

GARP:
**General Advice for Research Papers in
English and American Literary Studies**

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A. Preliminary remarks

Writing one's first research paper is a huge step in each student's academic development. Many students have no clear idea of the skills they are supposed to demonstrate in a paper or how they are to tackle such a project. And even if they do, they are sometimes afraid of the prospect of filling 10-15 pages with writing according to their own design.

Therefore, we invented GARP. GARP gives you a general guideline for the planning and writing of a paper, explains the formal requirements (layout, structure, style, citation etc.) and makes you aware of potential pitfalls (thematic vagueness, lack of academic rigour, plagiarism etc.). At the end of this document, you find a sample research paper with annotations which point out important features of a successful research paper.

B. Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is a research paper and what am I supposed to do in it?

In a research paper in literary studies, you are expected to demonstrate three main skills: first, to be able to *identify a specific topic* for the discussion of a literary text (usually a text you analyzed and discussed in a seminar), secondly, to provide a *sound and structured interpretation* of this text (based on your thematic focus) and thirdly, to *include or integrate critical sources* (interpretations written by scholars on this literary text and/or theories you can apply to this text) in your own line of argument. One could say that, when you write a research paper, you enter an academic conversation with other literary critics who have written on the same text or on a similar topic.

You may object that, unlike you, these critics have published their results, come to think of it, you somehow 'publish' your results, too, by making them available to your course instructor. Since your paper is not a completely private act of communication, then, not like a soliloquy in drama where nobody else is on stage while you ramble on about a certain subject matter, but rather like a monologue where you talk, but other people listen attentively, it is important that you express yourself clearly and coherently. And that you follow certain formal requirements (layout standards, a transparent structure, suitable language, proper use of terminology etc.) in order to make your contribution comprehensible and relevant. It is mandatory that you stick to the rules presented in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (ed. Joseph Gibaldi), which is currently in its 9th edition. Referring to editions 7 & 8 is also acceptable.

2. How do I find a topic?

Unlike other departments, we do not give you a list of prefabricated topics where you choose one task and then write your paper on it. Rather, we hope that our classroom discussions will offer interesting topics individual students want to explore in their research papers. We also invite you to come up with a topic of your own choice, based on your personal interests. This may be a bit harder at the beginning, because you first have to become creative and make up your mind about your project, but it is certainly more gratifying in the long run to compose a paper based on your own ideas. Of course, your course instructor will always advise you on the suitability of your topic, particularly if it is too broad or narrow in scope. Actually, we enjoy these preliminary conversations about proper topics a great deal.

3. How do I find critical sources?

Your instructor may provide a number of scanned documents on Moodle, photocopied material in folder, or a selection of books on the reserve shelf ('Semesterapparat') in the library. But you will have to do your own research, too, by browsing in the books our library (or the larger one on Göttingen) holds and by using KARLA, the MLA bibliography, or the KVK (if you do not know these abbreviations, please look them up).

For standard introductory works on literary genres, literary periods and literary theories please refer to our online guide DIANA (Directions in Anglo-American Studies) which contains a large number of publications. An excellent introduction to authors and their works is also provided by the following series on classic texts or topics: The *Cambridge Companion* series, the *Norton Critical Editions*, the *Contemporary Critical Essays*, and the *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism* series.

4. Can I use sources from the Internet?

The answer is a very clear "That depends". There are Internet platforms like *JStor* and *Project Muse* which offer you critical essays that were originally published in print by peer-reviewed academic journals. These sources are certainly permitted for research and quotation, but please note that these platforms usually offer you older sources and not necessarily the most recent publications. Therefore, you cannot restrict your research to *JStor* and similar data banks.

On the other hand, Internet sources such as blog entries by high-school students, fanzines or other non-academic contributions are clearly unsuitable because they are very often unreliable. Much the same applies to Wikipedia, Spark Notes, E-Notes etc.

5. Can I use an e-book version of a literary text?

For a seminar, your instructor may demand that you purchase a certain print edition of a literary text, in order to ensure that all students have the same textual basis (incl. page numbers) and, potentially, the same body of annotations. If the edition of a set text is not specified for the seminar, an e-book version may be acceptable for seminar purposes (if it contains a reliable, full text), but not for citation in a research paper. Most e-book versions do not have proper page numbers and are therefore not acceptable for use in a research paper. For your paper, always go for the best (if possible, critical) edition that other critics use, too.

