

# **FROM CINTHIO TO SHAKESPEARE: THE PORTRAYAL OF OTHELLO IN THE LIGHT OF SHAKESPEAREAN AND RENAISSANCE INTERTEXTUAL THEORY**

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## **1. Introduction**

Scholars apply the postcolonial theory when dealing with more than one text. They either use intertextuality or transtextuality as methods of analyzing and understanding Othello with other texts. Kristeva (1969) coined and defined the term of intertextuality: every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which imposes a universe on it. This explains how texts contain within themselves evidence of the history of other texts (Kristeva, 1969: 89).

This section outlines debates surrounding Shakespeare's dramatization of Othello and how it will be developed in this study, growing on the ideas of the previous studies done in the field of intertextuality in Shakespeare's Othello and Cintheo's Hicatommithi. In doing so, Othello's most acknowledged source text, "Un Capitano Moro" by Giovanni Battista Giraldi (1565),

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will be involved, thus, adding to earlier comparative readings of “Un Capitano Moro” and Othello.

Arndt (2018) in her study “Transtextuality in William Shakespeare’s Othello: Italian, West African, and English Encounters” compares multiple literary texts from different cultures: “Othello”, “The Handsome Stranger”, the Trickster character, well known all across Western Africa, Leo Africanus’s “The History and Description of Africa”, and Ahmed Yerima’s adaptation of *Othello*, entitled *Otaelo* (2002). Arndt found out distinctive similarities, differences and diversions. Thus, Arndt broadened the realm of her study which lightly touches the minor characters of both *Othello* and its Italian source (Arndt, 2018: 66-80). In her study, she is incomprehensively tackling the parallels and differences. Thus, the current study is going to fill these gaps mentioned above.

A study by Peter (2016) compares Shakespeare’s *Othello* with its Italian source Hecatommithi. He gives a list of plot points, including war with the Turks, Murder of Desdemona, Othello’s Race, and some character traits of only three characters: Roderigo, Emilia, and Cassio. Unfortunately, Peter gives only a brief account of what William Shakespeare had added and subtracted. Thus, the current study will present more details about other characters and events (Peter, 2016).

Rafferty (2015) in her study states that Othello was published as part of Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi*. Due to its conciseness and lack of character development, Cinthio’s story “does not seem to afford a suitable plot for a tragedy” (Rafferty, 2015: 35- 60). Hence, the current

study will reveal more details in order to show the similarities and differences.

Another study, written anonymously, titled *William Shakespeare's Othello and its Source* discusses the diction used in *Othello*. Shakespeare borrowed some phrases from their original source by Cinthio, for example, 'acerb' (1.3.350),<sup>6</sup> 'molestation' (2.1.16), and 'ocular proof' (3.3.363) (Honigmann, 2015 as cited in the article). Honigmann mentions the analogical theme of being wise and reasonable as apparent in both stories. The Moor in the original story tells Desdemona, 'appetite should be ruled by reason' which is echoed in *Othello* 'not/To please the palate of my appetite' (1.3.262 – 3). Furthermore, Norman Sanders (1984) discerns that relatively small points in Cinthio are developed by Shakespeare, for example: A sentence in Cinthio to the effect that Desdemona's family wished her to marry another man is the seed that produced Desdemona's noble birth, her elopement, and her distraught and racially prejudiced father (Norman, 1984:2). However, this study lacks details concerning minor characters and other elements as well.

Sawyer (2017) in his study points out that Shakespeare's *Othello* has been performed by a famous Africa-American actor in London. The tickets have been noticeably requested at the beginning of the performance. Although the critical response was less positive, the audience praised his acting performance (Sawyer, 2017: 77- 90). However, Robeson played the role of Othello on Broadway for the second time after thirteen years. This time, critics did not praise only his voice but also the way he was acting.

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In conclusion, the previous studies discussed above show the research problem and that there is no clear-cut and comprehensive reference to the main similarities and differences between Shakespeare's *Othello* and Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* and the reasons behind Shakespeare's additions and subtractions of certain elements while penning *Othello*. Thus, the current study works as a sequel to the previous studies. To obtain the objective of the study, the researcher will apply intertextuality theory.

### 2. Discussion

People of the twenty-first century believe that everything happens for a reason. Nothing exists out of nothing, there should be a cause for anything that happens. The same is true in literary studies, literary texts draw their influences on previous cross-cultural texts. This spirit of lucidity, mutuality, and earnestness born in the age of Renaissance had the interest in the classical past. This spirit really began in the 14th-century Italy. Renaissance writers showed their acceptance of the changing world by their keenness. One of the writers of the rising century was William Shakespeare. Just like his pioneers, Shakespeare translated and adapted many of his great works from other writers' works. To say that Shakespeare had based his play *Othello* on an Italian source is not a secret but a fact. Kernan (1986) claims that William Shakespeare based his play on a story in Giraldi Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi*, (111,7). This was a collection of a hundred tales printed in Italy in the Sixteenth Century. It is thought that Shakespeare read the original Italian version (Kernan, 1986: 171-184). Giving it a Shakespearean touch, he added and subtracted elements to become the play we know today. In such cross-culture

text reading, theorists use the theory of intertextuality for bridging *Othello* and the Italian source.

