

Why is Cassio the Successor? A Struggle for Self-Identity in *Othello* from the Viewpoint of Religious Conflicts in Early Modern Europe

Saki NIWA*

(Received 22 October, 2013)

Abstract

In this paper, I clarify the meaning of the last scene in *Othello*, in which Cassio, a Florentine, succeeds the reign of Cyprus in spite of the fact that many characters in this play are Venetians. I focus particularly on the historical background which I believe is closely related to the dramatic situation of each character, and analyze how the intertwined relationship of Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism in early modern Europe is reflected in their descriptions.

Key Words

Moor, Catholics, Venice, succession, Cyprus

Introduction

Shakespeare's *Othello* is mainly based on *Gli Hecatommithi* (1566?), a novella by Italian writer Giraldi Cinthio (1504-1573). Although the plot of the play is fundamentally similar to Cinthio's novella, there are many aspects which we cannot find in Cinthio's original source, and such aspects contribute to make *Othello* unique and profound as well as complicated and controversial. For example, Shakespeare created several new characters for his play, such as the clowns in Act 3, Scene 1. In addition, the description of Iago and his rather psychotic elocution is more deliberate, and the scene in which Othello kills his young wife is quite different from what Cinthio describes in his original novella. As a result, the theme of the plot, which is clearly given in Cinthio's original source, is made rather ambiguous in Shakespeare's *Othello*, or the play even raises new questions about what the theme of this play is.¹

One certain point is that we cannot analyze *Othello* without recognizing the problems of race, religion, and history at that time. The recent critics particularly emphasize the importance of the Muslim world which surrounded the early modern Europe and of its influence on the understanding of this play, because Shakespeare refers to the existence of Turk, a largest Muslim empire during the Elizabethan and Jacobean era.² In this paper I would like to suggest that we should consider the historical background of *Othello* not from the binomial point of view as Christianity and Islam, but in triangular perspective: Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. The reason is that *Othello* is set in Venice and Cyprus, both the Catholic world, and yet most of the audience of this play was probably English, the audience of the

* (Associate Professor, Kagoshima University)

Protestant country.

Othello and Cyprus: The Border between the Christian and Islamic Worlds

As in Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi*, the first scene of *Othello* is set in Venice, the republic where various races encounter and negotiate through mercantile activities. The setting is, however, soon shifted to Cyprus. Othello is sent to this island as a general who is most suitable for ruler. The detail of Turkish threat in Cyprus is mentioned in Act 1, Scene 3.

2 Senator: . . . yet do they all confirm

A Turkish fleet, and bearing up to Cyprus.

Duke: Nay, it is possible enough to judgement:

I do not so secure me in the error,

But the main article I do approve

In fearful sense.

. . .

1 Senator: . . . When we consider

The importancy of Cyprus to the Turk,

And let ourselves again but understand

That as it more concerns the Turk than Rhodes,

So may he with more facile question bear it,

For that it stands not in such warlike brace,

But altogether lacks the abilities

That Rhodes is dressed in. (1.3.7-26)³

There is no mention of Turk in Cinthio's story, though he of course hinted it, so we should recognize that, by referring to Turk, Shakespeare brings out the geographical and at the same time religious importance of the location: how this island [Cyprus] is situated as the border between the Christian world and the Islamic world.⁴ Moreover, the situation that Othello is sent to this island indicates that *he* is described as a border himself, because he is born "Moor" and yet he is a Christian.

The historic moment of Christian victory at the War of Lepanto in 1571 might have been fresh in the memory of the audience of *Othello*. The fact is, however, that the threat of the Islamic world was not completely taken away because Ottoman empire continued to influence the Mediterranean islands and, as Mater introduces some examples, there were many reports about Europeans who converted to Islam in the 16th century (1998, 63-69). In this way the Islamic world was a threat to the European world not only for its political power but also for its spiritual influence on the European people. In which case,

how should we understand the dramatic situation of Othello? Why is he described as a “Moor” and at the same time Christian? What is the meaning of his situation? In a sense, Othello is described as a character who embodies the desire of the Christian world of being superior to the Islamic world. The fact is that there were few cases of converted Christian, much less converted Protestant in England in the 16th century.

While the historical documents provide very few examples of Muslim conversion to Christianity in England, literary works are full of such conversions. . . . All these conversions were fictional and were produced by an English literary sensibility that was conscious of the failure to fulfill New Testamental and ideological goals in converting the Muslims: fiction served to make a bitter truth more palatable (1998, Matar 130).

In spite of the tension of war with Turk in Act 1, Scene 3, the audience is told the victory of Venetian side, and Othello, “the Moor”, is in the middle of this war as a Christian hero.