6. Am I supposed to include my personal opinion in a paper?

Again the answer would be “That depends” (on what you understand by it). When by ‘opinion’ you understand your emotional involvement or your level of identification with the protagonist in a literary text or how you found your topic, then please keep it to yourself.

Yet, any interpretation of a literary text represents a certain point of view or angle (maybe shaped by a certain method or theory that you use). This means that your reading, your interpretation of a text is never neutral or objective, but influenced by certain subjective assumptions and value judgments. The skill of writing a research paper consists in being aware of this relative subjectivity, to communicate it in an academically relatable and ‘intersubjective’ manner and to comment on issues that remain, in your informed opinion, questionable.

7. How important is my command of English in a paper?

Everyone makes mistakes in a foreign language. Try to limit their number by avoiding basic grammar, spelling, and punctuation mistakes and to ensure that your arguments are conveyed in clear and transparent English. Avoid slang terms and colloquial phrases, but also convoluted and stilted expressions. It is, e.g., fine to use the first-person singular form “I” (e.g. “In this paper, I will show/ demonstrate instead of using unwieldy constructions like “the author of this paper”, cumbersome passive constructions like “It will be argued that”, or hiding behind a *pluralis maiestatis* (“as we have seen”).

C. The ‘Ten Commandments’

These ‘commandments’, written in jest but meant to be helpful, address the most frequent ‘sins’ that students commit in research papers

1. Thou shalt not start a research paper without consulting your instructor.

You are very welcome to pick a relevant and feasible topic that interests you but it is imperative that you discuss it with your instructor as early as possible.

2. Thou shalt not choose a topic which is too vague and general.

Aim for a precise and specific topic and title, NOT "*Othello* – An Analysis" but "Otherness and Racism in *Othello*". Use the library (book browsing, MLA database etc.) to narrow your general area of interest (e.g., *Othello*) and zoom in on a specific project ("Otherness and...").

3. Thou shalt not include a lengthy plot summary or an author’s full biography in your paper. Thou shalt also not include your personal motivation for choosing a certain topic.

Your intended reader (and your instructor) knows the plot of the text you are working on. In a research paper it is neither appropriate nor necessary to tell the reader how deeply you were emotionally affected by the tragedy of *Othello*.

4. Thou shalt start your finished paper with a succinct but complete introduction.

The introduction should state your topic with your hypothesis or leading question. You should also explain your approach, define key concepts (e.g., "otherness"), and briefly sketch some relevant criticism. (Start your research with a good sketch of your introduction but compose the final version only after the main part of your paper is finished.)

5. Thou shalt not use the concept of authorial intention but engage the text and its significant features itself closely.

You should not be guided by the question "What does the author want to tell us?" Rather, ask yourself "What does the text mean?" or better "*How* does the text mean?" What are the effects of the author’s choice of tone, perspective, plot structure etc.?

6. Thou shalt neither overstructure nor understructure your paper.

Paragraphs (‘thought units’) and chapters ought to correspond to a coherent line of argument. If you produce mini-chapters or one-sentence-paragraphs the development and coherence of your argument suffers.

7. Thou shalt include a close reading of relevant passages from your literary text.

The art of ‘close reading’, the key to most papers in Literary Studies, requires that you use longer quotes and analyse them thoroughly, paying attention to form and style of the text,

including its syntax and specific meanings of individual words or phrases. Hence you will need good dictionaries, reference books and other tools of philological research. To paraphrase a quote before or after quoting is redundant and awkward: "The protagonist feels sick: 'I feel sick.' (p. 17)". This makes your instructor sick.

8. Thou shalt not treat a literary text as a mere mirror of external reality but as a work of art which constructs a fictional, alternative reality.

Do not treat literary texts as historical, factual documents. Neither misuse them *as mere proof of a 'theory' or an ideology*. Rather, explore their potential, their rhetorical and fictional strategies in order to assess what kind of reader-response they might elicit, for different readers, in the past and present.

