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Trabajo Fin de Grado

**Study of the literary
sources of Othello, by
William Shakespeare.**

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Introduction

The following document is a thorough analysis of one of the main tragedies written by William Shakespeare, *Othello*. It was written at the very beginning of the seventeenth century, about 1603. It is a story about an old black man, Othello, who married a young white lady, Desdemona. Due to several concerns, he has faith that his wife has been unfaithful and finally kills her in order to protect his honour.

William Shakespeare based his tragedy, mostly, on a short story previously written by Giovanni Battista Giraldi, also known as Cinthio: *The Moor of Venice*, published in 1566. It belongs to a collection of a hundred Italian tales named *Hecatommithi*, divided into two volumes split up into ten different decades which contains ten short tales each one.

In order to realize a complete and deep analysis of *Othello*, it is necessary to analyze both stories by separate and then, describe the differences and similarities of both tales.

Othello is not only based on the seventh story of the third decade but on more than one story. It is certain that the main influence in *Othello* is *The Moor of Venice* but the some other stories contain also certain influential factors that maybe were key elements for Shakespeare:

- Story one: a King of Scotland falls in love and tries to have his wife poisoned.
- Story two: a Mayor is untrue to his wife and, although she knows it, she refuses to do the same.
- Story four: a husband discovers that his wife is in love with another man, replaces himself in her bed and after it, reveals himself. At the end he forgives her.
- Story six: a husband finds his wife in adultery with a servant and some time afterwards, he kills both of them.

As we can realize, all these stories share common aspects in their plots, as the issue of love and the presence of unfaithfulness.

Othello is very similar to the sixth story in the sense that both stories concern revenge for honour.

The seventh story constitutes the main influence in *Othello*: a Moorish Captain marries a Venetian young lady despite her family's opinion. His Ensign accuses her to the Moor of being unfaithful and he kills her.

The Moor of Venice

2.1. Summary of the plot and main themes:

It is a tale that belongs to a collection of short stories; concretely, it is the seventh story contained in the third decade.

The tale narrates the story of a young white lady, Desdemona, and an old black man, the Moor, both living in Venice; they fall in love and get married despite her relatives' disagreement. While they are in Venice they love each other but when the Moor is sent to Cyprus everything changes. The Moor's Ensign falls in love with Desdemona and he wants to enjoy her but on his opinion, she loves the Captain. Then, he starts to hate her and tries to make the Moor believe that she is being unfaithful with the Captain. Using several tricks, the Ensign finally gets what he wants and at the end of the plot, the Moor decides to kill his wife.

Throughout this short tale there are different important themes that may be mentioned and described:

- Love: there is a love triangle composed by the Moor, Desdemona and the Ensign. Desdemona loves the Moor and he loves her but the Ensign falls in love with Desdemona despite she does not love him.
- Honour: it is an important element but Shakespeare gives more importance to it. It is the only important thing for the Moor; even he kills his wife not only for being unfaithful but in order to save his honour ("reputation").
- Unfaithfulness: Desdemona has not being unfaithful but the Ensign makes the Moor believe it.
- Revenge: the Ensign wants to take revenge because he thinks that Desdemona does not love her because she loves the Captain.

- Death: Disdemona is killed by his own husband but due to the Ensign's tricks.
- Jealousy: The Ensign is jealous because he thinks that Disdemona loves the Captain instead of him.

2.2. **Key elements:**

- Identity: the only character that receives a name is the main female character, Disdemona. The rest of the characters are named by using a nickname or their profession: the Moor the Ensign, the Captain, etc. The author does not want to give too much attention to their identity. He tries to give more importance to the facts rather than to the characters of the plot.
- There are several tricks used by the Ensign to create the Moor's doubt about Disdemona's unfaithfulness:
 - ❖ When the Moor deprives the Captain of his rank, Disdemona tries to reconcile them and the Moor tells it to the Ensign. He uses it in order to cause the Moor's doubt. But the Moor asks for an ocular prove.
 - ❖ The handkerchief is a key element and the most important one. The Moor gave it to Disdemona as a present when they got married and it is very important for the Moor but we do not know why; Shakespeare explores this element deeper. It is the final ocular prove that makes the Moor think everything about his wife's adultery.

2.3. Characters:

No much information is given about the characters of the short tale but the author gives to some of them a few characteristics that allows us to understand their behavior.

- ✓ The Moor. He is an old black man presented as a gallant, valiant man. He is chosen as Commandant of the soldiers. This character is named Othello by Shakespeare.
- ✓ The Ensign. He is presented with a handsome presence but with the most despicable nature. He falls in love with Desdemona and later he hates her. He has a little girl of three years old. Shakespeare gives him a name, Iago.
- ✓ The Captain. He is a very valiant man and very loved by the Moor. Shakespeare provides more information about this character and gives him an identity, his name is Cassio.
- ✓ Desdemona. She is a Venetian young lady, very beautiful and with a noble mind; she loves the Moor and gets married with him. Cinthio calls this woman Desdemona whereas Shakespeare calls her Desdemona.
- ✓ The Ensign's wife. She is an honest and fair young woman and she has a little girl. We do not know much information about her but in Shakespeare's tragedy, her name is Emilia.
- ✓ The Duke

Othello

It is one of the main tragedies written by William Shakespeare. It narrates basically the same story as Cinthio's tale, *The Moor of Venice*, but with new information and some differences. Othello is presented as a merciful character despite his race, which was not very usual in literature during Shakespeare's times; moors used to be described as villains; so the idea of a black man as a tragic and heroic protagonist was very original and unusual.

