A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on

William Shakespeare’s
Othello

Edited by Andrew Hadfield

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First performed around 1601, *Othello* remains one of William Shakespeare’s most controversial yet popular plays. This volume offers those new to the play all the information they need for an informed and wide-ranging study.

Andrew Hadfield first examines the historical and literary contexts of the play, through a concise, accessible overview, a chronology and reprinted documents from the period. He covers, among other issues, *Othello*’s Venetian setting and contemporary representations of Moors. The second section of the book traces various interpretations of the play, from the earliest responses through to modern critical texts as well as stage and film interpretations. In this section, all reprinted materials are accompanied by explanatory headnotes. The sourcebook then examines key passages of the play in detail. Each passage is reprinted in full, along with headnotes and annotations offering crucial guidance to Shakespeare’s language and the critical issues which surround the text. Throughout the volume, cross-references link together the contextual materials, critical responses and key passages, enabling those new to the play to make their own original yet informed readings of the text.

Offering not only a wealth of documents but also the guidance required to make the most of what they offer, this Routledge Literary Sourcebook is essential reading for any student of *Othello*.

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This aim is reflected in the structure of each Sourcebook. Section 1, ‘Contexts’, provides biographical data in the form of an author chronology and contemporary documents relating to the author and their work. In Section 2, ‘Interpretations’, the editor assembles extracts from the most influential and important criticism throughout the history of the work. In some cases this includes materials relating to performances or adaptations. The third section, ‘Key Passages’, gathers together the essential episodes from the literary text connected by editorial commentary and annotation so as to relate them to ideas raised earlier in the volume. The final section offers suggestions for further reading, including recommended editions and critical volumes.

Annotation is a key feature of this series. Both the original notes from the reprinted texts and new annotations by the editor appear at the bottom of the relevant page. The reprinted notes are prefaced by the author’s name in square brackets, e.g. ‘[Robinson’s note.]’.

Routledge Literary Sourcebooks offer the ideal introduction to single literary works, combining primary and secondary materials, chosen by experts, in accessible form.

Duncan Wu
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PALGRAVE for A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, 1918 [1904], Macmillan, pp. 176–82.


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My thanks to Michael Neill for reading an earlier version of the text and generously sharing his formidable knowledge of the play with me, and to David Scott Karstan and Joy Hayton for answering some queries. It has been a pleasure to work with Liz Thompson, Rosie Waters, Liz O’Donnell and Duncan Wu. My special thanks, as always, to Alison, Lucy, Patrick and Maud.
It is hard to imagine that any of Shakespeare’s plays has a more obvious contemporary relevance than *Othello*. The plot of the play is directly centred on questions of gender, sexuality, race and status, all key issues for us today. There have been a significant number of film and TV versions of the play, in addition to stage productions, throughout the twentieth century. In fact, there have been six major films of *Othello*: 1922, 1952, 1956, 1962, 1965 and 1995. Of all Shakespeare’s plays only *Hamlet* with nine can boast more screen productions. There has also been a huge amount of critical analysis of the play. Early in the twentieth century *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Othello* were named as Shakespeare’s ‘principal tragedies’ by the literary critic A. C. Bradley, who was keen to define the essence of Shakespeare’s genius. He regarded these four plays as the pinnacle of the career of the world’s greatest ever writer, a view still held by many readers and commentators. As a result *Othello* is commonly set at school and university level in the UK, the USA, Europe and Australia.

It is a sign of the cultural importance of *Othello* that the lead role has come to define how black actors should appear on stage and how theatre and film directors often want them to act. Black male actors have often been represented as superficially dignified and in control, while beneath the surface lies a bestial savagery ready to be released – exactly how Othello changes when he learns of Desdemona’s supposed infidelity. It has become a commonplace of theatre criticism that the crowning glory of any black actor’s career should be a successful performance of Othello. This is a neat reversal of the assumption that, in the interests of historical accuracy because there were no black actors in Elizabethan England, the role had to be played by a white actor blacked up. However, *Othello* clearly troubled and stimulated audiences in different ways in different places. *Othello* was rarely performed in South Africa before the overthrow of apartheid, because it raised the explosive issue of race and so made the authorities nervous of the consequences. In India, colonised by England, the play was frequently staged because it was seen by a native theatre public to be a play that challenged English rule through the positive representation of a tragic figure of colour. Such reactions reveal that the character Othello has provoked widely divergent reactions, sometimes angering and upsetting readers and audiences, sometimes being hailed as a
challenge to Western superiority and prejudice. Shakespeare has been seen as a man of his times, articulating the received ideas of his fellow countrymen in dismissing people of colour as savages. He has also been seen as a staunch critic of these received ideas, ennobling Othello and granting him the status of a tragic hero alongside more conventional figures such as Hamlet, Macbeth and Coriolanus. Critics are equally divided on these issues (see the essays in the Modern Criticism section by Leavis, Hunter, Newman and Hadfield, pp. 62–3, 66–70, 74–8, 92–3, and the extracts from Rymer in the Early Critical Reception section, pp. 44–7). It is likely that the issues of race and colour will dominate the ways in which productions of Othello are staged and the ways in which readers will respond to the play for the foreseeable future.