9. Thou shalt not hand in a paper without having carefully checked its form, content and language.

It is essential that you proofread your paper. 'Silly' spelling (often by computerized programmes) and basic grammar mistakes, inconsistent arguments (watch your "therefores" and similar connectors!), and formal mistakes have a negative impact on your grade.

10. Thou shalt not plagiarize!

Always acknowledge your sources properly. No matter if you "quote" (always with quotation marks!) or merely paraphrase a source, referencing your sources by author and page number is the foundation of serious and honest scholarship. A plagiarism (Täuschungsversuch) will cost you dearly.

D. Sample research paper

On the following pages, you find a full sample paper with annotations and instructions about layout, structure, citation, and other aspects of a research paper. The paper is on Shakespeare's *Othello* because you know this play from the *Orientierungskurs* and are familiar with some critical directions that can be applied to it.

Provide your contact details, course of study and matriculation number

Diagonalley 27
34125 Kassel
0561/ 123 4567
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Lehramt an Gymnasien/ L3
3. Fachsemester
Matr.-Nr. 007 0815

Do not forget your name

Proseminararbeit

Ronald Weasley

Aim for a precise and specific title

Otherness and Racism in Shakespeare's *Othello*

Italicise book titles

Provide course instructor's name, course title and semester

Prof. Emma Watson
PS "Introduction to Shakespeare Studies"
Winter semester 2020/21

Ensure your title concepts are reflected in your structure

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The table of contents should contain all chapter titles. Please note that the pagination begins with the introduction.

Use Times New Roman, font size 12 points. Use 1.5 spacing

Indicate your sources using the MLA parenthetical citation format

1. Introduction

Shakespeare's *Othello* has long been considered a "domestic tragedy" (Schülting 545) which focusses on love and jealousy before its political dimensions moved to the centre of critical attention in the 1980s. The play's treatment of gender relations and forms of early modern racism are now the main areas of interest for modern critics of the play. (ibid.)

Ibidem (Latin for at the same place) is used when you cite the same source and page twice in a row.

In this paper I will analyze the connection of otherness and racism in Shakespeare's play. Otherness, a term widely used in postcolonial theory, describes the result of thinking, writing, and speaking about foreign cultures in order to place them in an inferior position in relation to one's own culture. The practice of othering different groups or cultures is often motivated by racist tendencies, although some forms of it express a sense of fascination with 'exotic' cultures and places. In close readings of selected scenes I will show how *Othello* dramatizes racist stereotypes and how the characters use forms of othering in order to categorize Othello as alien and dangerous to Venetian society, and how he slowly begins to be influenced by this manipulation.

Conclude your introduction with a brief sketch of relevant criticism (cf. 4th 'commandment')

I will also look at the stage history of *Othello* and how productions of the play have become more aware of racial issues, using different strategies to deal with this phenomenon, e.g. through unconventional casting decisions.

For theoretical background information my paper relies on Ashcroft et al., *Postcolonial Studies. The Key Concepts*, and on Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory. The Basics*, for the performance history of *Othello* I found Ayanna Thompson's introduction in the Arden Edition of Shakespeare's play particularly helpful, and my interpretation of the play is mainly indebted to the essays by Berry and Mason.

Leave 2.5 cm margins, top, left, bottom. Leave 5 cm margin right.

Define your main concepts.

2. Otherness and Racism

The distinction between self and other is the starting point for creating identity at the level of the individual, but also in terms of creating national and cultural identities. Postcolonial studies have pointed out the far-reaching consequences of this mechanism when it comes to the relationship of colonizer and colonized:

Always justify your right margins.

The colonized subject is characterized as ‘other’ by discourses such as **primitivism** and **cannibalism**, as a means of establishing the **binary** separation of the colonizer and the colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view. (Ashcroft et al. 154f.; emphasis in the original)

Longer quotes (3+ lines) appear in single-spaced indented blocks. They use a slightly smaller font size (11pt.)

In his influential study *Orientalism* (1978) Edward Said shows how Western depictions of the East in literature, journalism, travel books, and art have helped to construct an image of the Orient which “has legitimized Western imperialism in the eyes of Western governments and their electorates and it has also insidiously worked to convince the East that Western culture represented universal civilization” (Bertens 177). The ‘othering’ of the East is a dual strategy which places non-Western cultures in an inferior position and at the same time stabilizes the West’s self-image of its own superiority. The West’s denigration of the East works by assigning certain negative qualities to representatives of the East such as “sensuality, irrationality, primitiveness, and despotism” (Bertens 178), whereas the West emerges as “rational, democratic, and progressive” (ibid.).

