"All Qualitie, Pride, Pompe and Circumstance of Glorious War": Character Revelations in Military and Strategic References in *Othello*

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"There once lived in Venice a Moor, who was very valiant and of a handsome person." So begins one of Giovanni Battista Giraldi's *The Hundred Tales*. This was the tale that William Shakespeare turned into *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moore of Venice*. Gir aldi, better known as Cynthius, paints this character first as being valiant, and that gallant nature is integral to the romance and tragedy.

When Shakespeare adapted the story, he used Othello's position as commanding general as a template to design a play of tragic love. Warfare and militarism become metaphors and motivations for a domestic drama. The conflict between Othello and Iago is one of personal intrigue involving the destruction of a few individuals. It is also a conflict between a general and one of his senior officers, and the script is filled with military references that enhance the tale of revenge. A personal conflict is waged as war, and Shakespeare uses Othello's love of warfare to illustrate the loss of his love of Desdemona. Unlocking the military references that run throughout the play enriches the understanding of the Moor of Venice's character.

The word Moor comes to English from the Greek *mauros* for "dark." This became the Latin *maurus*, which became Mauretania, the Roman name for the Western Sahara. From this came the modern state of Mauritania. From *maurus* came the French *maures* and the Spanish *moros*. In the eighth century, North African armies invaded Spain and Southern France. In the next century, they invaded Sicily and Italy. Moors, as they were now known in England, were known as dangerous invaders. To the Elizabethans, the words *moor* and *blackamoor* could be applied to all dark-skinned Africans.

Shakespeare's moors tend to be warriors. In *Titus Andronicus,* Aaron's militant nature is quite obvious. The battle exploits of The Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* are revealed in his introduction when he swears,

> By this scimitar
> That slew the Sophy, and a Persian prince
> That won three fields of Sultan Solyman.[1]

The Sophy was the Elizabethan term for the royal family of Persia. In 1598, England sent diplomats to Persia to help negotiate a peace between the Shah, whose family name was Safavid, and the Ottoman Turks. To the English general populace, Safavid became Sophy. Sultan Solyman was Suleiman the Magnificent, leader of the Ottomans, who had been a great threat to Europe a generation before Shakespeare and whom Christopher Marlowe dramatized. Because at this time the Persians and the Europeans had a common foe in the Ottoman Empire, this battle reference would make the Prince of Morocco an ally of an English enemy. Twice, therefore, Shakespeare uses Moors as villainous, yet valiant, combatants.

Othello is also a remarkable soldier, but he is a heroic moor. More than that, he is a commanding moor. More than that, he commands Europeans. While the Persians were not moors, the 1598 negotiations showed the English populace that Islamic peoples could be trustworthy and reliable. *Othello* shows a marked change in attitude toward moors. It is true that there are many racist comments in the play, but most of them are made by Iago, the villain. Those in power feel perfectly safe and confident entrusting their safety to a moor.

The conflict of the play begins with Iago being passed over for promotion. The advancement is given to

> a great Arithmetician,
> One Michael Cassio. . .
> That never set a Squadron in the Field,
> Nor the devifion of a Battaile knows
> More than a Spinfter, Vnleffe the Bookifh Theoricke:
> (1.1.22-26).

A *squadron* was a term for cavalry battalion, a command that would go to a junior field officer (a major or lieutenant colonel in today's military). This Cassio, who has only studied war, will now be the second-in-command, or lieutenant, to the commanding general (in today's service, a position which would earn the rank of three star-general).

And what of Iago's experience? He states that Othello witnessed him fighting effectively in Rhodes and Cyprus. From 1570-1573, Venice fought Ottoman attempts to take these colonies. This happened after *The Hundred Tales* was published in 1565, but during Shakespeare's boyhood.

And what is Iago's reward? He becomes "his Moorship's Ancient." These are two corrupt words placed together. *Moorship* is a corruption of *Worship*, a common title given to a general commander. This twisted phrase indicates a twist of racism in Iago. The title Ancient is a corruption of Ensign. In *Henry IV, Part II*, when Pistol is called "Ancient Pistol," this is not a reflection of age. An ancient, or ensign, is an officer who carries the banner or flag, the insignia, of the company, regiment or army into battle. This is a dangerous job, because the flag-bearer is a prime target. While the job carries high honor, it is not a position of command. Shakespeare's audience would have recognized these positions and understood completely Iago's bitterness at being wrongly passed over.