Othello deals with one of the central scandals of Western thought and culture, the marriage of a black man and a white woman, and the fear of miscegenation – the production of children of mixed race who do not know where they belong. Theories of race in the early modern period (c.1500–c.1800) generally stressed the importance of purity and the need to preserve a ‘race’ or nation from contamination with the seed and blood of other peoples, especially if they were thought to be of an inferior stock or breed. English writers often assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that God had made them in his own image – i.e. white – so black people must be either inferior or an aberration of some form. It is not surprising that Othello has proved to be such a controversial play, which has led to not only lively and sometimes acrimonious critical exchanges but also radically different evaluations of its meaning and significance. While some critics have argued that Othello himself is one of the most foolish and least credible of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes (see the comments by Rymer, pp. 44–7, and Leavis, pp. 62–3), others have seen him as a figure of heroic stature damned by a racist society in which he stood no chance of living a normal life (see especially the analyses by Hunter and Newman, pp. 66–70, 74–8, and Vaughan’s account of Paul Robeson’s Othello, pp. 100–4). While some critics have felt that Shakespeare was a racist and accepted a pervasive Elizabethan and Jacobean xenophobia, others have seen the play as sharply critical of a blind hostility to foreigners (see Hadfield, pp. 92–3). Equally important is the question of Othello’s treatment of Desdemona: are Othello and his wife star-crossed lovers who are undermined by a hostile society, or does Othello accept the perception of Venetian women presented to him with as little resistance as Iago and Roderigo show towards stereotypes of black Africans (see Eagleton, pp. 70–4, and Jardine, pp. 84–91)?

The aim of this Sourcebook is to give readers the material to explore these challenging and exciting questions themselves. The book contains material that will help to illuminate the play in its historical context as well as in its subsequent

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3 For a nuanced reinterpretation of the Othello story, see Caryl Philips, The Nature of Blood (London: Faber, 1997).
history on stage, as a book and on screen. There is, of course, no easy answer to any of the questions I have posed, and it is likely that readers will continue their arguments without ever resolving all of their differences. I hope that anyone who reads this Sourcebook will feel that they are in a better position to argue whatever case they wish to make.

The book consists of three main sections. There is an introduction to each section, and a headnote prefaces each extract. I have also tried to provide a series of cross-references to help the reader find his or her way about the book and make connections between the play and the various types of material included in the Sourcebook. While guiding and helping the reader, the text is also designed to help readers to think independently, make their own connections and develop their own ideas. The first section provides a series of contexts which will enable the reader to understand the intellectual and social milieu in which Shakespeare wrote *Othello*. A chronology gives an outline of the important events in Shakespeare’s own life and the key events that are relevant to *Othello*. There is a collection of contemporary documents: plays, historical accounts, travel writing and literary sources, which should help a reader to understand what Shakespeare might have read when writing the play, or the opinions and beliefs he would have been familiar with, even if he did not hold them himself.

The second section, ‘Interpretations’, gathers together a number of readings of the play which provide a sense of the nature of the debates the play has generated. There are some extracts from early criticism of the play from the end of the seventeenth century to the start of the twentieth century, followed by a substantial range of modern criticism dealing with questions of race and identity, gender issues, tragic form, style, language and historical context. There are also a series of comments on productions on stage and screen from the first recorded performance (1604) to the late 1980s.

The third section, ‘Key Passages’, consists of a series of annotated extracts from the play, providing headnotes and footnotes that I hope readers will find helpful. These gloss difficult and unfamiliar words, interpret individual sentences, provide details of probable source material and analogues, point out similar episodes and events in other plays and provide historical and literary information, as well as cross-references to material elsewhere in the sourcebook. These notes are not intended to be definitive but to help readers find their way through a complex and rewarding work.

There is also an annotated guide to further reading, providing information on editions and critical works. Throughout there are a number of illustrations that readers might find interesting and helpful.

The book is best read – as are most books – from cover to cover. However, I hope it might also be used as a handy guide for those keen to use it as a reference work. If it stimulates readers to explore one of Shakespeare’s most intriguing, complex and brilliant works more thoroughly, then I will feel that I have succeeded in my task.