Racism is closely linked to othering because it provides the ideological foundation for the creation of a hierarchy between supposedly fixed and stable races. European race thinking depends on such a hierarchy in order to justify its suppression and colonization of other cultures and ethnicities:

Racism can be defined as: a way of thinking that considers a group’s unchangeable physical characteristics to be linked in a direct, causal way to psychological or intellectual characteristics, and which on this basis distinguishes between ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ racial groups. (Ashcroft et. al. 181)

Shorter quotes are marked by double quotation marks.

As Ashcroft et al. point out, a difference in outward appearance did not always denote the superiority of one ethnic group over another. This kind of race thinking only developed in the course of the 17th century. It is, therefore, remarkable that Shakespeare’s *Othello* represents this conflict as early as 1603. As the *Shakespeare Handbuch* states: “Man könnte die Tragödie als erstes englisches Stück lesen, welches das Entstehen und die Dynamik rassistischer Vorurteile beleuchtet“ (Schülting 548).

Retain German quotes in the original – do not translate!

Your main part ought to combine your main topic with an interpretation of your literary text. But do not use the *term* main part in your headline.

3. Representing Otherness and Racism in *Othello*

3.1 *Othello* and performance history

Due to the instability of the term ‘moor’, there have been many different opinions on how to properly impersonate Othello. Since the early 17th century, there have been very different Othellos because the role has been constantly modified and reinterpreted. It is especially Othello’s skin colour that has been scrutinized since the early 19th century (Thompson 28).

In the Renaissance, blackface – the impersonation of a black person by a white person through the application of make-up – was the most prominent signifier of otherness on stage (Callaghan 78). Richard Burbage is believed to have first played the main character, for “the elegies written at his death in 1619 include praise for his portrayal of Othello” (Thompson 28). *Othello* was probably the first one of Shakespeare’s tragedies that was performed during the Restoration. (68) Apparently, Nicholas Burt was the first actor who impersonated Othello in that age, but it was Thomas Betterton who became famous for “making Othello his own” (68). He was known for his “heroic acting style” (ibid.). The nineteenth century, during which Othello was portrayed as “tanned, tawny, and off white” (31), has become known as the “Bronze Age of Othello” (ibid.). The new “lighter-skinned Othello” (32) was first impersonated by Edmund Kean, who portrayed Othello as a very passionate character who could calmly talk to the senate, but then explode with emotion (71). Between 1820 and 1870, Othello was usually “portrayed as light-skinned or bronzed” (32), i.e. actors wear bronze make-up instead of blackface. Significantly, there was another, more important development in that age:

Another seismic innovation for *Othello* performances occurred in the nineteenth century, but was not recognized as such until the late twentieth century: the first actors of colour began to play Othello, James Hewlett was probably the first black actor to play Othello, and the first productions were held in New York City at the African Grove Theatre in 1822 (n.b., this was five years before the complete abolition of slavery in New York State). (Thompson 78)

The most influential black actor of Othello was Paul Robeson, who played the role in England and the U.S. between 1930 and 1959. Robeson was aware of his precarious position as a black actor playing on stage next to a white Desdemona,

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(not after headline or
indented quote)

and attempted to make the part seem “less threatening sexually” (80), and rather naïve. Robeson was politically active and used his fame to bring attention to the issues of segregation and the exploitation of Africa. (ibid.)

Despite Robeson’s success, white actors “continued to dominate the role until the 1980s” (ibid.). From 1964 until 1965, Laurence Olivier famously portrayed Othello at the National Theatre in London (Nostbakken 150). He studied immigrants from the West Indies, who had recently come to the UK, and acted accordingly (Thompson 80) He was especially proud of his make-up, describing in detail how he achieved the look he aimed for in his book *On Acting* (81). Olivier was a “full-on racial impersonation” (ibid.) which was considered by many critics as “realistic” and “modern” (Nostbakken 150). While receiving positive reviews in the UK, audiences in the US were not so pleased with Olivier’s interpretation of Othello (Thompson 82). The fact he was using blackface reminded many Americans of the use of African-American stereotypes in minstrel shows. It was in the 1980s that there was a consensus that Othello ought to be played by black performers (81).

