

Othello (dir. Oliver Parker, 1995)

In his tragedies, Shakespeare vividly portrays humankind's vulnerability to fate, as well as humankind's resilience to the challenges that fate metes out. Through the alienation and moral degradation of his protagonists, Shakespeare invokes in his audience a sense of relatability; a realization that sudden twists of fate can make one "become a stranger in a world where they had once felt at home, and a stranger to the person that they used to be or thought they were."¹ Shakespeare's use of language, stage directions, and structure are crucial to engage the audience in the plight of the protagonist, whose transformation from an admired hero to a fallen one conveys the fragility of human sentimentality. Comparing the modes through which Shakespeare's work is presented, theatre versus television, allows for a deeper exploration of the multidimensionality of its functions.

In Othello for instance, Shakespeare presents a protagonist whose hamartia is a universally inherent human trait. Othello's naive tendency to trust reflects the human inclination to believe in the goodness of others, which in turn leads to a vulnerability that impacts judgment and invites manipulation. Looking at Act 3 Scene 3, occurring at the climax of the play, the audience realizes how Othello's all-consuming jealousy has transformed him from a loving and trusting husband to a man filled with envious rage, a man helpless in the face of his fear and insecurities. While the scene involves entries and exits of five characters, it is the interaction between Othello and Iago that encapsulates the power of words and the powerlessness of emotions.

For the theatrical analysis, this essay will refer to the RSC publication of Othello edited by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen. The 1995 adaptation of Oliver Parker's televised adaptation will be explored for the on screen analysis. Oliver Parker, adapted Shakespeare's play for a

¹<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/an-introduction-to-shakespearean-tragedy>

televised production and presented the play in a two dimensional world wherein there is absolutely no proximity between the audience and the thoughts of the characters. The effect of the lens works its way through both Iago's as well as Othello's points of views and powerfully demonstrates the extent to which Shakespeare conveys the consequences of human follies, the impact of which is a perpetual relatability. Considering the actions of the play from line 100 to 195 of Act 3 Scene 3, this essay will explore the difference between a theatrical and televised presentation of a Shakespearean tragedy.

Throughout the scene, it is Shakespeare's use of language that makes the audience aware of how human nature is fickle, feeble, and frivolous. Through Iago's dialogue and interaction with Othello the audience is made aware of Othello's vulnerability and insecurity that becomes self-destructive. Iago uses Othello's love for Desdemona as a weapon to manipulate and mould his mind toward suspicion and distrust. Exploring the scene through the lens of theatrical performance versus a televised presentation highlights the universality as well as the perpetuity of Shakespeare's portrayal of human follies and self-destruction. In contrast to the theatrical performance of creating foreshadowing through dialogue delivery and body language on stage, the televised version uses spatial and cinematic freedom to establish Othello's vulnerability and the beginning of his transformation. Furthermore, the use of close ups and zoom-ins allow the viewer a deeply personal interpretation of the moment.

In a theatrical performance, stage movements, use of props, lighting, and dialogue delivery are crucial to engage the audience in the limited space created on stage. Line 100, for instance, starts right after Desdemona and Emilia's exit, and begins with Othello's dialogue. There are no stage directions that indicate any tension or conflict in Othello's words as he declares his love for his wife and refers to her as "excellent wretch!"² However, it is through the use of an oxymoron that a stage actor playing Othello, would signify the intensity of his feelings of love as

²OTHELLO ISBN 978-0-230-57622-3

well as foreshadow his self-destruction as he believes that when he doesn't love her "Chaos is come again."³ The theatre with its restricted space counts on the actor's delivery and body language to convey the complexity of Othello's emotions.

Parker, in his televised adaptation, presents this moment with a wide angle shot of the castle and cuts to a quick exchange between Desdemona and Cassio as Othello and Iago enter from a compound below. Parker's abridgement of the dialogue between Desdemona and Othello is a deliberate attempt at adding a sense of urgency to the moment. The scene then cuts to a friendly sword sparring between the two men in which Othello manages to overpower Iago as the two women watch from above. Laurence Fishburne as Othello looks up at Desdemona and delivers the line while Kenneth Branagh playing Iago watches her with a smirk on his face. Parker's use of space in terms of scenic presentation of the compound below and the terrace of the palace above, symbolize the power as well as the peril of love.

While on stage the action would continue in the same space and at the same pace, it is the actors' effective use of stichomythia that would create a sense of tension. Shakespeare's choice of the iambic pentameter in the words "But for a satisfaction of my thought"⁴ spoken by Iago steer the thoughts of the audience too and imply that Cassio's intentions are not quite as noble as they seem. The dialogue continues to add to Iago's subliminal manipulation of Othello's thoughts as his trust begins to wane. Iago's questions are filled with implications of distrust for Cassio and yet his words sound innocently naïve. "Honest, my lord?"⁵ he answers with a question to Othello's question "Is he honest?"⁶

³OTHELLO ISBN 978-0-230-57622-3

⁴OTHELLO ISBN 978-0-230-57622-3

⁵OTHELLO ISBN 978-0-230-57622-3

⁶OTHELLO ISBN 978-0-230-57622-3

Parker uses the freedom of space and divides the same moment between the setting of a wash area and an armoury to convey Othello's rising doubts. The two men nonchalantly discuss Cassio's trustworthiness as they wash up and are seen surrounded by weapons. Close ups play a crucial role in establishing Othello's uncertainty and suspicion. Fishburne loads a rifle while Branagh is seen making notes in a book. The use of light and angles as the camera pans out to show both men diagonally facing each other, in the midst of swords and rifles further magnify the looming threat to Othello's love for his wife.

As the scene progresses, the absence of stage directions make it crucial for performers to deliver the word play between the two men. Whether it is the repetition of the word "honest" or "jealousy" or "love", it is up to the director and actor to invoke in the audience the ease with which words can impact the very core of one's convictions. Without any allegations or direct accusations, Iago's words convey the human tendency to trust as well as distrust with a fickle mindedness that can prove to be self-destructive. In many ways, the confines of a stage set can intensify the realization of the fragility of the power and powerlessness of love. Movements in terms of facing the audience of the other character could also enhance the relatability. Iago gradually but deliberately activates Othello's jealousy which is in most humans and inherent and often latent tendency.

Parker's adaptation utilises the advantage of the lens as well as spatial freedom to portray the dichotomous nature of love and trust. While Branagh moves around the weapons and talks about his own vulnerability, Fishburne keeps cleaning and loading the rifle. The camera cuts and zooms, sometimes to close up of their faces and sometimes to close up of Fishburne's hands loading the rifle. This then becomes a cinematic moment wherein the viewer realizes that Othello has reached a point of no return and is armed with rage and jealousy to avenge the sense of betrayal he feels.

Seen through two contrasting lens, the presentation of the scene invokes the realization of the power of two very different forms of entertainment. While theatrical performances can draw a live audience into the action of the play, a televised version can create a cocoon wherein the viewer is a manoeuvred into seeing exactly what the director wants them to see. While both forms have their unique aspects that allow deeper interpretation, the common factor remains the Shakespearean idea of human condition and its follies that is timeless and universal.