Shakespeare's Adaption of Cinthio's "Un Capitano Moro" into Othello

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Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

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Prairie View A&M University, 1981

A Thesis

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MASTER OF ARTS THESIS

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

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This Master’s Thesis entitled, “Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello”, would not have been feasible had it not been for the continued support of a cadre of persons, to whom I wish to express my sincere appreciation for their unwavering encouragements.

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# Table of Contents

**Abstract** vii

**I. Introduction: The Root of Racism in Europe** 1

1.1 - The European Attitudes in Antiquity toward ‘color’ 2
1.2 - The Evolutionary Background and the Roots of ‘Otherness/Racism’ 2
1.3 - The Perception of “Blackness” in the Eyes of Europeans 3

**II. The Historical and Social Presence of Africans Ancestry in Europe** 5

2.1 - Alessandro de Medici, generally called ‘Il Moro’ 8

**III. Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio and The Italian Novella** 9

**IV. A Critical Analysis of Cinthio’s Novella** 13

4.1 - The History of Sixteenth Century Venetian Ottoman Relations 13
4.2 - Venetian -Ottoman Rivalry 14
4.3 - Curzio, the Narrator 14
4.4 - Anxieties about Cross-cultural Encounters 15
4.5 - Biographical Information on Characters 16
4.6 - The Significance of the Name Disdemona 17
4.7 - Cultural, Racial and Religious Differences 17
4.8 - The Figure of the Moor in 14-16th Centuries Novella 18
4.9 - The Moor and Disdemona’s Marriage Built on Mutual Trust 18
4.10 - The Employment of Christian Moorish Unions 19
4.11 - The Importance of Cyprus for Venice 19
4.12 - The Moor’s Commitment in Defense of Venice’s Interest Scrutinized 20

**V. The Four Passages of “Un Capitano Moro”** 21
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

V I. Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” Patterned after the Italian Novella Tradition

(A) Boccaccio’s Novella # 9
(B) Ariosto’s Story
(C) Cinthio’s Novella

VII. Cinthio and Shakespeare’s Motives for Writing

VIII. What Were the Political and Socio-Economic Factors in England that Prompted Shakespeare to Write Othello

8.1 - Queen Elizabeth I’s Unstable English Economy
8.2 - England’s Relationship with the Ottoman Empire
8.3 - The Mediterranean, a Centre for International Trade
8.4 - The Moroccan Ambassador and His Entourage
8.5 - England’s Attraction and Affiliation with Venice
8.6 - The English Attitude Towards the Black Race
8.7 - What Black Skin Meant to White Englishmen
8.8 - Early Interracial Marriages in English Renaissance Literature
8.9 - England’s Relationship with Africa
8.10 - Queen Elizabeth I’s Royal Proclamation against Black people in England
8.11 - Queen Elizabeth I’s Supported Britain’s Nefarious Slave Trade
8.12 - Shakespeare’s knowledge of the Italian Condottieri and Their Mercenary Armies
8.13 - Shakespeare Patterns Othello after Leo Africanus

IX. A Comparative Analysis of Un Capitano Moro and Othello, The Tragedy of the Moor of Venice

9.1 - Notable Differences in The Titles of Both Literary Works
9.2 - The Non-naming of Characters
9.3 - Shakespeare’s Invention of Bianca
9.4 - The Development of the Character of the Ensign’s Life
9.5 - The Character of Roderigo Introduced
9.6 - The Marriage of Disdemona and the Moor
9.7 - Waging War with The Turks
9.8 - Shakespeare’s Deductions from Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro”
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

(A) Iago’s Motive  
(B) Desdemona’s Doubts  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>- Dismena’s Murder is different than that of Desmena’s</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.10</td>
<td>- The Changes to Cinthio’s Handkerchief</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

X. A Literary Analysis of Shakespeare’s Othello  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>- The British Transatlantic Slave Trade</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>- The interplay of Othello and Iago</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A)</td>
<td>Who is Othello?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>- Othello’s Origin and Nationality</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>- The Significance of Othello’s Marriage to Desdemona</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>- Othello Depicted as An Animal</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>- Othello’s Dual Personality</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>- Othello and Shakespeare’s Characteristics are Similar</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>- Othello Doubts and Devalues Himself</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>- The Prognostication of Iago as the Devil</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.10</td>
<td>- Iago, The Personification of Evil</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.11</td>
<td>- How Iago Manipulated Roderigo</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.12</td>
<td>- Iago’s Latent Homosexuality</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.13</td>
<td>- Iago’s Demonization of Woman</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.14</td>
<td>- Desdemona at Her Father’s Feet</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.15</td>
<td>– The Non-Punishment of Iago</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

XI. The Role and Symbolic Importance of the Handkerchief  

XII Conclusion  

XIII - Works Cited
Abstract

William Shakespeare’s *Othello* is an adaptation of Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio’s “*Un Capitano Moro*,” *that was* written in 1565; taken from his novella collection ‘*Gli Hecatommithi,*’ Decad.III., Novella 7. Cinthio’s story of the Moor of Venice fits the classification of the Italian novellas which grew to prominence during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries due to the popularity of Boccaccio’s *Decameron.*

Shakespeare liberated this story from its state of oblivion and utilized it as his framework for Othello; as the plot exposes some of the most intricate of human emotions – love, hate and jealousy, which are all entwined with schemes of conspiracies that add to the richness of a great novella. The story of the Moor of Venice encapsulates the displayed attitudes of Venetians during the Renaissance towards cross-cultural diversities and ethnicities that were brought into play by their foreign nationals, which they perceived and classified as ‘other’; due to Venice becoming a multicultural city state, because of her international trading enterprises.

Most historians believed that the modern notion of ‘racism’ cannot be applied to the ancient world or the Middle Ages. This is not to say that the disparaging constructions of ‘otherness’, xenophobia and other stereotypes did not exist. It is in the Early-Modern period that we start to witness the emergence of a notion of race, as it is familiar to us. William Shakespeare sensed this socio-cultural phenomenon. His Othello based on Cinthio’s “*Un Capitano Moro*”; was written in protestation of the stereotypic ‘otherness’ of Elizabethan England.

The objectives of this Masters’ Thesis are firstly to illustrate how Shakespeare adapted Cinthio’s “*Un Capitano Moro*” to construct his literary masterpiece, *Othello.* Secondly to demonstrate how he used the character of Othello as an allegorical figure to highlight institutionalized xenophobia and social injustices that were taking root throughout Europe and lead to the Transatlantic African Slave Trade.

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1. Introduction - The Root of Racism in Europe
William Shakespeare’s *Othello* is an adaptation of Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio’s “*Un Capitano Moro,*” that was written in 1565; taken from his novella collection ‘*Gli Hecatommithi,*’ Decad.III., Novella # 7. Cinthio’s story of the Moor of Venice fits the classification of the Italian novellas which grew to prominence during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries due to the popularity of Boccaccio’s *Decameron.*

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1. Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “*Un Capitano Moro*” into *Othello*

1.1 - *The European Attitude in Antiquity Toward ‘Color’*

To fully comprehend Othello as an allegorical figure, this could only be achieved by utilizing a microscopic lens to scrutinize the attitude of Europeans toward ‘color’, during the Renaissance
period. From the dawn of recorded history there was no preconceived notion of discrimination against people based on skin color. An excellent example of this is presented by Frank Snowden Jr. in his account of black-white relations covering the period of the Pharaohs to the Caesars. Snowden validated that the early Europeans did not discriminate against blacks because of the color of their skin. He also drew attention to the fact that for three thousand years Mediterranean whites through commercial ventures and wars met with African blacks and these encounters were recorded in art works and written documents. The black ethnicities whites interacted with as described by Snowden were mostly known as Kushites, Ethiopians and Nubians. As formidable warriors, Nubians commanded respect from their white adversaries. The general attitude and respect whites attributed to blacks during the period of antiquity were auspiciously positive (Snowden, p. 38). The color black was also looked upon positively by the Egyptians. Jan Nederveen Pieterse attested to this factor stating, “Black as a color is valued positively in Egyptian culture, as the color of fertility (dark as the silt of the Nile)” (Pieterse 23).

1.2 - The Evolutionary Background and the Roots of ‘Otherness/ Racism’

The age of the Renaissance was the beginning of modernity. It was one of the most dynamic periods of history, bringing capitalism, nation formation, humanism, individualism and global empires. Until this epoch, racial ideologies had not taken root.

According to current scholarship, ‘race’ is not a natural category, but a social construct. Stuart Hall states that ‘race’ is, “a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found” (Hall 45).

When it came to community identity in early modern Europe, such terminologies as ‘race’ or ‘racism,’ xenophobia’ and ‘ethnicity’ carried little to no relevance; as the word ‘race’ transmitted
a different connotation than it does today (Niro 48-52). The works of Cinthio and Shakespeare exemplify strong evidence of racial undertones that speak to how Europeans’ misconceived the cultural diversities and ethnicities of foreigners living within their societies. Hence the European hypothesis of the term ‘otherness’; as scholars date the origin of the word “race” back to the 1819th centuries (Richards 22).

1.3 - The Perception of ‘Blackness’ in the Eyes of Europeans

The Italian word ‘moro’ during the Renaissance was not necessarily synonymous of black: it mainly referred to dark-skinned North Africans. Also, the word ‘Ethiopian’ in the vernacular and Latin did not mean a native Ethiopian but was indicative of a black-skinned person from Africa (Earle and Lowe xvi). According to Wikipedia, during the Middle Ages the term ‘moors’ was predominantly applied to the Muslim inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Malta and Maghreb. The Moors were initially known as the indigenous Maghrebine Berbers and the name was later used to describe Arabs. During the Middle Ages and the early modern period, the term ‘moor’ was applied to Arabs, North African Berbers and European Muslims (Liddell and Scott 1705).

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

In Europe, the jargon ‘moor’ carried for Muslims a derogative connotation, particularly for those of Arab or Berber descent, regardless of whether they resided in Spain or North Africa. During the colonial period, the Portuguese introduced the name, ‘Ceylon Moors’ and in Sri Lanka there were ‘Indian Moors’ and the Bengali Muslims were also referred to as Moors. The longstanding Muslim community of the Philippines predated the arrival of the Spanish moors. The Spanish moors were identified as the moors because of their Muslim faith by the Spanish colonizers (Liddell and Scot 1705).
As per the discussion of ‘otherness’, ‘blackness’ was stigmatized as an emblematic of sin, the Devil, dirt, excrement/feces. These are the types of inferences that were projected onto people of darker skin pigmentation by Europeans during the Elizabethan era. They did not see blacks as equals to whites, they were deemed inferior. During the Renaissance ‘white and black’ created a pair of opposites and often exemplified the colored expression of Good and Evil. Light and the color white denoted God, Grace and the divine realm (Marrapodi 200) Some Europeans typically saw Africans as the ‘lower races’ or ‘sub-humans’ (Richards 5/6). Prior to 1850s the British held the view that humanity consisted of a hierarchy ranging from non-Europeans, particularly Africans and other crude or undomesticated people. They considered blacks to be inferior humans (Richards 7).

According to Ania Loomba’s writings in Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism, the Elizabethan’s awareness of race was directly influenced by how blackness was ‘othered’ in that time.

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

During that era there existed a multiplicity of standards that were somewhat contradictory, when used to determine grounds for racial isolation; as the significance of one’s ‘blackness’ was argued greatly and often altered which was dependent on numerous conditions. Historically, ‘blackness’ represented a variety of differences: danger, black people were lecherous, unprincipled, evil, ugly and repulsive. The creation of ‘the other’ through color and language is important. The connectivity of color to a man signified that he or she had certain qualities. The darker a person was the more vicious, the cruder their sexuality and exoticness (Loomba 40).

II. The Historical and Social Presence of African Ancestry in Europe

Joaneath Spicer, Curator of Baltimore’s Walters Art Museum, from October 14, 2012 to January
21, 2013, staged an exhibition entitled, “The African Presence in Renaissance Europe’ at the Walters Art Museum, with eighty paintings, sculptures and manuscripts; he showcased the presence and representation of blacks in Renaissance arts, from the late 1400s to the early 1600s; as noted in the article “European Perceptions of Blackness as Reflected in the Visual Arts” (https://thewalters.org/news/walters-art-museum-exhibition-reveals-the-african-presenceinrenaissance-europe/). The Venetian city of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in which both Cinthio’s novella and Shakespeare’s play are set, was home to people of multicultural and ethnic backgrounds.

As noted a late fifteenth century painting by Vittore Carpaccio, named, “The Healing of the Possessed Man”, which showcases not only nobles, clerks, bishops, Turkish traders, but also an African gondolier (https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/uploads/files/2013/10/strangers_in_the_city.pdf). At the beginning of the mid-fifteenth century Black African were brought against their will in significant numbers to Europe. Apart from the general stereotype of blacks being characterized as lazy and sexually promiscuous, physically strong, good musicians or dancers, Kate Lowe in Black Africans in Renaissance Europe writes about the existence of noble black men in European courts and emphasized the role of black people in the construction of European civilization. The presence of fifteen - sixteenth century black Africans is far from being undetectable. According to Earle and Lowe, their existences and contributions are recorded in written and visual sources, in secular and ecclesiastical documentations found throughout Northern and southern Europe. Both Earle and
Lowe educate their readers that the long history of black African communities in many parts of Europe was denied for political and racial reasons, and hence the subject of their existence and contributions were successfully hidden until the end of the twentieth century (Earle and Lowe 3).

According to Anne Marie Jordan, Queen Catherine of Austria’s Lisbon court consisted of slave women and children of different ethnic backgrounds who worked as musicians, cooks, pastry chefs, housekeepers, pages or servants in the royal apothecaries.

7

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

Jordan further highlights that white Moorish slaves were favored due to their skin color, whereas black slaves were dependable for religious reasons and lent to the social status found within the multicultural court (https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/619).

2.1 -Alessandro de Medici, Generally Called “Il Moro”

Another example of the presence of Africans in Europe is Cardinal Giulio de Medici’s illegitimate son, Alessandro de Medici. His sobriquet was ‘il moro’, the Italian for ‘The Moor’. Alessandro was born in 1510 to an African woman who worked in the Medici household, she is referred to in existing historical records as Simonetta da Collavecchio. According to historians, Alessandro’s father was Cardinal Giulio de Medici (cousin of Lorenzo de Medici), who became Pope Clement VII (http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/africans-in-medieval-and-renaissance-art-dukealessandrode-medici/).

Alessandro was invested as the Duke and permanent gonfalonier of the republic in 1532. During his reign, he commissioned the construction of numerous forts in and around Florence for example: Fortezza da Basso, a gigantic fortress in the historic district and other fortresses constructed around the city were all contracted by him. Alessandro exercised unlimited supremacy as the first black
duke of Florence and Penne. His intellect and good judgement for justice earned him the love and affection of the Florentines. Alessandro was perceived as a tyrannical autocrat, who deprived republican Florence of its liberty.

Among the Florentine exiles he faced many enemies who mocked and considered him as a peasant. They even accused him of poisoning his mother because of her ethnicity; to disguise his birth origin. This is a clear indication that Africans and people of mixed heritage were once ambassadors and dignitaries as they were much more free of racial stereotyping than their enslaved peers (http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/africans-in-medieval-and-renaissance-art-dukealessandro-de-medici/).

### III. Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio and the Italian Novella

Giovanni Battista Giraldi (1507-1573), a poet and dramatist followed the traditions of the academic circles of his day by adopting the Latin name Cynthius. Hence, the addition of Cinzio or Cinthio to his original name; as he was simply referred to by his peers as Il Cinzio (Carney163). Cinzio is one of Apollo’s titles, which means ‘the God of poetry’ (Tosi and Bassi 43, Kindle edition). Cinthio was born in 1507 and died in 1573. He became a physician and taught medicine at the University of Ferrara from 1532 to 1562. To compliment his teaching of medicine, most of his time was dedicated to writing in the Italian vernacular. As a disciple of Giovanni Boccaccio, he was acknowledged as a productive Italian author. His writings consist of nine tragedies, numerous works of literary criticism and a collection of short tales or stories that belong to the novella genre (Carney 163).
Tosi and Bassi informed that, the genre of the novella was brought to fame in the early Modern Europe by Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and gained great success in sixteenth century -Italy. It was a highly popular genre, incorporating the fashion of moral tales derived from the Latin classics and the tradition of the fairy tales (Tosi and Bassi 37, Kindle edition).

The collection of Cinthio’s short stories published in 1565 was the *Hecatommithi*. a collection of one hundred stories, written in the traditional style of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, where the story tellers are passengers on a ship to Marseilles escaping the pillage of Rome. Contrasting to Boccaccio’s work, Cinthio’s stories depict a connotation of morality (Carney 163). Both Sanders and Honigmann accredited Cinthio’s work as the inspiration for William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*. Tales from this collection were utilized by numerous Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists seeking new materials to satisfy the theatrical taste of their audiences. For instance, the fifth story taken from the eight ‘decade’ of *Gli Hecatommithi*, happens to be the literary source for the play ‘Measure for Measure’. Shakespeare happens to be the author of this play (Honigmann 50).

Although there does not exist a 16th century English translation of Cinthio’s work, the book was greatly enjoyed by the Elizabethan society. However, it is next to impossible to ascertain if Shakespeare utilized the original version in Italian or resorted to Gabriel Chappuys’1583 French translation (Honigmann 13 - 375). Nor is it certain the actual date in which Shakespeare wrote Othello. The years 1603 to 1604 have been traditionally documented by scholars as the date of its composition, with the play existing in two different versions: a Quarto text (Q) published in 1622
and Folio published (F) in 1623. Many have questioned if the Q and F texts were spinoffs of the Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

many diverse sources used by Shakespeare in the writing of the play. To settle these doubts, Hall concluded that Q and F versions have been interpreted as the first and second choice by William Shakespeare (Hall 8). Nonetheless, both Sanders and Honigmann corroborated the argument that Gli Hecatommititi was the principal source for Shakespeare’s Othello, giving unambiguous facts that drew attention to his familiarity with Cinthio’s work; i.e. Othello incorporates rare words and phrases which were used in Cinthio’s text and not that of the French edition. Examples can be found in Act three, scene 3, lines 361-5: “Give me the ocular proof…. Make me to see’t,” according to Sanders, this is closest to Cinthio’s “se non mi fai…..vedere co gli occhi” than Chappuys’s, “si tu ne me fais voir’.

In QI, Shakespeare used the unfamiliar word ‘acerbe’ and in his F version, ‘bitter’ can be found in Act I, scene 3, lines 338, which could be a replication of Cinthio’s ‘in acerbissimo odio’. Also, we see Shakespeare’s usage of the word ‘molestation’ as he described the flood in Act 2, scene 1, line 16, which could have been impacted by Cinthio’s Moor who speaks of the sea in an equivalent manner in a section ignored by Chappuys:’ogni pericolo, che ci soprauenisse, mi recherebbe estreme molestia’ (Sanders 3).

The construction of Gli Hecatommititi bears similarity to Boccaccio’s Decameron (10 themed stories per day orated by ten individuals during a ten-day period). The third decade is themed, “The Unfaithfulness of Husbands and Wives,” and the seventh story/novella is the interpretation of a marriage between a Venetian aristocrat, Disdemona and an anonymous Moor of Venice who

massacres her at the inciting of his ensign. 

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello
Honigmann; “where did Cinthio get the story of the Moor of Venice and where did it originate?”

Cinthio maintained that his tales are written based on real life circumstances, however, this has been debunked by Sanders, as only some of his stories can be classified as such. The unambiguous pragmatism of his tale of the Moor and his Venetian wife have motivated scholars to investigate Italian history for corresponding calamities of human resentfulness. Their findings insinuate that some demonstrate having similarities with Shakespeare’s play, one pertinent to a member of the Moro family and another presenting a captain nicknamed, Il Moro (Sanders 3). As it is somewhat challenging to pin point the origin of the ‘Moor of Venice’ or how Cinthio acquired the story; the most logical and plausible answer, can be found in the fact that this tale could have belonged to the tradition of story-telling which existed between the late 14 and 15 century Renaissance periods.

In the Anatomy of the Novella, “The European Tale Collection from Boccaccio and Chaucer to Cervantes,” we are told that the term novella was unreservedly employed in the Renaissance to describe both written and spoken narratives. “It must be decided, then, if a novella was an oral tale written down, or a literary tale intended for public recitation (Clements and Gibaldi 3). Hence, through this medium Cinthio may have learned of the story of ‘the Moor of Venice,’ having heard it in the very same tradition of storytelling. According to Leon Felipe, who wrote his version of Othello - ‘Otelo o el Panuelo Encantado (Othello or The Enchanted Handkerchief) between 19521960; in his prologue he traced the origin of the story that inspired Cinthio. He claimed that Cinthio must have acquired the tale of ‘A Moorish Captain’ born in Africa and the Middle East, which was circulated in the oral tradition of the Bedouins and Mohammed’s warriors.