Venetian Society Accepts and Rejects Othello

Venetian society seems to accept Othello as one of its members at first. First, he is promoted to general of the Venetian fleet. The navy took a very important role in Venice to expand its seaborne trade and defend its wealth against foreign power, so they usually chose a native Venetian as a leader on the sea. So it is quite natural that Iago be jealous of Othello’s exceptional promotion. Second, Othello is married to the daughter of the Senator, high rank in Venetian society. In addition, there is a disparity of age between him and Desdemona. This is also unusual in the real society of Venice, even if Othello is brilliant in the battlefield. Moreover, he is a Christian. Surely the audience expects that he was brought up in a pagan world as he tells in Act 1, Scene 3, so it is probable that he converted to Christianity at some point. These exceptional situations mean that Othello is described as a converted Christian who is accepted in Venice.

Desdemona continues to love Othello to the end of her life. She is described as a different woman from Desdemona in Cinthio’s novella, in which Desdemona is repentant that she got married to the barbaric Moor against her parent’s warning. Othello, who often utters his own fear of blackness in the play, also declares that he loves Desdemona in the hour of his death, while in Cinthio’s source the Moor cooperates with the Ensign to murder his wife and even tries to hide their crime by destroying the house where they lived together. Othello also declares as his dying word that he killed a Turk in Aleppo, the city where the murderer of Muslim is destined death penalty. It means that he still wants it to be admitted that he is a Christian.

Othello: And say besides that in Aleppo once
 Where a malignant and a turbaned Turki
 Beat a Venetian and Traduced the state,
 I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
 And smote him thus.

He stabs himself. (5.2.348-52)

At the final moment, however, Othello has to end his own life and break off his bond with Venetian society. First, he knows that *he* committed a crime by which he will be stripped of his citizenship. Second, he cannot brush away the consciousness of his color to the end of the play. The result is that, by killing both Desdemona and himself, he shuts out the possibility to have their own children: a mulatto. It is Othello who loses the chance to become a true Venetian. It means that he is a Christian on the one hand, while on the other hand he cannot be the member of Venetian society forever. Vaughan says that “he [Othello] is, after all, the *Moor of Venice* and, rejecting racial and national identities, he crafts a role for himself as the Christian crusader fighting against the Turk. . . . he is both Turk and crusader” (Tosi 29).

When we consider the reasons of Othello’s tragic end, however, we notice that it is not only caused by the fact that he is a “Moor”, but also caused by his weakness that he is seduced to kill his wife for the monster of jealousy, or the superstitious trick of Iago. In what follows, I investigate what Iago’s evil plot means. We should think of the relationship of his plot and the existence of Catholic Spain behind him. I will analyze what the monster of jealousy within Othello means and thereby make clear the true threat which is shown in this play.

Iago: A Trap of Superstitious Jealousy and What It Means

There are critics as Vaughan who analyze in detail the Muslim influence on the play.⁵ She emphasizes how the threatening invasion of Turkish Ottoman empire is reflected in the descriptions of Cyprus in *Othello* (19-32). It is true that Shakespeare was obviously conscious of the situation of Italy at that period and of how English audience might respond to the description of the chaotic situation within Mediterranean regions. There is, however, a more dreadful and menacing factor which erodes Othello’s heart and consciousness in the play: the monster of jealousy or the evil phantom of Iago.

It is ironic that Othello explains in Act 1, Scene 3, how his experiences in various pagan worlds attracted Desdemona and won her love. Brabantio complains that Othello’s witchcraft robbed his daughter of her sane judgment and consequently made her deceive her father.

Brabantio: She is abused, stol’n from me, and corrupted

By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks;
 For nature so preposterously to err,
 Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,
 Sans witchcraft could not. (1.3.60-64)

This time Brabantio emphasizes the superstitious nature of non-Christian or pagan magic which he thinks Othello uses, imagining him use some barbaric mesmerism to tempt his young daughter. It is, however, Iago's superstitious mesmerism that tempts Othello to the world of jealousy and it is Iago's evil plot that causes Desdemona's death. In this context we should notice that, at least for the English audience, the superstitious image of this play is connected with Iago rather than with Othello. Hamrick introduces the Catechism of 1572 which is edited by John More and Edward Dering. He mentions that they denounced Catholic as evil which seduced people by superstition (106-7). In a sense Iago's temptation of Othello was easily related with Catholic superstition for the English audience, who knew "the harsh antirecuscancy laws . . . designed not only to prevent the spread of Catholicism but also . . . to terrorize Catholics into conformity" (Marotti 35). Iago's name might be also helpful for the audience to imagine the threat of Spanish Catholic. "Iago's name suggests the Spanish killer of Moors, St. Jago" (Tosi 29). The audience is told that the true threat for Othello is not Turk but the superstitious and licentious image which Iago creates in the mind of Othello. The true enemy whom Othello has to fight with is this superstition. And this superstition is brought into his mind by the very Christian [Catholic] whose name sounds Spanish. Othello's effort to assimilate himself into the world of Venice is thus cut off. MacCulloch introduces Keatinge's explanation about the Protestant view of Catholic as "Satan":