Nevertheless, the issue of racism in connection with *Othello* did not disappear after the racist casting practice of having white actors perform the role of Othello had been abandoned. Hugh Quarshie, a British actor, made a speech at the University of Alabama in 1998, claiming that *Othello* is a racist play because of its historical background, being written by a white author, for white actors, and a white audience (87ff.). He sees Othello as a walking stereotype and does not appreciate black actors playing the part, for they could possibly legitimize racial stereotypes (89). Other actors have agreed with him, stating that Othello is a problematic character to play because of the risk of racial stereotyping. More recently, there have been productions with an all-black cast, so that audiences pay attention to the character of Othello and not his ethnicity (90). Adrian Lester, who performed Othello in London in 2013, is known for his eagerness to “strip away” (ibid.) everything but the character, and played Othello alongside other black characters.

The question is to what extent one can ignore Othello’s ethnicity and separate it from his character. In my following discussion of the play I will show, among other things, how strongly Othello’s thoughts and actions are determined by his status as an ethnic outsider.

3.2 Othello as the ‘Other’ in the character constellation

In the first scene of the play, Iago and Roderigo immediately confront the audience with Othello’s otherness, even though the main character has not yet appeared. Othello’s race and isolated position are already in focus (Cowhig 154). Clearly, the two characters dislike Othello and bear a grudge against him. The way they talk about him is greatly influenced by “racial antipathy” (ibid.), calling him “thicklips” (1.1.65) and “Barbary horse” (1.1.110). Iago’s dialogue with Brabantio is full of racist slurs and stereotypes:

IAGO: Awake, what ho, Brabantio! Thieves, thieves, thieves!
Look to your house, your daughter and your bags!
Thieves, thieves!

BRABANTIO: What is the reason of this terrible summon?
What is the matter there?
[...]

IAGO: Zounds, sir, you’re robbed, for shame put on your
Gown!
Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul,
Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe! Arise, arise,
Awake the snorting citizens with the bell
Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you,
Arise I say! (1.1.78-91)

Use these brackets for omissions in quotes.

Always provide a close reading of longer quotes and pay attention to the style and wording of an excerpt.

Iago’s speech plays with an assumption that all white Venetians share: that Desdemona could never have eloped with Othello of her own free will but that her disappearance can only be the result of abduction: she must have been taken away by the “thief” Othello who is considered to be too undesirable and unattractive for Desdemona. Another assumption that is implied by Iago is the image of a young Venetian upper-class woman like Desdemona as meek and passive, her father’s valuable property until she is being transferred from her father to a worthy husband.

Iago’s notorious speech continues with his animalization of Othello as “old black ram”, an image which suggests Othello’s sexual desire and lustfulness, whereas his ‘victim’ Desdemona is the “white ewe”, the young animal that stands for innocence, but is an animal nevertheless. What Iago’s metaphor implies here is that Desdemona has been seduced and soiled by Othello, making

her less than human herself. Iago's call to "awake the snorting citizens" shows that Othello's actions are not a private matter between him, Desdemona, and Brabantio: Iago claims that the whole affair is of public interest, because it is damaging to the social order of Venice.¹ His speech ends with the nightmare of anybody who advocates racial segregation: the prospect of Othello fathering Brabantio's mixed-race grandchildren.

Despite his racist statements, Iago is probably not actually racist. The reasons for his hatred of Othello are never completely revealed. At one point, he accuses Othello in a soliloquy of having committed adultery with his wife Emilia. If these accusations are justified is never confirmed (1.3.385-403) He rather uses his hateful, vulgar and racist speech as a tool to serve his purpose, which is doing harm to Othello's reputation by teasing out racist reactions in other characters. "Othello has no defense against such unreasoning hatred" (Berry 324), which makes him an easy target for Iago who knows exactly how to take advantage of people's weaknesses (Cowhig 157). Iago is aware that this is the most effective way to make Othello fall from Brabantio's grace.