11  

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello Then the tale arrived in Italy and was recited by Minstrels until Cinthio, a ‘hunter of tales’ put it in written form for the first time (Kliman and Santos 98).
Successful in his intentions Cinthio’s principal objective in writing these stories, was to produce literary works that were committed in bringing moral benefits to the reader. These stories were intended also to be useful parables in governing the private behavior of individuals, as well as a moral compass in the administration of public justice. In his approach Cinthio is more noble than his contemporaries when writing on this topic, but his work is also representative of a less than common (or greater than usual) conception on matters of race and power dynamics in his artistic output. Cinthio offers one, “partly racist warning” about the dangers of miscegenation. Therefore, it is for this reason that Cinthio inserted between the fifth and sixth groups of the ten tales of the *Hecatommiti* three *Dialoghi della vita civile* (Dialogues of Civil Life) (Tosi and Bassi47, Kindle edition).

Cinthio’s *Hecatommiti*, presents a series of short stories about different types of love, most importantly marital love. The story tellers explain in each of the ten series of ten stories (each), how husbands and wives should be selected. In the introduction one-man states that appetite should be ruled by reason, thereby arguing that prior to wedding we should take into consideration ‘the quality, manners, life and habits’ of potential partners. He denounced women who under the false pretense of being virtuous, disguise their ugly souls through ‘singing, playing, dancing…. and speaking so sweetly.’

**Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello**

Cinthio’s third decade from which the story of Disdemona and the Moorish Captain originates, orbits around the infidelity of husbands and wives. The sixth story depicts how a husband discovers his wife’s adultery and sought revenge by staging her ‘accidental’ death. The seventh story relates to the tale of the Moor and his revenge on his wife for her alleged infidelity (Honigmann 377).
4.1 - The History of Sixteenth Century Venetian-Ottoman Relations

Tosi and Bassi examined Cinthio’s novella within its historical and literary contexts to demonstrate that it offers more than a direct summary of conventional motifs that were present in the Italian novella tradition. According to these two authors, “The history of sixteenth century Venetian-Ottoman relations is a significant frame of reference for a more nuanced understanding of how Cinthio’s novella registered contemporary anxieties about cross-cultural encounters.” They argued that in this novella tale, Cinthio challenged cultural expectations about racial “otherness” and gender through his ability of combining several characters that were typical to the novella tradition: bestial Moors, noble Moors, unjustly accused women, and jilted or deceived two-timed men (Tosi and Bassi 48).

Concurring with Tosi and Bassi, Othello was written during the first part of the seventeenth century by Shakespeare, who set his tragedy against the eve of the 1570 Ottoman conquest of Cyprus; whilst Cinthio wrote his novella five years earlier around 1565.

4.2 - Venetian-Ottoman Rivalry

The reign of Suleiman I coincided with the Hecatommitithi’s composition (1527-1565), as the Ottoman Empire was at the pinnacle of its power. Contrastingly, the Venetian Republic was in...
decline, due to the rise of Turkish power and the newly discovered trade routes and markets across the Atlantic and around the coast of Africa. Tosi and Bassi informed that during the mid-sixteenth century, there existed a strong Venetian-Ottoman rivalry for commercial and military dominance in the Mediterranean, which was yet to be determined. Venice faced a significant amount of retrenchment of its maritime powers. As this was a time of decline and profound instability for the Republic, the sixteenth-century Italian readers were more concerned about current events which would have included victories and losses against the Ottoman fleets; therefore Cinthio’s story is about the tragic union between a Venetian woman and a Moorish captain would have conjured up these perilous political, economic, and cultural contexts (Tosi and Bassi 48-49).

4.3 - Curzio, the Narrator

In the tale of “Un Capitano Moro”, Cinthio utilized a narrator named Curzio. At the beginning of the Hecatommithi Curzio endorsed marriage as the only lawful path for love. He introduced his account as a counterpoint to stories of truly adulterous women.

14 Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

However, Tosi and Bassi confirmed that Curzio does not present his description as a story about race; but called attention to the despicable intrigues of evildoers (the Ensign) and the useable weakness of credulous minds (the Moor) (Tosi and Bassi 50).

4.4 - Anxieties about Cross-cultural Encounters

In his celebratory letter at the beginning of the third deca (decade), which is often overlook in studies of this novella, Cinthio evoked anxieties about cross-cultural encounters. The letter was dedicated to Laura Eustochia di Dianti, the lover or third wife of Cinthio’s patron, Duke Alfonso I d’ Este. In this letter, Cinthio prompted his addressee and readers to bear in mind the aesthetic conventions of visual art through which light or white shades could be further illuminated by their
proximity to dark or black ones. He also explicitly noted the long-established Christian tradition of assigning the opposing moral values of virtue/vice to light/dark:

‘Egli e’ commune parere de piu’ saggi del mondo, illustrissima Signora, che un contrario posto appresso all’altro piu’ chiaramente si conosca, che s’egli da se’ solo e’ considerate. Et nel vero la esperienza mostra che cosi e’ appunto, perché’ il bianco appresso al nero si scuopre vie piu’ chiaro, e l’oscur, che porta con lui il vitio, fa vie piu’ comparere I raggi lucentissimi della virtu’, che, senza cosi’ fatto paragone, non comparirebbero,”

Source: [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89010153427;view=1up;seq=72](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89010153427;view=1up;seq=72)

“Most Illustrious Lady, it is the general opinion of the world’s wisest men that when something is placed beside its opposite it becomes more clearly knowable than if it is considered in isolation. And in truth experience shows that this is so, because white becomes lighter when it is next to black, and what is dark, which is accompanied by vice, illuminates the very bright rays of virtue, which, without such a comparison, would not be apparent. The third decade demonstrates this binary opposition through stories pertinent to faithful or unfaithful spouses.

Cinthio’s dedicatory letter reverberates predominantly with the story of Disdemona and the Moorish Captain, which is the only story in the *Hecatommithi* that explicitly highlights racial, religious, and cultural differences through a black-white sexual union. The thematic links between the letter and the novella indicate Cinthio’s desire to warn readers of the dangers of associating with those of a different race. He utilized the unease about reading white against black, and virtue against vice, through his ability to modulate dialogues and accounts with determined clarity (Tosi and Bassi 50).
4.5 - Biographical Information on Characters

Cinthio’s tale of “Un Capitano Moro” does not provide readers with any background information on his characters, all appearing as the naïve puppets of Cinthio as they are not even named but presented according to their rank and station in life. In Shakespeare’s Othello they become sublimated and idealized as complete characters; characters that are turned inside out, due to the geniuses of Shakespeare, who offered biographical information on each protagonist. Tosi and Bassi explained that the reason why Cinthio did not provide biographical information on his characters was because he followed the established novelistic covenant of omitting identifiable details about the protagonists, including their names (Tosi and Bassi 50).

4.6 - The Significance of the name Disdemona

With reference to the established novelistic agreement, Disdemona is the only exception to this rule. Cinthio named the heroine after the Greek dysdaimon meaning ‘ill-fated spirit’; which was an implication that this novella was to be read primarily as a story about fate. Henry and Renee Kahane in their analysis on the etymology of Disdemona noted that the Greek dysdaimon signifies “cursed with an evil destiny, ill-starred and unhappy, or God-fearing and religious” (Kahane 232235). Shakespeare stripped Cinthio’s characters of their identifying labels pertinent to their military or social status: captain, standard-bearer, standard-bearer’s wife and head of the guard. In naming each of his characters, he brought them to life each having a distinct personality that enhanced the intricate plots and schemes of the drama (Tosi and Bassi 51).
4.7 - Cultural, Racial and Religious Differences

According to Torrentino, cultural, racial and religious differences are signaled in the rubric that preceded the novella: “Un Capitano Moro piglia per mogliera una cittadina Veneziana.” He asserted that the tale commenced with a highly unconventional assertion of a double cultural assimilation: the Moorish captain under the employment of the Venetian Republic is married to a Venetian citizen. The Moor, who personally and professionally has obtained social status within the Venetian society, remained an outsider and failed in being accepted, although he was described as a valiant moor:

“A very valiant Moor, who because he was personally courageous and had given proof in warfare of great prudence and skillful energy, was very dear to those Venetian lords, who in rewarding virtuous actions advance the interests of any republic (Torrentino 64).

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

4.8 - The Figure of the Moor in 14-16th Century Novella

In keeping with the figure of noble Moors that we find in the novella tradition, particularly in Giovanni Boccaccio and Masuccio Salernitano’s; Cinthio does not refer to the Moor as being noble, but implies “Un Moro molto valoroso”, “A Valiant Moro”. Therefore, Cinthio unambiguously evokes this tradition, which is a derivative of chivalric romance representations. Nonetheless, the noble Moors in other stories were never romantically related to Christian women. Moors that were sexually engaged with Italian women found in other stories of the novella tradition were in fact adversative to such images of noble Moors: they were habitually depicted as excessively sexual, sometimes sadistic, and often illiterate slaves. Hence, Cinthio presents the Moor as an African savage, who is activated by brutal jealousy, incited by barbarous rage. (Tosi and Bassi 51).
4.9 – The Moor and Disdemona’s Marriage Built on Mutual Trust

Cinthio’s moor is modeled after the original lascivious moor. His Moor marries and beds “una virtuosa donna, di maravigliosa bellezza, Disdemona chiamata”, ‘a virtuous woman, of stunning beauty, called Disdemona’ therefore he is viewed as a repugnant. Disdemona truly loves him as noted by Cinthio, “tratta non da appetito donnesco, ma dalla virtu del Moro, s’innamoro di lui”, “because of his virtuous nature and not out of womanly lust”. They live together for some time, prior to taking leave for Cyprus. Their resolve to travel to Cyprus together is a testimony that their marriage is built on mutual trust, affection and respect.

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

Tosi and Bassi underlined that, in the novella tradition, domestic harmony was a thing of rarity, even among Christian couples and most importantly was unheard of in stories pertinent to intercultural marriages. The geographical shift from Venice to Cyprus marked the beginning of problems for the happy couple (Tosi and Bassi 52-53).

4.10 -The Employment of Christian – Moorish Unions

With reference to the marriage between a Christian and a Moor, Cinthio distinctly avoids the use of poisonous language to describe the representation of Christian-Moorish unions, which were employed by Salernitano, Cornazano and Brandello. However, Tosi and Bassi reminded us not to dismiss Disdemona’s Family’s objection to the marriage, which subtly signaled the unpredictability of their union: “Si congiunsero insieme per matrimonio, ancora che I parenti della donna facessero cio’ che poterono perche’ ella altro marito si predesse”, (https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89010153427;view=1up;seq=72 “They
joined together in marriage, even though the woman’s relatives did what they could for her to take a different husband than him’ (Tosi and Bassi 53).

4.11 -The Importance of Cyprus for Venice

The fact that Cinthio included Cyprus into this novella is a clear indication of its importance for Venice. Marie Viallon informed that Cyprus was debatably one of the most ferociously disputed places in the sixteenth-century Mediterranean. Due to its tactical importance for commercial and military dominance. Venice fought hard to preserve its control of Cyprus since seizing it from the Lusignan dynasty in 1489.

As a result, Cyprus unrelentingly suffered recurrent raids by Ottoman forces, as well as copious attacks by pirates and corsairs of diverse religious association in search of booty and prisoners. In 1539, the Ottomans destroyed Limassol, which is today considered to be one of the largest commercial sea ports on the Mediterranean trade route, situated on the southern coast of Cyprus. These repeated threats forced Venice to reinforce its bases on the island at Nicosia, Famagusta and Kyrenia. From 1489 to 1570 Cyprus was theoretically Venetian territory. When the Ottomans expanded their empire by capturing Egypt and Syria, they considered Cyprus an essential part of their empire and Venice began to send Constantinople the annual tax it had formally sent to Cairo (Viallon, pp.202/203). According to Tosi and Bassi, Cinthio’s novella prefigures the 1570 Ottoman-Venetian battle for Cyprus, which is in keeping with the fact that when the Hecatommithi was published, because of the wagging the wars, the control of the island was still unresolved (Tosi and Bassi 54).
4.12 - The Moor’s Commitment in Defense of Venice’s Interest Scrutinized

Due to the Venetian-Ottoman tension, the Moor was selected to defend the Venetian territory of Cyprus against the Ottomans’ threat of war. This situation in and of itself is cause for one to question or scrutinize the Moor’s commitment in defending the interest of Venice, would he become a threatening internal adversary and if so by what means?

Tosi and Bassi laid these concerns to rest by underlining that the Moor was an unknown entity, and unidentifiable by name or country. The only known characteristics about him was that he was courageous, virtuous and black.

If the Moor was an ex-slave; a Turkish or North African soldier who was captured in battle; or an ex-diplomat from distant lands; or even a foreign mercenary hired to aid the Venetian Republic Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello in its military ventures, then the suggestion would have most likely occurred. Also, they reminded us that throughout the 16th century, the Ottomans frequently offered Venice military assistance through mercenaries. Although this was often a profitable enterprise for Venice, it was also frowned upon as a dangerous situation and considered to be an ‘un-Christian policy’ by the Church, which repeatedly and publicly condemned such alliances (Tosi and Bassi 54).

V - The Four Passages of “Un Capitano Moro”

Four controversial passages in Cinthio’s novella have been identified by Tosi and Bassi, as they signal modern day misgivings and society’s negative stereotypes about the Moors:

1. The standard-bearer endeavors to exacerbate the Moor against his wife by aggressively attacking his racial identity:
“Dovete adunque sapere che non per altro e’grave alla donna vostra il veder il capo di
squadra in disgrazia vostra, che per lo piacere che ella si piglia con lui, qualora egli in casa
vostra viene come colei a cui gia’ e’ venuta a noia questa vostra nerezza”,
(https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89010153427;view=1up;seq=72),

“You must therefore know that the only reason your wife is troubled at seeing the head of
the guard in your disfavor, is that she has been taking pleasure with him whenever he
comes to your house, like someone to whom your blackness has become distasteful.”

21
The above passage infers that unfaithful women may have at the beginning found Moors exotic and sexually alluring but they will quickly become weary or repelled of them. Tosi and Bassi reminded us that this subtly speaks to the xenophobic and misogynist views articulated in Salernitano’s and Cornazano’s novellas of adulterous Christian-Moorish encounters. As per the remaining portion of the standard-bearer’s accusations against Disdemona, the smear against the Moor’s ethnicity is intended to sway him of her adultery by fortifying established traditional hypotheses.

2. Disdemona, bewildered by her husband’s uncharacteristic anger, accused him of being true to his ethnic roots: “Ma voi Mori siete di natura tanto caldi, che ogni poco di cosa vi move ad ira ed a vendetta”, “But you Moors are so hot by nature that any little thing moves you to anger and vengeance.’

The story outlines a clear opposition between the Moor and his standard-bearer that divergences with Disdemona’s typecasting of her husband and the binary oppositions set up in the dedicatory letter.

3. Disdemona, ignorant of the root problems of her husband’s changed attitude towards her, assumed her family’s reservations were well-founded:

“E temo molto di non essere io quella che dia esempio alle giovani, di non matritarsi contra il voler de’ suoi; a che da me le donne italiane imparino di non si accompagnare con uomo, cui la natura, e il Cielo, e il modo della vita disgiunge da noi”,

“I fear greatly that I shall be a warning to young girls not to marry against their parents’ wishes; and Italian ladies will learn by my example not to tie themselves to a man whom nature, heaven, and manner of life separate from us.”
Tosi and Bassi stated that Desdemona saw her husband under the same light of the standard stereotypes of Moorish identity. Hence, these are the views which somehow simplified Cinthio’s complex approach to the discussion of loyalty, honor and race. Additionally, it is said that scholars habitually ignored the unambiguous moral added to this novella, and instead identified the fears of Desdemona expressed in the above passage as the moral message which is revealed in the tale’s tragic ending (Tosi and Bassi 56).

When the Moor returned home to Desdemona, tormented by the thought of her adultery, he is described as “Il misero Moro”, “The Miserable Moor”. Branca enlightened us by highlighting the fact that Bernabo’ reacted miserably to the thought of Zinerva’s unfaithfulness in Boccaccio’s Decameron Novella # 9: “When Bernabo’ heard this, he felt as though he had been stabbed through the heart, such was the pain that assailed him” (Branca 33).

4. “I signori Veneziani, Intesa la crudelta’ usata dal barbaro in una lor cittadina, fecero dar delle mani addosso al Moro in Cipri, e condurlo a Venezia, e con molti tormenti cercarono di ritrovare il vero. Ma vincendo egli, col valore dell’animo, ogni martorio, il tutto nego’ così costantemente, che non se ne pote’ mai trarre cosa alcuna. Ma sebbene, per la sua Constanza, egli schifo’ la mente, non fu pero’ che, dopo lo essere stato molti giorni in prigione, non fosse dannato a perpetuo esilio, nel quale finalmente fu da’ parenti della donna, come egli meritava, ucciso”

Source: https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89010153427;view=1up;seq=72.

“They Venetian authorities, upon hearing of the barbarian’s cruelty against one of its citizens, from the standard bearer and the head of the guard, seized the Moor in Cyprus, brought him back to Venice, interrogated and tortured him at length, and finally sentenced him to exile, where he is pursued and killed by Desdemona’s relatives.”
As per the above passages, Tosi and Bassi warned against the stance most critics have taken towards these expressed views above; by having read the protagonists’ opinions against them, rather than reading them within the context of the entire novella (Tosi and Bassi 55).

VI. Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” Patterned After the Italian Novella Tradition

When it comes to inconsistencies in Cinthio’s story regarding the Moor’s nobility and his vindictiveness, Geoffrey Bullough argued that,

“There is no inconsistency in Cinthio’s account between the Moor’s nobility and his vindictiveness. The Moor’s virtu... rest in his determination and strength of purpose. Therefore, once the Moor has been tricked by the Ensign into an illusion about Disdemona’s guilt and a conviction of her merited punishment, the cruel, barbaric murder plan is entirely in keeping with the earlier portrait of a hot-blooded and vengeful Moor (Bullough 236).

There are many examples of literary patterns in Un Capitano Moro that reflect Cinthio’s faithfulness to the traditional style of writing the Italian novella. These literary patterns are visible in the following novellas of:

- Boccaccio’s Decameron II, 9 through the characters of Bernabo’, Ambrogiuolo and Zinervra;
- Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso, through the characters of Polinesso, Ariodante and Ginevra injected into the fifth canto.

In both stories, naïve men are convinced of their women’s infidelity by crafty insinuations of wicked rivals whose romantic behaviors have been spurned by the women in question. Tosi and Bassi indicated that when Cinthio wrote his novella on the Moor, he must have been acquainted with both texts as there does exists some similarities of these stories to parts of his novella. These similarities are indications that he borrowed several images and phrases from other novellas (Tosi and Bassi 58).
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

A. Boccaccio’s novella # 9

Bernabo’ instructed a servant to kill his wife Zinevra in the woods. The servant having pity on the wife, liberated her. Zinevra escaped into a series of Mediterranean adventures and was finally vindicated and reunited with her husband. For his deceitfulness, Ambruogiuolo was detained, tied to a pillar, covered with honey and devoured by the stings of bees and wasps.

B. Ariosto’s Story

At the beginning of this story Ariosto contemplated suicide, but in the end decided to go back to the Scottish kingdom where Ginevra’s fate is being decided. She was to fight nobly in a battle for her life and honor, despite the belief that she was unfaithful. Again, a happy ending is brought about, with the assistance of one of Ariosto’s chivalric heroes, Rinaldo (Tosi and Bassi 59).

C. Cinthio’s Novella

At the end of Shakespeare’s Othello Desdemona was vindicated by Emilia’s confession. Contrastingly, Cinthio did not present an opportunity for the vindication of Disdemona’s character in the Moor’s eyes. It is extremely important to note that the standard-bearer independently devised and executed the stratagem, while the Moor stood by, fulminating against his wife, and then assisted in covering up the murder, making it appear to look like an accident. Whereas in Shakespeare’s Othello, the hero murders his wife, in Cinthio’s tale, the Ensign shouldered this responsibility, while the Moor could be accused of being an accessory to the crime. Significantly after the crime was committed, the Moor appeared neither exalted nor...
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

contented by the revengeful act. Instead, he is rather sympathetically portrayed as almost insane with grief. 25

The punishments awarded the standard-bearer and the Moor similarly suggested that Cinthio wished to cast his hero in a sympathetic light, rather than as a stereotypically vicious Moor. The standard-bearer is apprehended and tortured by the Venetian authorities for a separate crime and dies when his inner organs are punctured (Tosi and Bassi 59).

In the final passages of the story, the standard-bearer is crueler than all wicked men. The Moor is similarly arrested by the Venetian Republic based on the standard-bearer and Guard’s false accusations that he alone killed Desdemona and is brought back to Venice, tortured at length and finally sent into exile. Cinthio wrote that the Ensign succumbed to physical torture and interrogation with his ‘valorous soul’, a characterization that brings us back full circle to the initial presentation of the Moor. It is the constancy of his character and the absence of his confession to the murder of Desdemona that forced the Venetian authorities to condemn him to exile rather than death. Although he was a Moor, an alien stranger, a ‘barbaro’ different in nature, religion and culture; the authorities in Venice knew that he was responsible for the death of the Venetian citizen on Venetian soil but having no proof and in the absence of a confession, banishment was the only legal penalty.