3.1. Description of main themes and key elements:

- ❖ Political theme: Shakespeare makes reference to the war between Venetians and Turks. Within the plot there are a lot of allusions to Cyprus, Venice and the war. By contrast, Cinthio does not provide much information about it.
- ❖ Love. Desdemona and Othello love each other despite her family's objection and despite their differences: Desdemona is much younger than Othello; she is a Venetian lady whereas he is a black man; he is described as an ugly man and she is said to be a very beautiful lady.
- ❖ Appearance. Iago does not show himself as he really is. He pretends to be an honest man but in reality he is a great villain. He does not show his real intentions in order to not be weak and obtain his own objectives. He tries to behave correctly in front of Othello in order to become one of his best friends and he wants that Othello trusts on him.
- ❖ Honour. It is a very important theme within the plot. Everything Othello possesses is his reputation (honour); if he loses it, he will lose everything because honour is the only important thing for a man. Iago makes Othello think that honour is the only thing they possess as men and Othello thinks he has lost it. That is the reason why he decided to kill Desdemona, in order to protect his honour.

- ❖ Death. This tragedy ends with Desdemona's death. She is killed by her husband because he thinks that Desdemona has been unfaithful with another man.
- ❖ Revenge. Iago wants to get revenge on Othello and Cassio. That is why he invents several tricks to make Othello believe that his own wife is having sex with the person who says to be his friend, Cassio.
- ❖ Racism. There are a lot of insults used to refer to Othello and to black people in general. When Iago refers to Othello, he never uses his real name; he always names him by using the term "moor", which is a pejorative term used to refer to the black community. Apart from this, Iago also uses many other terms and expression when he is talking about Othello:
 - "An old black ram is tupping your white ewe" 1.1.87-88:
On the one hand, Iago uses the term ram to refer to Othello because this animal is a representation of devil and is it black as him; he compares Othello with an animal, which is very indecorous. On the other hand, he also uses the verb 'to tup' which is used to refer to the sexual act carried out only by animals; so one more time he is comparing Othello with an animal.
 - "You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse" 1.1.109-110:
Iago again compares Othello with an animal, concretely, with a horse; he also uses the term 'Barbary', used to refer to Moors.
- ❖ Identity. Othello deals with this theme in a deep way. Every character is given a name and an identity. He provides a description of each one and different characteristics to show us who is every character.

3.2. Characters:

- ❖ Othello. He is the play's main character, the protagonist of the plot. He is an old Christian Moor, very respected and a valiant general of the armies of Venice. He is an eloquent and physically powerful man and according to the text he possesses a 'free and open nature', which is used by Iago to turn his love for his wife into a destructive jealousy. He is a good soldier but he is black and old and he falls in love with Desdemona; they get married in secret despite their differences. It is not easy to know if he is the hero of the play or not. Some readers consider him the antagonist of the play because he kills his wife; by contrast, other readers consider that the main antagonist is Iago because he is the person who makes Othello become crazy.
- ❖ Desdemona. She is Othello's wife and the daughter of the Venetian Senator, Brabantio. She is a young white lady who belongs to the Venetian aristocracy. Desdemona and Othello were married secretly because she was younger and white; due to that, nobody expected that a beautiful aristocratic young woman as Desdemona married him. She is a very faithful woman although Othello believes she is not thanks to Iago's assumptions. Her mother is not mentioned so we can guess that maybe she died when Desdemona was a baby or a little girl.
- ❖ Iago. He is Othello's ensign and, in my opinion, the main villain of the play. Othello is a doll and Iago plays with him as if he were a child. He is a person who is lying all the time but who never expresses his real intentions because if he does it, he would be weak. He uses many proverbs so that he can manipulate people's minds and he also tries to criticize Othello by using several terms, such as 'moor'. Due to his ill mind Desdemona is killed by her own husband.
- ❖ Cassio. He is Othello's lieutenant and a very honorable man. He is a young and inexperienced soldier; according to Iago, he is Desdemona's lover and the person who has betrayed his friend, Othello. He never drinks alcohol so he is very embarrassed after being implicated in a drunken fight in Cyprus and losing his

place as a lieutenant. Iago uses him to play with Othello's insecurities about his wife's fidelity.