For the Turk with his sword is not so cruel, but the bishop of Rome on the other side is more fierce and bitter against us; stirring up his bishops to burn us, his confederates to conspire our destruction, setting kings against their subjects, and subjects disloyally to rebel against their princes, and all for thy name. Such dissension and hostility Satan hath sent among us, that Turks be not more enemies to Christian, than Christians to Christians, papists to protestants; yea, protestants with protestants do not agree, but fall out for trifles (346).

Iago is, of course, denied succession to the Venetian fleet both by the Venetians and by the English audience. He is too Spanish to be accepted in Venetian society. When Othello asks Lodovico to question Iago why he committed such a crime, Iago declares that he will never say a word.

Iago: Demand me nothing; what you know, you know.

From this time forth I never will speak word. (5.2.300-1)

After all, Iago is a Venetian and yet he seems “more devil – than Christian” (Tosi 29). He is not permitted to be in the society where common good is sought. As Vaughan accurately points out, Iago, the symbolic character of the jealous monster, is, as he himself says in Act1, Scene 1, “I am not what I am” (1.1.64) (Tosi 29).

Cassio, A Florentine and Christian: His Role as the Symbol of Anti-Papacy

At the end of the play, the Duke declares that Cassio should succeed the reign of Cyprus. As Iago says in Act 1, Scene 1, Cassio is a Florentine. It means that he is “a foreigner” and is in the same situation as Othello (Sanders 66). In Cinthio’s story, there is no mention about where “the Corporal” is from. Then why is he described as a Florentine in Shakespeare’s *Othello*? It is natural to think that Shakespeare gives some special meaning to the setting of Florence as Cassio’s birthplace. In this section, I will investigate the role of Cassio by analyzing his characteristics and its relationship with the religious background, especially with the Protestant view of Italy at that time.

As Sanders explains, there was “a double image” of Italy in early modern England.

For Shakespeare’s contemporaries Italy had long possessed a double image. It was the land of romance, pleasure and refinement: the country of Ariosto, Petrarch and Castiglione; the Renaissance model for less civilized northern lands. It was also the sump of sophisticated vice, the birthplace of the atheistic politician Machiavelli, a country made up of the courts of vicious princelings where poisoning, whoredom and sodomy abounded (17).

Throughout the play, Cassio is described as a favorable character compared with Iago on the one hand. He is even compared with Othello because, while Othello gives an image of being barbarian due to his origin as a Moor, Cassio is white, brought up in Florence, and so sophisticated. He is “a great arithmetician” (1.1.19), and often referred to as a better partner for Desdemona, a daughter of the Senator and “a maid so tender, fair, and happy” (1.2.66). On the other hand, he gets drunk and causes a drunken brawl in Act 2, Scene 3. He also keeps company with a courtesan, Bianca, who is Shakespeare’s original character. He does not intend to stop meeting her, even if she is despised by Emilia as “O, fie upon thee, strumpet!” (5.1.121). We can connect such double image of Cassio with the image of Italy just as Sanders explains. That is, Cassio is not a Venetian, but he is a typical *Italian* and that is enough for him to succeed the rule of Cyprus.

In the 16th and 17th century, each council in Italy had more or less related with Rome or with the Papacy. Florence (Duchy of Tuscany) and Venice (Republic of Venice) were no exception, but their

relationships with Rome were a little different. Florence was the center of the Italian Renaissance in the 16th century. As Sanders says, Ariosto, Petrarch, and Castiglione were widely read. Such a phenomenon was smoothly accepted in Venice, where there were various perspectives of moral or virtue conveyed by various types of men from one place to another. While in Rome, the ways of thinking about virtue and moral were so strictly put on the Papacy, that such humanistic phenomenon was severely condemned. As MacCulloch says, there was reproach among priests in Rome concerning the moralistic chaos within Italy.

. . . among the works that the Church ordered Italians not to read were Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the poetry of Petrarch and Ariosto, the writings of Castiglione on conduct and Machiavelli on politics (407).