Desdemona’s murder is instead vindicated through her relatives having tracked down the exiled Moor and executed him, as he rightly deserved (Tosi and Bassi 59 - 60). Instead of Cinthio producing the usual story expected in his dedicatory letter and the heading that preceded the third
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello
deca and seventh novella, he strove to defy gender and ethnic stereotypes that were disseminated
in the sixteenth-century.
With Cinthio’s novella being restored to its historical and literary specificity, it could be interpreted as a narrative that investigates the significances and penalties on human relationships in relation to the cultural prejudices about women and Moors. This Renaissance tale of black-white, Moorish-Venetian, Muslim-Christian romance, intrigue and murder, capitalizes on anxieties about crosscultural encounters in the setting of Ottoman military, as well as the economic and cultural expansions in sixteenth-century Mediterranean, which simultaneously alters the fate of the Venetian Republic (Tosi and Bassi 62).

VII. Cinthio and Shakespeare’s Motives for Writing

According to Giraldi Cinthio his motive for writing, “Un Capitano Moro” was:

“by the light of which, the fount and origin of laudable habits, and of all honest discipline, and likewise of every virtue, I have sought to perfect my work, which is wholly directed, with much variety of examples, to censure vicious actions and to praise honest ones, —to make men fly from vice and embrace virtue” (Taylor 4).

Cinthio designed his tale as a literary work to admonish young women against being unequally yoke in marriages. Therefore, it served also as a precaution that they should not link themselves or marry men of different racial and educational background. This is evident as Cinthio’s Desdemona spoke to the moral of the story when she stated:

“I fear greatly that I shall be a warning to young girls not to marry against their parents’ wishes; and Italian ladies will learn by my example not to tie themselves to a man whom Nature, Heaven and manner of life separate from us” (Honigmann 14).

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

Thomas Rymer is also of the belief that the moral of Othello is first and foremost, “a caution to all Maidens of Quality how, without their parents’ consent, they run away with Blackamoors”, this is in keeping with Cinthio’s words:
“Di non si accompagnare con uomo cui la natura e il cielo e il modo della vita disgiunge da noi”; (Barthelemy133).

Rymer is also convinced that this motive was also the message of Shakespeare’s Othello. Shakespeare’s convictions stemmed from what he must have understood Cinthio’s revelation to be; that the punishment Desdemona endured was because of her disobedience and desire for Othello. From this one gets the impression that Desdemona’s desire for Othello was sexual and thereby considered to be a threat to the white male domination in which women were not to be placed in the position to desire. This was totally exclusive to men. Rymer goes further in his explanation that Desdemona in relating her courtship with Othello, said in Act I, scene 3, line 253: “I saw Othello’s visage in his mind”, this was an allusion to the Senator’s and Shakespeare’s audience’s prejudice against Othello’s black face (Barthelemy 133). I strongly disagree with Rymer’s notion that Desdemona’s parental disobedience was consequential because of her desire for Othello. According to Honigmann’s account of Cinthio’s tale:

“A virtuous Lady of wondrous beauty called Disdemona, impelled not by female appetite but by the Moor’s good qualities, fell in love with him and he, vanquished by the Lady’s beauty and noble mind. Likewise, was enamored of her. So propitious was their mutual love that, although the lady’s relatives did all they could to make her take another husband, they were united in marriage…..” (Honigmann 378-79).

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

“Una virtuosa donna, di maravigliosa bellezza, Disdemona chiamata, tratta non da appetite donnessco, ma dalla virtu del Moro, s’innamoro’ di lui, ed egli, vinto dalla bellezza e dal nobile pensiero della donna, similmente di lei si accese ed ebbero tanto favorevole Amore, che si congiunsero insieme per matrimonio, ancora che I parenti della donna facessero ciò’ che poterono, perche; ella altro marito si prendesse”……

Source:(https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.8901053427;view=1up;seq=72).
As noted in the above passage, Desdemona’s desire and attraction for Othello was not sexual, as she was not ‘impelled by female appetite but by the Moor’s good qualities.” Andrews informed us that Thomas Rymer, asserted that Desdemona’s affection for Othello was ‘out of Nature’. He discredited this notion, by noting that these types of affections were not very common. He also alluded to the fact that there existed mix marriages in England, with white females and black males. The complexion or color of one’s skin was of no concern in Elizabethan England as it was an issue in Cinthio’s Venice (Andrews 277).

Contrasting to Cinthio’s warning to young single women against disproportioned marriages, one is drawn to the assumption that the moral of Shakespeare’s Othello was not only to illustrate that a white woman could fall in love with the virtues and distinct qualities of a man from another race, overlooking the differences in his skin pigmentation. This is obvious from the captioned statement that Desdemona was ‘impelled by the Moor’s good qualities, fell in love with him and he was vanquished by her beauty and noble mind;’ but I firmly believe that Shakespeare’s motive for writing Othello was to transmit a message to the Elizabethan society on the issue of racial ‘otherness’ as it pertained to its hypocrisy and treatment of the black race during his era; as he wrote Othello during a time of great racial tension in England.

What Political and Socio-economic Factors in England that Prompted Shakespeare to Write Othello

The above captioned question cannot be answered simplistically. Although Shakespeare might have utilized Cinthio’s novella as the material source to create this tragic drama to also satisfy the theatrical demands of the Elizabethan audience, he gave no explanations or reasons as to what
prompted him to write Othello; as a result, we are forced to look beyond the play to the historical context of the time in which Shakespeare lived to ascertain what essentially might have motivated the playwright’s Othello.

8.1 - Queen Elizabeth I’s Unstable English Economy

What role did the English economy play during the Elizabethan period? The instable English economy and the existing rivalry with the Catholic powers and Spain, Queen Elizabeth I was forced to forge business relations with North African Muslim rulers in the Mediterranean region, the center for trade and commerce as Europeans, north and sub-Saharan Africans and the East all met, traded and formed multinational relationships that overlapped with each other (Wells and Orlin 153). According to Christopher Taylor’s essay, ‘Elizabethan Economy’, by the time Elizabeth I ascended to the English throne, the country had virtually no money; since Elizabeth’s predecessor Queen Mary of Scotts’ husband Phillip II, bankrupted the English treasury to fund costly wars. Under the reign of Elizabeth there happened to have been roughly three to four million English subjects, most of whom dealt with sub-standard living conditions and dire poverty (http://faculty.tnstate.edu/smcurtis/Elizabethan%20Economy.htm).
8.2  
- England’s Relationship with the Ottoman Empire

England being on the threshold of bankruptcy, would have suffered a calamitous economic ruin, and with a weak economy she would have also been susceptible to looming threats of an invasion by Spain (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Armada). To counteract England’s economic demise, Queen Elizabeth I, without the slightest hesitation quickly aligned herself with the enemy of Christendom and Spain, the Turks of the Ottoman Empire. It is the formation of this relationship that opened not only the door of opportunities for England’s economic survival, but also introduced her into the world of ‘black Africans’. Jerry Brotton established that England began her relationship with the Ottoman Empire dating back to February 1570, when Queen Elizabeth I was officially excommunicated by Pope Pius V from Catholicism. I speculate that this could be looked upon as a theological Brexit for England, as the Queen was branded not only as being unlawful in the eyes of the church, but most importantly, a heretic. As a result, the Pope condemned Queen Elizabeth as a protestant heretic (Brotton 3).

Adhering to the familiar Arabic proverb: “your enemy’s enemy is your friend”, the Queen commenced business transactions with the Vatican’s adversary, the Ottoman Empire, whose Islamic religion was condemned by the Papacy as heretical; through the cunning assistance of Sir Francis Walsingham who acted as an English spy. England seized the opportunity of conducting business with the Ottoman Empire as they were the global superpower of the sixteenth century (Brotton, p. 3).

- The Mediterranean, a Centre for International Trade
Wells and Orlin wrote that, in the early 1580s under Elizabeth I’s reign, new enterprises were created, as England regulated its international trade, mostly with imports from the Levant (the eastern regions of the Mediterranean) and from Venice. This was one of the most calculating chess moves played by Queen Elizabeth. By the early 1600s the English wasted no time in establishing economic connections in the Mediterranean. However, the English did not monopolized trade in the Mediterranean, as there were Spanish, Venetians, as well as other European traders. The Turks governed trade and politics in this region as far back as the fourteenth century, as the economic tentacles of the Ottoman empire extended to a substantial number of Mediterranean seaports (Wells and Orlin 153).

Due to the aggressiveness of the Turks and their desire to further expand the Ottoman Empire, they conquered lands in eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, as well as Cyprus in 1571 and in 1574 Tunis. In protestation, Spain and Venice together with the Pope, created an alliance to defeat the imperialist advancements of the Ottoman Empire. Despite this effort, the Ottomans continued to strive throughout the Mediterranean and Europe, surviving into the seventeenth century. In 1600 Queen Elizabeth I’s interest was focused on diverting the Spanish navies from sailing north and overthrowing her reign, thereby reconverting England to Catholicism. At the same time, Elizabeth’s fascination and collaboration with the Ottomans grew as they both worked to circumvent war faring activities of Catholic Spain, who had recently expelled all Muslims from its southern region (Wells and Orlin 153-154).

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello
Because of Queen Elizabeth’s fascination, the Sultan of Morocco, Ahmad al-Mansur, became an ally of England. To achieve his objectives the Sultan of Moroccan Ahmad al-Mansur, sent a delegation of 17 men along with his ambassador Muhammad al-Annuri to meet with the English Queen and thus organize a military alliance against Catholic Spain. Their intent was to create a military coalition with African and English forces to conquer Spain (https://www.bl.uk/collectionitems/portrait-of-the-moorish-ambassador-to-queen-elizabeth-i).

The arrival of this delegation was some months toward the end of 1601, as William Shakespeare began writing *Othello, the tragedy of the Moor of Venice*. This provided Shakespeare a first-hand opportunity to observe the Moroccan ambassador and his entourage in their glory and splendor. The Africans took up a six months residency in London and attended the Queen’s coronation in November 1600. These Moorish noblemen were granted a private meeting with Queen Elizabeth I. Nonetheless, as they were foreigners of Muslim faith, they were criticized and shunned due to their cultural background and religion. They were looked upon as infidels and were not given the same treatment nor respect as what might have been shown to Christian ambassadors from other European states. The English perceived the Moroccans’ Muslim faith as ‘otherness’; something that was in complete contradiction to the English way of life and Christianity (Nostbakken 64).

The Moorish entourage remained in England over the Christmas period, which some speculate could have permitted them to attend Shakespeare’s company of players, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men earliest performance of ‘Othello’ as a part of the Yuletide season celebrations.
8.5
It is alleged that this might have been where Shakespeare encountered this prominent high-profile
party of Muslims, who apart from being considered by the English to be infidels and ‘Barbarians’, created great suspicion (Honigmann 2-3).

However, we do find some similarities between Othello and Al-Annuri. Othello is simultaneously admired and feared by his Christian hosts. He is cultivated as a military asset yet denigrated as an outsider. Al-Annuri and Othello, both Moors from the land of ‘Barbary’, one real, the other fictional, move into a Christian world that first embraces them, but eventually rejects and expels them. This amicable relationship between Queen Elizabeth I and the Moors built a broad antiSpanish alliance between Protestant England and Muslim Morocco and lead to the creation of the Barbary Company in 1585. Through the Barbary Company English merchants sold wool and munitions to the Moroccans, and in return they imported saltpeter (to make gunpowder), silk, cotton, spices, gold and the ever-present sugar.

Although Queen Elizabeth enjoyed this new-found affiliation with the Moors of Morocco, she feared that such friendship with Ottoman and Moroccan powers could have damaging repercussions on her image among Christian constituencies and subjects (Brotton, p. 6/7).

8.5 - England’s Attraction and Affiliation with Venice

Having discussed England’s attraction to the Mediterranean for trade and considering that both Cinthio’s novella and Shakespeare’s drama were set in Venice, it is crucial to examine England’s attraction and affiliation with Venice. During the Elizabethan period, Venice was in and of itself a prominent Italian autonomous state, like London, having a population of 150,000 people.
Venice played a meaningful role in Mediterranean maritime affairs. As a state, the city was a melting pot of diverse cultures made up of Turks, Greeks, Spaniards, Slavs, Jews, Moors and Englishmen. Therefore, Venice thrived as a maritime power until the sixteenth century, up to the age of discoveries, when England emerged as a powerful competitor. Could this be the reason why Venice was selected by Cinthio and Shakespeare as the locale for ‘Un Capitano Moro’ and Othello, the tragedy of the Moor of Venice”? (Honigmann 8-9).

Venice as a city, grew in the Middle Ages in stature and fame due to her economic competency, maritime hegemony and its ability to establish commercial routes in the Oriental Mediterranean and Asia. On the account of these trade routes and huge presence of foreigners, there was a consistency of goods and products from around the world. Graham Holderness shared William Thomas’s description of the Rialto as the commercial center of Venice:

“The Rialto is a goodly place in the heart of the city where the merchants twice a day assemble. The marketplace was the center of the city and Venice itself, was the marketplace of the world, attracting merchants and traders from everywhere: all the world flocked there” (Holderness, p. 24).

At the Rialto market it was feasible to find Egyptian spices, Byzantium silk fabrics, Western woolens, Italian cottons, silk and glass as well as an enormous amount of food supply, such as grains, meat and cheese (Jacoby 49). Apart from Venice being a commercial center, it developed a profitable banking system as one of the richest cities in the world. Venice benefitted greatly from its trading profits, heavy taxation, and the income derived from its Jewish community.
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

The English perspective of Venice was one of admiration for its political stability and its economic power as a maritime center of commerce in the Mediterranean region. This is the description of Shakespeare’s Venice of the 1600s (Holderness 25).

8.6 - The English Attitude Towards the Black Race

As one attempts to read and comprehend Othello, it is extremely difficult not to consider Shakespeare’s views and beliefs on the issue of race; therefore, it is imperative first and foremost to examine the Elizabethan attitude towards black people; prior to discussing allegorical elements of Othello. During the Renaissance and Elizabethan periods, the words ‘Racism’ or ‘Race’ did not exist, however, due to the traditional customs, rituals and day to day comportment of black Africans, they were not racialized due to their skin color; but their way of life and cultural traditions were contributions to elements of ‘otherness’ for the English. Could this racial ‘otherness’ be the factor that prompted Shakespeare’s utilization of Cinthio’s novella as the principal source for his Othello? In response to this question, E.A. J. Honigmann informs that Shakespeare in the construction and presentation on the topic of religion and race; used Venetian plays such as The Merchant of Venice and Othello, as he found these issues to be extremely tensed and multilayered due to the records of brutality experienced by Jews and Africans in times past (Honigmann 4). Joan Lord Hall also informs that, one could very well examine Othello to explore the attitude towards blacks and the misogynist behavior with respect to women; as noted by Iago’s comportment for his wife Emilia. Hall further explained that color prejudice thrived in England under the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I and King James (Hall 13).
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello
Hence, to fully understand the English attitude towards blacks, it is imperative to succinctly explore England’s knowledge of the existence of the black race through the annals of history. It is possible that the first time the English were made aware of the presence of Africa and its inhabitants could have been through their having read Mandeville’s Travel. Mandeville educated the British on racial characteristics and geographical whereabouts of the fluctuating degrees of blackness in humanity. Richard Eden’s Decades of 1555 also provided Elizabethan’s with some descriptions on who the Moors were and proof that some were even of noble and royal blood (Sanders 11).

8.7 – What Black Skin Meant to White Englishmen

Prior to the arrival of the growing number of darker-skinned people in England, the only form of education Englishmen obtained about the African continent and its inhabitants was through English literary sources. Although these references provided succinct accounts of Africa, they were often reproduction of earlier works; being stereotypical and inaccurate. The Africans’ skin color ‘black’ was always cited in these literatures without failure. Early travel writers documented the pigmentation and described other bodily features of the Africans they met. The depiction of the African skin and their habits were intriguing and provoked great unease among the English (Korhonen 95 -Black Africans in Renaissance Europe). The English followed the footsteps of the Arabs and dubbed sub-Sharan Africa as the ‘Land of Negroes’, a secretive continent occupied by unidentified people whose distinctive characteristic happened to be their skin color.

Upon the arrival of Africans to England in the sixteenth century, the English saw them through the
descriptive lens of the stories about their enigmatic qualities, gleaned from Mandeville’s travel
documentation. The mystery of the black skin was crucial to the construction of black ‘otherness’
and to the establishment of ‘white identity’. The conception of ‘race’ did not emerge as a
pigeonholing device within the Renaissance cultural moment; whereas the color of one’s skin
defined the boundaries of whether one was civil or barbaric (Korhonen 95).

According to Korhonen, the thought process of the English was based on their desire for order and
a harmonious relationship between the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ appearance of human beings; meaning
that the inner characteristics of an individual are reflected outwardly. Englishmen were of the
belief that it was extremely difficult to separate the exterior manifestations from the soul and
human nature. Under this scheme the ‘black skin people’ were deduced. Therefore, it is not an
exaggeration that during the Renaissance period, Englishmen associated black skin with ugliness
or malformation. The physiognomy of Africans was utilized by the English to dispute the
conventional images of beauty and ugliness. ‘Black’ was interpreted as the opposite of ‘white’,
‘beautiful’ or ‘fair’; which signified ‘white as beautiful’ and ‘black as deformed or ugly’. The
general opinion shared by white Englishmen was that their bodies were literally made in the image
and likeness of God, while the bodies of black Africans not having that clear, pure, whiteness of
pigmentation, were perceived as being of sin and total alienation from God. Englishmen saw the
black skin of Africans as a scourge, an illness, a flaw and a stigma. The early modern Englishmen
conceptualized the black skin as foul, a contaminated form of the original skin God intended man
(Korhonen 96,97-101).
During the English Renaissance, the ‘black skin’ induced a wide assortment of negativility and mistrustful attitudes among Englishmen. The black skin appeared to be exotic and erotic, producing an oxymoron of pleasurable desires, delight mixed with horror, desire with distaste; most importantly black Africans were thought of as being unrestrainedly sexual. Just as there was a connectivity between beauty and lust, there existed a connection between skin and sexuality. It is believed that many Renaissance theorists conceptualized women’s ‘beauty’ as the primary generator of ‘love’ in men. Hence, for the English the extreme beauty of a white woman was intrinsically affiliated with virtue; whereas a woman whose beauty was cosmetically improved was considered somewhat immoral and worthless. White beauty invited love, and sexuality was interpreted as a craze of regulated passion. Contrastingly, black malformation awakened not love, but lust. Foul blackness produced an adulterated passion, a sinful, disparaging lust. The English comprehended the deformity of blackness as ‘foulness’, a representation of deformity, the opposite of beauty (Korhonen 100-102).

8.8 - Early Interracial Marriages in English Renaissance Literature

The English Christian male-controlled archetype and white superiority were based on a system of self-discipline that supported and maintained the power of the father and master. In this regard, men were to control women and whites were to be in control of blacks. These two factors were difficult to achieve as men were sometimes not able to control themselves when they saw a black woman. In this framework, the perception of black women as ‘others’ gave good reason for fear and desire; as they were substances of sexual desire, hypothesized as ‘other’, inferior beings, whose fate was to be subjugated and controlled. Therefore, the English saw black
sexuality as a greater threat to white sexuality (Korhonen 103). As per early interracial marriages in English Renaissance literature, sexuality was always featured as the protagonist. When it came to white women, female sexuality was stigmatized as sinful. These black African characters were depicted as having engaged in illegal relationships, mostly with superior women. These men were social climbers. On the flip side of the coin, white women who gave into their carnal desires were destroyed, whereas the men having acquired influential status with honor, power and wealth were stated to have resentment and invidious of whiteness and its cultural superiority (Korhonen103).

8.9 - England’s Relationship with Africa

It is noted that the English had almost no interaction with Africa prior to 1550 but were dependent on old classical and medieval mythologies The English trade relationship with northwestern Africa which began in 1550s provided a first-hand experience, through maps and stories told by merchants, explorer and voyagers. There are two outcomes of the developed English trade with northwest Africa. One, it birthed the earliest arrival of black people in London in 1554 and two, this international political relation influenced the English perception of Moors; as viewed as being barbaric, illiterate, promiscuous and their only worth was to be in servitude as the white man’s property (Nostbakken 63).

8.10 – Queen Elizabeth I’s Royal Proclamation Against Black People in England

With the arrival of Africans in England as early as 1554, it is possible that Shakespeare would have met persons from North and West Africa walking the streets of London. The English to some extent were captivated by this small population.
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

These people were integrated residents and hardworking, some even intermarried. However, they often suffered grave antagonism by the Tudor citizens who had never seen or had to interact with Black people in their lifetime. These African folks formed Britain’s first black community. The impact of Elizabethan immigration policies must have been strongly felt and experienced by Shakespeare, causing him as a playwright to reflect on the issue of racism in London at the time and prompted him to write Othello (http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-18903391).

