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What is Othello's Secret?

R. M. Christofides

Abstract

Explicitly written from the perspective of a second-generation British Cypriot, this article examines the relevance of Shakespeare's *Othello* to the modern troubles of Cyprus. Drawing on the recurrent imperialist and nationalist struggles to control Cyprus, in Shakespeare's day and our own, the article explains how the author's upcoming book, *Othello's Secret: The Cyprus Problem*, radically reinterprets the domestic and military tensions of *Othello* as precursors to the island's more recent wars and divisions. Insight into the way an English writer in the early modern period understood Cyprus can contribute to the way scholars in the British academy understand the bard both in his context and in ours. Consequently, the article challenges the conventional Anglophone scholarly focus on Venice, highlighting a surprising academic blindspot given Britain's historical and ongoing colonial presence on Cyprus. In so doing, it reframes *Othello* as a play about Cyprus, offering a more personal account of how research on Shakespeare can purposefully contribute to geopolitical debates.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Othello, Cyprus, Cyprus Wars, nationalism, division, reunification

One summer in Cyprus, the island where my parents were born, I asked my uncle for some directions. I had just got my driving licence and decided to visit some relatives in the capital, Nicosia. His directions began like this: 'Go straight along here and you come to a left. If you go left here you come, eventually, to the Milano. You remember the Milano? We went there for Italian food sometimes. After the Milano you come to the Eleon swimming pool, on the other side. You used to swim there as a child with your cousins and the children from the English School. You remember? You learnt to swim there, I think. Or was that the Philoxenia? So anyway opposite the Eleon is a supermarket, AlfaMega. They have a café in the supermarket too. Stop and eat if you're hungry. Your mother loves the apple pie they do there. There's plenty of parking so it's no problem. If there's no room in the car park—there's always room, but just in case—there's street parking by the cafés round the corner where all the young people go. This time of day there's nobody. After six, it's Oxford Street on a Saturday, but now, it's no problem. After the supermarket there are some traffic lights. Just past the traffic lights there's a McDonald's. You know, I remember when they opened that McDonald's. You like McDonald's? I don't like McDonald's. All the boys and girls dressed up to go and eat Big Macs when it first opened. They thought they were going to the Ritz. Once you go past McDonald's you see the Hilton Park—not the central Hilton, the Hilton *Park*—and behind the Hilton Park are

the university buildings...’ This went on for some time, until my uncle paused: ‘Anyway, you don’t take that left.’ In fact, I didn’t have to take any lefts or any rights either. All I had to do was pretty much go straight, but in the endless process of telling me to go straight, my uncle gave me a detailed map of Nicosia with added family history. This, it seemed to me then, was wonderfully typical: only in Cyprus does a straight road have a thousand diversions.

This anecdote has served me well since then, as a narrative about a shared Cypriot trait we in the diaspora have permission to laugh about. But this is not some Mediterranean stereotype of talking around the subject endlessly, the ‘tireless dissimulation’ criticised by the British writer Lawrence Durrell in his famous colonialist travelogue *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus* ([1957] 2000: 25). Cyprus is a country with an unhappy twentieth-century history that culminated in the war of 1974, which visited on the Cypriot people the horrors of ethnic cleansing, mass graves, mass rape, missing persons and, ultimately, the catastrophic division of the island between its two major communities, the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots. Ask a British Cypriot when s/he or his or her parents came to Britain and the answer will usually be about a migration during the 1950s (when Cyprus was still a British colony) and early 1960s, or in the wake of 1974. So in a country where straight roads have a habit of ending, where they are violently terminated by the so-called Green Line that separates one community from the other, where they stop suddenly and send you back the way you came, in a country where straight roads do not reach their destination, reimagining the concept of a ‘straight road’—reimagining how to talk about the landscape of an island split in two—is a social and intellectual necessity. What appeared to be an amusing diversion from the point *was* the point; it was one of the many everyday instances of a collective psyche dealing with its shared trauma. And, as strange as it may seem, it also offers an analogy for the study of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, in which the hero arrives in Cyprus to fight off invading Ottomans but instead gets tricked into wrongfully killing his new wife.

