Othello as a Political Commentary on "the Myth of Venice"

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ABSTRACT

OTHELLO AS A POLITICAL COMMENTARY ON “THE MYTH OF VENICE”

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The premise of this essay is that the ascension of James VI of Scotland to the throne of England in 1603 motivated Shakespeare to give *Othello* -- performed for the king in 1604-- a setting, topicality, and an embedded political commentary that suited the political ideas and personal interests of the new monarch. After an overview of the possible sources of the play, this essay also reviews some of James's political writings, where he expresses his absolutist philosophy. Although some commentators believe there is a pro-republican subtext in *Othello*, this essay argues the opposite. It posits that by adding the Venetian first act in the play, Shakespeare, instead, portrays the republican government of Venice making ill-fated decisions that eventually precipitate the play's tragic dénouement. In *Othello*, this essay concludes, Shakespeare rendered homage to his new sovereign and patron by making a subtle political critique of the so-called "myth of Venice."
OTHELLO AS A POLITICAL COMMENTARY ON “THE MYTH OF VENICE”

BY

ALEJANDRO TAMAYO

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Timothy Crowley
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INTRODUCTION

There is "a scholarly consensus" that Shakespeare probably composed *Othello* sometime between 1603 and 1604 (Barnet xvi-xvii). The *Revels Books* indicates that the play was performed at Whitehall for the recently crowned James I on November 1, 1604 (*Yale: Othello* 175; Schoenbaum 200). Almost ten years earlier, Shakespeare had composed *The Merchant of Venice*, which Shakespeare’s company performed for James I later that same winter Revels season, in February 1605, and the king requested a second performance of that play specifically a few days later on Shrove Tuesday (Schoenbaum 201). Shakespeare had revisited the same republican setting in *Othello*. "It was only in Venice," Allan Bloom and Harry Jaffa explain, "that Othello and Shylock could act out their potentials; they were foreigners, and only Venice provided them freedom and a place in the city" (11). There is another creative reason, I believe, why Shakespeare might have decided that his second Venetian play, this time specifically composed for the new king, would be perfect to premier on Hallowmas, at Whitehall, before James I.² David McPherson writes about Europe's fascination with Venice, what some historians

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¹Citations from *Othello* throughout this work come from the 1997 edition of *The Riverside Shakespeare*.
²According to the “Theatrical Calendar of the King’s Men at Court” (1603-14), prior to *Othello*, Shakespeare’s company had performed before the king perhaps *As You Like It* (December 2, 1603), perhaps *Hamlet* at Hampton Court (December 26, 1603) and, before Prince Henry at Hampton Court, *A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream* (January 1, 1604); in addition to other half a dozen unknown plays (Kernan 203-04).
call the “Myth of Venice.” At the turn of the seventeenth century, Venice had already been for some time a myth, and "England was the country in Northern Europe in which this Myth was most strongly felt" (13). Here toward the beginning of King James’s English reign, when he aimed to unite England and Scotland officially, a glorified myth of Venetian republicanism ran counter to his emphasis on singular monarchy. I propose that Shakespeare built into Othello’s design certain structural and characterological ironies that might have been invented for indirect appeal to his king’s political theory.

Shakespeare built upon and redirected his previous artistry for this purpose. Othello follows two of Shakespeare's major works, Julius Caesar (1599) and Hamlet (1600-01), and some commentators have argued that both the Roman historical play and the Danish tragedy show Shakespeare's sympathy for republican ideas (Fitzmaurice, Hadfield, Matheson, et al.). Republicanism appealed to several members of the English nobility, especially in light of the succession of Queen Elizabeth. It could be argued that by setting Othello in Venice and showing in the first act, albeit inaccurately, the inner workings of the Senate and the Duke dealing with matters of state (and personal matters, too), Shakespeare once more shows his republican leanings. Mark Matheson thinks that Othello "is a fascinating example of Shakespeare's interest in republicanism." He argues that this play shows Shakespeare's "progressive" thinking by positively portraying the workings of a stable republic, the European alternative to hereditary and eternal monarchies (169). I intend to argue the opposite. Pamela Allen Brown writes that "[w]hile scholars have long demonstrated that Othello is 'a tragedy built on a comic structure' they have not speculated on the historical motivations" (148). In that sense, I accept the premises that, after having mastered the comic mode (Snyder 4) in nine previous plays, in Othello, as in Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare experimented with the comic structure, turning elements of
comedy into a tragedy (Carneiro, Clubb, Snyder, et al.) to perform for King James I a play whose topicality (the Cyprus wars, Moors, blackness, exoticism) interested and amused him (Hall 127-28, Jones 47-52). Here I argue further that tragic ironies of characterization and plot structure in *Othello* complement a dimension of historical irony regarding Cyprus and Venice to imply a subtle critique of the Venice myth. Shakespeare designed the play in this manner to portray for his new English king the moral and political decadence (and hence weakness or vulnerability) of the paradigmatic republic.

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3 For the baptism of his first son, Henry Frederick, in August 1594, James co-authored, along with William Fowler, a masque about the Christian Knights of Malta in battle against Moors and Amazons (Stewart 140).
SOURCEs AND IDEAS

Throughout the years, critics have identified different obvious and possible sources of *Othello*. Shakespeare adapted the central story involving Othello, Desdemona, and Iago from an Italian *novella* about a jealous Moorish captain in Cyprus with his Venetian wife, written in the mid-sixteenth century by Giovanni Battista Giraldi, also known as Cinthio, included in his collection *Gli Hecatommithi*, Third Decade, Story 7 (Bullough 7:194-202, 214-16, 221-22, 228-31, 239-52). Geoffrey Bullough suggests Shakespeare might have used other dramatic sources to give his characters the depth that Cinthio’s characters lacked: among others, the story of an Albanian captain with his wife, from Geoffrey Fenton’s *Certaine Tragicall Discourses* (1567), a translation of Belleforest’s *Histoires Tragiques* (1561), themselves adaptations of Matteo Bandello’s stories. This story contains some of the settings, events, and traits Shakespeare gave his main characters in *Othello* (7:202-203). Bullough also points out that Shakespeare’s ethnographic research might have come from John Pory’s *A Geographical History of Africa* (1600), a translation from Leo Africanus’s *Cosmographia et geographia de Affrica* (1526), and Philemon Holland’s *Natural History* (1601), a translation of Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia* (AD 77). Critics have found reverberations from these works in *Othello* (7:208-211). In addition to Cinthio’s story, Horace Howard Furness mentions Ludovico Dolce's tragedy *Marianna* (c. 1565); and two actual historical personages: Christopher Moro, lord-lieutenant of Cyprus in 1505, and Sampiero, the famous Corsican leader. In 1563, the Corsican, after accusing his wife of infidelity, strangled her with her handkerchief (372-375). More recently, Daniel J. Vitkus mentions *The Turkish Mahomet and Hyrin the fair Greek*, a lost
play by George Peele. This play was staged in London during Elizabeth's reign. When *Othello* was first performed, Vitkus writes, his audience was probably familiar with the story of the sultan and Irene, the enslaved Greek Christian. In the story, the sultan falls in love with his beautiful slave. One night, while she is sleeping, he is tempted to rape her, but instead, he calls his captains and nobles to show them how he can control his sexual attraction for the girl and to keep his "honor" intact, rather than having sex with her, he kills her (172). In a study on Venice as the setting for Shakespeare and Jonson's works, David C. McPherson gives an extensive list of travel, history, and reference books that, because of their date of publication, may have been used by the two authors to research the Italian city-republic, its culture, and politics (17-26). However, most critics agree that works by Lewes Lewkenor, Richard Knolles, William Thomas, and undoubtedly, Cinthio -- Shakespeare’s “prosaic source” (Allen 13) for the general outline of the play-- are sources of *Othello*.