At the same time, Desdemona's father truly is a "racial bigot" (Bala Ruma 35). He likes entertaining Othello and inviting him to his house, but as soon as Othello wants to be with his precious daughter, all his racist sentiments come to the surface. He is enraged about the fact that his daughter got married secretly and, in addition, to an "ill-suited" man (Thompson 35). Suddenly, Othello is nothing but "damned" and a "foul thief", who has used "witchcraft" and "foul charms" in order to make Desdemona "run from her guardage to the sooty bosom of such a thing as thou." (1.2.59-81) Brabantio's choice of words shows that he follows Iago's argument of how Desdemona's relationship with Othello is a form of racial contamination: Othello's blackness is interpreted by him as filthy and contagious, because soot rubs off on anyone who comes in close contact with it.

Like Brabantio, Roderigo shows a racist mindset when it comes to Othello (Mason 160f.). His conversation with Iago reveals Roderigo's negative opinion of Othello and his eagerness to cause him harm. The main reason for his hatred

¹ There is a parallel in the first act of the play between Othello's 'theft' of Desdemona, and the Turkish attack on Cyprus, which are both considered Oriental acts of aggression by the Venetians.

Use footnotes for extra comments and notes, not for citation!

of Othello might be that he originally wanted to marry Desdemona himself, but is not an acceptable suitor in Brabantio's opinion and not allowed in his house anymore (1.1.94-100). Being "weak and silly" (Mason 160) and a generally disregarded character, he is someone who would be expected to be "intolerant about a class not their own or a race not their own" (160) by the audience.

Desdemona, on the other hand, admires Othello for being different from the "wealthy curled darlings of our nation" (1.2.68), as Brabantio calls the Venetian noblemen whom Desdemona rejects. He has made her fall in love with him by telling stories about his adventurous life (1.3.129-170) and his different cultural background, and she is more in love with the idea of him and the image he creates for her than with his actual self (Berry 326). Othello is aware of this, claiming: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed" (1.3.168). Significantly, Desdemona distinguishes between Othello's outward appearance and his character, probably because she is conscious of the suggestion that their marriage is unnatural (Berry 321). By saying "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (1.3.253), she confirms Iago's claim that she cannot be physically attracted to Othello. She implicitly admits that she married Othello not for his appearance, but despite it (Berry 326). Even she calls him "my noble moor" (3.4.26) and "the Moor, my lord" (1.3.189) instead of his actual name. This demonstrates that she is not free of stereotypical thinking, although she alleviates the term (Berry 322). She is attracted by Othello's "exoticism" (321), yet her lack of understanding of Othello causes her to be passive and apprehensive around him (ibid.). Nonetheless, she continuously makes an effort to appease Othello when he starts behaving strangely around her. She never stops trying to salvage their marriage even when Othello abuses her (4.1.27).

Emilia, Iago's wife and Desdemona's maid, does not seem to be prejudiced until she discovers that Othello has murdered Desdemona. Suddenly, she calls him "the blacker devil" (5.2.129), accuses him of being "as ignorant as dirt" (5.2.160) and never "worthy" of her mistress (5.2.155ff.). This outburst reveals Emilia's loathing of Othello, and that she has always seen him as a "black devil" (Berry 320).

In contrast, Cassio idolizes Othello for his rank in the military and his importance in the war against the Turks (Mason 155). He has no reason to be biased because he has everything he could possibly ask for: a high status in

Venetian society, attractiveness, and everything has come to him naturally (156). Similar to Cassio, the other flat characters all appreciate Othello throughout the first half of the play, for being the “brave Othello”, “noble Othello”, or “the warlike Moor” (2.1.38; 27). To them, he is a valuable member of their military force and important in the war against the Turks. The Duke in particular is not negatively impressed by the ‘improper’ relationship between Othello and Desdemona, for he needs Othello as his general in the war. Consequently, he only has mild words to spare for the furious Brabantio when the latter claims that Othello stole his daughter. He states: “I think this tale would win my daughter, too” (1.3.173) and claims “your son-in law is far more fair than black” (1.3.291). Of course, this final statement can be taken to express the Duke’s opinion that Othello is a fully integrated member of Venetian society and does not represent the ‘Other’ anymore. On the other hand, it expresses a racist mindset, too, because the Duke praises Othello’s ‘white’ or ‘European’ qualities that are seen as superior to his repressed oriental qualities.

