.237). Othello seems substantially influenced by insecurity about his race, rather than solely a negative view of women. In a sense, he blames himself for her infidelity. Of course, both misogyny and Othello’s internalized racism are at work. If Othello’s paranoia were only the result of trauma from being constantly othered in a white society, tragic feelings about the play may rest there with a clear conscience. But because both Othello’s insecurity about his race and a genuine distrust of women are at work, it still represents an ethically problematic stance. The question about who we can have sympathy for in *Othello* is more promising when the answer is Othello himself, but it is certainly not settled.

I have examined attitudes which the play asks of its audience, which are best described as sympathies for Desdemona and Othello. These attitudes require ethically defective responses. But there is more to say about exactly how this constitutes an aesthetic flaw in the work. After all, it could perhaps be attributed to the great genius of Shakespeare that the play leaves us at war with ourselves. On the one hand, Desdemona did not deserve her death. On the other, Othello’s fall from grace is devastating. One is asked to sympathize with both the murdered and the murderer; this creates a conflict which is undoubtedly one of the play’s aesthetic merits. However, to the extent that the sympathies are based in misogynistic and racist thinking, the play possesses true aesthetic faults. It is conceivable that this play could have been created without such reliances, and been free to produce this dramatic effect just as convincingly.

To illustrate this, I will start with the ways in which *Othello* must be praised. Part of my argument is that the work is obviously meritorious. The crafting of Othello himself is notably exceptional; the way in which we see his undoing and this undoing is made evident through his speech is masterful. Additionally, the play possesses one of the most convincing villains in all of Shakespeare; one whose motivations cannot be pinned to anything besides a hatred of Othello and a love of chaos. The way the plot is constructed is masterful. The frustration and tension that is created with the handkerchief and the subtle workings of Iago to unhinge Othello are delicate but convincing. The play is also incredibly psychologically aware. It communicates Othello's complicated interiority and portrays such an awareness of how his marginalization affects his thoughts and actions. There are many things to praise about *Othello*, but my argument is that to the extent that these meritorious qualities rest on defective moral attitudes, their effectiveness is diminished as aesthetic qualities. For example, Othello's decline from a noble Venetian general to a raging murderer is undoubtedly based in racial stereotypes; this diminishes the aesthetic merit of this aspect of the play. Again, the quotes from black actors who have played Othello are evidence of this. The play has obvious merit, yet this reliance on racial stereotypes creates such a distraction from this merit that actors of color cannot entirely enjoy the aesthetic experience. This is obviously an aesthetic flaw. Additionally, the plot relies on an attitude of misogyny to move forward. To the extent that Othello's downfall is based in participating in that misogyny and is not due to his own experience as a man of color confronting his marginalization, the play represents another aesthetic flaw, as it prevents viewers from being able to engage morally with the cause of Othello's rage. If the audience feels that they must condemn misogyny, this is a serious barrier to feeling a sympathy for Othello for which the play obviously calls.

In this case, I have endeavored to explore why the play *Othello* represents such a challenge to the emotions and consciences of readers and viewers. The tension arising between the aesthetic merits of the play and its ethical shortcomings are substantial and problematic. When the play was originally performed in the early 17th century, it may have been a simpler task for audiences to reconcile ethical norms with the action of the play. Modern interpreters are perhaps offered more of a challenge; it is necessary to be critical of both the inherent misogyny leading to the action of the play and the racial stereotypes to which *Othello* is reduced. Problematizing these issues is essential to engaging ethically with this play. And though there is perhaps no place in the play where our sympathies can lie with a completely free conscience, and the attitudes the play requires of viewers can be construed as aesthetic faults, examining this dynamic between the ethical and the aesthetic in this case helps to pin down what exactly it is that actors and audiences both find so troubling yet so attractive about *Othello*.

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