Shakespeare sets *Othello* during 1570-71, at the outset of the Ottoman–Venetian hostilities. Virginia Mason Vaughan indicates that Shakespeare, while composing the play, probably read Richard Knolles's *General Historie of the Turkes*, published in 1603. Some of Knolles's accounts of the Cyprus wars find their way into the play (Vaughan, *Visions* 21; see Bullough 7:212-14, 262-65). Knolles includes a 60-page narrative about this event in his book. He describes the battles and the constant deliberations of the Venetian senate trying to solve the conflict (26). Andrew Sisson finds echoes of Machiavelli's *The Art of War* in *Othello* (144-46). We do not know if Shakespeare ever read the work of the Florentine diplomat⁴; however, he

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⁴ According to Alessandra Petrina, by making Cassio a Florentine and a bookish man who, in Iago’s words, “never set a squadron in the field” (1.1.22), Shakespeare was making a direct reference to an anecdote involving Machiavelli, chronicled in a *novella* by Matteo Bandello, “a well-known Shakespearean source for other Italian plays” (446; see Bullough 7:202-05, 253-62). In the anecdote, Giovanni de’ Medici challenged the Florentine philosopher to drill 3000 men as he had proposed in his *Art of War*. After hours of futile attempts, de’ Medici asked Machiavelli to step aside while Giovanni got the men ready in military formation in a few minutes.
might have read some references to Machiavelli's war philosophy in another possible political source of the play, Lewes Lewkenor's translation of Gasparo Contarini's *De magistratibus et republica Venetorum* (The Commonwealth, and Government of Venice), published in 1599.

The fact that the Republic of Venice had survived for almost a thousand years made it mythical in Contarini’s *De magistratibus* and in the eyes of other European nations. At the outset of the sixteenth century Venice had to resist the attacks and the spread of absolutism in the peninsula. According to Filippo Sabetti, "*De magistratibus* contributed to a particular view in the sixteenth century that has come to be known by modern historians as 'the myth of Venice,' celebrating the Republic's well-being and accomplishments and presenting its aspirations and self-image as reality" (xvi). Contarini’s book first circulated as a manuscript until it was published in Latin, posthumously, in 1543. Several Latin editions of the book circulated widely in Europe. The first Italian and French translations were published in 1544 (xvi-xvii). Gilbert states that *De magistratibus* "became the great source that fed republican thought in monarchical centuries" (qtd. in Sabetti xviii). In 1599, Lewes Lewkenor wrote the first English translation of *De magistratibus* from the original Latin and the Italian translation (xviii). Lewkenor took several liberties in his translation to make it more acceptable to English readers. Lewkenor's translation is not literal, Andrew Hadfield explains, and he often incorporates his own commentary or material from other authors. (In Lewkenor’s address to the reader, he acknowledges his indebtedness to “Donato, Justinian, Munster, Bodin, Ant, Stella, Sansouino, Domenico Francesco, Girolamo Bardi &c.”) Lewkenor intended to write a practical book about Venice rather than to be faithful to Contarini’s original (Hadfield 41-43).

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5 According to Pezzini, "Lewkenor's English translation (1599) […] draws on multiple sources (including the Italian translation of 1544, deriving from the 1543 Latin edition), collated with the Latin text from the 1571/8 edition" (Notes on the Translation, first page).
Wealth, Andrew Sisson argues, responded to the increasing interest of Elizabethan England in "classical republicanism" (137). Mark Matheson points out that at the outset of the 1600s, there was among English circles, such as Sidney and Essex's, a keen interest in Venetian republicanism for whom Contarini-Lewkenor's description of the Venetian republican system would have been not only reveling but promising (124). In his address to the reader, Lewkenor calls the Doge of Venice a “prince” (whose authority is “wholy subject to the lawes”), and describes Venetian republicanism as a “straunge and unusuall forme of a most excellent Monarchie” -- later he also calls it a “Commonwealth.” Lewkenor refers to the ruling Venetian senate as a “well ordered Aristocraticall gouernment” whose power “haue not any power, mean, or possibility at all to tyrannize, or to peruer their Country lawes.” He also calls Venice a “Democrasie or popular estate” where the 3000 member “Councell” govern more like an “assembly of Angels, then of men.” He describes the Venetian government as uncorrupted and fair in their impartation of justice, and in “their distribution of offices & dignities”. The English translator also wonders at the uniqueness of the Venetian civilian government body that presided over its military prowess:

Besides, what is there that can carrie a greater disproportion with common rules of experience, then that vnweapned men in gownes should with such happinesse of successe giue direction & law to many mightie and warlike armies both by sea and land, and that a single Citie vnwalled, and alone should command & ouer toppe mighty kingdomes, and such famous farre extended prouinces, remayning euer it selfe invincile, and long robed citizens to bee serued, yea and sued vnto for entertainment by the greatest princes & peeres of Italy. (The Commonwealthe: “To the Reader”)

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6 Florio explains that Lewkenor used the word "'commonwealth' rather than 'republic,' since the latter term was at the time rife with controversial assumptions” (qtd. in Sabetti xix).

7 Iago would most likely disagree with Lewkenor in this regard: “Preferment goes by letter and affection, / And not by old gradation” [...] (1.1.38-39).
In Lewkenor’s translation, Sisson notes, Contarini describes Venice as a perfect "mixture," a place where the monarchy, aristocracy, and popular rule coexist harmoniously (149). This harmonious coexistence where each group plays its part avoids "perturbation," the abuse of one group over the others. Contarini excludes foreign soldiers from the "mixture." They are foreigners and, therefore, should be treated as servants. Mercenaries fight abroad, away from Venetian society and culture. Their country is War (152). For Contarini, the culture of war was a destabilizing factor. Contarini wants to exclude the military from the structures of power. On the other hand, explains Sisson, Machiavelli wants the military to become part of the power structure via citizen-soldiers (153-54). For Contarini, this subordination of the military to civilian rule was indispensable for the survival of a republic.

Andrew Hadfield believes that besides Lewkenor’s translation of *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, William Thomas's *History of Italy*, published in 1549, might have also been another source of *Othello*. Thomas's work shows the reader the different forms of government in Italy and rates them according to their effectiveness. He rates Naples the worst because of its corruption, and Venice the best because, writes Hadfield, "[it] has all the advantages of stability and liberty, the wealth to be able to absorb and tolerate legions of disparate strangers and an active political system that encourages its citizens to get involved in public affairs" (70). For English readers, a country where government offices are fairly distributed and public servants closely scrutinized by the citizens must have sounded like an ideal society. Nevertheless, Thomas is also critical of Venice. He finds its proclivity for sexual liberty and vice reprehensible. He also criticizes the Venetians' love for money and dependency on Jewish lenders. However, what English readers might have found particularly interesting, Hadfield continues, is Thomas's description of the rule of law (70-71). In Venice, "all matters are
determined by the judge's consciences and not by the civil, nor yet by their own laws" (qtd. in Hadfield 72). He also finds faults in its justice system, because of the corruption of lawyers. However, his description of Venice's institutions is favorable for the most part. Hadfield argues that History of Italy is the primary source of The Merchant of Venice (73). Whereas in that play Venetian law works in favor of a cunning impostor (Portia defending Antonio), in Othello, the portrayal of Venice is more positive and sophisticated. The government of Venice has a prominent role in the play's first act when Othello appears before the Duke and the Senate to respond to Brabantio's complaint. The government sides with Othello. "It is hard not to see the play," writes Hadfield, "as an endorsement of Venetian values" (78). Hadfield notes that after Othello and Desdemona travel to Cyprus, and Iago sets in motion his evil plan of revenge against him, we see the other side of Venice, a place of loose morals and misogynistic culture. Iago uses the loose reputation of Venetian women to instigate Othello's paranoia. In The Merchant of Venice, Hadfield writes, Shakespeare's focus is the city's wealth. In Othello, Shakespeare's focus turns to Venice's republican system because, McPherson indicates, in the time between Merchant and Othello, Shakespeare read Lewkenor's Commonwealth (qtd. in Hadfield 78-79). Shakespeare learned in Lewkenor/Contarini how the republican system elected its duke and how ordinary citizens could stand up and proclaim their disagreement with the election of a new ruler if they were not happy, a circumstance untenable in a monarchy. Shakespeare, Hadfield concludes, admired Venice's republicanism. Othello "shows a state working better than many of the citizens it adopts, who misunderstand or abuse its institutions, especially when not contained within the safety of its borders" (80).