The title of one of Cyprus historian Andrekos Varnava’s books is *The Inconsequential Possession*, intended to sum up the British Empire’s neglect of Cyprus. Shakespeare studies has reproduced this colonial attitude, treating the island as an inconsequential diversion to the study of *Othello*. Perhaps unsurprisingly in a discipline still as ‘stale, pale and male’ as English Literature, the focus in Shakespeare studies has always been European Venice rather than Middle Eastern Cyprus. The arguments for placing Cyprus centre stage are, however, both numerous and compelling. Four of the five acts are set in Cyprus; Shakespeare includes the Cyprus Wars between Venice and the Ottoman Empire, something not in his primary source, a short story in a collection called *Hecatommithi* by the Italian writer, Cinthio; the play’s protagonist, Othello himself, dies in Cyprus, an event also not in Cinthio’s story; the historical accounts Shakespeare read document battles in Cyprus uncannily similar to the war of 1974; the anxiety over Turkish invasion and the Turk within in *Othello* still resonates powerfully in Cyprus to this day; the

Ottoman conviction that Cyprus was in its geopolitical sphere of influence has fuelled Turkish policy over Cyprus and the Cyprus Problem ever since. I could go on. No scholar has ever sought to join these dots. For me, reimagining the landscape of *Othello* to foreground Cyprus and the Cyprus Problem, to show the so-called diversions to be the indispensable fact of the matter, is an urgent necessity that, however successfully executed, was the purpose of my new book, *Othello's Secret: The Cyprus Problem*.¹ Shakespeare studies, and literary studies as a whole, has to address the political or geopolitical concerns of the moment, concerns that students and readers across the globe bring with them when they pick up a book, visit the theatre or enter the lecture hall. Approaches that have been squeezed out by a field of study still dominated by the Anglo-Saxon middle classes are the only way in which Shakespeare can truly be for everyone, can truly be global, can truly be relevant. The exclusion of Cyprus and the Cyprus Problem in studies of *Othello* is one of the most striking examples of an ongoing tendency – to talk a good game on diversity and inclusion yet still exclude the concerns of those minority groups for whom Shakespeare's plays mean something different, something new, something radically important. It is one such exclusion *Othello's Secret* aims to put right. At the very least, I hope that its argument places Shakespeare, perhaps unexpectedly, on the radar of fellow British Cypriots who take an ongoing interest in the politics of Cyprus, marrying two aspects of their identity.

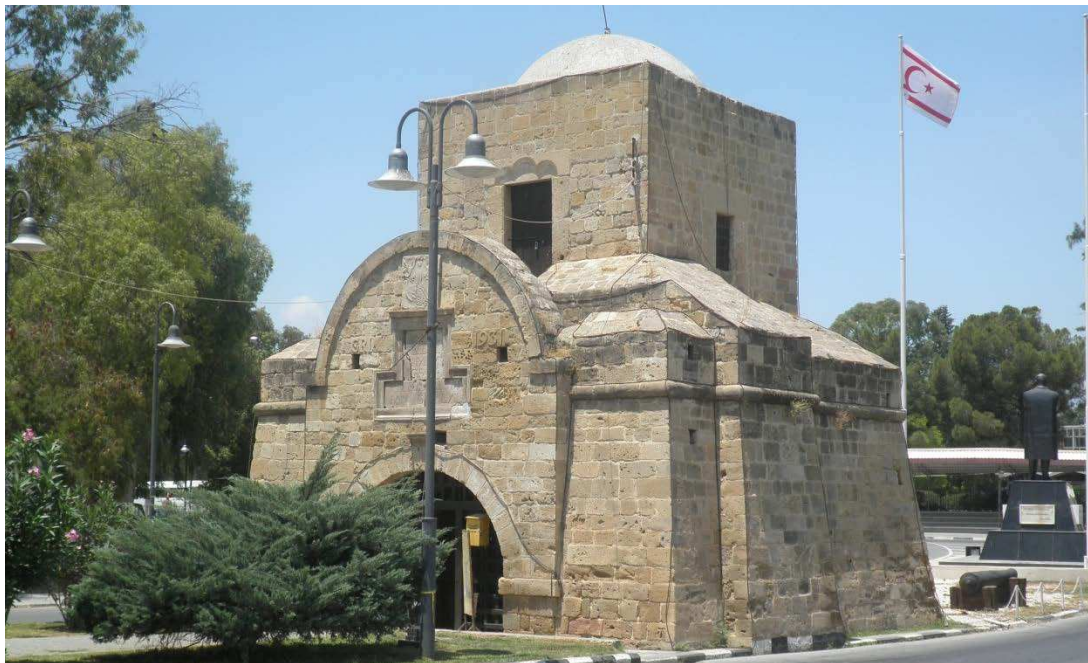


Figure 1: Kyrenia (or Girne) gate, built by the Venetians, now in the Turkish Cypriot part of Nicosia. The straight road south of here leads to the Green Line that divides the city.

