

THE ANNOTATED SHAKESPEARE

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Othello

FULLY ANNOTATED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY BURTON RAFFEL

WITH AN ESSAY BY HAROLD BLOOM

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For Stephen Pride and, of course, Shifra

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ABOUT THIS BOOK



Written four centuries ago, in a fairly early form of Modern English, *Othello* is a gorgeously passionate, witty, and complex text. Many of the play's social and historical underpinnings necessarily need, for the modern reader, the kinds of explanation offered in the Introduction. But what needs even more, and far more detailed, explanation are the play's very words. Here is Iago, as he so often is, complaining that he did not get the job he deserved:

Three great ones of the city,
In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,
Off-capped to him, and by the faith of man,
I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.
But he, as loving his own pride and purposes,
Evades them with a bumbast circumstance,
Horribly stuffed with epithets of war,
Nonsuits my mediators.

(I.I.7–14)

In twenty-first-century America, “suit” tends to mean a legal action. Here, however, it means a request.

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“Off-capped” is founded on the fact that everyone wore a hat and that to “doff,” or remove, one’s hat was a sign of respect.

“The faith of man” is not some vaguely humanistic doctrine but a simple reference to what Renaissance Europe regarded as *the* faith, Christianity.

In twenty-first-century America, again, “price” means the cost of something. Here, however, it refers to Iago’s self-evaluation, his “value.”

“Place” is for us almost entirely spatial, locational. We go to a “place,” we live in a “place.” But here it means post or position.

The construction “as loving” means “being someone who loves.” Prepositions were very much more elastic, in Shakespeare’s day.

In the phrase “pride and purposes,” the first word remains clear to us. But we tend to hesitate at “purposes,” which here means intentions.

And as “evades them” indicates, pronouns and their antecedents are also employed more loosely. “Them” refers to the “great ones of the city.” Verb tenses, too, have changed: “evades” is clearly a present tense, today. But here, “evades” is in the historical present tense, which effectively means the past rather than the present.

We might be able to guess at the meaning of “bumbast,” but certainty is preferable to supposition. It is indeed the ancestor of our word “bombast.” But “circumstance” would be impervious to guessing, for it means circumlocution, or beating around the bush.

“Horribly stuffed” has nothing to do with warfare: it means dreadfully padded.

“Epithet” has considerably shifted, in our time, having come to

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mean words of insult or scorn. Here, however, “epithets” refer only to vocabulary or verbal terms.

“Nonsuits” means to rebuff or turn aside.

And “mediators” refers, not to arbitration cases, but to go-betweens.

In this very fully annotated edition, I therefore present this passage, not in the bare form quoted above, but thoroughly supported by bottom-of-the-page notes:

Three great ones¹ of the city,²
In personal suit³ to make me his lieutenant,
Off-capped⁴ to him, and by the faith⁵ of man,
I know my price,⁶ I am worth no worse a place.⁷
But he, as loving⁸ his own pride and purposes,⁹
Evades¹⁰ them with a bumbast circumstance,¹¹
Horribly stuffed¹² with epithets¹³ of war,
Nonsuits my mediators.¹⁴

1 persons

2 three GREAT ones OF the City

3 petition, request

4 respectfully doffing/taking off their hats

5 the faith = the true religion (Christianity)

6 value

7 post, position

8 as loving = being one who loves

9 intentions

10 evades them = avoided answering “the great ones” (historical present tense = past tense)

11 bumbast circumstance = puffed out/inflated/empty circumlocution/
beating about the bush

12 horribly stuffed = exceedingly padded

13 the vocabulary, terms

14 nonsuits my mediators = turns back/rebuffs my go-betweens

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The modern reader or listener of course will better understand this brief exchange in context, as the drama unfolds. But without full explanation of words that have over the years shifted in meaning, and usages that have been altered, neither the modern reader nor the modern listener is likely to be equipped for full comprehension.

I believe annotations of this sort create the necessary bridges, from Shakespeare's four-centuries-old English across to ours. Some readers, to be sure, will be able to comprehend unusual, historically different meanings without glosses. Those not familiar with the modern meaning of particular words will easily find clear, simple definitions in any modern dictionary. But most readers are not likely to understand Shakespeare's intended meaning, absent such glosses as I here offer.

My annotation practices have followed the same principles used in *The Annotated Milton*, published in 1999, and in my annotated edition of *Hamlet*, published (as the initial volume in this series) in 2003. Classroom experience has validated these editions. Classes of mixed upper-level undergraduates and graduate students have more quickly and thoroughly transcended language barriers than ever before. This allows the teacher, or a general reader without a teacher, to move more promptly and confidently to the non-linguistic matters that have made Shakespeare and Milton great and important poets.