- ❖ The Duke of Venice is the main person of the Venice's Government. He is the person who applies the law and he chooses how people have to pay their offense. He has great respect for Othello as a public and military servant.
- ❖ Brabantio is Desdemona's father and a Venetian senator. He is a friend of Othello so he feels betrayed when the general marries his daughter in secret.
- ❖ Emilia is Desdemona's attendant and Iago's wife. She is a cynical woman. She steals Desdemona's handkerchief and gives it to her husband, Iago.
- ❖ Roderigo is a jealous suitor of Desdemona; he is young and rich. He is convinced that if he gives money to Iago, he would help him to win Desdemona's hand. When he realizes that Desdemona has married Othello, he agrees to help Iago to kill Cassio.
- ❖ Bianca is a prostitute in Cyprus and her favourite customer is Cassio, who cheats on her with promises of marriage.
- ❖ There are many other characters which play a less important role in this tragedy: Montano is the governor of Cyprus whom Othello replaces; Lodovico is Desdemona's cousin and a noble Venetian. He acts as a messenger from Venice to Cyprus; Gratiano is Desdemona's uncle and Lodovico's father, a noble Venetian; officers; senators; messengers.

Differences between both stories:

4.1. The structure

Both stories present a different structure; *The Moor of Venice* is a short story whereas *Othello* is a long tragedy written in order to be represented in a theatre. That is why their internal structure is so different.

Othello is divided into five different sections or acts split up into several different scenes whereas *Hecatomitti* is a collection of short stories divided into ten different decades and each decade contains ten short tales. *The Moor of Venice* is the seventh *novella* in the third decade and it contains several pages without any type of division.

The distinction between both is due to their function; that is to say, *The Moor of Venice* is a short tale written in order to be read in a short period of time, whereas Shakespeare decides to write a theatre play. That is why the whole play is written by using dialogues between characters.

4.2. Title and identity

Shakespeare decides to use the name of the main character for the name of his play, as occurs with other of his tragedies; by contrast, Cinthio prefers to use the nickname of the main character, which is the name he gives to him in his tale, and the name of the city where he lives. He avoids to give him a proper noun. The decision of the title is related to identity:

Shakespeare explores this theme in a deep manner, whereas Cinthio avoids to pay too much attention to this issue. In Cinthio's story most of the characters are not named, the only one who is given a name is the main female character, Disdemona. By contrast, Shakespeare decides to give them an identity and to explore it thoroughly, giving them certain characteristics and providing a brief description of each one. It is certain that Shakespeare took all the characters used by Cinthio but he gave them an identity and introduced new characters, as Roderigo and Brabantio. An important difference between both stories, dealing with identity, is the lady's name; Cinthio calls her Disdemona whereas Shakespeare prefers to call her Desdemona. Shakespeare used the same name early provided by Cinthio but he changes the first vowel of this name.

Cinthio uses two different characters, a courtesan and a woman who work at the Captain's house, whereas Shakespeare uses only one character that combines the functions of both characters, Bianca.

At the end of the plot, within the fifth act, Lodovico asks for that person who has killed Desdemona and Othello says to him that he is the man who used to be Othello because he is not Othello anymore.

Lodovico: "Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?"

Othello: "That's he that was Othello? Here I am." 5.2.280-281

Othello, before killing himself, says something in order to emphasize his identity as a loyal soldier, which is how he wants to be remembered because he says that he has committed one only mistake. According to him, he was cheated by Iago because he had not been jealous before. He did not realize how precious Desdemona was.

"Soft you, a word or two before you go.

I have done the state some service, and they know't:

No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,

Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,

Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak

Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;" 5.2.336-342

Othello wants to be remembered as the ‘Base Indian [Iudean]’. Judean were associated with evil and they were considered to be associated with the Otoman Empire. Indians [Iudean] were considered ignorant because they did not speak Latin and they did not know anything about the Bible. Othello at the same time sees himself as a ‘malignant and a turbanned Turk’; by standing himself with these words, he is suggesting that he sees himself as an enemy of the Venetian state. The term ‘turbanned’ is a symbol of Islam. ‘Aleppo’ used to belong to the Otoman Empire, nowadays, it belongs to Cyprus. When he used the terms ‘circumcised dog’ he is also referring to the Otoman Empire.

“Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drops tears as fast as the Arabian tress
Their medicinable gum. Set you down this,
And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbanned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog
And smote him – thus!” 5.2.343-354

“I kissed thee ere I killed thee: no way but this,
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.” 5.2.3356-357

Othello wants to kill that part of himself that is yet Otoman. A Venetian innocent lady has been killed by an Otoman, so Othello says that he has to kill this Otoman man who has kill his wife and he kills himself.

4.3. Differences within the plot of both stories:

Throughout both stories we can find many differences between scenes and facts.

❖ The beginning of both plots is different:

The Moor of Venice starts to narrate directly about Desdemona's wedding whereas *Othello* begins with a conversation between Iago and Roderigo. Iago is really upset because he was going to be the lieutenant but Cassio is going to be it instead of him.