Nevertheless, Shakespeare might not have fully understood how the republican system of Venice worked. Shakespeare, John Draper explains, understood the extent of the power of an
English duke and his usual subordination to the monarch. We see this in his historical plays set in England. However, he probably was also aware of the independence of some of the continental European dukes. Since the eleventh century, wealthy merchants and the nobility had ruled Venice. By degrees, they reduced the power of the Doge (Shakespeare calls him Duke) to a mere symbolic status. By the time Shakespeare composed Othello, writes Draper, the Republic of Venice was in decline. The Council of Ten (Consiglio de Diece), a group of nobles, concentrated the power. Shakespeare, Draper declares, did not understand or ignore the role of the Doge in legal preceding when he composed The Merchant of Venice; however, his understanding of the Venetian legal system by the time he composed Othello improved a little. We do not see whether or not the Senators discuss with the Duke Othello’s new appointment or his removal from the command of Cyprus. The Duke seems to have made those decisions himself, instead of The Ten or The Supreme Terrible Tribunal, who were the real power in Venice at the time\(^8\) (79). Draper explains that The Ten would have heard Brabantio’s complaint because they also presided over moral cases. The Ten followed intricate legal procedures, and their deliberations were secretive; the Doge had no legal power to decide in a case. Even though the laws of Venice prohibited the marriage between Venetians and foreigners, in Othello, the Duke seems to be oblivious of this (80). First, he sides with Brabantio; then, upon learning that the accused is Othello, he sides with the Moor and even allows Desdemona to testify and settle the case. Draper declares that Shakespeare’s knowledge of the workings of Venice did not improve in the ten years that separate Merchant from Othello. “Or possibly, he knew more than he showed; but, as a court-

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\(^8\) According to Filippo Sabetti’s description of the Venetian executive body, the Pien Collegio (xxx-xxxi), Othello would have had to receive his commission from the savi di terraferma and the savi agli ordini, not from the Doge, who belonged to the Minor Cosiglio and whose role was merely symbolic.
dramatist to James I, he preferred not to depict on the London stage a government in which the ruler had no power” (80).

In bridging those distinct perspectives on Shakespeare’s sources for representing the Venetian regime in *Othello*, it helps to revisit the principal narrative source for characters and plot. Ned B. Allen describes Cinthio’s story as “a kind of *exemplum*” (13). The characters in this story have no names except for Disdemona (Cinthio's spelling). The other characters are referred to as *Moro* (Moor), *Alfieri* (Ancient or Ensign), *Moglie* (the Ancient's wife), and *Capo di squadra* (Captain of a troop or Corporal). This is how Cinthio summarizes his story:

Un Capitano Moro piglia per mogliera una cittadina venetiana, un suo Alfieri l’accusa di adulterio al Marito, cerca, che l’Alfieri uccida colui, ch’egli credea l’Adultero, il Capitano uccide la Moglie, è accusato dallo Alfieri, non confessa il Moro, ma essendovi chiari inditii, è bandito, Et lo scelerato Alfieri, credendo nuocere ad altri, procaccia à sè la morte miseramente.

(A Moorish captain takes to wife a Venetian Dame, and his Ancient accuses her of adultery to her husband; it is planned that the Ancient is to kill him whom he believes to be the adulterer; the Capitan kills the woman, is accused by the Ancient, the Moor does not confess, but after the infliction of extreme torture, is banished; and the wicked Ancient, thinking to injure others, provided for himself a miserable death.) (Furness & Hemingway 376)

As Allen points out, Shakespeare follows Cinthio closer in Acts III to V than in the first two acts (13). Daria Perocco explains that Cinthio does not mention any conflict against the Turks. His intention is "to encourage the reader to be virtuous both privately and above all in civil and public life" (44). Cinthio wrote his story at the height of the Ottoman Empire and the decline of the Republic of Venice. In the dedicatory letter to the story, he seems to warn the reader about the dangers of miscegenation, yet, the story itself is not about race but deception (Perocco, 50). From the 14th to the 16th century, Perocco informs us, Moorish characters had a recurring presence in the Italian novella, both brutish-murderous-lascivious Moors and noble Moors.
Never before had a noble Moor character married a Christian white girl, as in Cinthio's story. "Venice is cast," in this novella, "as a place where cross-cultural, inter-religious, and inter-racial relations might not only exist but even flourish, in both the public and the private spheres" (53). Cinthio does not mention his Moor's nationality. Karina Attar speculates that he was probably a Turkish mercenary because the Ottomans gave Venice military assistance through mercenaries throughout the sixteenth century (qtd. in Perocco 54). Cinthio's novella had been circulating since 1565 and was translated into French in 1583. A Spanish translation appeared in 1590 (Yale: Othello 170). It is possible that Shakespeare could have read it in the original Italian (not a difficult thing to do for someone who can read Latin). Perhaps Shakespeare read the Moor's story in Gli Hecatommithi while researching The Merchant of Venice (1596-1598). What is evident, in my view, is that Shakespeare found in Cinthio’s story a perfect story to adapt specifically for the newly crowned King James I.
PATRONAGE AND POLITICS

Although Alvin Kernan only addresses *Othello* briefly in *The King's Playwright*, his description of the changes that James's ascension to the throne brought to the theater in London, and particularly to Shakespeare and his company, merits emphasis. King James, Kernan explains, brought a different dynamic to Renaissance theater. When James signed, on May 19, 1603, the warrant that made The Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare’s company, The King's Men, the king became their patron and the performers climbed up the social scale (203). On the other hand, critics like Leeds Barroll (*New History* 461-63) and Alan Stewart (183) explain that James was never a theater enthusiast: he preferred hunting. The actual support for players and theater, Barroll concludes, came from James’s wife, Queen Anne of Denmark, who, like her husband, also had a penchant for "Moorish" themed entertainment. In any case, as Kernan explains, Shakespeare now had access to the royal court, not sporadically as in Elizabeth's times, but frequently, several times a year (xv-xvi). At this point, I assume, Shakespeare started writing at least in part directly for the court, specifically for the king, queen, and prince. Shakespeare wrote *Othello* in 1603-1604, and its first royal performance at Whitehall in late 1604 was a rare opportunity for Shakespeare to make an impression on his new patron and sovereign as the royal playwright. In Shakespeare's time, Hadfield informs us, the writing profession was not only

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9 *A Jacobean Journal*, edited by G.B. Harrison, states, "8th February, 1604. The King's Players: Because they are forbidden to present any of their plays publicly in London by reason of the plague the King of his free gift hath given £30 to his players for their relief and maintenance" (107).
10 Many celebrations at the court of James had Moorish themes and attendees wore "Moorish" costumes and blackened their faces, including Queen Anne (Vitkus 150).
highly competitive but, for the most part, not lucrative. Playwrights had to write fast and hoped their plays were popular enough to make a profit. "One way of doing this was to be topical and to refer to recent events, whether in the main plot or more allusively and occasionally" (4). In that sense, I argue that Shakespeare composed *Othello’s* first act to give political topicality to his play, not to insinuate republican sympathies, as some commentators argue, but as a subtle critical comment on the declining republic of Venice. Scrutiny of topicality and embedded political commentary in plays performed in Elizabethan and Jacobean times was common. In 1605, when Samuel Daniel allowed the performance at the court of his play *The Tragedy of Philotas* for the king and queen, he was suspected of sympathizing with the Essex insurrection. The King’s Privy Council summoned Daniel for questioning (Curran 58). If there had been any suspicion that Shakespeare intended to portray the republican and Catholic government of Venice sympathetically, *Othello* would not have been performed at court anymore. The earl of Pembroke -- a member of the King’s Privy Council and, arguably, the man who made it possible for Shakespeare and his company to become the King’s Men (Barrol, *Connections*, 192-93)-- would have also been compromised if *Othello’s* first act had been perceived as a republican panegyric.11 *Othello’s* topicality, historical background, and Venice as the setting for the play would have interested James I, the Venetian political system being at odds with James's arguments for the divine right of kings to rule and bequeath the throne to their heirs apparent.

At the time Shakespeare composed *Othello*, the Venetian government was in good commercial relations with the Ottoman empire, allowing them passage through the Adriatic. The

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11 According to Peter Lake, during Essex’s imprisonment, two of his best friends, the Earl of Southampton and the Earl of Rutland, spend time in London going to the theater. After the rebellion, "members of Shakespeare’s company…were called to account before the Council for having put on, at the behest of some of the Essex conspirators, a special performance of a play about the deposition of Richard II" (526-27)
English government was also in a period of good relations with the Turks. However, the Catholic Hapsburgs were at war with them, as the Ottomans kept expanding west (Vitkus 162). Battles were fought in the Mediterranean between English pirates and Venetian merchants (Brown 145). Turkish pirates captured English subjects to collect ransom or sell them into slavery. The English feared the forced conversion into Islam imposed upon kidnapped English subjects (Vitkus 146).

