This Essay Aims To Explore The Elizabethan Perception Of The “Unnaturalness” Of The Marriage Between Othello And Desdemona In The Shakespeare Play “Othello” Essay, Research Paper

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This essay aims to explore the Elizabethan perception of the ‘unnaturalness’ of the marriage between Desdemona and Othello, through the eyes of William Shakespeare.

The most obvious, and conspicuous issue that would emphasise the theme of unnaturalness would be the topic of race. Othello was a black Moor, portrayed throughout the play as a ‘black ram’ and ‘beast with two backs’ or simply as ‘The Moor.’

Shakespeare accentuates the quandary in Othello by making his hero an outsider, a man from a different race and from a different country, one who doesn’t quite belong in the society in which he lives. Othello’s sensitivity to the issue becomes clear when Iago uses it as proof that Desdemona couldn’t be faithful to a man so foreign-such a match is ‘unnatural’ he says. Othello’s self confidence, once so strong, is easily eroded by Iago’s ability to convince him that he is inferior to the men of Venice.

The fact that Othello is much older than Desdemona, and of a different race would allow any member of the audience to deem the situation as ‘unnatural.’ Even for those who were not racist (and the Venetians in the play were) would think it more likely and thus more “natural” that she would be attracted to a younger white man. Indeed that’s one of the reason Othello falls for Iago’s plot; it makes more sense to him that she should love Cassio than that she should love him

I think that the Elizabethans would have been revolted by the idea of this old, (for the age difference between Othello and Desdemona was large) black Moor (the son of slaves) who was ‘tupping’ the beautiful, young, white Senator’s daughter, Desdemona. Marriage was merely a convenience, in which women were traded off, in exchange for large dowries and sums of money. Desdemona with her beauty and innocent nature would have fetched a large sum. Therefore Brabantio was disappointed and angered that, as a consequence to her actions, he would be unable to perform this ‘business transaction.’ The Elizabethan audiences were reserved and reticent. Shakespeare portrayed Desdemona as a lovely, courageous, gentle woman, deeply in love with her husband. Most Elizabethans would not have perceived her this way. They would have seen her as disobedient and disrespectful. They would have shared Brabantio’s disapproval of her marriage to a man of a different class, age and race. And when Desdemona pleads with Othello to reinstate Cassio, Elizabethans would have considered her a pushy, interfering wife. This is not to say Shakespeare’s audiences weren’t moved by Desdemona’s death. It’s just that social customs, no longer current, influenced their opinion of her. Today, her behaviour to Brabantio, though perhaps insensitive, is forgivable; her begging Othello, even if it comes close to nagging, is not a major flaw.

The setting of the play also emphasises the ‘unnaturalness’ of the play. Venice was seen as a place of extremes. Venetians were passionate and emotional. Othello was set there as a flashpoint of temper. Contrary to Britain which was calm and serene, Venetian men were considered hot-tempered, aggressive and easily jealous. An Elizabethan audience watching Othello would have been highly suspicious of Desdemona and her behaviour. Eloping was simply not done. However, because she was Venetian, the audiences would not have been too surprised.

The nature of the marriage would also have been perceived by the Elizabethans as ‘unnatural.’ The marriage was in secret. Shakespeare casts suspicion on the marriage that secretly takes place at night, without parental blessing, and that evokes violence when it is discovered. Othello had no right to marry her without getting her fathers permission. Desdemona had no right to choose her own husband. Their love and marriage is based on passion and not reason, which probably caused them to behave as they did, and which is partly why Iago is able to influence Othello’s mind and thoughts. This suggests that the marriage was based on lust not love. Harbage said “lust is the prime motive of the marriage” and I think that the Elizabethan audience would have been inclined to agree with Iago whose cynical view of love was “it is merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will.” In the popular mind of Shakespeare’s time the “only” explanation for Desdemona’s attraction to Othello, black skinned and much older, has to be (according to Harbage) the “waywardness of lust.” It is exactly by this argument -much more so than by the later ‘ocular’ proof of the handkerchief- that Iago mainly convinces Othello of her lust; he makes him see the marriage as ‘unnatural.’ This completely opposes the quaint idea of the ‘courtly love’, which was supposedly so popular in the Tudor period. The audiences would have seen the marriage as a whirlwind romance, which was primarily based on sex and desire, rather than love and devotion for the rest of their lives.

The element of witchcraft is a theme, I believe, that would be seen by the audiences, as another reason why the marriage was unnatural. Brabantio in Act 1 Scene 2 claims that Othello ‘enchanted Desdemona’ and that he had ‘practised on her; foul charms.’ His constant references towards black magic and the devil create an atmosphere of animosity towards Othello, suggesting that Shakespeare wanted the audience to empathise with the blustering Brabantio, whose world has just been turned upside down after hearing the exploits of his daughter; and feel hostile towards Othello, for whom, if he were not there, Desdemona would still be an innocent child. Shakespeare’s style used here is interesting because it reflects that of Nash, a controversial playwright who did a lot for the development of Elizabethan prose. His grotesque style and frequent lapses in taste established the bitterness of ‘unnatural’ themes. Shakespeare reinvented those themes to shock the Elizabethan audiences and the scandalous storylines brought people flocking eagerly to the theatres.

In conclusion I believe that the Elizabethan audience would have agreed to a large extent that the marriage between Desdemona and Othello was ‘unnatural’ because it was so unusual. Personally I do not think the marriage was unnatural but I can see why they would think so. Circumstances were different; the slave trade had just begun and most of the audiences did not understand the implications of true, meaningful love. This was because most marriages were made for convenience not for love. If they had not experienced love then it is comprehensible that they would not understand it. In the same state of affairs, I would have thought it unnatural, too.

Bibliography

Harbage “a critical analysis of Othello”