3.3 Othello’s internalization of racist stereotyping

Othello is proud of his heritage and of his military achievements: “My services, which I have done to the signiory, shall out-tongue his complaints” (1.2.18). He fashions himself as an “exotic Venetian” (Berry 323) and firmly believes in the possibility of his own assimilation. He creates this image of himself in the hope of being accepted in Venice and loved by Desdemona (326). Erroneously, he assumes that he is integrated into Venetian society for being Venice’s high commander, when in actual fact he is simply someone they hired to fight their wars for them (Bala Ruma 35). Shakespeare’s title *Othello: The Moor of Venice* implies assimilation and, at the same time, alienation (Berry 322). It is a fitting choice, because it hints at the issue of Othello’s otherness in the play. Othello’s reasons to believe he is worthy of Desdemona do not answer to the issue he is confronted with, which is his ethnicity, and not to his course of life (Berry 324). He may be a converted Christian, which “brings him closer to the audience” (Cowhig 159), but this is still not sufficient for him to be accepted into the tight circle of the Venetian upper class. In addition, he is rhetorically skilled and eloquent, but the reason for to express himself in this fashion is to mask his

insecurity about his otherness, and to prove himself to be a suitable member of Venetian society (Berry 324).

His position in the military is of immense value to him and he takes it extremely seriously. When ordered to go to Cyprus, he wastes no time to leave, instead of enjoying his marriage, or taking care of Desdemona: “To his conveyance I assign my wife, with what else needful your good grace shall think to be sent after me” (1.3.286ff). In this regard, he is boring rather than ‘exotic’, just like the honourable Venetian he aspires to be. Hence, his self-perception in the first half of the play is not realistic, but rather based on wishful thinking.

When Iago begins to influence his thoughts negatively, Othello starts to realize everything that is supposedly wrong and unnatural with his and Desdemona’s marriage. The image he has tried to push away is brought back to Othello’s mind by Iago’s manipulation. He has created himself to be “the calm, resolute and modest commander, unaware of prejudice” (Mason 158) but Iago awakens in him the racial animosity he has tried to fight his entire life. Othello’s transformation in Act 3 is intensified by the fact that he was so placid and confident in the first two acts (Cowhig 158). Beneath his calm surface, there is passion and insecurity (Mason 161). Suddenly, his excessive jealousy turns into a furious and violent character who seems to confirm stereotypes of “Moorishness” (Berry 317). It is in Act 3, scene 3, that Iago manages to unhinge Othello’s self-confidence:

IAGO: She did deceive her father, marrying you;
And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks,
She loved them most.
OTH.: And so she did.
IAGO: Why, go to then,
She, that so young could give out such a seeming,
To seal her father's eyes up, close as oak,
He thought 'twas witchcraft: but I am much to blame,
I humbly do beseech you of your pardon,
For too much loving you.
OTH.: I am bound to thee for ever.
[...]
IAGO: My lord, I see you are moved.
OTH. : No, not much mov'd,
I do not think but Desdemona honest.
IAGO.: Long live she so, and long live you to think so!
OTH.: And yet, how nature erring from itself –
IAGO: Ay, there's the point: as, to be bold with you,
Not to affect many proposed matches,
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Whereto we see in all things nature tends

[...] But pardon me: I do not in position
Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear
Her will, recoiling to her better judgement,
May fall to match you with her country forms,
And happily repent. [...]
(*Going*) My lord, I take my leave.

OTH: Why did I marry? This honest creature doubtless
Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds. (3.3.210ff.)

Iago begins by reminding Othello of Desdemona's betrayal of her father, which proves that she is an accomplished role-player who can feign innocence when she has to. The central statement in this scene is Othello's unfinished sentence about "nature erring from itself", which shows how he begins to believe in his marriage as an act against nature. His words echo Brabantio's racist speech from Act 1 in which he claims that it takes witchcraft "For nature so preposterously to err" (1.3.63), a sign that, on the one hand, Othello begins to identify with Brabantio's role as betrayed patriarch, but on the other, to accept his status as outsider in Venetian society. Iago's 'concerned' arguments only articulate and reinforce the anxieties that Othello has begun to internalize already.

