

Macbeth and *Othello*

Ella Baars

Professor Hinojosa

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Violence rages through the world today, from war to murder to domestic abuse. It is a constant, static background to the daily lives of everybody, including Shakespeare. Although he made a living out of it, Shakespeare's tragedies follow violent ends to violent means, which are still significant enough to influence lives in modernity. Two of his tragedies, *Macbeth* and *Othello*, track the downfalls of two men. In *Othello*, the main character Othello is subjected to racism by everyone around him except for the woman he marries is manipulated and lied to explicitly by Iago, who convinces him that the one person who actually treats him well is cheating on him. *Macbeth* follows Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, a Scottish nobleman who is prophesied to become King of Scotland by three witches. He takes the prophecy into his own hands with the encouragement of his wife, killing the king. While both plays are considered tragedies, falls of great men, this essay will explore the factors leading up to the falls, including social status and war, manipulation, and the aftermath. Shakespeare makes deliberate choices in both *Macbeth* and *Othello* which make them similar tragedies with very different main characters and outcomes. Overall, the characterization of the two main men, as well as the factors that allow them to "fall", make *Othello* the more impactful play of the two.

To begin, social class plays an enormous role in both *Macbeth* and *Othello*, in both relating and disconnecting the two titular men. Macbeth and Othello are similar in the sense that both men are respected military leaders who have relatively high social standings. Macbeth begins the play as the Thane of Glamis, a land-owning man whom fights valiantly in the civil war of Scotland. Othello, similarly, fought in the war against Turkey, which later leads the Venetian government to allow him full command of Cyprus. Because both men are war heroes in their own right, it is impossible to ignore the fact before either of the plays even begin, the two

men have committed exceedingly violent acts. In fact, they are something bragged about by other men. In *Macbeth*, the Captain speaks of Macbeth's fighting, saying this.

...brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name—
Disdaining Fortune with his brandished steel,
Which smoked with bloody execution,
Like valor's minion carved out his passage
Till he faced the slave,
Which ne'er shook hands nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseamed him from the nave to th' chops,
And fixed his head upon our battlements (*Macbeth* 1.2.16-23).

Such an excessive display of violence does not alarm the men around Macbeth. Rather, it makes him “brave” and “valor's minion”. These acts of extreme brutality are not only accepted by those around Macbeth, but celebrated. Similarly, Othello brags of his own violent acts in his final speech, detailing the man he once killed.

...Set you down this,
And say, besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
And smote him thus (*Othello* 5.2.344-349).

Similarly to Macbeth, this violent killing of another man is seen as a point of pride, as well as an opportunity for both men to rise in social status. However, there are very apparent differences between the two plays. Macbeth was respected before his valiant fight in the war. He was the Thane of Glamis prior to any violent acts, and was respected as a nobleman. Othello, on the other hand, used his ferocity against the Turks in order to gain public respect, something that he did not have prior to the war. To add, Macbeth is called brave and valorous by others, while Othello is the only one pointing out his service in the war among his peers. Macbeth does not need to remind people himself that he fought tremendously in the civil war. Others, like the captain, are so impressed with him that they spread the word around, leaving Macbeth to bask in his own glory. Othello must remind the Venetians around him that he has earned his place by fighting the cultural others, or he is at very high risk of becoming the victim of racism and poverty. This calls into question the motives that Macbeth and Othello had for fighting in these wars in the first place, but begins both the plays with remembrances of horrible, savage acts of violence that the reader cannot forget both men are capable of.

Continuing with the acts of violence, both Othello and Macbeth are coerced and manipulated by others into committing exceedingly severe crimes against others. Othello is manipulated out of sheer hatred by Iago, who wants to convince Othello that his new wife is unfaithful. He does this out of pure spite, his end goal being getting Othello killing Desdemona and being punished for it.