Many critics point out that the tale returns years back before Giraldi Cinthio. Cinthio himself borrowed it from a very famous Byzantine epic, because according to Krappe Alexander Haggerty who concludes that “ the play is not derived from Giraldi Cinthio’s *Ecatommiti*, III, 7, but from an unknown tale descending parallel to Girald’s from Byzantine epic of *Digenis Akrita*” (Krappe, 1924: 156- 161). In other words, when Shakespeare adapted the content of the story from *Hecatommiti* for his play *Othello*, he did not change the whole story by keeping the details of the original story. Thus, when we read Cinthio’s version and contrast it with Shakespeare’s *Othello*, we will find out the essential changes that Shakespeare did to introduce his play.

Porte- Ensign’s wife has no name. She is simply called Porte-Ensign’s wife with no name. This means she is identified by her husband; she is as evil as her husband. While in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Iago’s wife has a name (Emilia). She is an independent character with personality opposite to her husband. She is innocent as she sacrifices herself for her lady.

The Porte-ensigne’s wife in Cinthio’s story is aware of the plan against *Disdemona*, yet, she stays silent and does not expose anything. Whilst, Iago’s wife Emilia in *Othello* is ignorant of her husband’s plan, and after a while when she discovers the reality she sacrifices her life for her lady through exposing the fact in front of her husband, *Othello* and the others. Therefore, Emilia has more firm character in Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Presumably, it makes Iago lonelier in his viciousness and involved in evil deeds.

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In Cinthio's story Disdemona has parents. But in *Othello* Disdamona has only her father with no mother; she is Motherless. Shakespeare takes away mothers from his female characters like Desdemona and Ophelia. By doing so, Shakespeare, maybe, wants to show that during that time society was patriarchal. If Desdemona had a mother, maybe, she would not die at the end.

Importantly, the nameless Porte-ensigne of Hecatommiti starts his vicious scheme when he begins to cherish Disdemona, whereas in *Othello*, Iago's destructive scheme starts when Othello intends to have Cassio as his military officer rather than Iago. Hence, the Porte- ensigne's intention in Hecatommiti is clear that he admires Disdemona; therefore, he is the Capitano Moro's competitor in love. Iago, too, because of his anger at being denied an opportunity to command, takes special delight in directing the acts of others through his plots, and leaves to chance than does the Porte-ensigne (Allen, 2016: 69- 74). All things considered, it seems that Shakespeare intentionally eliminates any aspects of love and romance from Iago. His concept is to make the character of Iago as unemotionally empty as he can.

Though Cinthio's Porte-ensigne has clear motivation for revenge, Shakespeare's Iago is ambiguous in his actions and plans. As we have observed throughout the play, for several times Iago indicates about Cassio's promotion, but then he mentions hatefully of being Othello's servant, and elsewhere he accuses Emilia and Othello of adultery. These bewildering aspects in Iago's character are not the outcome of slack writing but were managed as Coleridge very well describes him:

The triumph! again, *put money* after the effect has been fully produced.—The last Speech, the motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity—how awful! In itself fiendish—while yet he was allowed to bear the divine image, too fiendish for his own steady View.—A being next to Devil—only *not* quite Devil—& this Shakespeare has attempted—executed—without disgust, without Scandal (Foakes, 1987: 2- 315).

Similarly, the Porte-ensinge has a little child daughter, a three-year-old whom Disdemona always adores. The latter shows her affection by holding and hugging the little girl. Apparently, the playwright has deliberately eliminated the aspects of sentiment from his devil. Both Emilia and Iago are presumably fruitless to show that Iago is deprived of innocence to make him more villain.

