

On Othello by Aga Maksimowska from Brick Magazine

“I hate *Othello*,” I said to a colleague after only a year of teaching the play. “I’m not teaching it again.” And so I didn’t.

I spent a couple of years trying to convince my students, all of them teenaged boys, that *Measure for Measure* was the best play Shakespeare ever wrote (it’s not) and that *Henry V* teaches wonderful lessons about leadership and manhood (which of Will’s plays doesn’t), all the while my sage colleague kept teaching *Othello* in her classes. Her students loved it; year after year it was their favourite Shakespeare. I dismissed the love-in as having nothing to do with the strength of the text, but the strength of my colleague’s teaching. She’s a gregarious woman with formal dramatic arts training; I’m a shy writer with an ESL chip on my shoulder, especially when people learn that I’m an immigrant, not a native with Polish heritage.

When the conversation of books came up, as it does each late Spring, I once again resisted *Othello*. “How about *Lear*?” I asked my colleagues who also teach Grade 11 English. I always want to change up the reading list, keep it current, new, exciting. I’m eager to promote diversity, include Canadian titles. There are infinite reasons for wanting to keep my students and myself on our toes. And yet, a part of me wishes that I had taught *Othello* for each of the past twelve years that I have taught the Grade 11 English course. This is because we all know that a good piece of literature keeps changing. The dynamic of each class, every single reader, every question that comes up in class reveals something new about a text.

Another colleague recently told me that the only questions worth asking in an English classroom are those teachers don’t already have answers to.

Othello and I don’t know each other very well. I have a lot of questions about him. So I asked my students all the questions I had no answers to when I finally gave in and revisited the text in 2015/2016: Why does *Othello* trust Iago so completely? Why does he hate Desdemona so much? Why does he not ask, ‘Hey, Des, did you and Cassio have a fling?’ What’s with the goddamned handkerchief?

After that first year of teaching *Othello* I gave up on it because it made me angry and I didn’t know what to do with that anger in the classroom. I understand the Barthes assertion well: “Literature is the question minus the answer,” but I wanted something other than bewilderment and anger. I felt alone in my *othelloness* and needed the text to stroke me, to hold my hand, to make me feel better. If not answers, then hints, hope, humour. I hated that I hated *Othello*, Shakespeare’s only black male lead. I thought myself a racist, and *Othello* a misogynist.

When I apprehensively returned to *Othello*, my class helped me get some answers. Emilia was the hope, her speech in which she blew the minds of my boys:

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.

And yet the cynical voice in me commented on Shakespeare’s efficiencies and patterns. This was Shylock’s ‘Hath not a Jew eyes’ speech rewritten, not some extraordinary

seventeenth century moment of empathy building. The groundlings would have had no time for Emilia's nonsense.

I still don't like Othello the character anymore than I did years ago, although I do love the play, thanks to Emilia and Desdemona, two wives murdered by the husbands whom both women chose to obey. The one thing that still nags me though is Desdemona's final line. Those are the words I would like to change. Yes: I have the gall to change the master's work.

When Desdemona breaths one last breath after her husband's hands have released her throat, she tells her beloved Emilia that she was "falsely, falsely murder'd." She goes on to proclaim, "A guiltless death I die," choosing her own truth over her vows to obey her husband at all cost. When Emilia asks dying Desdemona, "O, who hath done this deed?" Desdemona answers:

Nobody; I myself. Farewell
Commend me to my kind lord: O, farewell!

And herein lies my problem. Suddenly: answers. I don't want them *now*. I understand the nuance of Desdemona's final passage. She could be saying that she is to blame for being such a terrible judge of character and shacking up with Othello. Or she could be saying that her behaviour led Othello to murder her, a victim-blaming narrative that I refuse to follow. Her lord could be God, or he could be Othello. Either way, these lines don't work for me. It's one too many breaths for murdered Desdemona. Have her say nothing. Send her off in silence. Or have her say lies did this to me, assumptions, judgments, lack of communication, hierarchy, racism, power, domination, religion. Have her say you did this to me, sweet Emilia, friend and backstabber. You did this to me. I want her to say something other than, "I myself." I want her to live, and if that's not possible, then I want her to die a guiltless death, which suicide in the seventeenth century was not.