It is the inevitable forces of linguistic change, operant in all living tongues, which have inevitably created such wide degrees of obstacles to ready comprehension—not only sharply different meanings, but subtle, partial shifts in meaning that allow us to think we understand when, alas, we do not. Speakers of related languages like Dutch and German also experience this shifting of

the linguistic ground. Like early Modern English (ca. 1600) and the Modern English now current, those languages are too close for those who know only one language, and not the other, to be readily able always to recognize what they correctly understand and what they do not. When, for example, a speaker of Dutch says “Men kofer is kapot,” a speaker of German will know that something belonging to the Dutchman is broken (“kapot” = “kaputt” in German, and “men” = “mein”). But without more linguistic awareness than the average person is apt to have, the German speaker will not identify “kofer” (“trunk” in Dutch) with “Körper”—a modern German word meaning “physique, build, body.” The closest word to “kofer” in modern German, indeed, is “Scrankkoffer,” which is too large a leap for ready comprehension. Speakers of different Romance languages (French, Spanish, Italian), and all other related but not identical tongues, all experience these difficulties, as well as the difficulty of understanding a text written in their own language five, or six, or seven hundred years earlier. Shakespeare’s English is not yet so old that it requires, like many historical texts in French and German, or like Old English texts—for example, *Beowulf*—a modern translation. Much poetry evaporates in translation: language is immensely particular. The sheer *sound* of Dante in thirteenth-century Italian is profoundly worth preserving. So too is the sound of Shakespeare.

I have annotated prosody (metrics) only when it seemed truly necessary or particularly helpful. Readers should have no problem with the silent “e”: whenever an “e” in Shakespeare is *not* silent, it is marked “è” (except, to be sure, in words which modern usage always syllabifies, like “tented,” “excepted,” “headed”). The notation used for prosody, which is also used in the explanation of Elizabethan pronunciation, follows the extremely simple form of

my *From Stress to Stress: An autobiography of English prosody* (see “Further Reading,” near the end of this book). Syllables with metrical stress are capitalized; all other syllables are in lowercase letters. I have managed to employ normalized Elizabethan spellings, in most indications of pronunciation, but I have sometimes been obliged to deviate, in the higher interest of being understood.

I have annotated, as well, a limited number of such other matters, sometimes of interpretation, sometimes of general or historical relevance, as have seemed to me seriously worthy of inclusion. These annotations have been most carefully restricted: this is not intended to be a book of literary commentary. It is for that reason that the glossing of metaphors has been severely restricted. There is almost literally no end to discussion and/or analysis of metaphor, especially in Shakespeare. To yield to temptation might well be to double or triple the size of this book—and would also change it from a historically oriented language guide to a work of an unsteadily mixed nature. In the process, I believe, neither language nor literature would be well or clearly served.

Where it seemed useful, and not obstructive of important textual matters, I have modernized spelling, including capitalization. I have frequently repunctuated. Since the original printed texts of *Othello* (there not being, as there never are for Shakespeare, any surviving manuscripts) are frequently careless as well as self-contradictory, I have been relatively free with the wording of stage directions—and in some cases have added brief directions, to indicate who is speaking to whom. I have made no emendations; I have necessarily been obliged to make choices. Textual decisions have been annotated when the differences between or

among the original printed texts seem either marked or of unusual interest.

In the interests of compactness and brevity, I have employed in my annotations (as consistently as I am able) a number of stylistic and typographical devices:

- The annotation of a single word does not repeat that word
- The annotation of more than one word repeats the words being annotated, which are followed by an equals sign and then by the annotation; the footnote number in the text is placed after the last of the words being annotated
- In annotations of a single word, alternative meanings are usually separated by commas; if there are distinctly different ranges of meaning, the annotations are separated by arabic numerals inside parentheses—(1), (2), and so on; in more complexly worded annotations, alternative meanings expressed by a single word are linked by a forward slash, or solidus: /
- Explanations of textual meaning are not in parentheses; comments about textual meaning are
- Except for proper nouns, the word at the beginning of all annotations is in lower case
- Uncertainties are followed by a question mark, set in parentheses: (?)
- When particularly relevant, “translations” into twenty-first-century English have been added, in parentheses
- Annotations of repeated words are *not* repeated. Explanations of the *first* instance of such common words are followed by the

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sign *. Readers may easily track down the first annotation, using the brief Finding List at the back of the book. Words with entirely separate meanings are annotated *only* for meanings no longer current in Modern English.