Another key thing to remember is that the Porte- enseigne does almost all devilish things himself. For instance, he has the share in the slaying of Disdemona. In fact, he himself manages to kill Disdemona by creating an idea and plan for Capitano Moro and demonstrating how to kill her in a way that no one will recognize it to be a murder. He expounds for Capitano Moro that their house is too old, so that he may carry out the crime in a method that it would be shown as if she died in a ceiling flop. Thus, the Ensigne does almost every villainous actions and plots himself. For instance, he himself steals the handkerchief and manages to kill Disdemona. In contrasting with *Othello's* Iago, the fiendish Iago must be noted as a manipulator manipulating the other characters who escapes direct engagement in the cruel and barbaric actions (Parker, 2003). He seduces the other characters to sacrifice themselves. Iago is a cunning character who never takes a risks himself. He is always standing behind while letting the other characters stand for the mission. The real motive (reason)

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behind Iago's wickedness is ambiguous. Shakespeare creates this ambiguity to make it universal, to generalize it. Maybe he wants to say that Iago is the devil and the devil does not need a reason for his evilness. By doing so, Shakespeare exaggerates Iago's wickedness to show he is the devil himself; therefore, making Iago's psychology more complex than that of the character in the original story. He is the mastermind as he plans a conspiracy against lieutenant Cassio in order to kill him. Moreover, he persuades Roderigo to execute the strike. Similarly, it is Iago who persuades his wife Emilia to steal the handkerchief and bring it to him. Iago prompts Roderigo from behind to wake Brabantio at the beginning of the play, and the latter charges Othello in the council. Simultaneously, in the thrilling scene of murdering Desdemona, Iago cunningly proposes a plan for Othello to kill Desdemona. After smothering her in bed, Othello says:

Get me some poison, Iago; this night. I'll not

body and beauty: physical beauty.

expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty  
unprovide my mind again. This night, Iago. (IV. i. 156-157)

Iago in more than one occasion refers to Othello in racist terms constantly: "an old black ram" (I.i.111), "the devil" (I.i.91), "Barbary horse" (I.i.111). He refers to the marriage between Othello and Desdemona as "the beast with two backs" (I.i.115-116)

Shakespeare adds a sexual scene in the play when he depicts Othello's murder of his wife with a pillow. In fact, there is an excruciating irony in the play when Othello enters the bed chamber and urges Desdemona to pray before her execution, he



claims that he is acting out of justice. Interestingly, this scene has a cathartic effect as it arouses pity and sympathy in the audience, and moves their emotions and agony towards Desdemona. The story depicts an irony of a man who destroys himself blindly upon falsehood.

Notably, in Hecatomithi, Cinthios's original story, many characters have no name. For instance, the scoundrel (Iago) does not have a name; he is only called—le Porte ensigne. Similarly, Othello is called Capitano Moro' (Capitaine Mior) all through the story. Another key thing to remember is Captano Moro's wife 'Disdemona' the only character who has the name throughout the story, which Shakespeare adapted as Desdemona for his play. In fact, when Shakespeare named his character Othello, he adapted it from the original source. Shakespeare tries to make a clear linking between the Moor and Ottoman Empire. Thus, Shakespeare names Moor- Othello in order to make a clear connection between the Moor and Ottoman Empire.

The critic Bhattacharyya (2006) comes to conclusion that Shakespeare has tried to increase the importance of his hero, Othello. 'Captano Moro', the Moor in Hecatomithi's is just like Othello in Shakespeare's play. He has a gentle and adventurous nature, with a heroic heart. He is elegant and highly respected by the Venetian people, which is asserted by the Senate's help and support for him (Bhattacharyya, 2006: 82).

In contrast, Cinthos's Moor in Hecatomithi, yet, is pretty dull to Shakespeare's *Othello*. Shakespeare portrays Othello staggeringly as a passionate character. Othello and Desdemona are the poets of the play. They mimic each other, and they complete the structure of Iambic Pentameter to show their bond. Their

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poetic declarations of Love for Desdemona: O: "Nor I." D: "Nor I."....D: "Let me go with him." O: "Let her have her voice." D "O my fair warrior! D: My dear Othello! (2.3.239).

More significantly, there are also some important changes in the plot. For instance, Othello in Shakespaere's play, traveled to Cyprus alone then Desdemona follows him in another boat with Iago, whilst, the Moor (Capitaine More) and his wife Desdemona sail to Cyprus with each other in the same boat (Ibid). Thus, Shakespeare the playwright here, is at work, he is seeking to make an emotional atmosphere in the scene by depicting Othello and Desdemona's cheerfully reunion.

Noticeably, the great confidence that Iago shows to his master Othello is just like the confidence that Porte-ensigne exposes to the Moor in Cintho's *Hecatommithi*, and some details of this relationship approximately follow the source story (Wine, 1984: 120). Othello's hassle which occurs between his affection for Desdemona and his confidence in Iago directs him to intimidate Iago with sanction till he fetches him the proof of his wife's adultery. Thus, a structure relatively close to Cintho's Story.