Many members of modern audiences would be able to identify with Iago's situation if the terms were not antiquated. Most modern people have been unfairly passed over for promotion, honor, or credit and would sympathize with his desire for revenge. Shakespeare often uses this ploy: make the audience sympathetic to the plight of a character seeking revenge and instill in them the feeling that they, too, would desire vengeance if they were treated in such a way; then show the vengeful character either change, grant forgiveness and thrive, or go too far in revenge and be destroyed. For Shakespeare, revenge is self-destructive; forgiveness is self-empowering. For an audience to feel sympathy for Iago at the start of the play, they must understand how much he has been wronged professionally. They will only understand this if they know the military ranks and terms referenced in the scene. Most of Shakespeare's audience members would have such an understanding.

When Iago informs Brabantio, in rather crude ways, that Othello has eloped with Desdemona, a search begins to find the newlyweds. Roderigo is instructed to begin the search at the Sagittary. This is the English version of the Latin *sagittarius*, or "archer." A *sagittary* would be a place to store bows and arrows. Othello is on his honeymoon, and his officers believe he might be spending part of it in the arsenal. This is the first time that Shakespeare combines Othello's love of Desdemona with his love of militarism. It is a minor point but a good indication of character.

Iago truly believes that the general might leave his bride's bed to check inventory.

Brabantio is disturbed that this moor, this outsider, has run off with his daughter. Othello is not worried, for though Brabantio is the most powerful member of the Signiory, or senate, he is not the only one. Othello declares, "My [military] Services which I have done the Signiorie Shall out-tongue his Complaints" (1.2.17-18).

In Shakespeare's time, the Venetian Signiory was known for its centuries of endurance and success. It was a success born of ruthless efficiency. Brabantio's colleagues, therefore, would not jeopardize the well-being of a winning commander just to calm a father's wrath, even if it is a very powerful father. Othello knows this. He knows that his military record will protect him. Later in the play, he will know when that protection will vanish.

Before Brabantio can press his complaint, the Duke summons Othello into service against the imminent attack of the Ottoman navy against Cypress.

Othello explains that Desdemona fell in love with him while he was a guest at Brabantio's home. The general thrilled her with tales of adventures to far-off lands and,

> of the Canibals that each other eate,
> The Anthropophagi, and men whofe heads
> Grew beneath their fhoulders. (1.3.142-144)

Oddly, Shakespeare does not allow Othello a great victory over the Ottoman navy. A large storm displaces the Turkish fleet. In 1588, the Spanish Armada attacked the English warships in the Channel. After the Spanish were deflected to the North Sea, those ships that survived the initial battle were destroyed by storm. The salvation that the tempest provided for England would have been deeply remembered by Shakespeare's countrymen, and this might be the reason that the author gave nature, and not the protagonist, the victory. Elizabethan audiences would have had an emotional response to a storm sweeping away an invading fleet.

Perhaps there is a second reason for denying Othello a great victory over the Turks. The journey to Cypress not only has an absence of personal triumph, but also results in personal disgrace. Cassio loses his promotion by being caught drunk and brawling while on duty, a condition engineered by Iago. Iago's bitterness came originally from a military infraction: being unfairly passed over for a deserved promotion. He exacted his revenge, initially, through Cassio's military infraction. In modern times, it has often been said that Iago's hatred is not well-motivated. This is not so.

Shakespeare gives the audience a very good motivation, if the audience can fully understand the injustice leveled at Iago. This can only be accomplished if the audience understands how Iago has been slighted, and they can only understand that if they understand the military references. Shakespeare provides a revenge equal to an injustice. The audience should be sympathetic to Iago at this point. By Act 3, he has achieved his initial goal. He is back in line for promotion, and Othello and Cassio have both been humiliated. Othello came to Cyprus to achieve a great military victory. The storm took away that opportunity. Cassio's disgrace reflects poorly on Othello's judgment as a commander because it was Othello who promoted Cassio. Othello came to Cyprus for triumph and found shame. Iago's revenge was a military one.

Tragedy occurs not because Iago has no motivation for revenge, but because he becomes consumed by it. He should stop in Act 3. He continues in his hatred and will not stop until Othello is destroyed, not just disgraced. A common theme in Shakespeare's plays is that revenge is self-destructive and forgiveness is self-empowering. It is quite obvious that Iago's revenge leads to his own destruction. This becomes more effective if the audience can sympathize with Iago for the first half of the play. If they can see a man who has been wronged and who wants to reclaim what was taken from him, then the dreadfulness of the second half becomes more horrifying. The initial audience identification felt for Iago will turn to revulsion.