According to Emma Smith, the black population’s statistics had significantly increased in the late sixteenth century, exceeding the actual demographic of immigrants that were perceived by the Queen to be in England at that time. As a result, Lord Mayor and Alderman of London received an open letter in 1596 from Queen Elizabeth stating:

“Her Majesty understanding that there are of late divers blackamoors brought into this realm, of which kind of people there are already here too many, considering how God hath blessed this land with great increase of people of our own nation as any country in the world, whereof many want of service and means to set them on work fall to idleness and great extremity. Her Majesty’s pleasure therefore is that those kinds of people should be sent forth of this land, for that purpose there is direction to this bearer Edward Banes to take of those blackamoors that in this last voyage under Thomas Baskerville were brought into this realm the number of ten, to be transported by him out of the realm” (Smith 32).

In the letter, three distinct groups of Africans are mentioned:

**Group one:** - the one who have come ‘of late’ or recently. They are described in the letter as ‘divers’- divers could be an indication that they are numerous, or they are of a diverse origin and kind;

**Group two:** - the same ‘kind’ as the first but ‘are already here too manie’ – these were Africans who were present in England before 1596; which meant that these newly mentioned Africans are substantial in number and are easily distinguished from the newly mentioned arrivals. The phrase ‘already here’ could also be indicative to those who were also born in England, as the English parish records showed evidence that Africans were present in England prior to 1596;
Group three: a specific number of ten Africans brought into England by Thomas Baskerville. This letter is said to be the only official documentation that make mention of these ten Africans without recording their names (Onyeka, pp.5/6).

During the 16th century, Queen Elizabeth and her subjects exhibited a huge tolerance for the African population as she along with many wealthy and non-wealthy people employed them as footmen, servants or musicians. Some households might have had one or two black servants. In the Queen’s employment were Black musicians and maidservants (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/early_times/elizabeth.htm).

Although Queen Elizabeth I enjoyed being served and entertained by black people, these factors did not deter her issuance of two proclamations for their deportation. In 1596 Van Sender was to have exchange or sold these people to finance the release of English prisoners from England’s Catholic enemies Spain and Portugal.

Here follows an example of Her Majesty’s approved license proclamation for deportation:

“Her Majesty..... considerith.... That those people may be well spared in this realm, being so populous and numbers of able persons the subjects of the land and Christian people that perish for want of service, whereby through their labour they might be maintained. [You] are therefore required.... To aid and assist him to take up such blackmoors as he shall find within this realm, with the consent of their masters, who we doubt not, considering her Majesty’s good pleasure to have those kind of people sent out of the land.... And that their shall do charitably and like Christians rather to be served by their own countrymen than with those kind of people, will yield those in their possession to him” (Nostbakken 71).
Van Sender failed at exchanging or selling off these people, since the masters of black workers on the account of them not being remunerated refuse to grant them leave. Hence in 1601 Elizabeth issued another proclamation expressing her discontentment over the increased number of Blackmores and relicensed Van Sender to deport the Africans. (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/early_times/elizabeth.htm).

8.11 - Queen Elizabeth I Supported Britain’s Nefarious Slave Trade

James Walvin stated:

“Slavery in the Atlantic world was much more than the transatlantic crossing; as it involved three continents: Europe, Africa and the Americas into an economic and social interdependence that was lubricated by the blood, sweat and tears of African slaves. It was a brutal system that lasted more than four centuries and counted its victims (the dead and the damaged) to roughly 500 million. It was no accident that comparisons are frequently made between the Atlantic slavery and the European Holocaust of the twentieth century. Atlantic slavery did not only transformed the history of Africa, the Americas, but also Europe” (Walvin 48).

Numerous historians like James Walvin, Gustav Ungerer and Imitaz Habib attest to the enslavement of Africans in Tudor England in the sixteenth-century; which was fully justified by an international law called the Dum Diversas, a papal decree issued by Pope Nicholas V June 18, 1452 giving complete authorization to the Portuguese to enslave non-believers of Christianity. Some forty-one years later, in 1493, Pope Alexander VI approved and sanctioned Spain and Portugal’s enslavement practices in the ‘new world’. It is documented that Sir Hawkins was not the first English to have traded slaves from West Africa but, the first to construct the triangular route from Africa to the Americas and return to England, which he found enormously profitable on all geographical locations(https://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Slavery/articles/sherwood.html).
Upon learning of Britain’s involvement with this atrocious crime against humanity, Queen Elizabeth I, is said, first to have wept. When Sir Hawkins flaunted the indigenous products such as sugar, salt, cocoa, coffee, gold, pearls and cotton, the Queen whose country was experiencing a weak economy and most likely not being able to support the life style she had become accustomed to, found the slave trade to be an attractive and yet tempting open market. As a result, “Video Et Taceo” “I see and keep silent” became her motto. Additional voyages were sponsored by Queen Elizabeth, William Cecil and the Earls of Liecester and Pembroke. Hence, the British Monarchy benefitted from the slave trade for 150 years, having monopolized it from the Spanish and Portuguese. In exchange for John Hawkins lucrative adventures in slave trading, he was knighted ‘Sir John Hawkins’ and given a coat of arms featuring an African slave, by Her Majesty the Queen (Loomba and Burton 125).

According to James Walvin, the English prided themselves on their newly secured social and political status during the mid - seventeenth century; having successfully developed their slave colonies in the West Indies. By the mid-eighteenth century, the English emerged as the world’s pre-eminent slaving nation, shipping millions of Africans from their homeland to the Americas (Walvin 55). The slave trade of Northern Africa was extremely profitable and strengthened English economic ties; which led to England becoming one of the most prosperous European countries (Nostbakken 64). According to Eric Williams:

“It was highly profitable. The West Indian plantations provided great fortunes for Bristol and Liverpool, London and to some extent Glasgow” (Milwood).
I conclude that this was a product of the era in which Shakespeare lived that was filled with miscegenation and the ‘unattractiveness’ of being black. It is the background from which Shakespeare’s Moor emerged. Shakespeare utilized this backdrop in the most sensitive manner, by taking advantage of these ideas so that Othello would not materialize as another stereotypical Moor, but as a man of distinction who is epitomized by his fall and not the flaw of Moors, but the frailty of human nature (Barthelemy 40).

8.12 - Shakespeare’s Knowledge of the Venetian Condottieri and Their Mercenary Armies

Shakespeare’s appointment of Othello, an African Moor to the position of General of the Venetian army, must have been birthed from his cognizance that in the late 16/17th centuries, medieval city states such as Florence, Milan and Venice subcontracted their wars to mercenary armies. Although these cities enjoyed independence and a sense of diplomacy, they were in constant competition for territorial lands, establishing new trade routes and new powers; which meant that for this reason Northern Italy was in a constant state of wars. These rich city states and their citizens having obtained vast amount of wealth through trade, did not have adequate means nor manpower to economically sustain a standing army; as a result they could only call on knights of a few noble families to head their armies; but as their numbers needed to be increase to carry out the reinforced based warfare, the cities hired troupes of mercenaries (https://medium.com/the-historybuff/thescourge-of-italy-the-condottieri-and-their-mercenary-armies-7fca62a8).
Whilst the troupes consisted mostly of Italians, most mercenaries were foreign soldiers looking for fortune, hence their attraction to Italy. This is distinctively characteristic of Shakespeare’s Venetian army which is led by Othello, the African Moor, Cassio who is a Florentine and probably a Spanish as the name Iago is Spanish. Some of these foreign soldiers arrived with Emperors and others as princes to partake in the affairs of Italy. The leader of the troupes would negotiate a contract with the city or what was termed a *condotta*, thus the leader would become a *contractor* or a *condottiere*. The condottieri tended not to engage in open battle; reluctant to endanger themselves and their men – avoided at all cost formal battles where it was feasible, by engaging the services of mercenary armies ([https://medium.com/the-history-buff/the-scourge-of-italy-thecondottieri-and-their-mercenary-armies-7fca62a8](https://medium.com/the-history-buff/the-scourge-of-italy-thecondottieri-and-their-mercenary-armies-7fca62a8)).

Therefore, it is safe to say that in Act I, Scene 3, Shakespeare presents the Duke of Venice, the Senators and Brabantio as condottieri in Act 1, Scene 3, lines 49-50 “Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you against the general enemy Ottoman”; appointing Othello the expert warrior as the general of the Venetian army to safeguard their territory in Cyprus against the Ottoman invasion (Honigmann, p. 142). Othello being obedient to the call in Act I, Scene 3, lines 235-236:

**Othello:** “This present war against the Ottomites. Most humbly therefore, bending to your state……” (Honigmann 154).

46 Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

8.13 - Shakespeare Patterns Othello After Leo Africanus

It is strongly believed that Shakespeare might have been impressed not only by John Pory’s biographical interpretation of Leo Africanus, but also his marveled description of Leo Africanus:
“Give me leave (gentle reader) if not to present unto your knowledge, because some perhaps may as well be informed as myself; yet to call to your remembrance, some few particulars, concerning this Geographical History and John Leo the author thereof. Who albeit by birth a Moor, and by religion for many years a Mahumetan: yet if you consider his Parentage, wit, Education, Learning, employments, Travels and his conversion to Christianity: you shall find him not altogether unfit to undertake such an enterprise; nor unworthy to be regarded.

First therefore his Parentage seemeth not to have been ignoble: seeing...an Uncle of his was so Honorable a person and so excellent an Orator and Poet; that he was sent as a principal Ambassador, from the king of Fez, to the King of Tombuto......Neither wanted he the best Education that all Barbary could afford, ... So, as I may justly say (if the comparison be tolerable) that as Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians; so likewise, was Leo, in that of the Arabians and Moors. Moreover, as touching his exceeding great Travels, had he not at the first been a Moor and a Mahumetan in religion, and most skillful in the languages and customs of the Arabians and Africans, and for the most part travelled in Caravans, or under the authority, safe conduct, and commendation of great princes: I marvel much however he should have escaped so many thousands of imminent dangers.

And (all the former notwithstanding) I marvel much more, however he escaped them. For how many desolate cold mountains and huge, dry, and barren deserts passed he? How often was he in hazard to have been captive, or to have had his throat cut by the prowling Arabians, and wild Moors? And how hardly many times escaped he the Lion’s greedy mouth, and the devouring jaws of the Crocodile? Besides all which places he had also been at Tauris in Persia: and of his own country, and other African regions adjoining and remote, he was so diligent a traveler: that there was no kingdom, province, signory, or city; or scarcely any town, village, mountain, valley, river or forest, etc. which he left unvisited. But, not to forget his conversion to Christianity, amidst all these his busy and dangerous travels, it pleased the divine providence, for the discovery and manifestation of God’s wonderful works, and of his dreadful and just judgements performed in Africa.... To deliver this author of ours, and his present Geographical History, into the hands of certain Italian pirates, about the isle of Gerbi, situate in the gulf of Capes, between the cities of Tunis and Tripolis in Barbary. Being thus taken, the pirates presented him and his Book unto Pope Leo the tenth: who esteeming of him as of a most rich and invaluable prize, greatly rejoiced at his arrival, and gave him most kind entertainment and liberal maintenance, till such time as he had won him to be baptized in the name during his abode in Italy, learning the Italian tongue, he translated this book thereinto, being before written in Arabic. Thus, much of John Leo.

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

Being thus taken, the pirates presented him and his Book unto Pope Leo the tenth: who esteeming of him as of a most rich and invaluable prize, greatly rejoiced at his arrival, and gave him most kind entertainment and liberal maintenance, till such time as he had won him to be baptized in the name of Christ, and to be called John Leo, after the Pope’s own name. And so, during his abode in Italy, learning the Italian tongue, he translated this book there into, being before written in Arabic. Thus, much of John Leo” (Nostbakken 68-69).
It is not certain the extent to which Shakespeare read Africanus’ geographical history of Africa; but the one thing that is apparent, is he found Leo’s firsthand account of his experiences, a rich treasured chest from which he was able to select gems to create the character of his Othello. Shakespeare perceived the image of Othello to that of Leo Africanus who was born of noble heritage, an educated and experienced African traveler, who successfully integrated himself into the higher stratum of the white European society. In scrutinizing thoroughly, Shakespeare’s drama on the ‘Tragedies of the Moor of Venice’ it is particularly noticeable how the master playwright skillfully borrowed certain attributes from the person of Leo Africanus and wove them into molding the character of Othello. In Act 1, scene 2, Othello announced in lines 22, that he is of noble birth, i.e. he descends from ‘men of royal siege’ ‘taken by the insolent for/ and sold to slavery’ and obtained ‘redemption.’ Like Leo, Othello was captured and enslaved. For this reason, is it possible that Shakespeare could have been strongly influenced by the Moor, Johannes Leo Africanus’ adventurous travels and literary description of Africa, “A Geographical History of Africa?” If he was impacted by Johannes travel experiences and journals, he could have also modelled Othello’s enslavement on Leo Africanus’ capture by Italian pirates and gifted to Pope Leo X; as observed by Othello’s reference in Act 1, scene 3, lines 139 -140: “Of being taken by the insolent foe. And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence…” (Honigmann 147). was a carbon copy of Johannes Leo Africanus who after his enslavement received redemptive grace and pardon from Pope Pious X (Honigmann 15).

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

IX – A Comparative Analysis of “Un Capitano Moro and Othello, The Tragedy of the Moor of Venice”

Considering the revised version of Cinthio’s ‘Moor of Venice’ by Shakespeare, one would question to whom does Othello belong? James L. Calderwood provided a response to
Shakespeare’s authorial rights, by pointing out that if the same question was posed to the character
Iago, he would undoubtedly reply:

“Shakespeare, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it. Let me remind you that this fellow Shakespeare
is himself little better than a thief. How do you think this script came into his keeping? I’ll tell you.
This piratical Stratfordian boarded a land-carrack named the Hecatommthi, captained by one
Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio, an honest countryman of mine, and, without so much as a “By
your leave,” he plucked a precious story from its hold, pocketed it up, and went his way. Oh, I
grant you, he may have improved on it somewhat, but that does not make it his, any more that your
marrying Desdemona made her yours. After all, she passed from her father to you and, so it
seemed, from you to Cassio and (who knows?) perhaps to the entire camp, pioneers and all. These
stories, my lord, are like these women; we can call the creatures our, but not their appetites. Look
to ’t.”

With regards to the above quote, Calderwood further interpreted and concluded Iago’s soliloquy
to indicate that with the additions, subtractions, divisions and multiplication of Cinthio’s novella,
fashioning it into his desired design, he rightfully declared the work, “This play is my play”
(Calderwood 133). Reflecting on Shakespeare’s adaptation of Cinthio’s tale of the Moor of
Venice, I am inclined to think that today, if someone would have copied another’s literary work,
he or she would be accused of plagiarism. This was not the scenery during the Italian and English
Renaissance period, as the 15th century ‘Novella’ - the literature of storytelling gave novelists the
freedom and the ability to adapt their material for entertainment for their audiences, as they
resolutely struggled to imitate other writers (Clements and Gibaldi 15).

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

The Latin term, ‘ad litteram’ is perceived as an adoption of somebody’s work, which is exactly
what Shakespeare did in his utilization of Cinthio’s tale of the Moor, as the sources for his
masterpiece Othello. Shakespeare has exhibited his artistic genius in his ability of building not
only on the plots, characters, context and literary ideas of Cinthio, but also that of other colleagues,
transforming them into literary classics (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318156652). To
effectively demonstrate the improved modifications Shakespeare made to Cinthio’s ‘Moor of
Venice’, it is important to bear in mind as J.H. explained in his ‘An Examination of Othello and The Winter’s Tale’, that the alteration of stories into plays required such literary skills and a completely diverse technique of staging, thereby shifting the spotlight of the narrative from a fundamentally inactive display to a vibrant portrayal of character and action. J.H. further clarified that the ability to contest and undermine Cinthio’s narrative necessitated a remarkable ingenuity merged with a comprehension of the sensibility and intricacies of human beings. Shakespeare did more than just sensationalize Cinthio’s story, he converted it into a superb dramaturgical work. In this case, Cinthio’s Moor is elevated to the status of a great tragic hero, as the somewhat pleasant disapproving tale is improved into a classic play (https://winamop.com/shakjh.htm).

I commence the comparative analysis of Un Capitano Moor and Othello, The Tragedy of the Moor of Venice by stating that both literary works cannot be examined in the same light, as Un Capitano Moro, the story of the Moor of Venice was a short tale (novella), part of a collection of one hundred stories for the upper class of its day, and is a work that Shakespeare pulled out of oblivion, upon which he formulated the characters, plots and conspiracy for the tragedy of Othello (Taylor 4).

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

It takes a master pen like Shakespeare’s to elevate the Moor of Un Capitano Moro to a universal tragic hero in the person of Othello, thereby creating a classic with all the ingredients as outlined in Aristotle’s definition of tragedy: “The imitation of an action that is serious and also as having magnitude, complete in itself.” He continues:

“Tragedy is a form of drama exciting the emotions of pity and fear. Its action should be single and complete, presenting a reversal of fortune, involving persons renowned and of superior attainments, and it should be written in poetry embellished with every kind of artistic expression”.
Aristotle defined tragedy as a story about something that is ‘serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude’ that uses drama to tell of the fall of someone highly placed. This fall occurs because of external or internal forces, especially the protagonist own error or fragility, as noted with Othello’s fatal weakness (https://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/film-and-lit/tragedy-hand.pdf).

Charles Knight in the *Pictorial Edition of the Works of Shakespeare’s Tragedies Volume I* denoted “wanting in Cinthio’s story of the Moor of Venice”, as Shakespeare is considered the mastermind who brought individuality and personal traits to Cinthio’s unnamed characters, by imposing upon each a name. In this manner Shakespeare has afford us the opportunity to see his characters in actions and listen to their words. Shakespeare’s creativity enabled him to blow breathe into Cinthio’s characters, calling them into being, filling them with imperishable life. This was the power which Shakespeare alone possessed, and by which, out of a forgotten novel he has made Othello (Knight 324).

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello Taylor agreed wholeheartedly with Knight’s description of Shakespeare’s work, which he claimed is not applicable to Cinthio’s story. It only demarcates the origin of Shakespeare’s Othello. As for the narrative of the Moor of Venice, it is not a drama, but in its simplistic form a clear-cut story, depicting the nature of human beings combined with ordinary chain of events. Cinthio’s work is defined as having no structural art, no set arrangement along with some consistency and general truth to nature (Taylor 4).
Concurring with Edward John Taylor, Cinthio’s novel provided the skeleton (made up of incidents, traits of character and motives) which Shakespeare ingenuously infused with life, dignity and beauty. All are reflective of that which was ‘wanting’, as the simplicity of Cinthio’s tale, captivated Shakespeare’s imagination to create opposition and contrast of characters, passion, conspiracy, suggested motives are all indicative of the materials needed for Shakespeare’s literary genius (Taylor 5).

9.1 - Notable Differences in the Titles of Both Literary Works

Observing both works, the first notable distinction can be found in their names: Cinthio’s novel is ‘Un Capitano Moro’ (A Moorish Captain), whilst Shakespeare’s play is “Othello, The Tragedy of the Moor of Venice”. My intent is to demonstrate the significance behind the author’s and playwright’s selection of these two distinct titles. It is noticeable that unlike Shakespeare, Cinthio does not dignify his lead man by giving him a name. He is referred to from the get-go as ‘the Moor’.

I hereby argue that the title *Un Capitano Moro*’ carries a negative connotation and could be somewhat indicative of Cinthio casting some form of aspersions on the Moor, those of suspicion, sullenness, cunningness, obstinateness and cruelty. He is portrayed by Cinthio to be barbaric, spiteful, hot-tempered, gullible, jealous and a villain. To support my argument on the possible motive behind Cinthio’s name of choice, I hereby draw attention to psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon’s assertion that in European unconsciousness, the black man was symbolized as ‘evil and sin’ throughout history. He wrote: “The torturer is the black man, Satan is black…. When one is dirty one is black”. According to Fanon, whiteness is symbolic of purity, justice, truth and virginity. It
encapsulates the essence of being civilized, modern and human. On the other hand, blackness is diametrically opposite to whiteness; in retrospect to the collective unconsciousness, it represents ugliness, sin, darkness, and immorality. Fanon asserted that the definition given in the dictionary for white, signifies ‘clean and pure’, he also alluded to the fact that there are over 134 synonyms for whiteness the majority with positive implications in Roget’s Thesaurus; whereas contrastingly there are 120 synonyms related to the words black and blackness, meaning dirty, prohibited and lugubrious (Fanon 188). Although Fanon wrote hundreds of years after Shakespeare, it is renowned that these type of association with blackness were already formulated before and during Shakespeare’s time. According to Jeffrey Russell, the black devil was already concretized in early medieval times. In this regard, Russell states:

“The Ethiopian as the Devil, far from being new with Othello or even with the Song of Roland, is found in the writings of the [church] Fathers…. There is a deep psychological terror of blackness associated with death and night. The ‘black man’ is also a Jungian archetype of the brute or the lower nature or drives and is found in this capacity long before any considerable contact between Europeans and Black Africa” (Russell 114).

