

Ayasha Cantey
Sacred Heart University

ASC Speech

Yesterday, Patricia Akhemi mentioned that not teaching Othello could potentially do more damage than teaching Othello would. Which also brought up the question, if banning Othello would fall into the same categories of book banning and literary censoring? If you look at many of the texts that fall under the “banned” categories, they are painful to read, because they're supposed to be. The presence of Othello in academic spaces could stand as a learning ground. The existence of sexism, racism, misogyny, and patriarchy within the play, could help expose students, academics, or regular people on how to identify and deal with any of these situations. Because unfortunately, all of these issues are things that many people continuously face.

I was first introduced to the Untitled Othello Program during my Sophomore year at Sacred Heart University. I was a newly declared English major with a Creative writing and Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies minor.

While observing the many conversations of the Untitled Othello Project, I had the privilege of understanding that the text could yes be discriminatory, however, the interpretation and examination of character roles, stage directions, and changes in diction, impact how the play affects the audience. The cast would spend hours sometimes discussing a certain scene, word, character, possible ways

of execution, and all in all trying to determine, what purpose, if any, does this serve?

Tina Harper, an ensemble member, who was reading Bianca, stated, “Productions of Shakespeare allow the actors to portray an aspect of reality. Shakespeare often writes in a sense of good or bad. Or comedy or tragedy. In a relevant point in time, there are other ways to portray or emphasize vulnerability. You don’t need extra/ offensive phrases to communicate to the audience.” During the examination of the texts, we had a couple of substitutions of actors, especially in the role of Iago. Each one bringing with them, another possible execution of the character role. The cast strived to take loud and overbearing voices like Iago, and in a sense, take some of his space, the space of a jealous patriarchal misogynistic voice and give it to other characters such as Bianca, Emilia, and even at times Othello. The cast had simultaneously agreed that, “A villain can be a villain without taking away from or disregarding other characters”.

Like many people have mentioned before, Shakespeare and stage directions are an area of “uncertainty”. Leaving it up to editors, actors, academics, etc to find a way to execute the intent of Shakespeare's words, without adding from or taking from them .

Keith Hamilton Cobb once mentioned, “Wanting to see human beings perform a tragedy that is not a show of a black/ white hero. But rather, a show of

truth. Which strives not to pretend that words can't hurt people or make them feel less than. But rather one that's true in the sense of protectiveness in reference to humanity. While emphasizing the protection of certain people and their level of respect." In order for the play Othello to successfully be performed, it would need a cast who was up for a challenge. A cast that would respect each other's bodies, races, and identities.

This experience has contributed to my interest in literary research and especially furthering my work with the play Othello. I have since been thinking of ways to explain the excessive hatred of Iago's character. One such idea that arose was the possibility of Iago being played as a black woman named "Iaga". Iaga would be a character fueled by jealousy in a patriarchal and misogynistic world. All of her work would be overlooked by men in this period. So her anger and frustration would have a reason. Whereas, Iago's anger is once again left up to interpretation. We are often left grasping for explanations of Iago's villainous ways. However, the presence of another black body, that is a woman, could perhaps alter the play. And help provide clarity to the areas of the unknown.