"It happened that a virtuous Lady of marvelous beauty, named Desdemona, fell in love with the Moor, moved thereto by his valor; and he, vanquished by the beauty and the noble character of Desdemona, returned her love; and their affection was so mutual that, although the parents of the lady strove all they could to induce her to take another husband, she consented to marry the Moor; and they lived together in such harmony and peace in Venice that no word ever passed between them that was not affectionate and kind" Page 2.

Desdemona and the Moor get married at the very beginning of the plot; her family wants to marry her with another man but we do not know who this man is. By contrast, Shakespeare gives an identity to this character, Roderigo.

By contrast, Shakespeare's tragedy begins with a dialogue between Iago and Roderigo. Iago is very upset because he is not going to be the lieutenant and he is speaking about it with Roderigo.

"Tush, never tell me, I take it much unkindly
That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse
As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this" 1.1.1-3

We realize that Desdemona has got married with Othello due to Iago's and Roderigo's conversation. They decide to go to tell everything to Desdemona's father, Brabantio.

❖ Politic theme and war:

Shakespeare refers directly to the war between the Christian Venetians and the Muslim Turks, whereas Cinthio does not mention anything about the Turkish menace. According to Cinthio's story, troops are sent to Cyprus in peacetime.

"Now it happened at this time that the Signoria of Venice made a change in the troops whom they used to maintain in Cyprus, and they appointed the Moor commander of the soldiers whom they dispatched thither." page 2

As we can realize there is no allusion to any war or to the Turkish menace. It happened at the very beginning of the plot, when Disdemona and the Moor have already got married. He is sent to Cyprus and she wants to accompany him on this journey.

By contrast, Shakespeare's play contains some references to the war, mainly at the beginning of the plot:

"For I do know the state,
However this may gall him with some check,
Cannot with safety cast him, for he's embarked
With such loud reason to the Cyprus wars" 1.1.145-148

"Tis oft with difference – yet do they all confirm
A Turkish fleet, and bearing up to Cyprus" 1.3.7-8

As we can realize, Shakespeare refers directly to the Turkish threat and to the war whereas Cinthio does not make any reference to it. The Moor is sent to Cyprus but we do not know anything about the war.

❖ The trip to Cyprus.

When the Moor is sent to Cyprus he proposes to leave his wife in Venice but she persuades him and finally she reaches it:

"If indeed there are toils and perils to encounter, I will share them with you. And in the truth I should think you loved me little were you to leave me here in Venice,

denying me to bear you company, or could believe that I would liefer bide in safety here than share the dangers that await you. Prepare then for the voyage with all the readiness which the dignity of the post you hold deserves.” page 3

In *Othello*, though also he suggests to leave Desdemona in Venice, she asks the Duke for permission to go with his husband on that trip. The character of the Duke has more relevance in Shakespeare’s tragedy than in Cinthio’s tale.

Duke: “What would you, Desdemona?”

Desdemona: “That I did love the Moor to live with him

My downright violence and scorn of fortunes
May trumpet to the world. My heart’s subdued
Even to the very quality of my lord:
I saw Othello’s visage in his mind,
And to his honours and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate,
So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for which I love him are bereft me,
And I a heavy interim shall support
By his dear absence. Let me go with him.” 1.3.248-260

The trip presents another difference between them: In Cinthio’s story the sea is tranquil as is mentioned in the following quotation:

“He embarked on board the galley with his wife and all his troops, and, setting sail, they pursued their voyage, and with a perfectly tranquil sea arrived safely at Cyprus.”

Page 3

By contrast, Shakespeare decides to change this tranquil sea used in Cinthio’s story by a storm:

“Nothing at all, it is a high-wrought flood:
I cannot ‘twixt the haven and the main

Descry a sail.” 2.1.2-4

❖ Military situation

The Duke explains Cyprus’ military situation when he realizes that the person he must judge is Othello. At the beginning he appears to be really angry, but when he realizes that this man was Othello his attitude changes because Othello is the only person whom Venice could not lose.

“The Turk with a most mighty preparation makes
for Cyprus. Othello, the fortitude of the place is best
known to you, and, though we have there a substitute
of most allowed sufficiency, yet opinion, a sovereign
mistress of effects, throws a more safer voice on you.” 1.3.222-226

When the Duke uses the term “opinion”, he refers to reputation, which was a fundamental factor for a man during that period of time. Othello’s reputation is what sends him to Cyprus and also what saves him because he has committed a big offense but due to his honour (reputation) he is not afraid of it. Marriages were a contract and the pride’s father had to pay for it.

❖ Tricks

Within both stories Iago or the Ensign wants to destroy Othello or the Moor by using several tricks. In *Othello*, Iago tries to manipulate Roderigo’s mind making him to think that Desdemona would abandon Othello to stay with him:

“These Moors are changeable in their wills – fill thy purse with money. The food that to him now is a luscious as locusts shall be to him shortly as acerb as colocintida. She must change for youth; when she is sated with his body she will find the error of her choice: she must have change, she must.” 1.3.347-352

Iago is trying to explain Roderigo why Othello’s marriage is not going to have success. According to him, the food which Othello loves now, he would hate in a recent time, we can realize that he is speaking about Desdemona comparing her with food. So, he is saying that Othello would hate Desdemona. Then, he says that Desdemona would

prefer younger men because Othello is much older than her; according to Iago, Desdemona is only interested on Othello's body but she does not love her. When she gets tired of him, she would look for a younger man.