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

Hence, the Jungian archetype of the brute to which Russell spoke of was in keeping also with the ideologies of black Satan and the black barbarian which only was to be found during the middle ages in the mentality of Europeans. Russell underlined the characteristics that were dispensed to the black devil by white Europeans, such as: “the strength of an animal, hairiness, oversized organs, enormous sexual energy, were likewise accredited to the black man”. He further explained that during the medieval period the devil evolved from a cosmic entity to the treacherous and powerful Prince of Darkness (Russell 114-15).
9.2 - The Non-naming and Naming of Characters

In considering the non-naming and naming of characters, is it feasible that Cinthio might have been influenced by these associations that remained in European unconsciousness, that caused him to portray the Moorish Captain as a black brute and barbarian with all the affiliated attributes of the incarnate devil? It is my conviction that Cinthio’s decision not to name his lead character, was because he refused to elevate the Moor to a status of dignity. As John F. Andrews pointed out:

“It would have been an affront to all Chronicles, and Antiquaries, to top upon ‘um a Moor, with that mark of renown, who yet had never been accepted within the Sphere of their cognizance” (Andrews, p.271).

Cinthio was no stranger to Moors and their existence, having some form of interaction with them in Europe. He also, would have acquired some firsthand experiences with them living in Italy and most importantly Venice, being born immediately after Spain’s long pursuing war on Granada by Ferdinand V and Isabella I. The King and Queen having seized control of the region in 1492, made Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello a commitment to maintain religious freedom.

This was short lived as in 1499 Cardinal Francisco Jimenez Cisnero initiated a huge process of inquisition which involved mass conversion to Christianity, persecutions and the closing of mosque and synagogues. Prior to Cinthio’s birth (1504), in 1502, the Monarchs expelled all nonChristians from Granada. Due to King Manuel of Portugal’s 1492 royal decree a substantial number of Moors and Jews were deported to northern Europe (and settled in Italy); where they enjoyed the status of high ranking nobles as their knowledge and skills were respected and greatly valued (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Manuel-I).
Cinthio must have observed that although these persons were Moors of Nobility (Black nobility) they intermarried with Europeans and their surnames were linked with their African heritage. Surnames such as Moore, Morri, Morrison, Morse, Black, Morandi, Negri all bear linguistic reference to their African ancestry. In having named the Moor ‘Othello’, Shakespeare rescued him from the confines of Italian racist beliefs and raised him into a universal hero, whose only flaw was his trust in Iago, who unbeknown to him was bent on his sole destruction. Nonetheless, Shakespeare portrayed him as a tragic hero, a noble, loving and emotional being, as a valiant Moor, an experienced soldier-a man of power, strongly attached to his African ancestry. Whereas, Cinthio simply referred to him as ‘Un Capitano Moro’ the Moorish Captain, only eluding to his highranking status as observed by Honigmann:

“There was once in Venice a Moor, a very gallant man, who because he was personally valiant and had given proof in warfare of great prudence and skillful energy, was dear to the Signoria, who in rewarding virtuous actions ever advance the interest of the Republic” (Honigmann378). “Fu gia’ in Venezia un Moro molto valoroso, il quale, per essere pro’ della persona, e per aver dato segno nelle cose della Guerra, di gran prudenza e di vivace ingegno, era molto caro a que’ signori, I quali nel dar premio agli atti virtuosi, avanzano quante repubbliche fur mai” Source:(https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89010153427;view=1up;seq=72).
Notwithstanding the high-ranking military position Cinthio gave his protagonist, he was simply referred to as the Moor, who has not been given a name as that of the Senator’s daughter, Disdemona. Cinthio’s dubbing of the military Captain as ‘the Moor’ is without any mark of distinction was to clearly underline a pejorative nature of the protagonist. With reference to the employment of the Moor as a military captain, John F. Andrews informed that the Venetians employed strangers to fight their wars, hence Cinthio’s selection of the Moor as the General of the Venetian army (Andrews 271). Sanders also illuminated the same argument by confirming that for Cinthio and his readers, it was customary that a foreign commodore of the Italian forces was nothing extraordinary. This factor was emphasized and supported by G. Contarino’s study of the Republic, ‘De Magistratibus et Republica Venetorum’ of 1543, which underlined that traditionally the city held to the belief that it was a better course of action if their protectorates were defended on the continent by foreign moneygrubbing soldiers than with born citizenry, as was dictated by the conventional law that the general of the army had to be foreign born (Sanders 10). Sanders testified to the fact that the connectivity of race to miscegenation generates an extremely highlycharged emotional issue which could have been the circumstances for the Venetians who probably distrusted and was somewhat suspicious of the Moor chosen to defend them against the Turks; due to their having suffered perpetual hostility and developed a strong hatred and aversion for the Moors (Andrews, 271). Disdemona spoke of the savage passion and hot-tempered nature of her husband’s Moorish blood:

“But you Moors are so hot by nature that any little thing moves you to anger and revenge” (Honigmann 383).
This is a bird’s eye view of the characterization of Cinthio’s Moor, whereas Shakespeare presented his protagonist as being born in royalty, as clearly indicated by Othello in Act One, scene two, lines 21-22: “I shall promulgate – I fetch my life and being from men of royal siege” (Honigmann, 133).

Othello is also depicted by Shakespeare as a world traveler, as Roderigo described him in Act 1, scene 1, lines 134-135: Roderigo: “an extravagant and wheeling stranger of here and everywhere” (Honigmann 129). As per the construction of Othello’s character, Honigmann informed that, “Shakespeare was able to make his Moor more richly textured than Cinthio’s by weaving other sources into the play to fill out Othello’s background” (Honigmann 15). E.A. J. Homigmann stated that Shakespeare’s aptitude to construct a richer description of Othello by incorporating contextual information from additional sources; is a clear indication that he must have studied thoroughly the historical existence and prominence of Moors in Europe. The first alteration Shakespeare made to Cinthio’s tale was to name his protagonist, Othello. Regardless of the Moor’s African heritage, he was perceived as a top-ranking nobleman and Shakespeare spoke to this dignity by naming him, Othello.

He enlightened his readers/audiences on the background of his protagonist as noted in Act I, scene 2, lines 21-22, with Othello’s self-declaration, “I fetch my life and being/ From men of royal siege” (Hall, p. 53). Andrews noted that in the play, Shakespeare described Othello as a descendant from a race of kings (Andrews 276).

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

In comparing Shakespeare’s play with Cinthio’s novella, this Shakespearean play is filled with textual and visual; secular and ecclesiastical documentations. We see elements of Othello’s
Christianity as he adopted a militantly Christian tone as if to forestall criticism of himself as an outsider, or even a pagan in Act 2, Scene 3, lines 166-170:

**Othello:** “Are we turned Turks? And to ourselves do that which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?” For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl; He that stirs next, to carve for his own rage, holds his soul light: he dies upon his motion” (Honigmann, 22).

Whereas Cinthio portrays him as a pagan (Andrews, p. xx). The chart below illustrates how Shakespeare breathed and brought his characters to life from Cinthio’s novel:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cinthio’s Characters</th>
<th>Shakespeare’s Characters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disdemona</td>
<td>Desdemona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disdemona’s Relative (Father)</td>
<td>Brabantio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitano Moro - (Moorish Captain)</td>
<td>Othello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capo di Squadra – (Corporal)</td>
<td>Cassio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensign</td>
<td>Iago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensign’s wife</td>
<td>Emilia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wounded Soldier</td>
<td>Montano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtesan</td>
<td>Bianca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rodrigo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is also important to note that Shakespeare’s construction of two additional characters, is a clear indication that we must read both accounts through the literary analysis and the study of the oral and textual traditional that gave birth to them.
One of the major changes of great significance that Shakespeare made to Cinthio’s ‘*Un Capitano Moro*’ was his ability to not only name the drama ‘Othello’, but also that of adding layers to his masterpiece to create well-rounded and multi-faceted characters. In contrast to Cinthio, Shakespeare developed these characters into egotistical beings with their own names, personalities, and their identifiable individual perceptions of the world (Honigmann, 386).

**9.3 - Shakespeare’s Invention of Bianca**

Shakespeare’s creation of the character of Bianca is one of the most noteworthy changes of his source material. In *Gli Hecatommithi*, Cinthio informed that the ‘Capo di Squadra’ is a married man who emerges “*one dark night from the house of a courtesan with whom he used to amuse himself*” when he is attacked by the Ensign, he does not name the courtesan. (Bullough 249). Bianca’s affected role is not only to play ‘*the lady of the night*’, but her presence enabled Shakespeare to magnify the theme of men’s treatment of women, which is predominant to the relationship of a husband who conceived his wife to be a prostitute (Vaughan and Cartwright 105106). Carol Thomas Neely wrote in his essay that Bianca is not one who sentimentalizes love or is ashamed or disgraced by sex. From her perspective Cassio is heartless and an incentive, which she readily accepts as we see in Act III, scene 4, line 196:

**Cassio:** “*Tis but a little way that I can bring you, for I attend here; but I’ll see you soon.*”

**Bianca:** “*Tis very good. I must be circumstanced.*”

Bianca’s, ‘*I must be circumstanced*’ was her way of letting him know that she will be governed by circumstances and thereby yield to his conditions (Barthelemy 73-74).
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

9.4 - The Development of the Character of the Ensign’s Wife

The tale of the Moor of Venice is also modified by Shakespeare’s completed drawing of Cinthio’s outlined sketched of the Ensign’s wife, who Shakespeare named Emilia. Here’s an excerpt from Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro”:

“This false man had likewise taken to Cyprus his wife, a fair and honest young woman. Being an Italian, she was much loved by the Moor’s wife and spent the greater part of the day with her” (Honigmann 373).

“Aveva similmente menata questo malvagio la sua moglie in Cipri, la quale era bella ed onesta giovane, e per essere Italiana, era molto amata dalla moglie del Moro, e si stave la maggior parte del giorno con lei”

Source: (https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89010153427;view=1up;seq=72).

Shakespeare also borrowed the same concept of the Ensign’s wife, ‘a fair and honest young woman’ and applied it to Emilia. The relationship of Emila to Desdemona, could very well be likened to the function Juliet’s nurse performed for her in Romeo and Juliet. In this regard she is presumed to be slightly older than Desdemona. This makes Desdemona appear somewhat attractive, which stimulated Iago’s sexual possessiveness of her. Although he might not have been in love with her, but the idea of her having a lover sends him crazy with madness; when he confessed in Act 2, scene 1, line, 277: “Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my innards.”

From Cinthio’s story one gets a glimpse of how the Ensign’s wife felt towards him. She is being cognizant of his intent to murder Desdemona; refrained from informing her best friend because she stood in fear of him, only warning her to: “Take care not to give your husband any reason for suspicion.”
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

Contrasting to Cinthio’s Ensign’s wife, Shakespeare’s Emilia’s fearfulness of Iago is not voiced and her attitude about him is demonstrated in Act 3, scene 3, line 307:

**Emilia:** “I am glad I have found this napkin. This was her first remembrance from the Moor. My wayward husband hath a hundred times wooed me to steal it, but she so loves the token --- For he conjured her she should ever keep it.”

His disparagement and her reluctance at first is an indication that the relationship between husband and wife is not a healthy one (Honigmann 43-44). Emilia can be viewed as a passive accomplice in Iago’s scheme. When in Act 3, scene 4: **Desdemona:** “Where should I lose that handkerchief?”

**Emilia:** “I know not, madam.”

If she was not fraught with fear of Iago she might have very well revealed and ruined his murderous conspiracy. Yet, in Act 5, scene 2, line 122, Shakespeare exemplified Emilia’s character as one of untruthfulness: **Othello:** “She’s like a liar gone to burning hell! ‘Twas I that killed her.”

Shakespeare’s intention in this scene was to have Emilia experience this painful confrontation and by hearing the jest of the conversation, as a result, her guilt forced her to comprehend the consequences of her lie, but still afraid of Iago, she attempted to inform Desdemona without ever naming Iago, like Cinthio’s Ensign’s wife in Act 3, scene 4, Line 95: **Emilia:** “Is not this man jealous?”

**Desdemona:** “I ne’er saw this before.
Sure, some wonder in this handkerchief.
I am most unhappy in the loss of it.”

**Emilia:** ‘Tis not a year or two shows us a man. They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;
They eat us hungerly, and when they are full they belch us.” (Honigmann 43). 62

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

The function of her character is identical to that of Bianca but grows with great significance in the play (Vaughan and Cartwright 107). Shakespeare lengthened the role of the wife of Cinthio’s Ensign. As a result, Emilia is seen as one of the greatest female roles created by him. It is said that she is perceived as the first feminist in Western literature. This is obvious from her speech ‘on the overall treatment of women by men’ to Desdemona in Act 4, scene 3, lines 85/103:

But I do think it is their husbands’ faults
If wives do fall: say that they slack their duties,
And pour our treasures into foreign laps,
Or else break out in peevish jealousies,
Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us,
Or scant our former having in despite;
Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace,
Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them: they see and smell
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,

As husbands have. What is it that they do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is: and doth affection breed it? I
think it doth: is’t frailty that thus errs? It is
so too: and have not we affections, Desires
for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well: else let them know, The ills
we do, their ills instruct us so.”

In the end, Emilia disobeyed Iago and exposes his crime.


In his adaptation, Shakespeare was faithful to Cinthio’s plot, most particularly as can be seen with acts 3 and 4 of the play. Shakespeare exhibited his dexterous techniques in morphing and adapting certain parts of Cinthio’s story to intensify the drama and improve character performance (Hall
9.5 - The Character of Roderigo Introduced

The introduction of Roderigo as Iago’s fool in scene one of Act I, is Shakespeare’s brainchild. Roderigo’s existence afforded Iago the opportunity to emphasize with greater intensity through conversations rather than monologues his evil and sadistic nature as well as his capabilities for ruthless manipulations (Hall 20).

9.6 - The Marriage of Disdemona and the Moor

There are numerous details in Cinthio’s novella that Shakespeare excluded from his play, one of which has to do with the marriage of the Moor and Desdemona. Cinthio’s tale recounts, “a Moor marries a Venetian lady, “Disdemona”, against her parents’ wishes and the two travel to Cyprus where the Moor is appointed as Venetian military commander”; instead Shakespeare’s newlyweds enjoyed marital bliss for quite some time prior to being dispatched to Cyprus:

“the marriage between the Moor and Desdemona lasts harmoniously for some time before the two departs for Cyprus” (Nostbakken7).

Joan Lord Hall’s analyzed that the order of Cinthio’s tale proceeded rapidly than the act of Shakespeare’s Othello. She noted that the interval between the wedding in Venice and the Cyprus events spanned between weeks or months instead of days (Hall 20). E.A. J. Honigmann in “Shakespeare: Seven Tragedies”, spoke to the fact that this incident was an invention of Shakespeare, which is quite different than that of Cinthio’s tale, with the Moor embarking on board the galley with his wife and set sailed together; which is not the same in the play. Shakespeare invented this occurrence to introduce the rest of his secondary cast in this scene (Honigmann, p. 97).
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

9.7 - Waging War with The Turks

At the beginning of Cinzio’s tale, the Moor is dispatched as the Commandant of the troop of soldiers in a time of peace in Cyprus. Whereas Othello’s assignment was altered by Shakespeare from a peaceful environment to one of war. This is evidently exhibited in Act I, scene 3, line 222, when the Duke tells Othello:

*Duke:* “The Turk with a most mighty preparation makes for Cyprus. Othello, the fortitude of the place is best known to you, and, though we have there a substitute of most allowed sufficiency, yet opinion, a sovereign mistress of effects, throws a safer voice on you. You must therefore be content to slubber the gloss of your new fortunes with this more stubborn and boisterous expedition.”

*Othello:* “The tyrant custom, most grave senators, 
Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war
My thrice-driven bed of down. I do agonize
A natural and prompt alacrity
I find in hardness, and do undertake” (Honigmann 153).

The fact that Shakespeare sent Othello to war against the Turks, indicates that he must have read Richard Knolles’ *Generall Historie of the Turkes*, on how the Venetians did everything in their power to defend the wealthy island of Cyprus against the Turks (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Knolles). Shakespeare being cognizant of Venice’s ownership of Cyprus from 1470 to 1559, amalgamated into the play, her battles of the 1570s with the Ottoman Empire to maintain proprietorship of Cyprus, which was the eastern island that overlooked the shipping channels that divided Europe and its trading centers. However, in 1571, Cyprus was confiscated by Turkish forces who were later defeated by the Christians in the battle of Lepanto (https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/othello/play-summary).
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

According to Julie Hankey, the taking of Cyprus by the Turks, which led to the great battle of Lepanto, twenty years later was still recognized as the “Hallelujah” of Christendom. When Shakespeare wrote Othello, this victory was still freshly remembered through the newly crown King James I’s poem on the subject; hence the dispersal of the Turkish fleet in Othello was Shakespeare’s invention (Hankey, p.15). The fact that Shakespeare made constant references to ‘the Turks’ or ‘turning Turkish’ throughout Othello, spoke to the sporadic disputes that existed between European Christian supremacies and the Islamic Ottoman Empire, which was equally an economic rivalry as it was a war of religions.

Within the play, Shakespeare made good usage of the Christian-Turkish binary; yet undercuts it by portraying the Venetian Iago as a villain and Othello as an outsider. Even though he has been selected as the General of the Venetian army, ‘the Moor’ remains a foreigner and an outsider in Venice. The fact that he was not a European nor a Turk, demonstrates his isolation and likeness to the detached island of Cyprus; he was found in the middle, only as a representative of Venice and Cyprus. Consumed with recklessness, just before killing himself, he reflected upon his service to Venice by underscoring that as a Christian hero he was successful in killing the turbaned Turk as noted in Act 5, scene 2 Lines 363-366:

Othello: “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.”

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

To add the state of imminent war in Cyprus, Shakespeare bypassed certain aspects of Cinthio’s story, by eliminating the following details: the handkerchief falling into the Captain’s possession as a result of the Ensign having stolen it, instead of seizing the moment when Desdemona displaced it; the bribery of the Ensign by the Moor to orchestrate a plan for the joint killing of Desdemona and their passing it off as an accident; the Ensign is accused by the Moor of the death of Desdemona, with a reciprocated confrontational revenge between them, the story ends as one man exposes the other as the guilty culprit, whilst neither of them is willing to take responsibility for the sinful deed and inevitably both dies. This is Cinthio’s ethical assumption to their crimes (Nostbakken 7-8).

It has already been established that Cinthio’s narrative of the Moor of Venice, is not a drama, but in its simplistic form a clear-cut story, depicting the nature of human beings combined with ordinary chain of events. Cinthio’s work is defined as having no structural art, no set arrangement along with some consistency and general truth to nature (Taylor 4). Therefore, for Shakespeare to execute some of the changes involved in transforming the narrative into drama; he had to condense Cinthio’s story into a 2-3-hour performance by eliminating passages not suitable for the stage. As a result, he successfully converted descriptive paragraphs into discourses and soliloquies with characters interacting with each other (Nostbakken 8).

9.8 - Shakespeare’s Deductions from Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro”

Shakespeare’s ability to adapt a simple moralistic tale into an emotionally intense drama of manipulation was made possible, because he incorporated the following from Cinthio’s story:
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

a) Iago’s Motive

In Cinthio’s story, the Ensign’s (Iago) provocation is driven only by his lust for Disdemona (Desdemona). In Act 2, scene 1, line 291, he confessed: “Now I do Love her too”, but this never took root. He became bewildered and was non-acceptant of the fact that a beautiful white Venetian lady was in love with a Moor. Disdemona’s unrequited love for Iago caused him to imagine that she was having an extramarital affair with the Corporal, hence his confessed love took a drastic turn of abhorrence. Iago adhered to this motive as a means of convincing himself that his action was justifiable. Shakespeare’s removal of Cinthio’s unrequited-love motive, spoke more to the sinister side of Iago’s character. Iago confessed to Cassio that he used Desdemona as his pawn to exploit her friendship with Cassio as his pawn to exploit her friendship with Cassio as proof of their tight friendship (Hall 19). Could this wider context function as a possible explanation for the ulterior motives beneath Iago’s cruel plot to bring down the Moor of Venice?

b) Desdemona’s Doubts

Shakespeare altered Desdemona’s doubts from Cinthio’s Disdemona, who had expressed uncertainties about her choice in marrying a ‘hot-blooded’ Moor. This was quite evident after Disdemona interceded on Cassio’s behalf for forgiveness from the Moor; whose mind already poisoned by the Ensign, erupted in anger and responded to her in Cinthio’s story:

**Moor:** “There must be a very powerful reason why you take such trouble for this fellow, for he is not your brother, nor even a kinsman, yet you have him so much at heart!”
Disdemona: “I should not like you to be angry with me. Nothing else makes me do it but sorrow to see you deprived of so dear a friend as you have shown that the Corporal was to you. He has not committed so serious an offense as to deserve such hostility. But you Moors are so hot by nature that any little thing moves you to anger and revenge” (Honigmann 375).