Finally, though both Othello and Iago are the focal point of the play, the minor characters also play an important role. They have the role of accelerators who speed and dramatise the events. Brabantio is Desdemona's father and Othello's father-in-law who shows deep hatred towards Othello as he says: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. She has deceived her father, and marry thee" (Act 1, Scene 3). Roderigo is presented as, mainly, Iago's puppet. The former does whatever the latter says. Rodrigo is the walking purse for Iago. He is fool because he takes Iago's advice literally, even when Iago is only using him. Another puppet

is Casio whose close relationship with Desdemona Iago uses to heighten Othello's fatal jealousy. Iago says, "As he shall smile, Othello shall go mad. And his unbookish jealousy must construe Poor Cassio's smiles, gestures, and light behaviour Quite in the wrong" (Act 4, scene 1). Lodovico accelerates the events. His message forces Iago to speed up and carry out his plan before Othello leaves Cyprus when he says, " Maybe the letter moved him, For, as I think, they do command him home, Deputing Cassio in his government (Act 4, Scene 1). Successful evil acts are unattainable without the cunning manipulation in others' minds. This tragedy will not come into existence if these minor characters are cast off. They are Iago's important keys to his success and to everyone's devastation. Thus, through the minor characters, one can learn a real life lesson that one should never ignore the actions of people around him, because those seemingly trivial individuals around might have significant impacts on one's life.

### 3. Conclusion

To sum up, Shakespeare's *Othello* has offered to dwell on Shakespeare's concern in emotional depth and theatrical effect. Shakespeare adds new characters such as Roderigo, Brabantio (Desdemona's father), Lodvico (Barbantio's relative), and others to make the play more comprehensive and dramatic and stress the idea that Iago is the master manipulator who manipulates the others in order to get his plans done.

Shakespeare points out that the sensibility of a person's grief can insulate and spoil the object. Emphasis on these arguments can direct to the severe in delusion and doctrinaire that we can find in Iago. Meantime, Shakespeare has not lost view of the need to depict these notions with satisfactory lucidity and perceptible

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effect that they demand the stage. The most significant change that Shakespeare creates in his villain is the cunning of Iago's traits in order to build more supreme picture of the coolness and guilt. Shakespeare has purposely made Iago an expert of delusion, doubtlessly setup on playwright's own knowledge of how villain character act.

Unlike Cinthio's *Hicatommithi* (The story of Desdemona of Venice), Shakespeare clearly refers to the war between Turks (Ottoman's) emperor and the Christian Venetians in order to give more political aspects reflecting the imperialistic conflict during that era.

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### **Abstract:**

Judging by the most famous quote No one is self-sufficient for John Donne, no text is self-sufficient for Shakespeare. Throughout the history of literature, Shakespeare has proven himself shrewd when it comes to borrowing texts to write stories. Based on the view of intertextuality theory, this study reveals the close connection between Shakespeare's Othello and Hecatmati (1565) by Giovanni Battista Giraldi also known as Giradi Gencio (1504-1573). Shakespeare derives his playwriting freely from history, literary works, as well as other sources. This reading of intertextuality will show what and why Shakespeare adds and deletes to adapt his stories to his plays, including events, characters, plot, and style. By comparing Shakespeare's Othello and Hecatmati (1565) to Gentheo, we see how Shakespeare crafts his characters during his time to bring political, romantic, and theatrical depth to the story.

**Key words:** Shakespeare, Othello, Hecatommithi, Renaissance, intertextuality.

الملخص:

انطلاقاً من الاقتباس الأشهر (لا أحد مكتفٍ ذاتياً) بالنسبة للكاتب جون دون، فليس هناك نص مستقل ذاتياً بالنسبة للكاتب شكسبير. وعلى مدى تاريخ الأدب، أثبت شكسبير نفسه الأدهى عندما يتعلق الأمر باستعارة النصوص لكتابة القصص. واستناداً إلى رؤية نظرية التناص، تكشف هذه الدراسة الصلة الوثيقة بين مسرحية أوثيلو لشكسبير ومسرحية هيكاتوماتي (١٥٦٥) لجيوفني باتيستا جيرالدي المعروف أيضاً باسم جيرادي جنثيو (١٥٠٤-١٥٧٣). يستمد شكسبير كتابة مسرحياته بحرية بالاعتماد على التاريخ، والأعمال الأدبية، بالإضافة إلى المصادر الأخرى، حيث أن قراءة التناص هذه ستبين ماذا ولماذا يقوم شكسبير بالإضافة والحذف لتكييف ما يستمد من القصص مع مسرحياته بما في ذلك الأحداث، والشخصيات، والحبكة، والأسلوب. فمن خلال مقارنة مسرحية أوثيلو لشكسبير وهيكاتوماتي (١٥٦٥) لجنثيو، نرى كيف يقوم شكسبير بصياغة شخصياته خلال عصره لإضفاء العمق السياسي والرومنسي والتأثيرات المسرحية على القصة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** شكسبير، أوثيلو، هيكاتوماتي، عصر النهضة، التناص.