**Is Othello a racist play and what was Shakespeare’s angle?**

**Race now and in the world of the play – what the critics say**

Included here are five extracts from criticism, exploring different aspects of race in the play. You could each read all five extracts and talk about them as a group, or you could read one each and discuss your findings.

**Reading one – Catherine Belsey**

Read and talk about Catherine Belsey’s description of the differences between the way

Shakespeare’s early audiences might have thought about race and modern views. How

does this influence your reading of the play?

Critics [...] might be interested in the historical difference between our own perceptions of blackness and those of Shakespeare’s early audiences. The play was the product of a society already fascinated by travellers’ tales of distant cultures, and beginning to be interested in the mercantile possibilities

of colonial conquest. Some of this appears in Othello’s stories of cannibals and men with shoulders above their heads, as well as the references to his own captivity and sale into slavery (we should, perhaps, remember that Africans enslaved each other at this time, as well as being victims of the European slave trade). Imperial values developed a mythology of white civilisation and black barbarity, which readily mapped onto an existing system of differences, familiar from Christianity on the one hand and secular love poetry on the other, between what was fair, beautiful and good and all

that was dark, ugly and evil.

**Catherine Belsey, ‘Shakespeare: interpretative contexts’ in *Literature in Contex*t, ed. Rick Rylance and Judy Simons (2001)**

**Reading two – Ruth Cowhig**

Considering *Othello* in the context of early modern England, Ruth Cowhig suggests that

Shakespeare is doing something quite radical and shocking for his audience:

Only as we recognise the familiarity of the figure of the black man as villain in Elizabethan drama can we appreciate what must have been the startling impact on Shakespeare’s audience of a black hero of outstanding qualities in his play *Othello*. Inevitably we are forced to ask questions which we cannot

satisfactorily answer. Why did Shakespeare choose a black man as the hero of one of his great tragedies? What experience led the dramatist who had portrayed the conventional stereotype in Aaron in 1590 to break completely with tradition ten years later? Had Shakespeare any direct contact with black people? Why did he select the tale of Othello from the large number of Italian stories available to him?

**Ruth Cowhig, ‘Blacks in English Renaissance drama and the role of Shakespeare’s *Othello*’ in *The Black Presence in English Literature*, ed. David Dabydeen (1985)**

**Reading three – Julia Briggs**

■ Read Julia Briggs’ description of the way in which Elizabethan society used

the words ‘black’ and ‘fair’ and the associations these had. Talk about how this contextual

knowledge might alter your interpretation of the ways in which the words ‘black’ and ‘fair’

are used thoughout the play.

Elizabeth’s edicts suggest that her society discriminated against people with different colour skin in the same way that many societies still do today; the point that ‘most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel’, appears as something of an afterthought in the 1601 proclamation. As a colour, blackness was associated with the devil, evil-doing, and death,

and from the mid-sixteenth century it reflected a new awareness of visible difference by acquiring aesthetic overtones, as the antithesis of ‘fair’, which had traditionally [...] been more highly valued and more fashionable than dark skin since it was already a measure of status: only the privileged could afford to avoid sunburn and the darkening of the skin that resulted from labour out of doors. But now difference of skin colour was defined in terms that rated pale European skins above darker complexions.

**Julia Briggs, ‘Africans, Jews and ‘Strangers’ in *This Stage-Play World* (1983, 1997)**

**Reading four – Ruth Cowhig**

Ruth Cowhig explicitly considers the role race plays in motivating Iago.

How far do you agree with her reading?

Iago’s destructive cruelty has seemed to many characters to be inadequately motivated. They have spoken of ‘motiveless malignity’ and ‘diabolic intellect’, sometimes considering Iago to be the most interesting character in the play. I think this is an unbalanced view, resulting from the failure to

recognise racial issues. Iago’s contempt for Othello, despite his grudging recognition of his qualities, his jealousy over Cassio’s preferment and the gnawing hatred which drives him on are based on arrogant racism. He harps mercilessly upon the unnaturalness of the marriage between Othello and

Desdemona [...]

The exclamation of disgust and the words ‘smell’ and ‘foul’ reveal a phobia so obvious that it is strange that it is often passed over. The attack demolishes Othello’s defences because this kind of racial contempt exposes his basic insecurity as an alien in a white society.

**Ruth Cowhig, ‘Blacks in English Renaissance drama and the role of Shakespeare’s *Othello*’ in *The Black Presence in English Literature*, ed. David Dabydeen (1985)**

**Reading five – Fintan O’Toole**

■ Read Fintan O’Toole’s views on the issue of race in the play. Talk about whether you agree or disagree with his arguments.

The most obvious thing about Othello has also been, in the way that the play has been taught and interpreted, the least obvious. Othello is black, but Othello, a man who engages our sympathies more immediately and more directly than any other Shakespearian tragic protagonist, could not, in a long

tradition of criticism of the play, possibly be black. How could a black man be so noble, so engaging, so obviously capable of such delicacy of feeling? There are two ways of dealing with this. One is to deny that Othello’s blackness has anything much to do with the play. The other, by the

vehemence with which it insists that Othello could not really be played as black on the stage, disproves the first, showing by its very racism the centrality of the colour of Othello’s skin to the play as a whole [...]It would, of course, be equally outrageous to see *Othello* as a play about racism in a modern sense. Shakespeare’s England was not a multi-racial society or the centre of a multi-racial Empire as it would later become. At the same time, though, Shakespeare was certainly conscious of race. If there was no large black population in his England, there were significant numbers of

black people, significant enough for Queen Elizabeth to complain in 1601 of being ‘discontented at the great numbers of Negars and blackamoors which are crept into the realm’. And we know that Shakespeare was aware of the fear, revulsion and sexual disgust which blackness could invoke in a

contemporary audience because he used it quite frequently. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* is glad to be rid of the Prince of Morocco and ‘all of his complexion’. The King of Naples in *The Tempest* is criticized for having married his daughter to the King of Tunis even though the court had pleaded

with him not to ‘loose her to an African’. Hamlet talks of his mother’s desire to ‘batten on this Moor’, a pun in which ‘Moor’ is used as the opposite of ‘fair’. Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* is an atheist and an ‘inhuman dog’. What is unusual about *Othello* then, is not that it uses racial

antagonisms, but the attitude it adopts towards them. For if, in *Titus Andronicus*, it is the Moor who is an ‘inhuman dog’, in *Othello* it is not the Moor, but his tormentor lago, who is described as an ‘inhuman dog’. (Act 5 Scene 1 l.64) [...]

The important thing, indeed the crucial thing, for an understanding of what happens in the play, though, is that this racism isn’t just the context in which Othello lives. It has entered his mind and his soul. It is an integral part of him, a piece of the outside world which he carries around in his most

intimate, private self. It is the connection between the world around him and his thoughts, desires, feelings. Iago is able to influence Othello, not because Othello is stupid, or because he carries jealousy like an original sin stamped on his soul, but because lago makes this connection. Iago’s brilliance lies not in what he puts into Othello’s mind, but what he draws out of it. He takes what is already there, and gives it ‘a local habitation and a name’, takes shame and doubt and gives them visible substance.

**Fintan O’Toole, *Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life* (1990, 2000)**