Although Desdemona in Act 3, scene 4 lines 124 -132 informed Cassio:

“Alas, thrice-gentle Cassio, my advocation is not now in tune; My lord is not my lord, nor should I know him were he in favour as in humour altered. So, help me every spirit sanctified, as I have spoken for you all my best. And stood within the blank of his displeasure, for my free speech. You must awhile be patient: what I can do I will, and more I will than for myself I dare. Let that suffice you” (Othello 248-249).

She does not get the opportunity to intercede for Cassio, because Shakespeare curtailed this from happening by moving the plot along with the attack on Cassio’s life, which was instigated by Iago and the Moor. As a matter of fact, he says to Emilia in Act 5, scene 1, lines 111-114:

Cassio: “Cassio hath here been set on in the dark, By Roderigo and fellows that are’scaped.” He’s almost slain, and Roderigo is dead” (Othello 304).

Desdemona’s love for Othello never vacillates and compelling evidence of this factor can be found in Act 4, scene 2, in the brutal interrogation as seen in line 34:

Othello: “Why, what are thou?”

Desdemona: “Your wife, my lord: your true and loyal wife”.

69
9.9- Disdemona’s Murder is different than that of Desdemona’s

Desdemona is the sacrificial lamb of the white race. The murder of Disdemona is orchestrated by Cinthio’s Ensign who conspired with the Moor to use sandbags to beat Disdemona to death and cover up the fatal act, by making the roof cave in on her corpse is quite different than that of Shakespeare’s.

**Ensign:** “A method has come into my head that will satisfy you and that nobody will suspect. It is this: the house where you are staying is very old, and the ceiling of your room has many cracks in it. I suggest that we beat Disdemona with a stocking filled with sand until she dies. Thus, there will not appear on her any sign of the blows. When she is dead, we shall make part of the ceiling fall; and we’ll break the Lady’s head, making it seem that a rafter has injured it in falling, and killed her. In this way nobody will feel any suspicion of you, for everyone will think that she died accidentally” (Honigmann 383).

Shakespeare dismissed Cinthio’s death methodology, by having Iago in Act 4, scene 1, lines 204-205 to instruct Othello on how best to determine Desdemona’s demise:

“*Do it not with poison, strangle her in bed – even the bed she hath contaminated*” (Othello 266).

In this manner Othello murdered his wife alone with his bare hands, not wishing to mark her porcelain beauty as noted in Act 5, scene 2:

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Othello: “It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.
   Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars,
   It is the cause. Yet I’ll not shed her blood,
   Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow                   And
   smooth as monumental alabaster.
      Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men” (Othello 305-306).
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Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

Shakespeare having changed the sandbagging death to Desdemona’s strangulation by Othello is an act that was said to intensify and compound the feeling of pity and fear (http://www.shakespeareforalltime.com/comparative-analysis-of-cinthios-glihecatommathishakesepares-source-for-othello).

9.10 - The Changes to Cinthio’s Handkerchief

Shakespeare altered the use of the handkerchief as a piece of evidence as the “ocular proof,” in Cinthio’s version. The dressmaker who lived in the Captain’s residence deciding to replicate the embroidery of the handkerchief, was witnessed by the Moor in passing and taken as the ‘ocular proof’ that the Captain obtained the handkerchief as Desdemona’s token of love. In Othello, Shakespeare utilized Bianca as Cassio’s courtesan, who indignantly approached Cassio with the handkerchief at the end of Act 4, scene 1, line 180:

**Bianca:** “O Cassio, whence came this? (the handkerchief) This is some token from a newer friend! To the felt absence now I feel a cause: Is’t come to this? Well, well.

This confrontation is fueled in Act 4, scene 1, line 170, when Othello has a sense of degradation; he assumed that Desdemona gave the love token to Cassio:

**Othello:** “O Iago! Iago: And did you see the handkerchief?**

**Othello:** Was that mine?

**Iago:** Yours, by this hand: and to see how he prizes the foolish woman your wife!
Movies, plays and other literary works are not whimsically written or produced because their authors or producers considered them pleasurable to generate. Most literary works and movies are spawn out of the necessity to highlight or draw attention to issues or situations, as they are said to have a profound impact on the social wellbeing of people, serving to educate and rectify circumstances for the overall betterment of humanity.

According to Joan Lord Hall, “dramatic literature participates in the shifting of ideology and cultural beliefs of its times and it illuminates and is illuminated by our own ideological struggles.” In this regard Ms. Hall believes that Othello could be examined in ways in which it contributes to the marginalization of black Africans and women during the early seventeenth century; as color prejudice was a kind of xenophobia that existed in Shakespeare’s day (Hall 13).

In keeping with Joan Hall’s statement, as one of the greatest playwrights and literary activist to have ever lived, could it be that Shakespeare utilized allegorically Othello as an important piece of philosophical document that was aimed at teaching Elizabethans and their European neighbors a significant lesson on racial tolerance and acceptance that were not overtly told in the story? Elaine Robinson in her book, ‘Shakespeare Attacks Bigotry’, informed that over 400 years ago, Shakespeare explored ‘blackness’ during the Renaissance period. She claimed that this was
extremely important because truth and justice is important; protesting and eliminating bigotry are important; these were the virtues that Shakespeare adhered to and believed in.

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

For these reasons, she came to the realization that Shakespeare was protesting the African slave trade and racism in defense of "real Christianity" (Robinson13, Kindled Edition).

10. 1 - The British Transatlantic Slave Trade

Ms. Robinson further educates that Shakespeare wrote five tragedies in protestation against the African slave trade, excellent examples of these are:

(1) Titus Andronicus – in which Aaron the Moor Shakespeare’s ironic force de tour in protest and he is also proof of how Shakespeare ‘pricked European consciousness amid the African slave trade;
(2) The Merchant of Venice;
(3) Othello;
(4) King Lear; (5) The Tempest.

According to Ms. Robinson, with Shakespeare’s completion of Titus Andronicus in 1590, from Angola alone there were 52,000 slaves were shipped, with numbers of Black cargoes augmenting to an average of more than 5000 a year. A year after Shakespeare’s sunset (his death) in 1617 the numbers continued rising as 28,000 slaves were packed and shipped yearly from Angola to the Congo. Henceforth, the supply and demand, distribution and marshalling of vast number of human chattels became the established pattern for the history of the Atlantic slave trade, a gigantic international enterprise during the high Renaissance in Europe (Robinson 98-108 Kindled Edition).
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

Robinson goes further to educate that Shakespeare protested all forms of bigotry, notwithstanding the fact that they were religious-ized, legalized or institutionalized. He strongly rejected and condemned Aristotle’s philosophy of slavery, which was the foundation and defense for the African slave trade. Aristotle’s philosophy of slavery can be referred to as the invention of the inhuman or nonhuman:

“A slave is a sort of living piece of property…. Those whose condition is such that their function is the use of their bodies and nothing better can be expected of them, those, I say, are slaves by nature. It is better for them to be ruled thus….. The use made of slaves hardly differs at all from that of tame animals; they both help with their bodies to supply our essential needs….. It is clear then that by nature some are free, others slaves, and for these it is both just and expedient that they should serve as salves” (Robinson 1373, Kindle edition).

I believe whole heartedly that Shakespeare in staging Othello, was sensitized to the plight of the Black race in Elizabethan England and throughout Europe. He used his artistic license in adapting Cinthio’s story ‘Un Capitano Moro’ to circuitously tackle the issue of racial intolerance, injustices and the atrocities experienced by the Black African race at the hands of the Europeans. In support of my theory, E.A. J. Honigmann stated:

“Cinthio’s story of the Moor…. must have appealed to Shakespeare partly because it allowed him to grapple with an emerging social problem, one that many critics of Othello have passed over in silence. I mean racism, Europe’s response to the ‘other’ (Honigmann 27).

Elaine Robinson is of the belief that, Shakespeare wrote Othello to illustrate ‘how the white man destroys the black man through racist menticide.’ The sly perniciousness of lago, in her opinion can be depicted as a mirror reflecting the characteristics of some White Europeans during the Renaissance period as being that of the arch-racist; the arch-African slave trader; and an
Ms. Robinson’s argues that the tragedy of Othello was not primarily due to any terrible flaw he might have had; as Shakespeare presented him as a great warrior and general. She avowed to the fact that Othello’s tragedy could be found in Iago’s expressed racism, which demonstrates that racism is more devastating than war, and against which even a great warrior such as Othello is unprotected and thereby left vulnerable. As Shakespeare clearly stated, ‘Racism destroys soul and body,’ as noted in Act 5, scene 2, lines 296 when Othello ask Cassio in the end:

Othello: “Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?”

Hence, Robinson’s theory that Othello's tragedy, his madness, the killing of his beloved and himself was caused by lethal racism, Iago's work. For Robinson, Iago epitomizes the soul and character of western civilization. She portrays racism as menticide and it is not difficult to find both elements in the character of Iago. In breaking down the word menticide into two syllabi, she showcases Iago as being a racist mind-killer, that is, ‘Menti’ means mind, and ‘cide’ means killer. As such, she is convinced that the definition of ‘menticide’ could easily be attributed to Iago’s racist destruction of Othello:

"Menticide" is a systematic and intentional undermining of a person's conscious mind for instilling doubt and replacing that doubt with attitudes and ideas directly hostile to his normal ideas and attitudes by subjecting him to mental and physical torture, extensive interrogation, suggestion, training and narcotics” (Robinson 1315, Kindle Edition).

For this reason, one can see how Iago’s systematic and intentional undermining of Othello's conscious mind. How he implanted doubts and replaced them with mental tortures of suggestion, implication, intimidation, insinuation, fraud, projection, set-up, manipulation, insidiousness, deception, treachery, hatred, jealousy, and false pretense (Robinson 1319, Kindle Edition).
Therefore, I am in total agreement with Robinson’s theory that, the White European supremacists succeeded in enslaving Africans due to their abilities to bypass the conscious minds of Africans, they attacked them with mental tortures, thereby their ability to psychologically destroy the enslaved. As per the analysis of Othello, Robinson alluded to the fact that as he (Othello) became more cognizant of being betrayed, he sporadically recognized the racist world in which he resided. Iago, who is extremely acquainted and mindful of Othello’s state of being, does everything in his evil power to infiltrate Othello’s sense of self-worth and uprightness by forcing the general to accept the construction of himself and his overall interaction with others is one that has been fabricated on racism.

In other words, Robinson explained that in Shakespeare’s depiction of Othello, he revealed one of the deadly consequences of menticide, playing a psychological game on black people, whereby in their understanding of themselves around white supremacists; they begin to internalize the attitudes of the white racists. That is, they will envision themselves selves as they are perceived as being inferior to their oppressors, they buy into the racist myths, or are forced to act as if they do for the sake of survival (Robinson 1321, Kindle Edition). In his book, ‘Black Skin, White Masks’, Frantz Fanon denotes:

“The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is correlative to the European’s feeling of superiority. It is the racist who creates his inferior” (Fanon 72).
10.2 - The Interplay of Othello

According to Robinson, Shakespeare depicted Othello as a great war hero, to demonstrate that racism is more destructive than war, and even though he was the Napoleon Buonaparte of his day, found himself defenseless against xenophobia (Robinson 1307, Kindle edition).  

a) Who is Othello?

*Othello is a man of profound knowledge and military skills* that made him the ideal candidate to be selected by the Duke and Senate to become the brigadier general to lead the Venetian army in war against the Ottoman Turks. The Duke knowing the danger and threats of the Ottomans and that they were the enemy of European Christendom, employed Othello as the general, invoking his guidance and advice as noted in Act 1, scene 3, line 49:

**Duke:** “Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you Against the general enemy Ottoman.”

The Duke goes even further to admit that although they had an adequate replacement in Cyprus, they were not willing to risk anything, feeling safer with Othello at the helm; hence, his acceptance of the challenge according to Act 1, scene 3, line 222 - 235:

**Duke:** “The Turk with a most mighty preparation makes for Cyprus. Othello, the fortitude of the place is best known to you, and though we have there a substitute of most allowed sufficiency, yet opinion, a sovereign mistress of effects, throws as more safe voice on you. You must therefore be content to slabber the gloss of your new fortune with this more stubborn and boisterous expedition.”
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

**Othello**: “The tyrant custom, most grave senators, hath made the flinty and steel couch of war my thrice-driven bed of down. I do agonize a natural and prompt alacrity. I find in hardness and do undertake this present war against the Ottomites.”

As a resident Moor, he was extensively accepted within the Venetian social hierarchy, and often invited home by Brabantio. He spoke of his times with Desdemona’s father to the duke in Act 1, scene 3, line, 130:

**Othello**: “Her father loved me, oft invited me, still questioned me the story of my life, from year to year – the battles, sieges, fortunes that I have passed.”

Brabantio’s invitation to his home (in my opinion), is symbolic of the Venetian society’s open invitation to Othello. This is where he gleaned an indebt education of Venetian civilization. It is only imaginable how he must have ‘stood out’ as a black man among the white Venetians. As an ‘outsider’ within the Venetian society, he was highly noticeable, and being extremely astute, he balanced living with and living separately from others for his survival. Due to his national origin, life experiences on the battle fields, and enslavement, he adequately assimilated within the community by adopting values and religious stances found among his fellow Venetians. The most tragic of the Shakespearian characters, Othello is the personification of innocence to be victimized, he is symbolic of black fatalities of the most cold-blooded cruelties in the history of humanity. That which is at the core of his tragedy is Othello’s innocence, as his character is flawless (Robinson1335, Kindle edition).

According to Jonathan Swift, “Honesty hath no fence against superior cunning,” which implies that Othello’s virtues of innocence and impeccable honesty were qualities that inadequately equipped his defense against Iago’s untouchable shrewdness.
Shakespeare presents through the person of Iago the characteristics of some white European supremacists, as he is the devil incarnate (Swift68). In his assessment of Iago’s cunning skills, Greenblatt noted that Iago succeeded in his conniving schemes through his abilities in not only concealing his motives, but through his masterful manipulations and orchestrations of his allies’ comportments, owing to his expert choice of language. He is also shrewd and quick in his analysis of his accomplices’ behavioral comportment and social changes, manipulating them to his advantage. According Greenblatt Iago has:

“a sharp eye for the surfaces of social existence.... A reductive grasp of human possibilities.” Iago is “sensitive to habitual and self-limiting forms of discourse and demonically sensitive to the way individuals interpret discourse, to the signals they ignore and those to which they respond” (Greenblatt 258)

Elaine Robinson, Greenblatt argued that through the skill of improvisation, Iago capitalized on the unexpected and altered given situations or circumstances into his own, to his advantage. The Europeans acquired the same ability, whereby they ingratiated themselves into the pre-existing political, religious, and even psychic structures of the Africans, and altered these structures to their advantage. Robinson referred to these European improvisational skills as ‘egregious conning’ that played a significant role in the development of the African slave trade and racism (Robinson, 1342-1343, Kindle edition).
10.3 - Othello’s Origin and Nationality

As for Othello’s origin and nationality, Shakespeare distinctly represented him as a Moor, a negro, one of African origin, he is referred to as ‘black Othello’ in Act 2, scene 2, line 26-29:

Iago: “I have stoup of wine, and here without are a brace of Cyprus gallants that would fain have a measure to the health of black Othello”.

Also, in Act 3, scene 3, Shakespeare provided through the person of Roderigo a somewhat description of Othello’s negroid features in his lines to Iago:

Roderigo: “What a full fortune does the thick lips owe, if he can carry’t thus!”

The references of Othello, being ‘black, thick lipped’ are all characteristics that he pertains to one of the negro races. This is an excellent example of xenophobia, that is understood in the aversion for non-European features.

Othello’s nationality was African, as noted by Honigmann’s declaration that, “Othello is a black man, probably from North Africa, now living in a white European community” (Honigmann, p.291). Shakespeare presented him as a ‘Moor’ and his native country to be that of Mauritania as noted in Act 4, scene 2, lines 224-227:

Roderigo: “Is that true? Why, then Othello and Desdemona return again to Venice.”

Iago: “O no, he goes into Mauretania and taketh away with him the fair Desdemona, unless his abode be lingered here by some accident –.”
The fact that Shakespeare through the voice of Iago spoke of Othello’s country of origin, is an illustration of his geographical knowledge of the northwestern African region that included the northern part of Algeria and Morocco. Mauretania derived its name from the antique Berber kingdom of Mauretania dating back to the 3rd century BCE through the 7th century CE in the far northern part of Morocco and Algeria. The inhabitants of Mauritania, which is in northwest Africa; a region that now covers northern Algeria and Morocco. In the Middle Ages, the people of Mauritania were of a dark skin complexion in relation to Europeans and their name ‘mauros’ ‘black’ was synonymous for ‘negro’ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mauritania).

With reference to Mauretania being the native country of Othello, the famous Senegalese historian and anthropologist, Cheikh Anta Diop, informed that the African inhabitants can be divided into three distinct races:

1. Negroes proper found in Central and West Africa;
2. Kaffirs originates from the east coast and have a less imperceptive facial angle than Blacks and a high nose, but thick lips and woolly hair;
3. Moors are similar in stature, physical appearance and hair, they are slightly different only in darker skin complexion due to sun tanning because of the climate in which they reside. According to Anta Diop, the Moors are direct descendants from the post-Islamic invaders extending from the Yemen to North Africa. He also stated that they are basically Arab
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

Muslims and there are numerous documents that have records of important Moorish families in Mauritania today.

These documents are manuscripts containing the family tree of this race ever since their departure from Yemen and bears testimony as to their origin as a people (Anta Diop, p. 52). Hence, this is the lineage from whence came Shakespeare’s Othello.

10. 4 - The Significance of Othello’s Marriage to Desdemona

To further consolidate his acceptance into the Venetian society he married Desdemona, a white lady. Could Othello find in this interracial marriage access to complete equality with the illustrious Venetian race? The interracial marriage of Othello and Desdemona in 15th century Italy was perceived as a racial taboo. The famous literary critic, Thomas Rymer in 1693, in his writings accentuated the unlikelihood of the match between Othello and Desdemona by referring to the relationship in this manner: “But not the soft and savage to combine, / Serpents to doves, tigers to lambskins join” (Rymer, p.202).

Rymer’s implication of Othello as a savage is racist and signified that he did not envision Othello under the same light as Shakespeare, who saw the Moor as a probable husband for the senator’s lily-white soft skin daughter, who does not have a streak of racism following in her veins.

Robinson highlighted an awesome tribute made by A.C. Bradley to Shakespeare’s ‘glorious conception’, Desdemona, whose marriage to a ‘a coal black man’ is spurned by racist critics:

“Desdemona, the ‘eternal womanly’ in its most lively and adorable form, simple and innocent as a child, ardent with the courage and idealism of a saint, radiant with that heavenly purity of heart which men worship the more because nature so rarely permits it to themselves had no theories
Robinson concluded that Shakespeare did not find it monstrous that Desdemona loved a black man.

As for Bradley, he did not find her love for Othello ‘prudent as it turned out to be tragic’.

However, Robinson disagreed, arguing it was prudent as Shakespeare had intended. The love of Othello and Desdemona was a never ending one, and their tragedy was the destructive work of the devil, Iago (Robinson1426-1427, Kindle edition).

Shakespeare addressed racial ‘otherness’ directly, through his marriage of Othello and Desdemona; by so doing, he affords the black man the characteristics a racist would consider impossible, as a means of illustrating that racism in and of itself is destructive to humanity (black people in particular) and to the features intended to birth the probable. According to Robinson, Shakespeare’s reason for writing Othello, was based on his determination to end racism by any means necessary (Robinson1390, Kindle edition).

Othello’s intimacy with Desdemona was just cause for Iago’s formulated drama of sexual preoccupation in his mind as noted in Act 1, scene 1, line 115, when Iago informed Brabantio:

**Iago:** “I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.”

Here, Iago tells Brabantio that his daughter and the Moor are copulating. His reference to ‘making the beast with two backs’ is taken from Rabelais’ French proverb, as Shakespeare must have been
helped by a recent reading of Rabelais; and uses the phrase to depict Iago’s preferential taste in talking about sex which he does rather often. In this regard, this type of action could be called Rabelaisian, as it was normal for Frenchmen to seldomly joke about the uro-genital events and here Iago comes across as being mesmerized by the thought of the Moor having sex with Desdemona. He is portrayed as a voyeur who tries to manipulate the sex drive of others (Honigmann, 49).

Irrespective of his marriage to Desdemona, he is still seen as an outsider and Iago succeeds in destructively ‘castrating’ Othello. Even though he exudes the brilliancy of a general; some characters refer to his ‘blackness’ with disparagement. Through the character Iago Shakespeare illustrates this factor in Act 2, scene 3, line 29:

**Iago:** "Come, lieutenant, I have a stoup of wine, and here without are a brace of Cyprus gallants that would fain have a measure to the health of black Othello."

