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Racism as a Manifestation of Class Prejudice: A Marxist Reading of Shakespeare's Othello

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Racism pervades our society, and it is commonplace today to hear bourgeois liberals decry the evils of racism as though these evils were mere bedevils that mass education and a general renewal of federal aid to various government programs might relieve—or perhaps even eliminate. Such proposals, however, though well-intentioned and compassionate in their prompting, are astonishingly naïve in their ignorance and invariably inadequate in their application. As more radical social critics know, racism is spawned and nurtured within the larger class struggle. As such, only the achievement of a classless society will eliminate the evil of racism, for the ruling classes will never offer any serious attention to or remedy for racism, as they well know and fear that the end of racism requires the overthrow of the system of exploitation by which the capitalist state thrives and racism is nurtured. That racism is not an inherent component of human society as such, but rather a constitutive part of such societies as ours that are fraught with contradiction and class struggle is well-attested in humanity's literature; one need only look to Shakespeare's Othello for validation of the point.

Racism, as such eminent authorities as Professor Derrick Bell and journalist Clarence Page have noted, is a function of oppression. Only oppressive societies are racist, and only oppressors within those societies can reasonably be classified as racist. While a measure of prejudice or resentment against members of the privileged racial class may exist among individuals of oppressed races, such natural responses of contempt and disdain, engendered by subjugation and humiliation, cannot credibly be classified as racist, despite the efforts of the ruling classes to seek such demonizing attribution; indeed, such attempted assignations, upon reflection, ought to be recognized as absurd. To contend, for example, that oppressed classes within racist societies are capable of racism themselves is tantamount to arguing that Nat Turner's Rebellion or the heroic struggle of the ANC against apartheid is explainable by people of color against whites because they were white. Rather, a truthful reading of history requires one to recognize that when oppressed races rise up in revolutionary outrage against the coercive authority wielded by the oppressor race and its functionaries, such races do not act on racist but revolutionary impulses—for such revolts would not even occur were it not for the propagation of the conditions which occasion these rebellions in the first place. Racial violence that erupts against representatives of ruling class authority is almost entirely attributable, therefore, to the propagation or maintenance of oppressive, class conditions, forgetting by the savage ignorance and divisiveness of ruling class authority which make such uprisings inevitable. Discerning observers realize, for example, that white persons in South Africa were not attacked by black South Africans during the years of apartheid because of some supposed innate hatred of Caucasians that lurked in the minds of black South Africans; they were assailed because they were representatives and beneficiaries of the racist state authority; anyone who thinks otherwise would do well to consider that, indeed, all revolutionary struggles are pros-

occurred by an underclass against the representatives of an enemy power, although many of those representatives, as individuals, may be innocent of the crimes committed by their government.

But now to Othello to demonstrate the relationship between class and race. Most of us are familiar with the plot of the tragedy, so there is no need to recount that; however, even in our familiarity with the outline of the play, we may be inattentive to the embedded—and likely unintended—commentary on the relationship between class conflict and racism which, in my opinion, provides the drama with so much of its poignancy. Race-motivated intensity and contemporary relevance to those of us committed to the cessation of class conflict and all of its attendant evils. Consider the conflict, for example, in the play, wherein Iago's hatred of Othello is enkindled, and note the forms which that hatred assumes. Iago's racist invective is spawned by the disappointment he suffers when Othello advances Michael Cassio, rather than Iago, to the lieutenantcy; Iago's venomous racism, therefore, is substantially attributable, not to Iago's hatred of people of color, but to Iago's failure to achieve social advancement and an enhanced class position ("I know my price, I am worth no worse a place").

Iago's perceived injury to his class identity and place incites Iago's confidante, Roderigo. In dull-witted sympathy, Roderigo appropriates Iago's rage and makes it his own; he calls Othello "thick lips" (I.i.66), and Iago urges him to inflame a similar hatred of Othello in Brabantio by an appeal to racist prejudice ("Call up your father. Rouse him, make after him, poison his delight, Proclaim him in the streets; incense her [Desdemona's] kinsmen. And though he in a fertile climate dwell/Plague him with flies") (I.i.67-71). Roderigo, in a vicious, racist assault on Othello, alludes to bestial acts in describing the act of love shared by Othello and Brabantio's daughter, Desdemona; he warns the senator that "an old black ram/is puffing your white ewe" (I.i.88-89). Iago seizes on all these attributions and advances his slanderous attack on Othello by pricking Brabantio's latent racism and arousing him to anger; Iago goads the senator: 

"[Y]ou'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you" (I.i.11-12).

Iago, playing the old racist horror of a black man making love to a white woman is insufficient to Iago's morbid purpose, however. Othello is also assailed as "lascivious" (I.i.126) and Desdemona, in the embrace of a man of color, is derided as one who, against Nature, "hath made a gross revolt" (I.i.34). Brabantio agrees; as he declares, his daughter's choice for a mate to be from those repre-resentatives of his own class and race is repugnant to him. The senator cannot comprehend why that an "evident from the second scene of the first act.

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(68, 70-71). To Iago too, Desdemona's choice of Othello is also an unnatural desire governed by rude instinct; as he assures Roderigo, "when she is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice" (l.iii.350-51). To both Iago and Brabantio, therefore, that a woman could choose a husband apart from considerations of wealth and race is inconceivable; Brabantio would have the affection explained as "merely a lust of the blood" (l.iii.334).

Many readers of Othello either have ignored or subordinated these racist emphases and trivialized their relationship to class conflict. For example, David Bevington, a noted Shakespeare scholar, regards Othello pre-eminently as a "tragedy of love" (xx), and Antoinette Dauber thinks that the play is essentially an exercise in dramatic irony (126). Others, like Margaret Webster, even appear to give some credence to one of the more patently ridiculous stereotypes urged upon Othello by readers inclined to believe that Othello, as a black man, is a dull-witted fool, a slave to mindless passion for white women:

Iago... knowing every twist which can be given to the Moor because of his alien and "inferior" race, does not reckon with the full primitive power of the passion which he unleashes (218).

Essential to any responsible reading of literature is the ability to penetrate its exterior polish to perceive its inner substance; the ability to read literature such as Othello with an eye to its embodiment of the perspectives of the world as those perspectives are defined and focused by the ruling class and mediated to the world through its literary messengers is crucial to the multiculturalist's critical task. Any critical reading of the world's literature which seeks to discover literature's participa-

suffocating sameness with which the ruling class would have people socially anesthetized. The outcry for a restoration of "traditional values" is not so much a call for regenerated values, therefore, as it is a demand for the reassertion of social control; if a decaying society in accelerating collapse cannot preserve its mechanisms of social regulation and guaranteed assent to its authority, it faces the spectre of annihilation.

Conservative, capitalist America's waving of its hands in pious horror is only a newer expression of Brabantio's outrage against that which challenges the world over which he, as a ruling class elite, has been privileged to preside; it is but a new form of reaction.

Othello, therefore, is more than light entertainment for a quiet afternoon's reading; it is an exposition of the tragedy which defines and accompanies all forms of class rule and injustice; Othello summons us to a recognition of the perpetuity of the terrors inflicted on the exploited and oppressed in all forms of class-based authority; it is an alarm awakening us to revolutionary consciousness.

Works Cited