One of the main issues that *Othello's Secret* seeks to address is a critical history of scholarship and interpretation that overlooks Cyprus. This can be traced as far back at least to Francis Gentleman in the eighteenth century who was baffled by the change of location in the second act from Venice to Cyprus, because 'every part of the plot might have been preserved with equal force, by keeping the characters all through at Venice' (1770: 134). Gentleman was writing two hundred years after Cyprus had fallen to the Ottomans in 1571, an event that had a profound impact on not only Shakespeare's England but the wider European psyche fearful of this rapidly advancing Muslim empire. Gentleman was also writing more than a hundred years before Cyprus passed from Ottoman to British hands. Perhaps, then, he can be forgiven his inability to recognise the island's importance. Subsequent critics cannot. Shakespeare studies as a field has unproblematically placed *Othello* as a Venetian play alongside *The Merchant of Venice*. I could—and do in *Othello's Secret*—cite numerous examples of this institutional neglect, but allow me to offer a few indicative examples. In *Visions of Venice in Shakespeare* (Tosi & Bassi, 2011) the two plays are seen as complementary, and this collection of essays claims to explore the modern relevance of both plays, especially in relation to their setting. Cyprus, and in particular the current division of the island that is rooted in the Cyprus Wars of *Othello*, does not register. Emrys Jones considered those conflicts, which were of such interest to Globe and Blackfriars audiences, to be 'very remote' from the interests of modern theatregoers (1968: 51). Jones made this statement eight years after independence from British rule, an independence that came after the struggle between British colonial forces, still supplemented in those days by national servicemen, and anti-colonial guerrillas. After independence, inter-communal relations in the mid-1960s became so strained that a regional war involving Greece and Turkey was only avoided after intense Anglo-American diplomacy, official and covert. Despite Jones's statement, one clearly not critiqued by his disciplinary peers, conflict in Cyprus, on a geopolitical and on an everyday level, was very much a British interest.

This occlusion of Cyprus extends to performance too. Director Iqbal Khan's 2015 production of *Othello* included scenes of torture inspired by the Iraq War. This connection could only be made given the backdrop of the Cyprus Wars and the frequently-made connection between the Abu Ghraib prison abuses and the torture of EOKA suspects by British colonial forces.² Yet the Royal Shakespeare Company ran the play alongside *The Merchant of Venice* as season openers and described the billing as a Venetian double-header: 'We have taken Venice as our starting point', claimed the programme notes (2015). Let me restate: four of the five acts of *Othello* are in Cyprus. Calling *Othello* a play about Venice is like calling *The Merchant of Venice* a play about Belmont.

Part of the reason why, despite the setting, *Othello* continues to be thought of as a Venetian play is the pervasive idea that Shakespeare does not portray Cyprus in the detail he does his Italian settings. The Cypriots in the play do not speak and 'do

not matter' (Hibbard, 1968: 42). However, this assumption misunderstands Cyprus as a nation and especially Cyprus in the early modern period. The silk handkerchief, for example, that is so crucial to the play has become a key part of research on *Othello*, but always in relation to Venice. Karen Newman argues that Cassio's possession of the silk handkerchief Othello gives to Desdemona looks like damning evidence of adultery because, in fifteenth-century Venice, possession of a woman's handkerchief was considered proof of a sexual liaison (1987: 155). Newman's argument is one of a long line of handkerchief-inspired insights that, each in their own way, contribute something valuable to our understanding of the play. But the long history of Cypriot needlework and silk production has never been examined, even as a token counterpoint to these Venice-centric approaches. *Othello's Secret* introduces this ancient history of Cypriot silk production to the conversation, but I want to take the opportunity here to mention something more recent. On a main street in Paphos sits a terebinth tree covered in handkerchiefs. This 'Tree of Handkerchiefs', as it is commonly known, overhangs the catacombs of Solomoni, a female martyr either Jewish or Christian. The terebinth tree (pictured, *Figure 2*) is probably the island's best known example of the practice of votive offerings, in the form of handkerchiefs and small rags, tied to trees. Silk production and embroidered handkerchiefs go back a long way in Cyprus, and they have visible, ongoing importance to everyday life there. Centuries of material production have produced cultural practices like the 'Tree of Handkerchiefs' that sweep across time and connect the island as it is now with the island about which Shakespeare would have heard and read. But the new ways of interpreting the handkerchief of *Othello* this ongoing history offers us have been ignored; this says more about the collective lack of interest in *Othello's* setting than Shakespeare's supposedly sketchy depiction of it.