Iago’s description ‘black Othello’ is an indication of his perception of the Moor’s color being symbolic of sin. Cinthio referenced his protagonist as ‘the Moor,’ which is a suggestion that because of the color of his pigmentation, he was acknowledged by others as being black. In Elizabethan times this was reflective of color symbolism, white being synonymous with honor and innocence, whilst black is affiliated with wickedness and guilt (Honigmann 70). The Moors due to their cultural background are normally perceived as being uncivilized, barbaric and rash. Iago being cognizant of this factor, is more than confident that Brabantio would not approve of
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

his daughter marrying a black man, once he appealed to Brabantio racist nature by using racist nicknames and animalizing Othello in Act 1, scene 1, lines 97/101 as a "Barbary horse" and "black ram," thereby associating his blackness to carnality and barbarism. Iago continued to inflame Brabantio’s level of racism by saying:

Iago:  
“Even now, now, very now, an old black ram  
Is tupping your white ewe. Arise, arise!
Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,
Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you.
Arise, I say!” (N.B. highlighted text in bold are not reflected in the original quotation).

In speaking to Brabantio about his daughter’s elopement with Othello, Iago used racist slurs by referring to Desdemona’s husband as the “old black ram” who is “tupping’ that is, sleeping with Brabantio’s “white ewe” who is Desdemona. Iago’s use of racial slurs stemmed from the fact that Shakespeare has more so than Cinthio did in “Un Capitano Moro,” incorporated and played on the Elizabethan notion that black men are hyper sexual animals. Iago’s intent by speaking in this manner is to manipulate Brabantio’s fears of miscegenation (https://www.shmoop.com/othello/race-quotes.html).

From a closer analysis of the above quotation, when Iago speaks of ‘an old black ram’

Shakespeare provides the first clue as to Othello’s age. This is blatant racial language used by Iago. Although Othello is not specifically named; Othello’s ‘otherness’ ‘race’ is circuitously mentioned through the introduction of the “black” ram versus the “white” ewe. Again, Shakespeare cleverly demonstrates the European attitudes toward black people through his use of animal imagery. Iago’s statement compares Othello to an old black ram—which introduces both animal imagery and the racial connotation of black versus white. Othello is reduced by Iago to the status of a ram, that of a beast, a position lower than that of humanity in the Great Chain of Being
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello
(http://english142b.blogspot.com/2008/05/old-black-ram-is-tupping-your-white-ewe.html).
It would be remiss not to analyze Iago’s ingenious use of language as it pertains to gender. He referred to the specificity of gender in using the language of “ram” versus “ewe”. Additionally, his insertion of “tupping” which is a vulgar terminology for the procreation of sheep points to the dynamics of gender. In this case that Desdemona is referred to as ‘the white ewe’ as an indication of the hierarchal order of man over women also inciting that women are perceived as objects or property in society (http://english142b.blogspot.com/2008/05/old-black-ram-is-tupping-your-white-ewe.html).

It has been established that “Tupping” is an English archaic word that means copulating. However, it must not be discarded that Iago’s description of Desdemona as ‘white ewe’ again is a play on black and white, here white epitomizes purity, unstained, precious and beloved (Honigmann122). This hits to the core of Brabantio’s prejudice, the sexual animalistic barbaric description of his daughter with Othello in this manner is repulsive and one he found to be abnormal. How ironic of Iago to refer to Othello as ‘the devil’, when he himself, a white racist is tantamount to the devil incarnate.

The message Shakespeare conveyed was that a racist perceives things not as they are, but as he is. Iago’s reference to Othello as the devil was based on his skin being black, whereas he who is of a white pigmentation was not looked upon as evil. Shakespeare in this scenario demonstrated that there is absolutely nothing inherent with the black skin that can be associated with evil, as he has presented black Othello as having impeccable character. Hence, his tragedy is the work of the devil, Iago (Robinson 1450, Kindle edition).
The idea of an old husband with a young wife was a traditional butt of comedy. As Honigmann states, to have a full understanding of the importance of comedy and how it embellished the tragedy of Othello, one must look beyond stage comedy. Othello is no longer a young man; his age is just as perplexing as his race. He is much older than Desdemona, who is said to be very young adultscent, hence Othello married a much younger woman. Shakespeare gives an indication of Othello’s age in Act 1, scene 3 line 263:

**Othello:** *To please the palate of my appetite,*
\[Nor to comply with heat, the young affects\]
\[In me defunct, and proper satisfaction,\]
\[But to be free and bounteous to her mind\]

As noted from Othello’s lines, when he spoke of his plate it was about his taste or liking for….

‘*My appetite*’ - sexual desire, ‘*nor to comply with heat*’ - to act in accordance with or to satisfy

‘*heat*’ passion and sexual excitement in females, ‘*in me defunct*’ – are extinct. According to Honigmann, this captioned quote could be read as: ‘nor to satisfy sexual passion, the youthful appetites that are extinct in me, and permissible gratification of desire (Honigmann 152)

10.5 - **Othello Depicted as An Animal**

According to Doris Adler, in her article, “The Rhetoric of Black and White in Othello”, Roderigo continued to inflame Barbantio’s outrage by his persistent sexual references and bestial implications by the repeated allusions to animals, black animals and African animals as noted from Act 1, scene 1, lines 110/113):

**Iago:** “You’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you’ll have your nephews neigh to you; you’ll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for gernans.” (Othello 251).
Iago does not see Othello as a human being, he called him a Barbary horse, could this be Shakespeare’s foreboding or indication of how the European (white) supremacists would animalize Africans and threat them as beast of burdens in relations to the Transatlantic Slave Trade? The captioned quotation is an excellent example of Iago’s continuous reference of Othello to that of an animal. Close examination of the word ‘Barbary’ indicates it as the home of the Berbers or Moors, the place of their origin, the Saracen countries along the north coast of Africa. ‘Barbary horse’ is an Arab horse and Othello is called a Barbary horse by Iago. Here Iago also informed Brabantio that his descendants ‘nephews’ grandsons, in the desire of uncleanly lust between Desdemona and Othello, that they would become like the stoned horses, neighing at his neighbor’s wives. ‘You’ll have ‘courses’ for cousins,’ could be interpreted as, you will have powerful horses ridden in battle, ‘jennets (Spanish horses) for germans’ implying that he could also have Spanish horses as well as (germans) for relatives. The fact that Shakespeare selected the word ‘jennets’ was his way of indicating the point that the Moors had settled and developed Spain (Honigmann 123).

10.6 - Othello’s Dual Personality

In analyzing Othello’s characteristics, I find it rather difficult to overlook the dual side of his personality, that of greatness accompanied with weakness; a schizophrenic situation.

On the battlefield he is a force to be reckoned with, a man who is extremely skilled and confidant in military matters, with outstanding accomplishments and victories in war; yet when it came to his personal life and matters of the heart, he was not able to clearly think for himself, as he was incapacitated and under the demonic spell of Iago. Iago’s ability to hold such power over Othello was due in part to penetrate through Othello’s conscious state of being and greatly affect his psychological temperament. Although Othello was a skilled veteran soldier, he was not capable
and prepared to take on Iago, because Iago has transported him into the world of the senses, igniting the beast of anger and jealousy he found in Othello. Othello’s love for Desdemona is not enough to placate the faith and trust he placed in Iago; this is the result of his dancing with the devil.

10.7 - Othello and Shakespeare’s Characteristics are Similar

Iago plans to exploit Othello’s gullibility in Act 1, scene 3, Lines 398-403:

**Iago:** *The Moor is of a free and open nature*
*That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,*
*And will as tenderly be led by the nose*
*As asses are.*
*I have’t, it is engendered! Hell and Night*
*Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light”.*

From the captioned statement, Iago spoke of Othello’s naivety of taking men at face value and not really knowing or understanding human nature. As it is relatively easy to lead a donkey around, Othello was so ingenuous that he could be effortlessly led astray. When Iago spoke of the Moor as being ‘free’, he was implying that he was spontaneous, frank and unreserved. 89
The Moor’s ‘open nature’ spoke to the fact that the Moor did not conceal his thoughts or feelings. Because of his open honesty, it was easy for Iago to manipulate and read Othello, as his way of existence left him vulnerable, without any defense mechanism in place. Honigmann, shared Ben Jonson’s tribute to Shakespeare, in that he quoted Iago’s lines to describe Shakespeare’s personality:

*The Moor is of a free and open nature that thinks men honest that but seem to be so.*

According to Jonson, ‘Shakespeare was indeed honest, and of an open and free nature.’ This is Jonson’s description of his friend and fellow dramatist likening Shakespeare’s character to that of Othello (Honigmann 105). Could Shakespeare’s honesty be the driving force to be free and open to stand up for justice in protestation against the xenophobia and racism Blacks and Moors were facing in Europe and his attack against the Transatlantic Slave Trade? Iago’s persistency in his cause to tear down this mighty war giant; astutely disguises himself with the mask of honesty as his ensnarement for treacherous show of aggressions. Iago is such a mastermind in portraying his false honesty as noted in Act 3, scene 3 lines 262:

**Othello:** “This fellow’s of exceeding honesty.”

Othello is completely blinded and bewitched by Iago. However, it is a known fact, that every person of strength has a breaking point or a hidden weakness about them. Samson was the strongest man that ever lived, until the tenacious Delilah discovered his area of vulnerability.
Like Deliah, Iago remained determined to discover Othello’s Achilles heel with a burning desire and intent to obliterate him. In Act 3, scene 3, Line 323:

**Iago:** I have use for it. Go, leave me.  
I will in Cassio’s lodging lose this napkin  
And let him find it. Trifles light as air  
Are to the jealous confirmations strong  
As proofs of holy writ. This may do something.  
The Moor already changes with my poison:  
Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons  
Which at the first are scare found to distaste  
But with a little art upon the blood.”

### 10.8 - Othello Doubts and Devalues Himself

Iago has discovered another of Othello’s weaknesses, other than his ability of ‘trusting blindly’ that of “jealousy” and hereby deliberately uses the verbal poison to strike at his Achilles heel (Bloom, p. 202). Othello’s major flaw if it can be called a flaw, was his trust in Iago. Let us establish Othello’s vote of confidence in Iago, whom he conceived as the epitome of honesty. In Act 3, scene 3, Line 262:

**Othello:** “This fellow’s of exceeding honesty  
And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit,  
Of human dealings. If I do prove her haggard,  
Though that her jesses were my dear heart-strings,  
I’d whistle her off and let her down the wind  
To prey at fortune, Haply for I am black  
And have not those soft parts of conversation  
That chamberers have, or for I am declined  
Into the vale of years – yet that’s not much  
She’s gone, I am abused, and my relief  
Must be to lathe her.”
Othello here confirmed that Iago is of “exceeding honesty,” this is not true. However, unbeknown to Othello, Iago is the devil in the flesh who is omniscient, therefore it can be safely stated that on the flip side of the coin; Othello spoke truth in stating that Iago had “All qualities with a learned spirit, of human dealings.”

In keeping with Elaine L. Robinson’s theory, Othello’s mistaken judgment of Iago occurred when he was reduced to the racist stereotype of a black man. Subconsciously, he identified his status as a black man from an old psychological racist tape that played repeatedly in his head while he was an African slave. Robinson, believed that Iago’s ability to undermine Othello’s conscious mind was due to his adroitness in zeroing into Othello’s subconscious mind, the storehouse of days of his enslavement; where his greatest doubts, fears, and destructive insolences were implanted by former slave masters were deposited. Iago resurrected these factors in Othello’s mental state (Robinson 1708, Kindled edition).

It is here where Othello began to devaluate himself. Iago has deceitfully worked his magic and entered Othello’s psyche, yet portraying himself as a person of the highest integrity. As a result, Othello is left in a state of an uncompromising internal self-doubt. Could Othello’s lack of affective self-esteem be a root problem from his early childhood, from which he could have suffered from a lack of love and understanding? Iago affectively inflicted a feeling of inadequacy on Othello’s psychological makeup and hence his self-rejection and loathing; which brought him to an extremely painful state of irritation and a sense of feeling excluded, hence his saying ‘I am black’
From a racist perspective, Othello now thinks of himself as an inferior being and his identity has been reduced to ‘thick-lips.’ By admitting that he is ‘the other’, clearly demonstrates his cognizance of being in a shaky position, that of not being as polished and culturally cultivated as Europeans of a similar class. This is a position in which he no longer controlled. In the end, he relinquished control and submitted himself trustfully to Iago.

Iago having mentally manipulated Othello resulted in him becoming illogical and shaped his jealousy, driving him to the threshold of madness. Due to Iago’s venomous poison, Othello suffered a schizophrenic split, going back and forth from the state of normalcy to that of hostility. Robinson indicated that the valiant Othello, the Othello Desdemona fell in love with was no longer there, he had long departed, due to his conscious mind having been systematically undermined by Iago, as acknowledged by Othello himself in Act III, scene 3, lines 345-357:

“I had been happy if the general camp,
Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,
So I had nothing known. Oh, now forever
Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!
Farewell that plumed troop and the big wars
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner and all quality,
And, O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
The immortal Jove’s dread clamors counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello’s occupation’s gone!”

Robinson also drew attention to the fact that Othello being distraught by anguish and torture, was a naked man without the classiness, contaminated artificial “pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war” and imperialism.
In this regard, Shakespeare satirized both war and imperialism. Othello being on the brink of madness, had moments of striking lucidity. In Act III, scene 3, line 362-366 this is obvious when he perceived Iago as the villain he was:

“Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore, 
Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof. 
Or by the worth of man’s eternal soul, 
Thou hadst been better have been born a dog 
Than answer my waked wrath!.... 
Make ne to see’t, or at least so prove it 
That the probation bear no hinge nor loop 
To hang a doubt on, or woe upon thy life!”

According to Robinson, Shakespeare utilized Othello’s lucid state to convey and demonstrate the white man’s destruction of the black man (Robinson 731-1732, Kindled edition). Iago succeeded in confusing Othello. In Act III, scene 3, lines 384-388, Othello directly and honestly revealed his state of confusion to Iago, leaving himself completely open for Iago to further insert the dagger deeper into him:

“I think my wife be honest, and think she is not. 
I think that thou art just and think thou art not. 
I’ll have some proof. Her name, that was as fresh 
As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black 
As mine own face.”

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

In this situation, Othello’s openness does absolutely nothing for him as Iago’s malicious nature overpowers his honesty. This is reflective of the circumstances in Gulliver’s Travel, where the King uttered the following words to Gulliver as it pertained to fraud, “Honesty hath no fence against superior cunning” (Robinson 88).
The only thing Othello desired from Iago was a living reason or proof of Desdemona’s disloyalty as he exclaimed in Act III, scene 3, line 412:

“Give me a living reason she’s disloyal”.

However, Iago wasted no time and capitalizing on Othello’s confused state of being thrusted the dagger deeper into his wound of confusion and told him of Cassio talking in his sleep about making love to Desdemona, lines 416-425:

“I lay with Cassio lately
And being troubled with a raging tooth
I could not sleep. There are a kind of men
So loose of soul that in their sleeps will mutter
Their affairs – one of this kind is Cassio.
In sleep I heard him say ‘Sweet Desdemona,
Let us be wary, let us hide our loves’,
And then, sir, would be gripe and wring my hand,
Cry ‘O sweet creature!’ and then kiss me hard
As if he plucked up kisses by the roots
That grew upon my lips, lay his leg o’er my thigh,
And sigh, and kiss, and then cry ‘Cursed fate
That gave thee to the Moor!’”

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

Upon hearing of Cassio’s fraudulent dream Othello is further plunged into a deeper state of despair and chaos.

10.9 - The Prognostication of Iago as the Devil

Robinson highlighted some of the ironies of the Shakespeare’s assault on racial ‘otherness’ through his prognostication of Iago as the devil. According to her this represents a major switch from the racist tradition of ascribing the title for the black man.
The fact that Shakespeare made Iago’s evil actions archetypal to the devil, is an indication of his attentiveness to the European racist absurdities of stereotyping the black man with the devil, instead of associating the devil with evil actions. At the very beginning of the play, Shakespeare provided three significant clues of Iago’s devilish nature:

1. His intense hatred of Othello;
2. His ominous indication of intent: “Were I Othello I would not be Iago”;
3. “I am not what I am.”

Iago’s admission that, ‘I am not what I am’ is a clear indication that he was implying, ‘I am in secret the devil’. As per the phrase, “Were I Othello I would not be Iago” is Shakespeare’s way of showing that the play is controlled through the theme of racist menticide (Robinson1435, Kindle edition).

10.10 - Iago, The Personification of Evil

In analyzing Iago’s character, he is the proto-type of the European (White) supremacist; addressing Othello in a very patronizing manner. Through this mechanism, he duped and alienated Othello. Iago’s greatest dilemma was ‘hatred’. In this regard, Alice Munroe’s mother best identified the venomous streak in Iago’s personality.

“Hatred is always a sin, my mother told me. Remember that. One drop of hatred in your soul will spread and discolor everything like a drop of black ink in white milk” (Alice Munroe mother).
At the outset of the play, it is Iago who inseminated the seed of hatred that was planted when Othello stripped him of his promotion of Lieutenant in the army; and this being the first and only seed, has germinated discoloring and destroying every aspect of his life and those with whom he interacted with. Iago expressed his resentment at Cassio’s appointment as Lieutenant in Act 1, scene 1, line 17:

**Iago:** “Nonsuits my mediators. For, “Certes,” say he, “I have already chose my officer.” And what was he? Forsooth, a great arithmetician, One Michael Cassio, a Florentine, A fellow almost damned in a fair wife,”

That never set a squadron in the field,
Nor the division of a battle knows”.

Here Iago rejected the petition and the decision of his superiors. He underlined Cassio’s greatest ability in arithmetic that limits his military expertise to merely theoretical knowledge from books and policies. Cassio’s promotion birthed a deep seethed hatred in Iago’s heart for Othello as noted in Act 1, scene 3, line 351:

**Iago:** “I have told thee often, and I retell thee again and again, I hate the Moor. My cause is hearted, thine hath no less reason.”

However, Othello is cognizant of Iago’s desire to be awarded Cassio’s position after the announcement of his demise as noted in Act 3, scene 3, line 490:

**Iago:** “My friend is dead; ‘Tis done at your request. But let her live.”

**Othello:** “Damn her, lewd minx! Oh, damn her, damn her!

Come, go with me apart. I will withdraw. To furnish me with some swift means of death. For the fair devil! Now art thou my lieutenant.”
Iago: “I am your own forever” (Honigmann 35).

In addition to hating Othello, he took immense delight in having the power and his ability to manipulate and destroy others. The Duke’s primary concern was that Othello had the required competence of a skillful warrior to go to battle on Venice’s behalf; whereas Iago having not been promoted to Lieutenant is green with envy and hatred, no longer is concern about Othello’s military abilities, but is highly interested in knowing other aspects of his character, so that he would be able to utilize him in a different way….. that is giving him a long rope, so that he could eventually hang himself. However, Iago does not necessarily need any profound knowledge of Othello’s character in plotting his demise, all that was required was for him to follow through with his plans was to play a deadly trick on Othello.

Iago became cognizant of Othello’s Achilles heel, jealousy and sat out to exploit this to the maximum. Iago is the grand master strategist, who cleverly discovers a person’s single weakness or passion and uses it as a tool of manipulation. He is knowledgeable that Cassio when drinking alcohol loses self-control and Rodrigo lusts passionately after Desdemona (Heller 89). Iago is the powerful prince of darkness. As the grand manipulator, he orchestrated and played the game of cat and mouse, knowing exactly which strings needed pulling and what buttons pressing to unraveled other’s weaknesses to deploy his schemes. Iago being the incarnate devil capitalized on a single vice or weaknesses found in others, with the full knowledge that in so doing, he had the power to cause an individual’s character to change into the opposite.
His devious stratagem worked as they reflected his victims’ own beliefs, he masterfully confirmed their suspicions and fulfilled their expectations. All Iago needed to succeed in his plans was to have the people who he intended to harm, place their full trust and confidence in him.

One of Iago’s strong characteristics was his fraudulent nature. As Robinson noted, fraud is envisaged as one of the noticeable traits of white supremacy. She goes further in identifying White supremacist as being disciples of Satan and explained that when it comes to discussing the topic of fraud with Gulliver, the King stated that: “Honesty hath no fence against superior cunning.” According to Elaine Robinson, this defines, white superiority, as “Superior cunning”, it is a way of identifying white supremacy with superior cunning malice” and superior “malicious cunning of Satan who rules them because Satan dwelled in their hearts (Robinson 88). Iago is convinced that men are either wicked, foolish or power hungry. He does not believe in the existence of selflessness and the decency of making a self-sacrificing. He treats women badly, being of the concept that all women are potentially whores. He does not have a fruitful relationship with his wife, who out of righteousness, rebels against him in a selfless manner (Heller 90).