From the papal point of view, the character as Cassio is not permissible because his behavior is dogmatically immoral. On the contrary, the strictness of Rome's leadership was regarded as repugnant in Venice. MacCulloch explains the process of conflict between Rome and Venice, and how English Protestant viewed such a trouble as follows:⁶

. . . In Venice, more than anywhere else, voices were openly raised against the package of doctrinal and administrative reform that emerged from the Council of Trent, providing expression for the anger of many southern European bishops and conciliarists at Rome's efforts to centralize authority. The governors of the Republic listened sympathetically to local spokesmen of such clergy, particularly when quarrels between Rome and Venice over jurisdiction and the administration of church property culminated in 1606 in a tense stand-off between the Republic and Pope Paul V: the Pope laid Venice under an interdict. . . . the Venetian authorities ignored the interdict, . . . The affair was of huge interest to northern European Protestants, particularly to the open-minded King in the Atlantic Isles, James VI and I, who saw what was happening in Venice as offering great possibilities for his own vision of a rapprochement across the Reformation divide. . . . His ambassador in Venice, Sir Henry Wotton, optimistically commissioned a translation of the English Book of Common Prayer into Italian, and used it to show off English worship for Venetians in his embassy residence (409).

According to MacCulloch, English Protestant viewed the conflict among the Italian councils with interest and stood by the Venetian side. It is understandable that English audience would have been satisfied with the consequence of the play only if we remember how the English monarch broke off

*This is a revised version of the paper read at a symposium at the meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan: Kyusyu Branch held at Oita University on 29 and 30 October, 2011. I am grateful to Tetsuya Tonai, Takayuki Yamato, Junji Kobayashi, Takako Yamashita, and Yuko Sugiura for their helpful comments.

Notes

1. In *Gli Hecatommithi*, the only character who is given first name is Disdemona, whose name means “unfortunate” in Greek (Sanders 64). The theme of this work is: how we should behave in order to get a good spouse, so it means that this narrative gives readers the warning that young people will become “unfortunate” just as Disdemona if they protest their parents and marry some pagan against their parents’ wish or advice (Morrison 6). Disdemona repents having done a bad choice because she has to face her husband who changes suddenly and shows his barbaric nature. “. . . and I fear greatly that I shall be a warning to young girls not to marry against their parent’s wishes; and Italian ladies will learn by my example not to tie themselves to a man whom Nature, Heaven, and manner of life separate from us” (Bullough 248).
2. The relationship between England and the Ottoman Empire during Tudor and Stuart period has been analyzed from many different points of view by many different critics. For example, Matar explains how Turks and Moors were situated in early modern England and how Britons were treated among the Muslims (1999, 19-82).
3. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. Norman Sanders (Cambridge: CUP, 2003) 79. All further references to this work appear in the text.
4. According to Levith, “until 1570 Cyprus was under Venetian control, a frontier of sorts for Christian Europe against the Turks. . . . It represented a strategic fortress in the face of a perpetual Ottoman threat. It was also . . . a possible launching point for a new Christian Crusade to recapture the East” (29).
5. Andrea analyzes various types of women who were more or less related with Islam in early modern England.
6. Black explains the difficulties which the Holy Office of Rome had to face to control tribunals within Italy, especially “the most independent” Venice. He also says that “the Spanish Inquisition enjoyed” such condition (52).

Works Cited

- Andrea, Bernadette. *Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature*. Cambridge: CUP, 2007.
- Black, Christopher F. *Church, Religion and Society in Early Modern Italy*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Bullough, Geoffrey, ed. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. Vol. 7. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973.
- Hamrick, Stephen. *The Catholic Imaginary and the Cults of Elizabeth, 1558-1582*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009.
- Levith, Murray J. *Shakespeare's Italian Settings and Plays*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.
- MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700*. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Marotti, Arthur. *Religious Ideology & Cultural Fantasy: Catholic and Anti-Catholic Discourses in Early Modern England*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005.
- Matar, Nabil. *Islam in Britain: 1558-1685*. Cambridge: CUP, 1998.
- *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Morrison, Mary. *The Tragedies of G. B. Giraldi Cinthio: The Transformation of Narrative Source into Stage Play. Studies in Italian Literature*. Volume 4. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997.
- Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Ed. Norman Sanders. Cambridge: CUP, 2003.
- Tosi, Laura, and Shaul Bassi, eds. *Visions of Venice in Shakespeare*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.
- Wyatt, Michael. *The Italian Encounter with Tudor England: A Cultural Politics of Translation*. Cambridge: CUP, 2005.