*The most important typographical device here employed is the sign * placed after the first (and only) annotation of words and phrases occurring more than once. There is an alphabetically arranged listing of such words and phrases in the Finding List at the back of the book. The Finding List contains no annotations but simply gives the words or phrases themselves and the numbers of the relevant act, the scene within that act, and the footnote number within that scene for the word's first occurrence.*

INTRODUCTION



Over the past four hundred years, neither the text of *Othello*, nor the “true” understanding of that text, has been fully settled. We lack manuscript copies of any of Shakespeare’s plays, and different printed sources frequently provide quite different readings. Given the nature of this annotated edition, however, and the fact that *Othello*’s textual issues are more or less resolvable (especially in the light of Scott McMillin’s extremely helpful edition of the play’s *First Quarto*), I want to deal first with interpretation and more briefly, and only thereafter, with textual issues.

The primary focus of interpretive disagreement has become the character Othello. Who and what he is meant to be—his origins, his nature—have recently been intensely disputed. Traditionally, Othello was taken to be a black African. But the fact that he is described by Shakespeare as “the Moor” has led to the contention that, knowing pretty clearly what a “Moor” was, but not being anything like so well informed as to black Africans, Shakespeare must have intended Othello to be a dark-skinned non-Negroid Muslim, a good deal more Arab than Ethiopian.

However, “as late as the 17th century,” records *The Oxford En-*

glish Dictionary, under “Moor 1,” “the Moors were commonly supposed to be mostly black or swarthy (though the existence of ‘white Moors’ was recognized), and hence the word was often used for ‘Negro.’” Still, the play’s repeated references to Othello as “black,” it is argued, are no more definitive than the early-seventeenth-century meaning of the word “black” itself. And the definition under “*black* 1c” explains that, though “strictly applied to negroes and negritos, and other dark-skinned races . . . [the word is applied] often, loosely, to non-European races, little darker than many Europeans.” The play’s reference to Othello as “thick-lipped” has been similarly debated.

What had earlier been understood as racial and cultural differences in Othello’s psychology and behavior are therefore, it is contended, simply personal to Othello, like the epilepsy from which Iago (but no one else in the play) says he suffers. Accordingly, whether Othello is indeed black in the current meaning of the word is a matter of basic importance in understanding both the character and the play that bears his name.

Shakespeare’s Knowledge of Black Africans

“I will not say,” wrote A. C. Bradley a hundred years ago, “that Shakespeare imagined him [Othello] as a Negro and not as a Moor, for that might imply that he distinguished Negroes and Moors precisely as we do.”¹ In fact, there were highly visible Moors in Shakespeare’s London; there can be small doubt that he knew quite well what Moors looked like. He may well not have known a great deal about them, at least at firsthand; he seems unlikely to have met or had any dealings with Moorish ambassadors and other such lofty folk. Yet on the evidence, he appears to have known black Africans a good deal better. “By 1596 [ten years be-

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fore the probable date of *Othello's* composition] there were so many black people in London that Queen Elizabeth I issued an edict demanding that they leave. . . . When Shakespeare wrote *Othello* he was not . . . particularly 'confused' about racial identities. . . . [He] would have seen black people on the streets of London for most of his adult life, and so would his audience. Racial jokes and word play were well within their experience and understanding."²

London's black population of perhaps five or ten thousand was to some extent created by upper-class fashions. Starting with Queen Elizabeth herself, "black people were seen as fashionable accessories . . . and the use of black servants and entertainers by royalty and nobility filtered down to much less affluent households and establishments. . . . Whites 'blacked up' for roles as Africans in plays and masques."³

But apart from the dictates of fashion and the upper classes, and distinctly "within Shakespeare's lifetime," London had become deeply involved in "the exchange of goods and slaves between Britain, Africa and the Americas. [This] was a trade which permanently transformed the economies of all three areas." Black sailors appeared on streets and in pubs; "planters returned home with their black servants."⁴ We are now aware—there having been a surge, in the past few decades, of British historical investigation into these matters, clearly caused by the massive post-World War Two in-migration of black people from British colonies—that the chronological start of this earlier, more limited, but still significantly sized in-migration began as early as 1555 (before Shakespeare's birth) and no later than 1588.⁵ Shakespeare's demonstrable familiarity with the sweep of daily life in England's teeming capital city, and his fairly detailed knowledge

of many trades and professions, across a wide-ranging social scale, enhances the likelihood that he may well have socialized with, and even more probably seen close up and conversed or spent time with, a good number of black Africans.