Moving on from the handkerchief, the Euro-Ottoman identity politics that underscore *Othello* and reach their climax in Othello's schizophrenic suicide, where he acts out his slaying of a Turk in Syria by *being* that Turk in Syria, can certainly be associated with Venice, but they are far more powerfully associated with Cyprus. Not only was Cyprus the battle site of this proto-colonial clash of civilisations, but the cultural politics of that clash stayed with the island and evolved into the tragic events of the twentieth century. Cyprus in Shakespeare's day was a paradigm of diversity, as Pierre d'Avity explained in *The estates, empires, & principallities of the world*: 'Besides the Greeke and Latine Churches, there are other sects in this Island, as Armenians, Coftes, Maronites, Indians, Nestoriens, Georgiens, and Iacobites' (Avity, 1615: 1001). Though Othello's mysterious, polycultural past has often been taken as an instance of the open multiculturalism of Venice—a city-state in which, as William Thomas wrote in *The historie of Italie*, 'thou arte free' regardless of religion or background (1549: f.85r) —it is equally, more convincingly, a dramatic representation of Cypriot polyculturalism. Othello embodies the island's traumatic relationship with its own diversity. As he guiltily plunges a knife into his stomach, Othello tries to end the Turk and anti-Turk battle he fights externally and internally, a battle that

sums up the dilemmas facing Cypriot society in the sixteenth century, but also in the centuries to come.



Figure 2: The 'Tree of Handkerchiefs' overhanging the catacombs of Solomoni in Paphos, Cyprus.

The war and ethnic cleansing of 1974 fought a battle that was not only ideologically similar to Othello's, but which also bore an unsettling similarity to Richard Knolles's descriptions of Turkish invasion in *The generall historie of the*

Turkes. Knolles's book, published in 1603, has been one of the main reasons why scholars have dated the composition of *Othello* to 1603 or 1604, due to the information Shakespeare seems to have taken from that work. In the same section in which Knolles describes the Cyprus Wars that made such an impression on Shakespeare, he also gives a history of Cyprus and the Venetian, Egyptian and other cultural influences on the island that *Othello's Secret* locates in Shakespeare's play. This includes Catherine Cornaro, whose story Knolles describes (1603: 844–5). Cornaro was a Venetian teenager who married James II of Cyprus and travelled to the island to consummate her marriage, a clear prototype for Desdemona. Perhaps Shakespeareans have not wanted to engage with Cyprus and its early modern protagonists, but the same cannot be said of Shakespeare or his contemporaries.

It could be that the blindspot in Shakespeare studies regarding Cyprus is the manifestation of a wider cultural-political trend. To paraphrase Sisodia in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, so much of English history happened overseas that the English themselves are too often unaware of what it means (343). This might seem like a cliché now that postcolonial studies are, themselves, part of the established order. But clichés are clichés because they are too often true. I would be a very rich man indeed if I had a tenner for every time people have assumed from my surname that my heritage is Greek. (This, of course, coming after many have looked at me and asked that time-honoured question: 'Where are you *really* from?') It is a common mistake, and one, it must be said, encouraged by Greek nationalism in the Cypriot community, but we should bear in mind that the very problem of Cyprus has been the violent struggle to define the island as homogeneously Greek, homogenously Turkish or as neither, as a place of diversity in no way Greek or Turkish. This last is a place of diversity made up of all the various religions and cultures early modern writers such as Avity and Knolles saw as integral parts of Cypriot society. The struggle towards homogeneity was encouraged by the political and cultural frameworks imposed by British rule, frameworks that identified Cypriots as Greeks or Turks. Soon, people on the island began to identify with Athens and Ankara rather than each other and what they shared. So while some Cypriots would gladly consider themselves Greek (or Turkish), others would be offended to be thought of in this way. That this great political fracture has been off the radar of British consciousness, given Britain's colonial entanglements in Cyprus, constitutes a remarkable collective oversight.