In 1604, James re-opened diplomatic relations with Venice after a hiatus of 44 years (Brown 145). Nicolo Molin, the Venetian ambassador in England, had an audience with the king the same week *Othello* was performed at Whitehall (“Venice” 189). Molin might have attended the performance. In addition to the ambassador, several Venetian diplomats visited the English court in 1603 and 1604 (Akrigg 59-60). Arguably, Shakespeare was aware of the new king’s interest in the Turkish-Christian conflict, not only in historical and poetical terms but as the focus of England’s current strategic diplomacy in the Mediterranean.

It is not unreasonable to speculate that Shakespeare had access to the writings of King James VI recently published in England right after the Scottish king became James I. Among these texts were his youthful epic poem *Lepanto*, and his texts justifying hereditary monarchy, *Basilicon Doran* and *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*. Emrys Jones points out that Richard Knolles dedicated his *General Historie of the Turkes* (1603) to King James, stating that

> your Maiestie hath not disdained in your *Lepanto, or Heroicall Song*, with your learned Muse to adorne and set forth the greatest and most glorious victory that ever was by anie the Christian confederate princes obtained against these the *Othoman* Kings or Emperors (qtd. in Jones 48).

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12 Considering that, as Kernan informs us, Shakespeare and his company performed, sometime before 1604, *Hamlet* (a play about regicide and corruption in the Danish court) for King James and his Danish wife, Queen Anne (31), it is possible to assume that Shakespeare would not have been concerned about offending the Venetian diplomats with his portrayal of the Venetian Senate.
Jones also indicates that an allusion to the Battle of Lepanto was displayed in March 1604 on the Italian pageant arch during James's coronation procession through London (48-49). I agree with Jones's assumption that Shakespeare and his fellow actors also wanted to salute the new king and patron with a play explicitly tailored for his tastes (52).

For its early Jacobean audience, *Othello*'s historical setting was based on a relatively recent event: the Ottoman invasion of Cyprus. In his Scottish youth, James had written an epic poem about the 1571 Battle of Lepanto between a Catholic coalition and the Ottoman naval force. In the preface to the poem, James indicates that he had received criticism for celebrating the Catholic victory (*KJ Selected Writings* 94-95). It has been suggested that the date of composition was 1585, or even 1588, in the latter case perhaps as a preemptive salute from James to Phillip II had the Spanish Armada been successful (9).\(^{13}\) The poem appeared in James's second volume of verse, *His Maiesties Poeticaall Exercises at Vacant Hours* (1591). When James ascended to the throne of England in 1603, the poem was published in London as *His Maiesties Lepanto, or, Heroicall Song*. Among other critics, Emrys Jones believes *Lepanto* is the "link" that connects *Othello* to James (47-48). McPherson does not agree with Jones’s suggestion because “the play makes no mention of Lepanto” (76-77). However, Thomas Madden informs us, the Christian coalition that defeated the Ottomans in Lepanto was responding to the Turkish invasion of Cyprus (333-34). In that sense "the Cyprus wars” (1.1.150) is a reference that includes the Battle of Lepanto. In the final scene of the play, Othello declares, just before killing himself,

> And say besides, that in Aleppo once,  
> Where a malignant and turban’d Turk

\(^{13}\) There seems to be a hint of the Spanish Armada's defeat in *Othello* when a "desperate tempest" destroys the entire Turkish fleet (2.1.20-24).
Beat a Venetian and traduc’d the state
I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him --- thus. (5.2.352-356)

James’s Lepanto begins,

I sing a wondrous worke of God,
I sing his mercies great,
I sing his justice heere withall,
Povvr'd from his holy seat.

To wit, a cruell Martiall warre,
A bloodie battell bolde,
Long doubtsome fight, with slaughter huge,
And wounded manifold:

Which fought was in LEPANTOES's gulfe,
Betwixt the baptized race
And circumcised Turband Turkes... (KJ Writings 95-96)

Othello's final speech echoes James’s language. In the play, Shakespeare deviates from his main source, Cinthio's novella, by including the Turkish-Venetian conflict in the first act as, I would argue, an homage to his patron's Lepanto. As Jones indicates, Gli Hecatommithi was published in 1565, before the Turks took Cyprus (50). One could assume that Shakespeare's audience at Whitehall knew that Cyprus had fallen to the Turks. This knowledge gave Shakespeare's audience a privileged level of, to use Amir Khan's term, “verification” (31). Even though Othello is described as a courageous and skillful commander, the original audience knows that he will not change the outcome of events: Venice would lose Cyprus. This verification makes Othello a tragic hero from the very beginning in historical terms. If Shakespeare's intention, Jones indicates, was to set Othello in the days that led to the fall of

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14 In 1572 Nestor Martinengo published in Verona and account of the siege of Famagusta, the last Venetian bastion in Cyprus before it surrendered to the Turks in 1571. An English translation was published in 1572 under the title The True Report of all the successe of Famagosta (McPherson 79).
15 Vitkus points out that, because of their knowledge of the historical outcome, Shakespeare’s audiences probably smiled when they heard the words “Our wars are done...the Turkish fleet...are drowned” (2.1.20, 17-18) (168).
Cyprus in 1571, his play takes place in the year Cyprus "turned Turk" (51-52). *Lepanto* served as a Jacobean referential theme for *Othello* indirectly, as a framework for tragic irony relevant to a political subtext that runs through the first act.

James was not, in praxis, the absolute monarch he wished he were. As James VI of Scotland, he had to share power with his Parliament and had to deal with the constant criticism from the Kirk, the Church of Scotland (Croft 29-31). In a dispute with members of the Kirk in 1596, Andrew Melvill, the leader of the delegation of ministers that met with the king, admonished him,

> And thairfor Sir, as divers tymes befor, sa now again, I mon tell yow, thair is twa Kings and twa Kingdomes in Scotland. Thair is Chryst Jesus the King, and his Kingdome the Kirk, whase subject King James the Saxt is, and of whase kingdome nocht a king nor a lord nor a heid, bot a member (qtd. in Nicolson 6).

James worked with the Scottish Parliament; however, rather than compromising, the king tried to make Parliament work for him (Croft 37). By 1597, Pauline Croft indicates, James had complete control over Parliament and the Kirk (43). Once in England, James also had to share power, now with the English Parliament. However, the Scottish king always believed in his divine right to rule and in hereditary monarchy. He was not an absolute monarch, but his political ideas leaned in that direction. His son Charles I would approximate that Jacobean dream and lose his head for it.

As mentioned before, at the time James VI became also James I, republican ideas had been circulating and were very popular among some English circles, though applied intellectually to the English monarchy rather than aiming to replace it. Some of those ideas came from Scotland. Blair Worden, Hadfield explains, argues that there was no English republicanism
until the Civil War, that what was being debated before was the responsibility of monarchs towards their subjects, not the replacement of the monarchy with a republic. However, the intellectual debate in Elizabethan times and all the publications that made references to the ancient republics demonstrate the interest that early modern writers had for this form of government (*Shakespeare and Republicanism* 50-51). Although some critics believe that Shakespeare had a keen and favorable preoccupation with republicanism, Blair Worden points out that Renaissance playwrights did not advocate for a republican system of government: “In Shakespeare’s England, there was admiration for classical (and aristocratic) republican virtue, but no suggestion that England could or should become a republic” (28). Shakespeare’s English history plays present scenarios of rebellion or usurpation, but the goal was always to restore the legitimate monarchy. A common theme in Renaissance literature was the perfect monarchy, the idealization of a good king (29).

In 1603, after the ascension of James I to the throne of England, one of his works, *Basilicon Doron* (1598), was rapidly published. It became an instant bestseller (*KJ Writings* 12). *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, also written in 1598, was published anonymously in Edinburgh. Only a few copies were printed in London by 1603 (259). It is possible that this work circulated among members of the court. I would speculate that because of his company's new position at court and his contacts there, Shakespeare would have had access to it. Arguably, these two works would have helped him shape his political commentary on Venice to conform tacitly to the new king’s political views.