For whiles this honest fool

Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,

And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I'll pour this pestilence into his ear
That she repeals him for her body's lust
And, by how much she strives to do him good,
She shall undo her credit with the Moor (*Othello* 324-330)

This is mirrored by Macbeth's wife, Lady Macbeth, who is an extraordinarily ambitious woman whose dream is to rule Scotland. She sees her opportunity and seizes it, coercing Macbeth into killing the king.

...Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear
And chastise with the valor of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crowned withal (*Macbeth* Act 1 Scene 5, lines 23-28).

The similarities between the wording are impossible to miss, with Shakespeare using the phrase "pour ____ into the man's ear" in both instances. While Iago's is sinister, utilizing the word "pestilence" which invokes imagery of death and smoke, Lady Macbeth's are more personal. She says "my spirits", which could be read as either alcohol, which would imply that she is releasing

his inhibitions and doubts, or her essence, making Macbeth mirror her ambition and become more like what she wishes she could be like as a man. Either way, it is clear by swapping out these words that the overall mood of the passage changes entirely. Iago's speech conveys his hatred towards Othello, and makes it clear that his intention is to ruin Othello's life with jealousy. Lady Macbeth's words, conversely, show how adamant she is that she will one day rule with her husband. It is to elevate the couple, rather than to ruin them.

Finally, the two men both commit murder, which occur at different points in the respective plays and have very different outcomes. Othello, spurred on by Iago's rhetoric and lies, strangles his innocent wife to death.

...Cold, cold, my girl?

Even like thy chastity. O curséd, curséd slave!

Whip me, ye devils, From the possession of this heavenly sight;

Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulfur,

Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire.

O Desdemon! Dead, Desdemon, dead! Oh! Oh! (*Othello* Act 5 Scene 2, lines 269-275).

Othello is plagued by guilt once he finds out his wife was not unfaithful, wishing the worst fates possible upon himself in agony. He is not only remorseful, but incredibly heartbroken by what he has done, taking full responsibility for the death of his wife. On the other hand, Macbeth, at his wife's encouragement, murders King Duncan in his sleep, then murders the guards, who are the prime suspects. Macbeth does not show remorse for his actions and never admits to them. He refuses to take accountability. Additionally, the two differ not only in intention, as well as how

much the audience sees. Macbeth's crimes are not put to the stage, while Othello's murder of Desdemona is something that the reader must grapple with along with Othello. Additionally, the final deaths of both plays, the titular men themselves, are carried out very differently. Macbeth is killed by his own people, who see him as a murderous tyrant. In fact, the beginning of the play mirrors the end, with Macbeth being beheaded in the same fashion he was bragged about for doing. The more tragic end, however, is that of Othello. He is wracked with guilt, finding out Desdemona was never unfaithful to him, and kills himself, his last words still begging to be remembered as a good man. Certainly, the reader feels more sympathy for Othello. He was manipulated and lied to by someone who despised him for no reason, and although his violence towards his wife must not be excused, it was the only act of violence committed at his hands or request through the play. Macbeth, however, after killing the king, had many other men, including his best friend Banquo, killed in order to keep his power. He was not lied to or misled by Lady Macbeth, and she certainly did not want him to fall. Macbeth had power and wanted more, while Othello had none from the start and only wanted control over the thing he loved.

Overall, the evidence and analysis explored in this essay prove that Othello's fate is a true tragedy in the modern sense of the word. The reader is forced to feel sympathy for the man, due to his lower social status and lack of public respect, the manipulation he faced at the hands of Iago, who wanted nothing but to see the man he hated ruined forever, and the remorse he felt for the crime against his wife that he was pushed into committing. Macbeth, conversely, began as a nobleman who did not have to earn the respect of others around him, was coerced into doing something for his benefit by someone who wanted to see him succeed, and neither admitted to nor felt guilt for the murders he committed and had others commit for him. Macbeth was never a

hero or an underdog, while Othello was. This makes *Othello* the more hard-hitting, impactful play of the two.

Work Cited

Shakespeare, William, et al. The Norton Shakespeare. 3rd ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.