This is of course not a certainty, but only a preponderance of evidence, supporting the likelihood of Shakespeare's personal knowledge of black Africans and Othello's racial origins. To counterbalance these probabilities, there is Iago's reference to Othello as a "Barbary [Arabic] horse" (1.1.110) and also Iago's bald lie that, after leaving Cyprus, Othello and his wife will proceed, not to Venice, but to Mauritania, the Moorish "homeland" (4.2.221). The historical evidence as we now have it seems a good deal more reliable than the perpetually untruthful Iago.

Othello: Social and Psychological Factors

Black Africans lived in a wide variety of landscapes, spoke a great many different languages, yet tended to share certain basic social characteristics. "It is important to stress the traditional nature of Africa," writes the Ghanaian W. E. Abraham.⁶ That is, rather than transcontinental political unity, black African societies were structured around relatively fixed customs and practices, transmitted as intact as possible from generation to generation. This was not an existence formed or governed either by electoral choices or by externalized hierarchies. "We know that such societies," explains Eli Sagan, "though lacking a state, did not live in social chaos. . . . Custom and the power of custom, reinforced by the inexorable pressure of the kin, maintained order." Though inevitably affected by outside forces, and local group rivalries, this remained an essentially stable way of life. Not surprisingly, the attitude of traditional societies toward individualism in thought or action was

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“cool, if not downright hostile.”⁷ All the sacred, unsolvable matters of life were dealt with not by personal decisions but by magic.

These circumstances, in turn, fostered what Bronislaw Malinowski has called a “clear-cut division” between conditions which are known and natural and, on the other hand, “the domain of the unaccountable and adverse influences, as well as the great unearned increment of fortunate coincidences. The first conditions are coped with by knowledge and work, the second by magic.”⁸ As Sagan puts it, “Witchcraft, not a moralistic religion, made the world go round.”⁹ Accordingly, it is not that the fundamental cause-and-effect stance of modern Western societies is absent from traditional societies, but rather that it is only selectively relevant. “Magic, which is so important in the religious and moral life [of traditional cultures], is probably the most effective means of social control.”¹⁰

Nor are these matters that have changed a great deal, over the past five hundred years. “The persistence of [traditional] culture is indicated by the similarity of twentieth-century traditions . . . and sixteenth-century reports . . . [In southeast Africa, for example,] they eat the same kind of seed cakes, wear the same dress at military dances, follow the same pattern of symbolic dancing, live by the same type of social organization, and practice the same economy that characterized their different groups when [in the early sixteenth century] the Portuguese first encountered them.”¹¹ Traditional cultures being, by definition, group-oriented, someone born into such a social setting necessarily adheres to and depends upon the group for both social and inner psychological stability. Deprived of the group, the individual inevitably lacks many basic resources, and most especially those for dealing with adverse circumstances.

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These are enormously important matters for understanding Othello. He is likely to have been born and raised in a traditional society; he also claims to have been of royal descent, and we know nothing to the contrary. Kidnapped, enslaved, he literally fought his way to ascendancy, ending as a valued, powerful general in the hired service of the Venetian state. Along the way, he became a believing and practicing Christian, and acquired much of the manners and mores of the Christian West. (It is worth nothing that, had he been a Muslim, conversion to Christianity might have been more problematical.) That is, in the process of struggling with the urgent strictures of his difficult, uprooted existence, but drawing on the deep strengths of his apparently innate physical and military abilities, Othello created both an impressive career and, within its bounds, a stable, well-functioning personality. The Othello we see in act 1 is strong, forceful, contained—an admirable, profoundly functional commanding officer.

Yet as the play plainly shows, the twin forces of traditional, custom-ruled society, and the magic which controls it, cannot help but be persistent, even if for the moment dormant. Othello's immensely successful military career thus remains a structure of narrow focus; the bright polish of success remains a relatively thin veneer. As long as he continues to follow his military path, he is secure and will likely continue to be successful. The Othello we see in act 1, however, is a man already in the early stages of being drawn past the boundaries of a purely military sphere. The soldier's world, as he so eloquently explains, is all-male, rough and perpetually isolated from the non-traditional world of sophisticated, westernized Venice—which is of course, for Shakespeare and his audience, the world of early Jacobean England and, most particularly, of swirling, cosmopolitan London.

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