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16 An Anglicized version of James's *Basilicon Doron* was published in 1599 in Edinburgh. In 1603 after Elizabeth's death, 14000 copies were printed in London (*KJ Writings* 199).
17 The Earl of Southampton and, perhaps, the Earl of Pembroke too (Kernan 9).
Basilicon Doron is a fatherly advice book written in, as James claims, "the stile of Gods" (200) for his son, Henry, but it is also a blueprint into James's absolutist ideas, ideas that he would expand in The True Law. In Basilicon, James tells the prince that he, Henry, is the inheritor of the throne by divine right. He uses the expression "Democraticke forme of government" pejoratively when explaining to his son "the popular tumult and rebellion" during the Scottish Reformation revolts (223). James calls the republican works of Buchanan, Rerum Scotica Historia (1592), and Knox, Historie of the Reformation (1587), "infamous invectives" (243). Hadfield explains that George Buchanan's monarchomach work on Scottish history and politics offers examples of classical republicanism and biblical references to Jewish kings to argue that kings serve their people, who have the right to elect and depose or execute bad kings. In History of Scotland (1582), Buchanan, King James's tutor during his Scottish youth, makes a case for the deposition and execution of James's mother, Queen Mary Stuart. Hadfield points out that, like many English political theorists and nobles, Buchanan was an admirer of the Republic of Venice. In De Jure Regni (1579), Buchanan refers to the Doge as “king” to compare Venice with other monarchies. He declares his admiration for the way the Doge is elected and how he has to obey the law (35-40). When Contarini explains Venetian republicanism, he declares similarly that entrusting the government of a nation to a single man is wrong. Intellect and reason, Contarini argues, should preside over a nation (The Republic of Venice 13).

Later on, James published The Trew Law of Free Monarchies (1598), wherein he defends hereditary monarchy and makes the point to differentiate the government system of Venice from that of the "free Monarchies" where kings should obey the law but at the same time have

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18 Buchanan had also tutored Montaigne (Nicolson 7).
absolute power over their subjects. It is not clear whether or not Shakespeare was familiar with Buchanan's work prior to working on *Othello*,¹⁹ but, as the royal court's official playwright, he most likely read *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*. James begins his treatise justifying, based on Scripture, his divine right to the throne, and that of all the kings from "free" (as opposed to elective) monarchies. He claims that God himself decided that kings should rule people, and therefore rebellion against them was like rebelling against God (260-267): "the practice through the whole Scripture prooveth the peoples obedience given to that sentence in the law of God: *Thou shalt not rayle upon the Judges, neither speake evill of the ruler of thy people*" (his italics 267). Then, James refers to Britain's ancient history to declare that from the times of the first king of the island, King Fergus, "kings were the authors and makers of the Lawes, and not the Lawes of the kings" (269). He declares that Parliament is the highest court of the land, whose work is to enforce the laws created or authorized by the king; however, "the King is over-Lord of the whole land: so is he Master over every person that inhabiteth the same, having power over the life and death of every one of them" (271). James explains that the divine right to rule applies only to what he calls "free Monarchies" not to elective monarchies, "and much less of such sort of governors, as the dukes of Venice are, whose Aristocratick and limited government, is nothing like to free Monarchies" (272). James insists that any rebellion against the king is not only against God but also against nature. He claims that the king is the father of all his subjects, "Pater patriæ," or the head of a body where the subjects are the limbs. The father may be cruel and strike his children, but their duty is to flee from the father, not to strike him back. When the body is diseased, a limb may be cut off to protect the rest, but the head must stay in place all the time. James also speaks of how unnatural it would be for beasts to kill their parents (272-274).

¹⁹ It has been suggested that Shakespeare's characterization of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth might have been influenced by Buchanan's 1582 *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* (*Yale: Macbeth* 136-37).
James scorns the people who write about the right of the subjects to rebel against a tyrant in the name of their country (274-275). He quotes Du Bartas, "Better it were to suffer some disorder in the estate, and some spots in the Common-wealth, than in pretending to reforme, utterly to overthrow the Republicke" (his italics 275). James declares that the king's ruling privilege should go to his inheritors: "the duty and alleageance, which the people sweareth to the prince, is not only bound to themselves, but likewise to their lawfull heires and posterity" (278-279). He concludes *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* by asserting that only God may punish kings (278-279).

Shakespeare was among other playwrights who also wanted to entertain the new king with plays that adhered to his monarchical ideas. In 1604, Sir William Alexander, one of James's courtiers, published a collection of pro-monarchy plays called *The Monarchick Tragedies*. These plays were meant to be acted privately in court, not for public performances (Hadfield 75). Knowing that, as Hadfield explains, "James seemed to have objected to literary works only when they related directly to his status as king, or threatened to cause a scandal" (79), Shakespeare chose a Venetian play, I would argue, to portray the republic, its political system, and its morals, as the cause of its weakness and consequently its impending defeat by the Turks. He did this, I posit, through tragic inversion of comedic elements, pitched both for powerful dramatic effect and political commentary in relation to mythologized republican ideals about Venice.
VICE, VIOLENCE, AND VENICE

Some critics have pointed out that *Othello* differs from Shakespeare's other tragedies because of its comic structure (Brown, Bristol, Snyder, Teague, et al.). More than 400 years have changed how theater and, more recently, film approach *Othello*. Contemporary audiences expect to see a psychological play about jealousy gone tragically wrong. The play's political topicality is lost to today's audiences. Pamela Allen Brown sees in *Othello* a satire of Venetian culture.

Some English circles admired Venice's judicial system, wherein, as described by Contarini via Lewkenor, “decision-making” ensured “the complete rationality of every decision and the complete virtue of every decision-maker” (148). Brown points out that Shakespeare satirizes this description by showing the Senate and the Duke choose a foreigner as the defender of the state and by allowing him to take his wife with him to the warfront. Brown notes that the first hint that what King James and his court in Whitehall were watching was going to be satirical is the verbal abuse that Iago and Roderigo inflict on Brabantio, a senator of the republic (148):

*Brabantio:* Thou art a villain.

*Iago:* You are a senator. (1.1.118)

Whereas I believe that in *Othello*, the focus of the political criticism is Venice’s republicanism, Brown believes that the satirical structure of the play is a response to the xenophobic atmosphere prevalent at the time (152).
After its performance at Whitehall, *Othello* was performed at The Globe for a less sophisticated audience more aggressively biased against foreigners, mainly against Italians (Brown 146). This might explain the racial mockery and sexual innuendo targeted at the old Moor and his young and innocent wife. However, for the Jacobean audience, the presence of a Moor on the stage must have made at least some spectators think that the plot was absurd and implausible, if not outrageous. There is no way to prove how close the version that the King's Men played for James was to the texts printed much later. Since Elizabethan and Jacobean plays were invariably works in progress, with lines added or deleted, scenes modified or omitted, and a degree of collaboration and improvisation, as noted in *Hamlet* (3.2.38-44), I believe there is the possibility that Iago’s racial and pornographic discourse evolved during performances at The Globe, and later venues, for the benefit of the "barren spectators" (*Hamlet*, 3.2.41). Perhaps some of Iago’s animalistic and sexual diatribes were first ad-lib additions, and since they made "the unskillful laugh" (*Hamlet*, 3.2.25-26), they became part of the text.

Differences between *Othello*’s quarto text (1622) and the Folio (1623) bear diverse interpretations, another of which could be Shakespeare’s structural method of inventing political commentary. The quarto contains fewer lines than the Folio. Leah S. Marcus writes that some critics suggest that the Folio is a revision of the quarto done by Shakespeare himself. What makes these textual differences particularly interesting is, as Marcus indicates, the additional lines in the Folio. For the most part, these lines express Iago’s sexual and racial derision against Othello and Desdemona. Marcus speculates that the quarto could have been the text used for the first performance of *Othello* at Whitehall in 1604 and that later on when the play went to the London theaters, it was revised. Another possibility, Marcus concludes, is that the Folio is closer

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20 John-Mark Philo suggests that *Othello* might have debuted at The Globe (126).
to a non-extant original. In that case, the quarto is Shakespeare's revision for the court
performance (21-34). Ned Allen argues that the presence of “double time” (dramatic time and
historical time running together\textsuperscript{21}) in \textit{Othello} could indicate that Shakespeare wrote one part of
the play at a different time and then put it together somehow awkwardly; that is why there are
several chronological contradictions in the play (17). “The problem is,” asks Allen, “why
Shakespeare made a play by splicing together two parts not originally written to go together?”
(24). I would argue that Shakespeare composed the Cyprus part of the play when he decided to
use Cinthio’s story as the basis for a play that he might have written before James ascended to
the throne. Then, when as the king’s playwright he needed new plays at court, Shakespeare,
departing from his source, added the Venetian scenes – where a Moor serves as Venetian
military general without question, and the Senate pauses crucial deliberations of state to listen to
a father in distress – to infuse his Cinthio adaptation with an implicit political commentary.