Iago also says to Roderigo that Desdemona and Cassio could be in love because both of them are young, they belong to the same social class and both are intelligent.

“That Cassio love her, I do well believe it,
That she loves him, 'tis apt and of great credit.” 2.1.284-285

To start his plans, Iago needs Cassio to be in trouble and he knows Cassio very unsoldierly. Cassio is a very fashionable soldier and he never drinks alcohol so Iago makes him drink to have a fight with Roderigo. This fact makes Othello angry and he demotes Cassio.

“Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter,
Making it light to Cassio. Cassio, I love thee,
But never more be officer of mine.” 2.3.243-245

Within the third act, temptation scene, Iago tries to convince Othello that his wife is unfaithful by using some implicit expressions. For instance, in the following quotation, he is suggesting that something strange is occurring, that is why he uses “or if”:

“Nothing, my lord, or if – I know not what” 3.3.36

Iago manipulates Othello's mind but without accusing anyone; there is an important uses of his words that make Othello thinks what he wants. He manipulates Othello to think about his wife's adultery.

At the very beginning of the fourth act, Iago gets that Othello hears Cassio speaking about a woman, Bianca, but he thinks that Cassio is speaking about his wife, Desdemona. Iago, who has slept with Cassio, says to Othello that when he was sleeping he was dreaming and speaking about a woman.

Iago: "Will you think so?"

Othello: "Thinks so, Iago?"

Iago: "What, to kiss in private?"

Othello: "An unauthorized kiss!"

Iago: "Or to be naked with her friend in bed

An hour or more, not meaning any harm?" 4.1.1-5

❖ Racism

In both stories racism is very present within the plot but Shakespeare makes a deep use of it. Both use the term "moor" to refer to one of the main characters, which is a racist way of designing this character due to his skin colour and origin. But apart from this term, Iago uses other terms to reinforce the idea that Othello is different. When Iago or the Ensign refers to Othello or The Moor he always uses the term "Moor", he never uses his real name to refer to him.

"Make all the money thou canst. If sanctimony, and a frail vow betwixt an erring Barbarian and a super-subtle Venetian, be not too hard for my wits and all the tribe of hell, thou shalt enjoy her- therefore make money." 1.3.355-359

Iago is stereotyping Othello calling him "erring barbarian": he calls him "erring" because he is not from Venice. For Iago, who was born in Venice, to be erring is a bad thing. He also uses the term "barbarian" because this term is used to mean "uncivilized".

"The Moor is of a free and open nature
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
And will as tenderly be led by th' nose
As asses are." 1.3.398-401

Iago also compares Othello with an animal, concretely with a donkey. He says that Othello believes in the appearance of men. He is very trusting because he has a free and open heart; Othello does not conceive tricks. Iago is giving a good quality of Othello but at the same time he compares him with a donkey. He says that he could do whatever he wants with Othello because he trusts on him.

❖ Lust vs. revenge

In *The Moor of Venice*, the Ensign is driven by lust because he loves Desdemona but she does not love him. He thinks that she does not love him because she loves another man, the Captain.

“Now the wicked Ensign, regardless of the faith he had pledged his wife, no less than of the friendship, fidelity, and obligation which he owed the Moor, fell passionately in love with Desdemona, and bent all his thoughts to achieve his conquest.” page 3

“He therefore sought in various ways, and with secret guile, to betray his passion to the lady; but she, whose every wish was centered in the Moor, had no thought for this Ensign more than for any other man; and all the means he tried to gain her love had no more effect than if he had not tried them. But the Ensign imagined that the cause of his ill success was that Desdemona loved the Captain of the troop” page 3-4

By contrast, in *Othello*, Iago is driven by revenge. He wants to take revenge because Othello chose Cassio as his lieutenant instead of him. According to him, Cassio is less prepared than him to obtain this position; that is why he wants to take revenge on Cassio. In the following quotation we can realize what Iago thinks about Cassio.

“Forsooth, a great arithmetician,
One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,
A fellow almost damned in a fair wife
That never set a squadron in the field
Nor the division of a battle knows
More than a spinster – unless the bookish theoric,
Wherein the togged consuls can propose
As masterly as he. Mere prattle without practice
Is all his soldiership”. 1.1.18-26

At the same time, he wants to take revenge on Othello as well; that is why he says to Roderigo that Othello has had sex with his wife; in order to have a supposed real reason

to take revenge on him. Within the first act, Iago says that his wife has been unfaithful with Othello.