10.11 – How Iago Manipulated Roderigo

In the story of the Moor by Cinthio, he only named Disdemona, whilst presenting other characters according to their ranking. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, Shakespeare improved Cinthio’s novella, by bring his other character’s personalities to life by naming them. They became Shakespeare’s auxiliary characters to assist in the thickening of the plot and moving the story ahead. Roderigo is one of these auxiliary characters, who plays Iago’s fool. At
the beginning of the play we find the wealthy Roderigo in the company of Iago. He was

extremely naïve having employed Iago’s expertise in assisting him to win Desdemona’s Love. Iago

being the crook that he was, spent Roderigo’s money to develop his own goal. The

examination of Roderigo’s appearances in the play, provides testimony that his role and

importance in the play was to assist Iago in the execution of his conniving schemes:

(1) In Act 1, scene 1: Iago used him as his coconspirator to plant the racial seed and

incite trouble for Othello, the Moor who eloped with Brabantio’s daughter,

Desdemona;

(2) In Act 1, scene 3: Roderigo gave full support to Iago, whilst the newlyweds

defended their marriage to the Duke;

(3) In Act 2, scene 1: Roderigo landed in Cyprus and two scenes later, he acted as Iago’s

accomplice in aggravating a fight that caused Cassio’s fall from grace with

Othello;

(4) In Act 4, scene 2: Iago baited Roderigo into conspiring with him on how to murder

Cassio;

(5) In Act 5, scene 1: Roderigo having accepted Iago’s charge, failed in his attempt to

kill Cassio and was thereby wounded in the process. Roderigo finally came to the realization

that he was duped and cursed Iago; who being a friend of no man, in

turn murdered Roderigo.

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

(6) Shakespeare utilized the interplay between Roderigo and Iago for the specificity

of illustrating Iago’s manipulative and devious character

(https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/othello/character-list). Iago being completely cognizant of Roderigo’s unrequited love for Desdemona, upon witnessing a friendly innocent gesture of affection between Cassio and Desdemona, took advantage of this situation and told Roderigo that Desdemona was in love with Cassio. In this manner he not only
tapped into Roderigo’s racist nature, but also incited his jealousy about Cassio; manipulating him to support his devious scheme. In Act 2, scene 1, Iago explained the following to Roderigo about Desdemona:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Lay thy finger thus, and let thy soul be instructed.} \\
&\text{Mark Me with what violence she first loved the} \\
&\text{Moor, but for Bragging and telling her fantastical} \\
&\text{lies. And will she Love him still for prating? Let not} \\
&\text{thy discreet heart Think it.} \\
&\text{Her eye must be fed; and what delight shall she Have to look on the} \\
&\text{devil?} \\
&\text{When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there should be, again, to} \\
&\text{inflame it and to give sattiety a fresh appetite, loveliness in Favour, sympathy} \\
&\text{in years, manners and beauties; all Which the Moor is defective in. Now, for} \\
&\text{want of these required conveniences, her delicate tenderness will find Itsel} \\
&\text{abused, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and Abhor the Moor.} \\
&\text{Very nature will instruct her in it and Compel her to some second choice.} \\
&\text{Now, sir, this granted – as it is a most pregnant and unforced position –} \\
&\text{who stands so eminently in the degree of this fortune as Cassio does?}
\end{align*}
\]

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

Roderigo decided to partake in Iago’s scheme in plotting Cassio demise. He gleefully fought Cassio causing him to lose his prestigious position, only to be appointed as his successor. Iago convinced him that this was his last and only opportunity with Desdemona. Sadly, unbeknown to Roderigo, that he was a manipulated pawn on Iago’s chessboard, to achieve his devious objectives; in the end being ignorant that he was being set up to be murdered by Iago (Robinson1585, Kindle edition).

Is it feasible that Shakespeare through Iago’s Machiavellian stratagems and manipulations of
Roderigo, was transmitting an allegorical message to the Elizabethans about how the European White supremacists, deceitfully befriended some African tribal leaders with gifts, such as inferior guns, mirrors, and mediocre products as a means of getting them to become accomplices to enslave their fellow Africans?

10. 12 - Iago’s Latent Homosexuality

Dr. Ernest Jones questioned Iago’s relationship with Othello. J.I. M. Stewart in 1949 psychoanalytically spoke of the possible motive for Iago’s obsession to destroy the Moor and his wife. He summed it up to the fact that Iago could have exhibited a subconscious affection for Othello, which could be observed as the latent homosexual foundation of which Iago did not fully understand (Honigmann 50).

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

We also find allusions to Iago’s homosexuality, when Othello replied to Iago in Act 3, scene 3, line 472:

**Othello:** “I greet thy love Not with vain thanks but with acceptance bounteous and will upon the instant put thee to ’t. Within these three days let me hear thee say That Cassio’s not alive.”

**Iago:** *My friend is dead, ‘tis done – at your request. But let her live.*

Iago claimed to have shared a bed with Cassio (which is homosexual in the context of sleeping with someone), when Othello pressed him for proof of Desdemona’s disloyalty.

**Othello:** “Give me a living reason she’s disloyal.

**Iago:** I do not like the office.
But saith I am entered in this cause so far,
Pricked to’t by foolish honesty and love, I will go on.
I lay with Cassio lately
And being troubled with a raging tooth
I could not sleep. There are a kind of men
loose of soul that in their sleeps will mutter
Their affairs – one of this kind is Cassio.
In sleep I heard him say ‘Sweet Desdemona,
Let us be wary, let us hide our loves,’
And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand,
Cry ‘O sweet creature! And then kiss me hard
As if he plucked up kisses by the roots
That grew upon my lips, lay his leg o’er my thigh,
sigh, and kiss, and then cry, ‘Cursed fate
That gave thee to the Moor!’"

It is felt by E.A.J. Honigmann that it was not Shakespeare’s intention to focus our attention towards
Iago’s homosexual nature. He goes further to explain that Iago’s perverted nature distinguished
him from the normality of other men and women in the play (Honigmann 50-52).

10. 13 – Iago’s Demonization of Women

Iago demonization of women stemmed from the medieval and Renaissance tradition of misogynist
satire, that operated on the fear of men that once females can act on their sexual appetite, this will
lead them in becoming promiscuous to satisfy their insatiable desire (Hall 64). Women are
perceived by Iago as being sex objects and sexual marauders, this was the stance of the traditional
male satirist as can be seen in Act 1, scene 1, line 115, when Iago informed Brabantio:

Iago: “I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.”
Iago’s provocation of Othello with fictitious phantasmagorias of Desdemona’s sexual activities, gave the impression that Iago is a voyeur, who immensely enjoyed imaginatively the idea of other people’s sex lives as clearly displayed in Act 4, scene 1, line 3-8:

**Iago:** “Or to be naked with her friend in bed

*An hour or more, not meaning any harm?*

**Othello:** Naked in bed, Iago, and not mean harm? It is hypocrisy against the devil:

*They that mean virtuously, and yet do so,

The Devil their virtue tempts, and they tempt heaven” (Honigmann 38).

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**Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello**

**Desdemona, The Divine**

Cassio upheld Desdemona as ‘divine’. For him she is the opposite to that which he thought of other women; she is totally an un tarnished woman. Desdemona is the Venetian pearl and the best they offered Othello. She represented the eternal female and is viewed as a goddess or a type of the Virgin Mary. This is apparent in Act 2, scene 1, lines 85-87 with Cassio’s greetings of her arrival in Cyprus:

**Cassio:** “Hail to thee, lady! and the grace of heaven,

*Before, behind thee, and on every hand, Enwheel thee round.”* (Hall, p. 65).

Here Cassio utilized the term “thee” here. According to Honigmann, this is an echo of ‘Hail Mary,’ and her identification with heaven continues to the end of the play (Honigmann107). As for Iago’s marriage to Emilia, there are indications that it was on the rocks prior to his and Emilia turn on each other. Iago’s interest and only purpose for his wife was to utilize her as a pawn in his devious plot by stealing Desdemona’s handkerchief in Act 3, scene 3 line 294:
Emila: “I am glad I have found this napkin.  
This was her first remembrance from the Moor.  
My wayward husband hath a hundred times  
Wooed me to steal it, but she so loves the token…” (Honigmann 38).

10.14 - Desdemona at Her Father’s Feet

In trying to conceptualize Brabantio’s emotional state upon learning of his daughter’s elopement to the Moor, I pondered and reflected on a 19th century painting entitled ‘Desdemona at Her Father’s Feet’, by Delacroix Eugene.

The painting is a depiction of Desdemona on her knees before her father arrayed in a brown dress, in supplication for either his forgiveness or acceptance of her decision to wed the Moor. Contrary to this imagery, is the look Brabantio gives his daughter, which could easily be one of disappointment or disgust, as he thrusted her aside whilst on looking spectators watched in the background (https://www.picture-desk.com).

Delacroix probably was inspired to paint Brabantio’s reaction to Iago and Roderigo’s news about his daughter’s secret nuptial to Othello, the Moor. Iago and his accomplice Roderigo successfully convinced Desdemona’s father that Othello was triumphant in marrying his daughter through some form of magic. Thereafter, Othello is confronted by Signor Brabantio in Act 1, scene 2, lines 6275:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Brabantio:} & \quad O \text{ thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter?} \\
& \quad \text{Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her!} \\
& \quad \text{For I’ll refer me to all things of sense,} \\
& \quad \text{If she in chains of magic were not bound,} \\
& \quad \text{Whether a maid so tender, fair, and happy,} \\
& \quad \text{So opposite to marriage that she shunned} \\
& \quad \text{The wealthy curlèd darlings of our nation,} \\
& \quad \text{Would ever have, t’ incur a general mock,} \\
& \quad \text{Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom} \\
& \quad \text{Of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight.} \\
& \quad \text{Judge me the world if ’tis not gross in sense}
\end{align*}
\]
According to Robinson, Brabantio’s stereotypically attacked Othello as a black man under the guise of the devil; whereas the real devil was Iago, a white man. The accusation of magic is also affiliated with the Devil and with witchcraft, the ‘black magic’ of Africa (Robinson1498, Kindle edition).

Analytically, Robinson informed that Brabantio language was one of hatred, ignorance, bigotry, intolerance and ugliness. His speech was rather insensitive and filled with distortions, dehumanization and incorrect accusations. For Shakespeare, the more dehumanizing of Brabantio’s language, was the depth of his its inhumanity (Robinson 1511, Kindle edition).

After hearing these accusations, Othello requested a trail where he denounced having used any form of magic to marry Desdemona, they both married because they were in love with each other.

The fact that Othello has been named as working magic, is Shakespeare’s way of connecting Othello’s race and his mystic abilities with his African background and culture. Othello is a testament of Shakespeare’s intent to expose the hatred of the Elizabethan’s attitude ‘otherness,’ as it pertains to those of a different racial background, as a means of sustaining their own superiority (Robinson 1498, Kindle edition).
Desdemona dispelled Othello’s use of magic and confirmed that they both were in love and in Act 1, scene 3, lines 180:

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

Desdemona My noble father,
    I do perceive here a divided duty.
    To you I am bound for life and education.
    My life and education both do learn me
    How to respect you. You are the lord of my duty,
    I am hitherto your daughter. But here’s my husband,
    And so much duty as my mother showed
    To you, preferring you before her father,
    So much I challenge that I may profess
    Due to the Moor my lord.

These were the very first words spoken by Desdemona in the play and it was directed to her father before the Venetian senate. Desdemona was a crafty politician, she was thoughtful and mindful of maintaining her loyalty to her husband Othello, whilst being respectful of her father. Here, she astutely drew attention to the fact that her ‘duty is divided’; here Desdemona made a distinction between two kinds of lords and duty:

(1) To Brabantio, you are the master of my duty hitherto, but now I owe;

(2) A wife’s duty to the Moor, my new lord.
The word ‘hitherto’ is indicative of the fact that her new identity as wife now superseded the previous one as daughter. The fact that she says, "I am hitherto your daughter. But here’s my husband," in and of itself is an attack on sexism. This signified her courageousness, fortitude and confidence to state her case to her father in the presence of the Venetian senators (Honigmann 146).
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

With broken and contrite heart, in Act 1, scene 3, from line 190 Brabantio says to Desdemona:

Brabantio:

God be with you. I have done.
Please it your grace, on to the state affairs.
I had rather to adopt a child than get it.—

Here one gets the impression that Brabantio was completely frustrated and fed-up with Desdemona, having reached a resolution, left her with only God’s blessings, as he himself was finally through with her, she was no longer his responsibility. He discarded her and quickly moved on to state affairs with his grace. As there are no other grounds upon which he could reject the marriage, he unfavorably calls out to Othello with the most racist tonality:

Brabantio:

Come hither, Moor.
I here do give thee that with all my heart
Which, but thou hast already, with all my heart I would keep from thee. For your sake, jewel, I am glad at soul I have no other child.
For thy escape would teach me tyranny,
To hang clogs on them.—I have done, my lord (Act 1, scene 3, lines 193/196).
Robinson clearly underlined that this illustrates Brabantio’s racist resignation. She claimed that if Othello was a white wealthy Venetian with the same sterling qualities, Brabantio would have considered Desdemona fortunate and would have loved the white Othello, in the same way he had loved the black Othello, prior to his discovery of Desdemona’s nuptial to him (Robinson 1548, Kindle edition).

10.15 – The Non-Punishment of Iago

Iago is not punished in Shakespeare because he represented the European (white) supremacists who were responsible for the fall of the Black race. The play was written for a white audience. Iago spoke directly to them and assumed they shared his views, understood his reasoning and admired his ingenuity….. this could be likened to the public lynching and beating of slaves to the enjoyment and amusement of whites on the colonial plantations. Iago opened the door to the world of dark sentiments and Othello cannot fight things that exist only in the dark, in the mind. He gets lost in the labyrinth of the mind, that had been held in check by the magical powers of the Egyptian handkerchief.
As per Medieval and Renaissance poetry, traditionally, the handkerchief has played the role of a powerful symbol of women’s romantic escapades. An excellent example could be found in days of old when ladies would consciously drop their handkerchiefs so that cavaliers would fetch and hold onto them as keepsakes of their affections (http://www.arogundade.com/the-handkerchiefinwilliam-shakespeares-othello-handkerchief-scene-s symbolism.html).

According to Tamara A. Goeglein’s article, “The Emblematic Handkerchief in Othello, and its Untold Backstory,” explained that numerous literary critics have shared their interpretations on the significance of the handkerchief. Here are a few quoted examples: Hodgson claimed that, “the handkerchief was an emblem representing Desdemona’s reputation;” Green noted that, “it was a ‘phallic emblem of Desdemona’s castration;’” the fact that the handkerchief was dotted with strawberries, it has been argued by Lynda Boose that, “they were an insignia of ‘virginal blood’, ‘the marital blood pledge,’ and that of the ‘consummated value’ of Desdemona and Othello’s marriage (https://ojs.uv.es/index.php/IMAGO/article/viewFile/8876/9088).

The most important object in Othello was the famous Desdemona’s handkerchief, which was a prominent symbol that is central to this Shakespearean drama. It appeared within Othello, over 30 times. Descriptively, it is white and dotted with the images of strawberries and permeates with history. Woven with the finest silk from sacred worms, the strawberries were colored with extracted dye from the hearts of embalmed virgins.
Originally, it was Othello’s father’s gift to his mother, and in the same fashion, Othello gifted it to Desdemona as a demonstration of their love and loyalty (https://www.arogundade.com/thehandkerchief-in-william-shakespeares-othello-handkerchiefscene-symbolism.html).

The respect and admiration Desdemona held for the handkerchief reverberated throughout the scenes of the play. As a symbol of Othello’s love and trust, Desdemona held onto it on her person constantly, as noted in Act III, scene 3: “to kiss and talk to.” Iago becoming wise to the symbolic meaning the handkerchief held for Othello and Desdemona’s relationship, cunningly stagemanaged the handkerchief and without Cassio’s knowledge, placed it into his possession, using it as false evidence to denote Desdemona’s infidelity (http://www.arogundade.com/thehandkerchief-in-william-shakespeares-othello-handkerchiefscene-symbolism.html).

The English literary critic Thomas Rymer published in 1693, ‘A Short View of Tragedy’, where he extracted from Othello, a lesson which he believed Shakespeare wanted to impart to women: “This may be a warning to all good wives, that they look well to their linen;”

Rymer upheld the belief that Desdemona’s destruction, was her fault for having lost the famous handkerchief (https://poetsinews.com/2015/10/21/looking-to-the-linen/). Although Thomas Rymer scoffed at the role and symbolic importance of Othello’s handkerchief, a piece of cloth, it was the most important object in the play and represented all that Othello was; his reason for existing. It was gifted to Desdemona and was a representation of Othello’s past. Othello offered
something that was worth more than gold to Desdemona and although she valued the handkerchief, she was not the proper guardian and misplaced it (Vaughan and Cartwright 182).

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

Othello’s handkerchief was symbolic of his African ancestry. It had magical powers as it was woven by an Egyptian gypsy and gifted to his mother. This is certainly Shakespeare’s way of acknowledging Othello’s African higher knowledge and its society of noble values based on honor and truth. Hence in Act 3, scene 4 lines 55-56 and 69-74, Othello spoke of the magic of the handkerchief:

Othello: “That handkerchief

Did an Egyptian to my mother give;

She was a charmer, and could almost read

The thoughts of people. She told her, while

she kept it, ‘Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father

Entirely to her love; but if she lost it,

Or made a gift of it, my father’s eye

Should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt

After new fanicies. She, dying, gave it me,

And bid me, when my fate would have me wiv’d,

To give it her………

…… there’s magic in the web of it.

A sibyl, that had numbr’ed in the world

The sun to course two hundred compasses,

In her prophetic fury sew’d the work;

The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,

And it was dy’d in mummy which the skillful

Conserv’d of maidens’ hearts.”
The handkerchief stood in place of his parents’ nuptial and was the object that upheld Othello’s marital fidelity, the magic. The true significance of the handkerchief was further obscured by Othello’s revelation to Desdemona, after it was stolen and given to Iago by Emilia.

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

However, Desdemona was incapable of understanding the true meaning and importance of the handkerchief, being stunned of Othello’s disclosure, after he left her, she and Emilia contemplated Othello’s tale as noted in Act 3, scene 4 in lines 99-102:

**Emilia:** “Is not this man jealous?

**Desdemona:** I nev’r saw this before. Sure, there’s some wonder in this handkerchief; I am most unhappy in the loss of it.”


In Act 3, scene 4, lines 75-77, Desdemona upon hearing Othello’s explanation about the handkerchief’s power, at the outset reacted by discarding what she heard, fearing the importance of the handkerchief and Othello’s jealousy:

**Desdemona:** “I’ faith! Is’t true?

**Othello:** Most veritable, therefore look to’t well.

**Desdemona:** Then would to God that I had never seen’t” (Vaughan and Cartwright 183).

Othello perceived Desdemona’s rejection of the magical powers of the handkerchief, as a symbolic denunciation of himself and thereafter turned the table by equating the handkerchief not to himself but to his wife’s honor in Act 4, scene 1 lines 10-15:

**Iago:** “But if I give my wife a handkerchief ..... 

**Othello:** What then?
Iago: Why then 'tis hers, my lord, and being hers, She may, I think, bestow 't on any man.

Othello: She is protectress of her honour too; May she give that?

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

Vaughan and Cartwright claimed that the variance in his and Desdemona’s comprehension on the importance of the handkerchief was the factor that assisted in the precipitation of their tragedy. The handkerchief was designed with spotted strawberries as shown in Act 3, scene 3 lines 435-438:

Iago: “Nay, yet be wise, yet we see nothing done, She may be honest yet. Tell me but this, Have you not sometimes seen a handkerchief Spotted with strawberries, in your wife’s hand?”

Vaughan and Cartwright informed that the fruit was sometimes a signal of treachery, as serpents often hide behind its leaves to poison anyone who picks the forbidden fruit like ‘Eve’ in the story of Adam and Eve. This speaks to the treacherous nature of Iago, who capitalized on the pleasant appearance of an honest soldier, thereby camouflaging his venomous nature and utilized the beautiful handkerchief to double-cross Othello and destroy his happiness. Hence, Iago used the handkerchief as the object of destruction (Vaughan and Cartwright 183). The handkerchief can also be viewed as truly having some magical powers. It can be likened to a wedding band or ring that serves as a marital bond. The handkerchief was a symbolic representation of the marriage between Othello and Desdemona. Throughout the Shakespearean play the handkerchief was handled by almost every character, which was indicative or reflective that there was a significant problem that existed with Othello’s marriage. Desdemona’s marriage remained intact, if the
handkerchief remained in her possession; but the moment she lost it, the magical charm was demolished, and the marriage was in peril (Vaughan and Cartwright 184).

Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

XII. Conclusion

This thesis concludes definitively that Shakespeare adapted Cinthio’s ‘Un Capitano Moro’ to write Othello, the tale of the Moor of Venice; and to attack bigotry in England and Europe. Although the word ‘racism’ was birthed between the 19 and 20th centuries, its components existed in 13/14th century Venice and within Elizabethan England during Shakespeare’s era. Shakespeare explored ‘blackness’ 400 years ago. Hence, it can be strenuously and convincingly argued that Othello as a cultural and artistic product of its time was an act of declaration against the African slave trade and racism.
Shakespeare’s Adaptation of Cinthio’s “Un Capitano Moro” into Othello

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