If Shakespeare read James’s \textit{The Trew Law of Free Monarchies} and Lewkenor’s \textit{The
Commonwealth and Government of Venice} as part of his research for \textit{Othello}, he would have
noticed how Contarini’s views on government radically contrast with James’s absolutist ideas:

\begin{quote}
And though in the opinion of many men, the kingly domination is
of highest esteeme and greatest account: neuerthelesse I shoulde thinke that
though the principalitie of one alone, that should lawfully, and by right
challenge to himselfe the dignity of a king: if the matter be by it selfe
considered, shoulde seeme of all other the best, yet in regarde of the breuitie
of life, and mans fraile disposition, which for the most parte enclineth to the
worser parte, the gouernment of the multitude is farre more conuenient to the
assemblie of citizens (Contarini/Lewkenor Book 1, 13).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{21} Wilson xxxiii.
For the benefit of his patron and absolutist-minded sovereign, I argue, Shakespeare could have wanted to show on the stage this "assemblie of citizens" deliberating on matters of war, and love, on the eve of one of the republic’s most crucial moments of its history, a historical event that marked the beginning of the end for the Venetian republic. Although some critics like John W. Draper argue that Shakespeare's understanding of the government of Venice was minimal (81), it could be possible that Shakespeare might have chosen to misrepresent the actual functioning of Venetian laws and government (like giving the Doge/Duke a power of decision that he did not have) as a political commentary to expose the republican government of Venice as the cause of its own debacle. As Peter G. Platt suggests, Shakespeare might have been someone who, rather than admiring, questioned the myth (134). Platt also points out that even some of the introductory poems to Lewkenor’s translation of The Commonwealth are critical of that myth (135).22 Othello's first act gives a historical and political context to the play and functions to some degree as a negative critique of the "mythical" Republic of Venice.23

At the opening of Act I, as Iago vents his frustration on Roderigo, he declares that rather than being chosen a lieutenant, he was overlooked in favor of a foreigner and given the post of "his Moorship's ancient" (1.1.33) instead. The pornographic scenario that Iago paints for Brabantio perhaps would have made the audience think that they would see on the stage an

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22 In poem i, Edmund Spenser declares Venice a third Babel that grows over the ruins of the first and second Babel, implying that Venice will also fall victim to its own vanity: “They both are fallen, that all the earth did feare./ And buried now in their own ashes ly./ Yet shewing by their heapes how great they were./But in their place doth now a third appeare./ Fayre Venice, flower of the last worlds delight” (lines 6-10). In poem ii, I. Ashley goes beyond Spenser’s pessimistic image of a flower that will eventually wither. Ashly comperes Venice with a beautiful virgin “Whose glorious beauty cals vnnumbred swarmes,” and whose beauty will eventually wither and transform her into an ageing courtesan: “Now I prognosticate thy ruinous case./ When thou shalt from thy Adriatique seas./ View in this Ocean Isle thy painted face,/ In these pure colours coyest eyes to please./ Then gazing in thy shadowes peereles eye,/ Enamour’d like Narcissus thou shalt dye” (lines 3, 9-14).

23 The myth of Venice, according to J.G.A. Pocock, “consists in the assertion that Venice possesses a set of regulations for decision-making which ensure the complete rationality [my italics] of every decision and the complete virtue of every decision-maker. Venetians are not inherently more virtuous than other men, but they possess institutions that make them so” (qtd. in Platt 132-33).
Aaron, a Muly Hamet, or an Eleazar, as in *Titus Andronicus*, *The Battle of Alcazar*, and *Lust's Dominion*, which had been very popular plays prior to *Othello* (Vaughan and Vaughan 43):

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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. (1.1.88-91)
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After Brabantio gives the scene its setting, “This is Venice” (1.1.105), we learn that the girl who, along with the Moor, is "making the beast/ with two backs" (1.1.116-17) is the Senator's daughter, a white Venetian noblewoman. She has secretly married an exotic foreigner. When Othello enters Act I Scene II, though a Moor, he is hailed as a hero of the Catholic republic. As Iago warns Othello about the possible consequences of marrying Brabantio's daughter, Othello dismisses Iago's "concern" by indicating that "My services which I have done the Signory/ Shall out-tongue his complaints" (1.2.18-19). His confidence speaks of a society that would allow a foreigner to marry a noble Venetian woman. As afore mentioned, Shakespeare overlooks the fact that, by law, foreigners were not allowed to marry Venetian women and that Venice was known at the time to be “fiercely protective of the chastity of its daughters” (Platt 124). Othello is most likely a converted Christian whose Moorish origin associates him with the infidel "Mahometans." Then, through Cassio, the audience learns that Othello is a general – Shakespeare gives Othello a higher rank, Cinthio's Moor was just a captain (*Capitano de soldati*) – and that the Duke of Venice and the Senate are summoning him to the palace to talk about a situation regarding Cyprus (1.2.39-44). Here Shakespeare gives the play a historical topicality. As discussed before, we can assume an historical awareness on King James’s part that the

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24 *Mahometan* was probably the way Muslims were called in early modern times. The *OED* quotes J. Pory, from his translation of Leo Africanus’s *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (1600): “The Mahumetan priestes alwaiies forbad the Arabians to passe over Nilus with their armies” (I.10).
Venetians had lost Cyprus, and at least some members of his court would have known that, too. They were watching a play whose historical background was the beginning of the republic's defeat. As Brabantio and his party find Othello, the Senator expresses what for some members of the early modern audience would have seemed a fair claim: the implausibility of a white noblewoman voluntarily marrying a Moor – "a thing as [Othello]" (1.2.71) – unless some sort of magic were involved (1.2.73-75). Brabantio is confident that the state will punish Othello because

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my brothers of the state,
Cannot but feel this wrong as 'twre their own;
For if such actions may have passage free,
Bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be. (1.2.96-99)
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The Senators' deliberations in 1.3 add historical and political irony to Brabantio’s presumption about his colleagues. The military scenario they describe seems to be what Richard Knolles described in his *General History of the Turks* (1603) about the Turkish invasion strategy against Cyprus (McPherson 75). When Othello enters the scene, the Duke greets him by calling him "Valiant Othello" (1.3.47). Then he vests him with the most strategically crucial military task: "we must straight employ you/ Against the general enemy Ottoman" (1.3. 47-48). There is no hint that Othello will be under a Venetian commander. He will be in charge. Shakespeare might have purposely ignored the lack of power that a “Captaine Generall of [the] Armie” had in Venice. According to Contarini,

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when wee haue any warres by land, there are some of our Gentlemen sent into the Armie, who therein doe beare office and authority, while the warre endureth, as namely, the Treasurers, and Legates, who neuer stirre from the side of the Captaine Generall of our Armie, who is alwaies a straunger, which hath no authority to doe or deliberate any thing without the aduice of the Legates (Lewkenor 132).
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Even before these senators hear Brabantio’s complaint against Othello, they have rendered Brabantio’s claim of the previous scene ironic, in that they have created a “statesman” from a “bondslave and a pagan” (the former label associating black skin loosely with slavery, the latter associating Moors loosely with Mahometans). Othello will lead the Venetian forces against their enemy, making him a de facto high-ranking representative of the Catholic state.25

The Venetian regime’s treatment of Brabantio’s case extends the scene’s political irony into the ethical and cultural terrain of Brabantio’s racial bias against Othello. When Brabantio interrupts the war council, he reiterates his racist premise that since his daughter is “not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,” she is a victim of “witchcraft” (1.3.63-64). The Duke seems to accept that premise initially in promising to punish with “the bloody book of law” (1.3.67) whoever has done this to Brabantio’s daughter. Yet, even though Brabantio finds miscegenation “Against all rules of nature” (1.3.101), members of the Senate seem to be willing to bless the union if Othello won Desdemona’s heart fairly: “Did you,” asks a Senator to Othello,

by indirect and forced courses
Subdue and poison this young maid’s affections?
Or came it by request and such fair question
As soul to soul affordeth? (1.3.111-14)

Othello states that he is not an articulate person: “Rude am I in my speech,/ And little bless’d