“But for my sport and profit. I hate the Moor
And it is thought abroad that ‘twixt my sheets
He’s done my office.” 1.3.385-387

Iago says to Roderigo that Othello has done his work, that is to say, he has had sex with Iago’s wife. By contrast, Cinthio’s tale does not say anything about it. The Ensign is driven by the love he feels for Desdemona. Iago is not in love with Desdemona as occurs in Cinthio’s story, and he does not think that she loves Cassio. He only says that Desdemona loves Cassio in order to manipulate Othello’s mind but Iago does not believe it. He uses it as a trick to obtain what he wants.

To sum up, in both stories revenge is present but due to different factors. In Othello, Iago wants to get revenge on Othello and Cassio due to professional reasons; whereas in The Moor of Venice, the Ensign is driven due to lust, because he is in love with Desdemona; and later he is driven due to hate, because Desdemona does not love him and his love for her changed into hate.

❖ Honour

Within both stories honour is a key element since it is the most valuable thing that a man can possess. Although in Cinthio’s story it is important, Shakespeare gives more relevance to it.

“Till I am evened with him, wife for wife...
Or, failing so, yet that I put the Moor
At least into a jealousy so strong.” 2.1.297-299

According to Iago, Othello has destroyed his reputation because he has had sex with his wife, Emilia; that is why he says “wife for wife”: he wants to destroy Othello’s reputation. At the same time, he wants also to destroy Cassio because he thinks he could have sex with Emilia too. Iago is confused because he has plans but not the details for

these plans. He uses a proverb which means that evil is not a question of ideas but a questions of acts. If you want to do something evil, you do not have to think about details.

“Tis here, but yet confussed:

Knavery’s plain face is never seen, till used.” 2.1.309-310

When Cassio is demoted he says that he has lost his reputation; due to the loss of his honour he is not a man, he is not a human being any longer. According to Cassio, we are animals but with honour, so if we lose our honour, we remains animals.

“Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have

lost my reputation, I have lost the immortal part of

myself – and what remains is bestil. My reputation,

Iago, my reputation!” 2.3.258-261

But Iago says that reputation is not so important. According to him, sometimes you lose it and sometimes you deserve it. But his real intentions are different; he wants that Cassio speaks with Desdemona to ask her to speak with Othello to pardon him.

“As I am an honest man I thought you had

received some bodily wound; there is more of sense

in that than in reputation. Reputation is an idle and

most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost

without deserving. You have lost no reputation at all,

unless you repute yourself such a loser.” 2.3.262-267

❖ The handkerchief

It is a common element in both works but with some differences: Shakespeare gives more importance to it and explains that it was a present given by the Moor’s mother to him just when she was going to die. His mother received it from an Egyptian charmer. If the wife had the handkerchief, her husband would love her, but if she lost it, her husband would hate her and would go with another woman.

“That’s a fault. That handkerchief

Did an Egyptian to my mother give,
She was a charmer and could almost read
The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it
‘Twould make her amiable and subdue my father
Entirely to her love; but if she lost it
Or made a gift of it, my father’s eye
Should hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt
After new fancies. She, dying, gave it me
And bid me, when my fate would have me wive,
To give it her. I did so, and – take heed on’t!
Make it a darling, like your precious eye! –
To lose’t or give’t away were such perdition
As nothing else could match.” 3.4.57-69

When Othello uses the term “Egyptian”, maybe he refers to a Gypsy charmer because gypsies were related to Egyptians. So this handkerchief could represent the handkerchief’s test of the gypsy culture used to prove prides’ virginity. The handkerchief appears in Cassio’s hands which could mean that Desdemona has lost her virginity with him; due to several factors she has not have sex with Othello yet.

Cinthio does not explain why it is so important for the Moor; what we know is that it is very treasured by him. It is a very important symbol in both stories.

When the lady loses it, Othello demands a lot for it whereas in Cinthio’s tale, the Moor is not such impatient. He asks her to look for it in another time.

Another difference between them is the way in which the lady loses her handkerchief. In Cinthio’s tale, there is a character who plays an important role on this fact: the Ensign’s daughter.

“The Ensign had a little daughter, a child three years of age, who was much loved by Disdemona, and one day, when the unhappy lady had gone to pay a visit at the house of this vile man, he took the little child up in his arms and carried her to Disdemona, who took her and pressed her to her bosom; whilst at the same instant this traitor, who had

extreme dexterity of hand, drew the kerchief from her sash so cunningly that she did not notice him, and overjoyed he took his leave of her.” Page 6

By contrast, Shakespeare prefers to omit the figure of this child and create a different setting. Iago knows that this handkerchief was very valuable for Othello and he wants to get it, so he manipulates in some way his wife to obtain it from Desdemona.

“No, faith, she let it drop by negligence
And, to th’advantage, I being here, took’t up. 3.3.315-316

Emilia gives the handkerchief to Iago and he gives it to Bianca, who finally gives it to Cassio. Knowing that, we can imagine more or less what Iago is planning. As he knows the great importance of this handkerchief for Othello, he also knows that if Othello sees that handkerchief on Cassio’s hands, it would be a strong prove of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness.