If Iago's initial revenge is a military one, so is Othello's failure. When he commits himself to killing Desdemona, he knows that he will forfeit his life in doing so. Earlier, Othello knew that his war service would protect him after he eloped with her, but nothing will save him after he murders the daughter of the most powerful member of the Signiory. It is not the loss of life Othello regrets; it is the loss of his command:

> Oh now, for ever
> Farewell the Tranquill minde; farewell Content;
> Farewell the plumed Troopes, and the bigge Warres,
> That makes Ambition, Virtue! Oh farewell,
> Farewell the neighing Steed, and the fhrill Trumpe,
> The Spirit-ftirring Drum, th'Eare-piercing Fife,
> The Royall Banner, and all Qualitie,
> Pride, Pompe, and Circumftance or glorious Warre:
> Farewell: Othello's occupation's gone. (3.3.348-357)

He does not say, "Farewell Othello's life." He says, "Farewell Othello's occupation." The loss of one love, Desdemona, will

necessitate the loss of his other love: war. This provides added motivation for Othello's hesitation to act against his wife. He will lose not one great passion, but two.

Iago senses this hesitation and decides to goad his adversary onward. He lies that Cassio unwittingly revealed and confessed an affair with Desdemona. When Iago baits Othello by feigning to urge caution, the general responds,

> Like to the Ponticke Sea,
> Whofe Icie Current, and compulfive courfe
> Nev'r keepes retyring ebbe, but keepes due on
> To the Proponicke and the Hellefpont:
> Even fo my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
> Shall nev'r looke backe, nev'r ebbe to humble Love. (3.3.450-457)

The Pontic Sea is the Black Sea, which connects to the Mediterranean by a series of small, narrow waterways called the Bosporus, the Sea of Marmara, or Propontis (ahead of the Pontis), and the Dardenelles, or Hellespont. The Black Sea is indeed quite cold as it is deep and fed by five huge rivers, four of which come from the wintry Steppes and Urals. Because there is so little evaporation and so much water feeding in, the Pontic is constantly overflowing. The Mediterranean is fed by only one major river, the Nile. As it is shallow and half-surrounded by the scorching Sahara, it has a high rate of evaporation. The Atlantic and the Black Sea are constantly overflowing into the Mediterranean through the Strait of Gibraltar in the west and the Propontis and Hellespont in the east. This means that there is a steady, strong current constantly running from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, and military planners used this source of natural propulsion to their advantage. There is no ebb, only invariable flow. Othello uses a strategist's terms to describe his intentions: the relentless flow of bloody thoughts not yielding to the ebb of humble love. Later, he will use fire and heat as metaphors for his passion. Now, he uses icy water to describe his commitment for vengeance.

Shakespeare took a tale of tragic love and revenge and presented it as a wasteful war, the opposite of the glorious campaigns Othello loves. Iago achieves his victory when Othello murders Desdemona, but it is a Pyrrhic victory. Othello realizes just how dreadfully he has lost when he recounts a prized victory from the past. His last long speech ends

> . . . in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant, and a Turbond-Turke
> Beate a Venetian, and traduc'd the State,
> I tooke him by th' throat the circumcifed Dogge,
> And fmoate him, thus. (5.2.348-352)

The Syrian city of Aleppo is deep in the heart of Ottoman territory. The Venetian army never set foot there. If Othello had been there, he would have been surrounded by enemies. If he had killed a Turk for beating a Venetian, he would have been in tremendous danger. It would have been a valiant act, and he recalls this courageous deed just as he kills himself. His last physical feat is to commit suicide after murdering his wife. Yet, in the midst of these crimes, he remembers a moment of brave and patriotic soldiering. Earlier he asked, "Where is that Promethean heat that can thy light relume" (5. 2.12-13). In his darkest moment he finds a memory of brightness and Promethean valor.

Othello remembers the grandeur of his youth just before the ignobility of his death. Ludovico's last speech is addressed to Iago:

> Oh Sparton Dogge:
> More fell then Anguifh, Hunger, or the Sea;
> Looke on the Tragicke Loading of this bed:
> This is thy worke:
> The Object poisons Sight,
> Let it be hid. (5.2.362-366)

A Spartan dog is a bloodhound that has been bred and trained for use in war. After a battle, war dogs were often seen rummaging among the carnage. This was a loathsome sight to professional soldiers. The worst results of battle were often seen in the gruesome work of a war dog. Iago's campaign of revenge was a private war: one in which a valiant soldier and an innocent noncombatant were felled by a treacherous dog. There was no quality, no pride, no pomp and nothing glorious. Revenge in Shakespeare is always self-destructive. Iago loses all that he has gained by his treachery and will also lose his life. Othello not only loses his two great loves, he also forfeits the right to die as a soldier, in glorious battle. He ends as a war dog's discards.

Notes

1. *First Folio* Act 2, scene 1, lines 24-26.