25 “To pick up Othello’s story then,” Bartels writes, “in the volatile environment where the play insists we must, to view Venice’s relation to the Moorish stranger in the here and now of Venice, is to recognize that the terms of that relation derive not only from the Venetians but also, as significantly, from the Moor. If the opening scene prompts us to read the Moor through Venice, once Othello appears the play prompts us, reciprocally, to read Venice through the Moor, proposing and endorsing him as representative of the Venetian state” (171).
with the soft phrase of peace” (1.3.81.82). Then Shakespeare gives his Moor a rhetorical quality and musicality of speech that no other character in the play possesses. At this point, the Senate, “this office of gouerning assemblings of men […] giuen to the minde and reason onely” (Contarini/ Lewkenor 10), puts on hold war strategy to discuss Othello and Desdemona’s marital status. They prefer to listen to Othello’s story rather than to continue planning for the defense of Cyprus. Even though Brabantio had welcomed Othello into his house (1.3.128), Othello understands the Senator’s repulsion for his foreignness in stating, “I do confess the vices of my blood” (1.3.123), and asks permission to tell his story. When he finishes, the Duke has forgotten the promise he gave Brabantio moments earlier and declares, “I think this tale would win my daughter too” (1.3.171). After Desdemona confirms that she has married the Moor because she loves him, or rather, loves the picture of him that she paints in her mind (1.3.252), the Duke blesses Othello and Desdemona’s matrimony and bestows on the Moor a right reserved only to Venetian citizens. Then the Duke returns to state business briefly to give Othello his assignment. The discussion turns to the trivial again when Othello requests accommodations for Desdemona while he is away (1.3.236-274). Finally, the Duke remembers that he has a war situation to discuss:

Be it as you shall privately determine,  
Either for her stay or going. Th’affair cries haste,  
And speed must answer.” (1.3.275-77)

The Duke and Senators share Brabantio’s general cultural bias but make a terrific and ultimately tragic exception for Othello as a foreigner because of his military ethos.

In *Othello*, the protagonist role of the state in the first act, which gets attributed there to Othello as Venetian military commander, links it to the tragic events of Act 5. The word “state”
is uttered eight times in Act I: “justice of the state,” “business of the state,” “the state affairs,” etc. The state is the power around which all the characters and their actions gravitate. The state does not do anything to get Iago his coveted appointment:

[...] Three great ones of the city,
In personal suit to make me his lieutenant
Off-capp'd to him; and, by the faith of man,
I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.
But he loving his own pride and purposes
Evades them with a bumbast circumstance
Horribly stuff'd with epithites of war,
And in conclusion,
Nonsuits my mediators; for, “Certes,” says he,
“I have already chose my officer.” (1.1.8-17)

The state gives Othello a war-hero status, and now the republic's security depends on him:

Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you
Against the general enemy Ottoman. (1.3.47-48)

The state blesses Othello and Desdemona's union: “Let me speak like yourself,” says the Duke to Brabantio,

and lay a sentence,
Which as a grise or step, may help these lovers. (1.3.199-200)

The state later removes Othello from Cyprus and appoints Cassio as governor:

[...] they do command him home,
Deputing Cassio in his government. (4.1.237-38)

Montano, as governor of Cyprus and representing the state, allows Emilia to unmask Iago when she asks, “Good gentlemen, let me have leave to speak” (5.2.195). Furthermore, it is the state who will torture and dispose of Iago (1.1.153):

To you, Lord Governor,
Remains the censure of this hellish villain,
The time, the place, the torture, O, enforce it! (5.2. 367-69)

Although not written in the play but, as mentioned before, a fact that was most likely known to the audience at Whitehall is that ultimately, the Turks would defeat the state of Venice
in Cyprus. In *Othello*, David McPherson explains, "[t]he fall of the real, as opposed to the fictional, Cyprus was not a possibility but a *fait accompli*; and the fall of the real Cyprus in a sense foreshadows the fall of Othello himself" (90). We witness Othello’s emotional and ontological disintegration from the beginning. The opening and closing acts constitute what Elizabeth Frazer would call the political “frame” of the play (507). As Matheson observes, the representation of the government of Venice and its hierarchies in the first act of *Othello* are crucially consequential for all the characters involved. The first act “is indispensable for generating the basic dramatic situation” (171). Virginia Mason Vaughan emphasizes that Act I is about contemporary global politics (*Contextual* 6). Disintegration begins when the state trusts Othello with the safety of the republic, allows him to keep Desdemona as a wife, and lets him take her along to Cyprus. Added to these ill-fated decisions is Othello’s misunderstanding of his true status in Venice, where he thinks he belongs. Othello sees the state as a quasi-divine power and himself as a man who owes devotion to that power. Matheson explains that Othello is “arguably the most conservative character in the play” (174). Even though, later on, Othello claims that he does not have “those soft parts of conversation/ That chamberers have” (3.3.264-66), earlier he talks of his royal stock, of himself as someone who “fetch[ed][his] life and being/ From men of royal siege” (1.2.21-22). Othello addresses the Senate with reverent devotion:

    Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors,
    My very noble and approved good masters; (1.3. 76-77)

    I kiss the instrument of their pleasures. (4.1.218)

He speaks as if he were talking to a king rather than to the group of men who hired him as a mercenary. Othello, a Moor, sounds more Christian than the Catholic Duke or the Senators. Matheson points out how the council members never use Christian language in their deliberations, whereas Othello does:
Are we turn’d Turks, and to ourselves do that
Which heaven has forbid the Ottomites?
For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl. (2.3.170-172)

In Matheson’s opinion, Othello seems to think of himself as a religious fighter, a crusader rather than the mercenary he is (175). Iago sees all this and takes advantage of Othello’s naïveté.

“Othello,” writes Vaughan,

is caught between the old ideals and the new professionalism; his adherence to a chivalric code of honor defines his sense of ‘occupation’ and makes him more vulnerable to the wiles of Iago, a perversion of the new military man (Contextual 5).

In Act II, after Iago makes Cassio lose his lieutenancy for the drunken incident (2.3), he begins to work on Othello. Late in Act 3 Scene 3, through Iago’s machinations, Shakespeare divests Othello of the martial demeanor and regal rhetoric that he displays at the beginning of the play and transforms him into the frantic imaginary cuckold of which Iago warned Othello shortly beforehand in the same scene:

\[ Iago: \] O beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-ey’d monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. (3.3.165-67)

Iago manipulates Othello as a man of nature other than his own:

\[ Iago: \] I would not have your free and noble nature,
Out of self-bounty, be abus’d. (3.3.199-200)

Othello is a foreigner whose “free and noble nature” is vulnerable to the mores of a decadent society and its women:

\[ Iago: \] In Venice they do let God see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands. (3.3.202-203)
Iago reminds Othello of Brabantio’s warning words in 1.3.292-93: “She did deceive her father, marrying you” (3.3.206). Now Othello suddenly begins to think how delusional he had been in believing that a beautiful, white Venetian young woman could have fallen in love with a man like him. Iago reminds him that Desdemona refused men “Of her own clime, complexion, and degree” (3.3.230). Then Iago mischievously implies that Desdemona’s infatuation with Othello might not have been because of “the dangers [he] had pass’d” (1.3.167) as he thought, but something (for the mores of Brabantio and at least some members of the early modern audience) sexually “perverse” on her behavior:

[…] one may smell in [Desdemona’s] will [to marry Othello], most rank, Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural. (3.3. 232-33)

And then, Iago continues, after satiating her sexual curiosity for a Moor, Desdemona finally realizes her mistake:

But pardon me I do not in position Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear Her will, recoiling to her better judgment, May fall to match you with her country forms And happily repent. (3.3. 234-38)

Now Othello is at Iago’s mercy. He not only has made the Moor an irrationally jealous gull, but he has also removed from him his regal pride and eloquence, and, most hurtfully for Othello, he has reminded him that he is not only “an extravagant and wheeling stranger” (1.1.150), a foreigner, but also an old man:

Haply, for I am black, And have not those soft parts of conversation That chamberers have, or for I am declin’d Into the vale of years […] (3.3.263-66)

By the end of Act III Othello's rhetoric is Senecan in nature:

Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell! Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne
To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught,
For 'tis of aspicks' tongues! [...] 
O blood, blood, blood! (3.3.446-451)

As Othello’s mind suffers the effects of Iago’s “poison” (3.3.325), he begins to accept the fact that his “honest” ancient might be right, that his own delusions of love have cuckolded him. The man of war is no longer on the battlefield valiantly defending the republic but in the middle of a domestic drama (the stuff of stage comedy) wherein he has become the pusillanimous character he prophetically described earlier to the Duke and Senators:

[...] when light-wing’d toys
Of feather’d Cupid seel with wanton dullness
My speculative and offic’d instruments,
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and base adversities
Make head against my estimations! (1.3.268-74)

He feels utterly alone, and dispossessed of that that had given meaning to his life:

Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars [...] 
Othello’s occupation’s gone. (3.3.348-57)

At this point, Shakespeare turns the play into a tragedy of psychological horror.