“I have use for it. Go leave me.
I will in Cassio’s lodging lose this napkin
And let him find it. Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ. This may do something. 3.3.323-327

❖ The Ensign’s wife is too afraid to speak out about her husband’s acts whereas Iago’s wife, unwittingly, helps her husband.

“I am glad I have found this napkin,
This was her first remembrance from the Moor.
My wayward husband hath a hundred times
Wooed me to steal it, but she so loves the token
- For he conjured her she should ever keep it –
That she reserves it evermore about her
To kiss and talk to. I’ll have the work ta’en out
And give’t Iago: what he will do with it
Heaven knows, not I,” 3.3.294-302

❖ Shakespeare makes use of two different locations

Othello and Desdemona has not have sex because he killed her on the third night. Othello says that Desdemona has been unfaithful many times but it cannot be possible since they got married only three days before. We can say that there are two different clocks: the first one is the real time, the three days before he killed her; the second one is a subjective clock because Othello says that his wife has been unfaithful for many times.

❖ In the fourth act of Shakespeare's tragedy, Desdemona asks Iago to speak with her husband because she does not understand why he is behaving so strange with her. By the same way, Disdemona ask for some help but with a difference; she asks the Ensign's wife to speak with her husband about it.

"O God, Iago,
What shall I do to win my lord again?
Good friend, go to him, for, by this light of heaven,
I know not how I lost him." 4.2.150-153

"But as I know the Moor is on such terms of friendship with your husband, and communicates to him all his affairs, I pray you, if you have heard from him aught that you may tell me of, fail not to befriend me." Page 8

❖ Death:

In both stories the female character dies but the way in which both are killed is different. During the fifth act, Othello strangles Desdemona while she begs for her life. He makes it looks just as a justice's action, as a kind of sacrifice that he has to do in order to protect naïve husbands. He acts as a judge and also as an executioner. By contrast, in Cinthio's story the Ensign plays an important role on her death. The Moor and the Ensign plan how to kill Disdemona but trying to appear that it has been an accident. They pretend to beat her and simulate that it has been caused because the ceiling has fallen down.

"The unhappy Disdemona rose from bed, and the instant she approached the closet, out rushed the Ensign, and being strong and of stout nerve, he beat her cruelly with the bag of sand across her back; upon which Disdemona fell to the ground, scarce able to

draw her breath; but with the little voice she had left, she called upon the Moor for aid.”

Page 10

Desdemona dies before the morning whereas Disdemona dies when they are going to bed during the night.

“On the following day Disdemona was buried, followed to the grave by the universal grief of the people.” Page 10

The Moor and the Ensign discuss about the best way to kill Disdemona and they are not very sure about it, whereas Othello and Iago proposes two different ways.

“A plan comes to my mind, which will give you satisfaction and raise cause for no suspicion. It is this: the house in which you live is very old, and the ceiling of your chamber has many cracks; I propose we take a stocking, filled with sand, and beat Disdemona with it till she dies; thus will her body bear no signs of violence.” Page 9

Othello: “Get me some poison, Iago, this night. I’ll
not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty
unprovide my mind again. This night, Iago.”

Iago: “Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed –
even the bed she hath contaminated.” 4.1.201-205

When Othello is going to kill Desdemona, he asks her if she has prayed and asked for pardon for her sins but without accusing her; by contrast, the Moor, directly, accuses her of being unfaithful to him.

“Therefore confess thee freely of thy sin,
For to deny each article with oath
Cannot remove nor choke the strong conception
That I do groan withal. Thou art to die.” 5.2.53-56

“But the Moor, leaping from bed, exclaimed, ‘Thou wickedest of women, thus has thy falseness found its just reward, the recompense to wives who, counterfeiting love, place horns upon their husbands’ brows’.” Page 10

Another difference between them has to do with the attempt to kill Cassio or the Captain. Whereas Iago pray Othello for being the executer, the Ensign, at the beginning, refuses to do it because he knows it would be difficult; but after being given some money he accepts to do it, by contrast, Iago does not receive money for his work.

“And for Cassio, let me be his undertaker. You
Shall hear more by midnight.” 4.1.208-209

“Until at length, after much entreating, and being richly paid, the Moor prevailed on him to promise to attempt the deed.” Page 8

Similarities between both stories

It is easy to realize that Othello's main influence was *The Moor of Venice* because they share many different characteristics:

- ❖ The plot is the same in both stories but with several differences, which has been explained in the previous pages, but with the same tragic ending. In both stories, an innocent young lady is killed by his old and blank husband due to a villain's mind.

- ❖ When the Moor is sent to Cyprus, he proposes to leave Desdemona in Venice because the trip by sea has a lot of dangers. Othello, by the same token, suggests to leave Desdemona there.

- ❖ When the Moor demotes the Captain, his wife, Desdemona, speaks with him so that she could convince him to pardon him.