When convinced of Desdemona's infidelity, Othello sees the reason for her adultery in his skin colour: "Haply [i.e. perhaps] for I am black" (3.3.267). This illustrates, once again, his insecurity. During the play he keeps a low profile about his cultural background, except in his most private conversations with Desdemona. It seems as if he lacks a "a true sense of personal identity" (Berry 323), which is one of his main struggles. He wishes to be a Venetian, but cannot reconcile this image with his otherness. In his reflections, he cannot be both different, and at the same time human (330). The 'blackness' he discovers in Desdemona for her immoral behaviour affirms his own: "Her name, that was as fresh// as Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black// as mine own face." (3.3.389ff.) He sees everything that is considered despicable about his own black self in her, and establishes Desdemona as the stereotypical, diabolic, lascivious Moor (328). He asks her if she is a "strumpet" or a "whore" (4.2.83; 88), and though she promises him that she is none of these things, he cannot believe her. The reason for his "sexual disgust" (Berry 329) is the "specific question of race" (ibid.). Thus, with the murder of Desdemona, he tries to kill his own blackness. He is unable to separate her supposed betrayal from his own being. All the "black sensuality" (ibid.) she embodies needs to be dispatched. Upon seeing

Desdemona's dead body, and realizing what he has done, Othello denounces himself: "O cursed, cursed slave! Whip me, ye devils, from the possession of this heavenly sight! Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur, wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!" (5.2.274ff.)

The issue with the competing images of the Venetian noblemen and, on the other hand, the exotic moor, which have bothered Othello throughout the entire play, can only be resolved by his own death (Berry 330), as his final monologue shows:

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of them as they are; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice; then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well:
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme;
[...]; set you down this,
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian, and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him thus. (*Stabs himself*) (5.2.336-353)

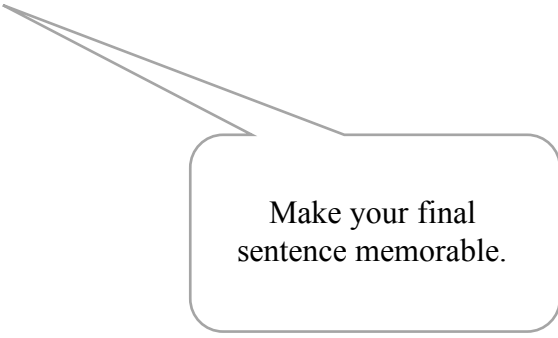
In his self-justification he remembers how he, as a representative of Venice, once punished an Oriental man for his transgressive behaviour in Aleppo. To prepare the ground for his own suicide with that story demonstrates that he splits his identity into the two different aspects of his personality that he has tried to negotiate all the time. Obviously, he is unable to reconcile these two sides and attempts to maintain his honour by siding with his Venetian part and suppressing the Oriental one.

4. Conclusion

As my analysis has shown, otherness and racism are crucial factors in the dramatic conflict, but also in the performance history of *Othello*. Othello is constantly confronted with the need to re-adjust the representation of his identity. The othering and racial stereotyping practiced by Iago and Brabantio that Othello has to endure induce him to highlight his assimilation to Venetian values and his commitment to the interests of the Venetian republic. While he foregrounds his 'exotic' and adventurous side in private conversations with Desdemona, he plays the role of the dutiful and Europeanized servant to the state

Keep your conclusion concise and highlight your main results. Do not repeat all your findings chapter by chapter.

in public. Yet, this does not mean that his private face is more authentic than his public image and that his part of the assimilated Venetian is just a mask he wears in order to conceal his essential otherness. Such a reading would confirm the racist attitudes of the white Venetians who see Othello as a barbarian whose 'true' identity breaks through in his murder of Desdemona. Instead, Othello performs these different roles without being able to find a balance between them or to reconcile himself to a stable identity in a hostile social environment which reduces him to his skin colour. This is the tragedy of Othello.



Make your final sentence memorable.

5. Works Cited

Follow MLA guidelines throughout your paper. Distinguish between Literature and Criticism.

5.1 Literature

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Journal articles and book chapters are marked by double quotation marks. The journal itself is *italicized* (like a book).

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