“Cyprus’s geographical and political position,” Vaughan argues, “mirrors Othello’s psychic situation. Like Cyprus, Othello can be colonized by Venice -- he can be put to use. But he can never become wholly Venetian” (Visions 22). In a fateful moment of hubris, Othello takes a member of the Venetian nobility as his bride, and the state of Venice allows it. “[T]he marriage does not and cannot change him, though it changes his relationship to Venice,” writes Harold Bloom, “in the highly ironic sense of making him more than ever an outsider” (Invention 448).

In political terms, what had made Othello a Christian and not a “Turk” was his mercenary work for Venice. “Othello’s position vis-à-vis the Venetian state,” writes Graham Holderness, “is [...]
explicitly one of acknowledged alienation: he is there because he is different. He is respected, honored, trusted, treated as the ‘noble Moor’; but he is not accepted as a Venetian” (133).

In the final act, the play goes through another dramatic transformation. Othello’s psychomachia begins at the end of Act III and becomes madness in Act V. He is no longer an imaginary old cuckold but a tragic hero and a sinister priest presiding over a syncretic sacrifice. Desdemona is his sacrificial lamb:

[…] she must die, else she'll betray more men. (5.2.6)

[…] what I intend to do […] a sacrifice. (5.2.64-65)

Othello, the converted Catholic, performs his own version of the last rites on his victim:

Have you pray'd to-night, Desdemon? […]
If you bethink yourself of any crime
Unreconcil'd as yet to heaven and grace,
Solicit for it straight.
[…] I will walk by.
I would not kill thy unprepared spirit.
No heaven forfend! I would not kill thy soul […]
Think on thy sins.
[…] and for that thou di’st.
[…] I say, amen. (5.2.25-58)

Desdemona’s reaction to word of Cassio's "death" ignites Othello’s fury and precipitates the ritual toward its horrific end:

Othello: [Cassio’s] mouth is stopp’d;
Honest Iago hath ta’en order for’t.

Desdemona: […] What, is he dead?
[…] Alas, he is betry’d and I undone!

Othello: Out, strumpet! weep'st thou for him to my face?
[…] Down, strumpet! (5.2.71-79)

It takes just a moment, and the arrival of Emilia, for Othello to begin the process of the classic tragic hero’s final, fateful realization:
If [Emilia] come in, she'll sure speak to my wife.  
My wife! my wife! what wife? I have no wife.  
O, insupportable! O heavy hour! (5.2.96-98)

Othello is now the embodiment of Vice:

*Emilia:* [...] thou [Othello] art a devil. (5.2.132)

And yet, after making Othello a Venetian hero, an imaginary cuckold, and a despicable killer, in the end, Shakespeare grants his Moor a remorseful – and, arguably, redemptive – Senecan-style anagnorisis:

[...] O cursed, cursed slave!  
Whip me, ye devils,  
From the possession of this heavenly sight!  
Blow me about in winds! Roast me in sulphur!  
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!  
O Desdemon! dead, Desdemon! dead! O, O! (5.2.277-282)

The Venetian state is represented in the final scene by the presence of Montano, Gratiano, and Lodovico. The events in Act I are indispensable to understanding the irony in Lodovico's admonition to Othello in Act Five:

O thou Othello that was once so good,  
Fall'n in the practice of a damned slave,  
What shall be said to thee? (5.2.291-293)

The same question could be asked to the state of Venice that put all its trust in a converted Moorish mercenary and blessed his marriage to a Venetian noblewoman despite her father's opposition:

*Duke:* I think [Othello’s] tale would win my daughter too. (1.3.171)

*Senator:* [...] brave Moor, use Desdemona well. (1.3.291)

Throughout the play, Othello is hailed as a brave, skillful commander, as the soldier who would protect Venetian Cyprus from the threatening Turk. However, we never see him on the
battlefield. Of the main male characters, Othello is the only one who does not fight. The only person he strikes is his wife (4.1.240). It is just at the end that he tries to justify the prestige he once had:

I have done the state some service, and they know't
[...] in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him -- thus. (5.2.339-356)

We finally see him in action here, serving the state – as the “erring barbarian” (1.3.355-56) hired to fight the barbarians – when he executes himself. In Othello's final speech, Holderness argues, "[t]o say he has done the state some service links him to Venice, but also separates him from it: he has assisted, from the outside, a state that is not wholly his, of which he is not a citizen" (133). When war, Othello's sacred métier, is over, he falls into ontological emptiness. Marrying Desdemona makes him feel alive and empowered within Venice personally, but killing Desdemona divests him of his humanity. His anagnorisis prompts him to die for Venice for killing a Venetian. As Holderness points out, he dies by doing that for which Venice hired him: to kill Turks, to kill the "malignant…Turk," into which he has turned. Four hundred years have deluded the tragic irony of this final scene. Othello was the enemy within, but the gullible republican state, which put so much trust in its foreign mercenaries, failed to see it. To replace Othello as Cyprus's protector, the state of Venice turns to another foreigner, Cassio, a book soldier, a desk soldier. As the play closes, Lodovico decides to return to Venice to relate to the state the tragic end of the Moor (5.2.370-71), to the state of Venice that itself stands on the brink of decline.
CONCLUSIONS

1603-1604, the year of *Othello*, was a turning point year for Shakespeare, in that the newly crowned King James I became Shakespeare's sovereign and his patron. I believe that *Othello's* topicality is a response to this event. Like some of his contemporaries, Shakespeare saluted the king with a work written specifically for him. In *Othello*, directly and indirectly, he addresses a relatively recent historical event (the Battle of Lepanto), current events (the reopening of trade with Venice, the English trade expansion into the Levant, the westbound expansion of the Ottoman Empire, and the fear that this provoked in the British psyche), and, as England began exploring new territories, the close encounters with Africans and the peoples of the New World. All these topics and the exoticism associated with them interested King James. *Othello’s* character evokes this exoticism. Furthermore, the Republic of Venice, a setting that Shakespeare had researched almost ten years earlier when composing *The Merchant of Venice*, stood in contrast with James's political philosophy. Shakespeare considers all these factors and composes a tragicomedy following the comedy-turned-tragedy structure he had successfully experimented with in *Romeo and Juliet*. In *Othello*, Shakespeare takes the popular imaginary cuckold-gullible-jealous-husband theme of early modern comedy and turns his play into a grotesque tragedy laced with a subtle political commentary. The incongruities that some critics find between *Othello's* political first act and the rest of the play show some degree of haste on Shakespeare’s part. As a commentator speculates, the first act could have been composed later than the Cyprus acts. In my view, Shakespeare made this insertion to include the Lepanto theme and Venice's republican governing body at work during a crucial time in its history. Thus, the
first act frames *Othello*’s political commentary on the Republic of Venice. Although Cinthio's novella did not include any scene where the Doge of Venice and the Senators deliberate on matters of war, Shakespeare decided to create such a scene where the republican members of government put in the hands of a Moor the fate of Cyprus, while at the same time happily approving his marriage to a white Venetian noblewoman. On November 1, 1604, the audience at Whitehall might have seen *Othello* as a political commentary criticizing the mythical Republic of Venice where a cunning ensign easily manipulates his gullible and irascible exotic master, driving him to murder and suicide. In *Othello* Shakespeare portrays the government of Venice as a gullible state that invests the safety of its republic in a gullible, old, Moorish soldier hired to protect Venetians from the evil Turks. In the end, the Moor, whom the Venetians revere as their commander against the Turks, turns himself into one and kills the beautiful, virginal Venetian the state allowed to be his legal wife. This representation of the mythical Republic of Venice in a state of weakness and wild disarray presumably pleased King James, mainly because he and the rest of the Whitehall audience knew the historical outcome for Cyprus from the beginning.
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