“Not long afterwards it happened that the Captain, having drawn his sword upon a soldier of the guard, and struck him, the Moor deprived him of his rank; whereat Desdemona was deeply grieved, and endeavored again and again to reconcile her husband to the man.” Page 4

Equally, when Othello demotes Cassio, Desdemona speaks with his husband in order to make him change his opinion about Cassio and pardon him.

“I prithee name the time, but let it not
Exceed three days: i' faith, he's penitent,
And yet his trespass, in our common reason.” 3.3.62-64

- ❖ In both stories the husband wants to see a prove of his wife's unfaithfulness: Iago knows that Desdemona is not unfaithful but Othello asks him for some kind of ocular prove, but he does not want to see them.

“Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore,

Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof,” 3.3.362-363

In the same way, the Moor asks the Ensign for another prove about his wife’s adultery.

“Make thou these eyes self-witnesses of what thou tell’st, or on thy life I’ll make thee wish thou hadst been born without a tongue” page 5

❖ Unfaithfulness is a key element in both stories; the female character is killed due to this theme. Within Shakespeare’s tragedy, Iago invents that Desdemona has been unfaithful to her husband, Othello, with another man, in this case, Cassio. By the same token, the Ensign also invents that Desdemona. That is why Othello or The Moor thinks that his wife has been unfaithful and he decides to kill her.

In the third act, Iago speaks with Othello about initial women’s reputation. According to him, to be unfaithful has been a Venice’s characteristic. He uses the term “our country” to designate Desdemona and Iago’s country, but not Othello’s country.

“I know our country disposition well –
In Venice they do let God see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience
Is not to leave’t undone, but keep’t unknown” 3.3.204-207

Iago says to Othello that he is not going to be accepted because he is different. For him, Desdemona’s love is unnatural because Othello is black, older and from a different culture and country. So that, Iago says to Othello that if she does not love him, she would cheat on him and if she loves him, she would also cheat on him due to her nature. According to Iago, the unnatural behavior in Desdemona is that she married him.

“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 –
Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,

Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.
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.” 3.3.232-242

❖ The handkerchief constitutes a common element for both stories. It represents an important issue in the sense that the loss of this element is the final proof that the Moor needs to confirm his doubts about his wife.

There is a common dialogue, both with different contents but the same meaning, between the husband and his wife when she loses the handkerchief and he asks for it. Although in Shakespeare’s tragedy, Othello is more demanding as we have seen in the previous section.

Othello: “Lend me thy handkerchief.”
Desdemona: “Here my lord.”
Othello: “That which I gave you”
Desdemona: “I have it not about me.”
Othello: “Not?”
Desdemona: “No, faith, my lord.” 3.4.52-57

“I know not how it is – I cannot find it; can you, perchance, have taken it?”
“If I had taken it,” said the Moor, “why should I ask it of you? but you will look better another time.” Page 7

❖ When Cassio is hurt he says something very similar to what the Captain says:

“My leg is cut in two.” 5.1.72

“Having formed this resolution, the Ensign, going out one dark night, sword in hand, met the Captain on his way to visit a courtesan, and struck him a blow on his right thigh, which cut off his leg and felled him to the earth.” Page 9

❖ In both stories, it is difficult to understand if Othello and the Moor are the hero of the plot or not and Iago and the Ensign are the villain of the plot who make the Moor kill his wife.

❖ Both, the Ensign and Iago, suffer torture when everybody realizes that they are the villain of the plot.

“To you, lord governor,
Remains the censure of this hellish villain,
The time, the place, the torture: O, enforce it!
Myself will straight aboard, and to the state
This heavy act with heavy heart relate.” 5.2.365-369

“The Signoria of Venice, when they heard of the cruelty inflicted by a barbarian upon a lady of their city, commanded that the Moor’s arms should be pinioned in Cyprus, and he be brought to Venice, where, with many tortures, they sought to draw from him the truth.” Page 11

Conclusion

In my opinion, Shakespeare read the tale written by Cinthio and decided to write a play to be represented on a theatre. If we read both works carefully, we can notice that both of them narrates the same story but with a lot of differences; the main one is the structure of both works since Cinthio's work is a short tale and Shakespeare's work is a long tragedy written in dialogues. As we have explained before Shakespeare writes this tragedy by means of several changes and he also adds new information and characters.

The end of both stories is a very important topic nowadays: an honest and innocent woman is killed by his husband. A lot of woman die every day in our society due to male chauvinism and in both stories a woman is killed because his husband is a jealous person and thinks that she has been unfaithful.

Gender violence and mistreatment was present during Shakespeare's times but it is still present in our actual society despite the evolution in time. In my opinion it is what remains us animals and not the loss of our honour; we must treat people as we want to be treated and there is no reason to hit a woman. When we talk about gender violence or about mistreatment we always thinks about a bad man hitting his wife but it is not necessary like that; nowadays there are also many men who safer mistreatment by some women. Currently we must inform against anyone who mistreat other people.

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