This oversight is not necessarily deliberate or malicious. I was in a bar not too long ago—I spend a lot of time in bars in *Othello's Secret*; I do my best thinking there, it seems!—when a friend told me about his recent holiday in Cyprus. He confessed that, despite our long friendship, he was completely unaware of the division of the island. Now this is someone who is politically aware, well-travelled and has a first-class degree in History from a Russell Group university; he matches the stereotypical image of someone who would know the one major, overriding historical fact of his holiday destination. He was mortified by this gap in his knowledge. Other omissions

are far more troubling. At a recent conference *in* Cyprus I met international delegates whose work, in a variety of academic fields, was *about* Cyprus, and yet I spoke to more than one who was shocked to learn of the current status quo of division or the island's difficult colonial past, as if these things were international secrets. The neglectful colonial attitude Varnava highlights has a postcolonial afterlife.

The personal experiences I am sharing here have been key to the writing of *Othello's Secret*, key to bringing Cyprus and the Cyprus Problem to the fore in a study of Shakespeare's work. This personalisation has been something that those who write about literature shy away from because, as McKenzie and Papadopoulou have powerfully argued, depersonalised writing that appears objective or scientific ticks the right boxes in a market-led university space in which publications need to be generated quickly and in line with generalised research agendas (2012: 1–18). What has been lost in the process—despite all the rhetoric of research having an 'impact' beyond the university—is the ability to bring lived experience to the table, the same lived experience that makes literature powerful, meaningful and pleasurable for the people in the 'real world' our work is supposed to find. The result, as Garrett A. Sullivan's analysis of the state of play in studies of Tudor and Stuart Drama tactfully puts it, is 'a period of "normal science"—of incremental elaborations upon already existing conceptual models' (2013: 441). This intellectual stagnation or mechanisation gives research less, not more, of an 'impact': 'What is the value or relevance of a work in which nothing—or no one—really seems at stake?' (Mackenzie & Papadopoulou, 2012: 3). For me, and for my family, a lot is at stake in *Othello*.

My father was detained for two years without charge and tortured by British officers in colonial Cyprus for his involvement in EOKA. EOKA, like the Venetians, saw the Turks as barbarous enemies. My father, like Othello, later became associated with this enemy Turk. My father, like Othello, has a mysterious family background that encapsulates the diversity of Cyprus. And our family, like every Cypriot family, was affected by the war of 1974 in ways that continue today, ways that include anxieties about ethnic identity that *Othello* anticipates by four hundred years. The parallels—historical, literary and poetic—between *Othello* and the island's troubles since the day Shakespeare's tragedy was first acted on the stage have always been painfully clear to me, have always informed the way I read it. The story of these parallels has to be told; it is a story that offers those who love Shakespeare the opportunity to think about *Othello* in a radically different way, a way that demonstrates how English literature as a discipline can say something valuable and relevant about complex geopolitical issues.



Figure 3: Barrack at 'Camp K' detention camp, Kokkinotrimithia, Cyprus, where my father spent most of his detainment.



Figure 4: 'Camp K'

The story of those parallels between *Othello* and the Cyprus Problem has never been more urgent. In 2015, an independent pro-solution candidate, Mustafa Akıncı, was elected president of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus—a pseudo-state recognised only by Turkey. Akıncı’s supporters wore t-shirts with olive branches imprinted on them, and his surprise election was seen as a gesture of peace towards the Greek Cypriots. Since then reunification talks have been re-energised and the prospect of peaceful reunification—albeit in the form of a bi-zonal, bi-communal state—seems closer than it has done for a long time. The main ideological barrier that stands in the way of peaceful reunification is the deeply-embedded narrative of Greek and Turkish nationalism, the narrative of two irreconcilable adversaries. This narrative—rather than the narrative of a diverse, polycultural Cyprus we find in *Othello* and its sources—has dominated political discourse in Cyprus in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The ‘straight road’ has always been the road of nationalism, of singular identity. Reimagining that road as one with a thousand diversions, one like the ‘straight road’ my uncle described with all its offshooting possibilities, is a social and intellectual necessity that can not only negotiate past traumas but help find a route to a peaceful, united future too. Now more than ever, the time is right to counter the destructive, violently opposed narratives of a homogeneous Cyprus with the narrative of a heterogeneous, polymorphous Cyprus. A Cyprus for all. *Othello*’s Cyprus.

Notes

1. R. M. Christofides, *Othello's Secret: The Cyprus Problem*.
2. EOKA were the anti-colonial guerrillas—terrorists to the British—who fought colonial rule.

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