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## Animal Imagery in Othello: How Hatred And Racist Slurs Affected Othello During Play

Othello incurs resentment for many reasons. He is from a land that Venetians consider exotic and mysterious, he has had unique adventures, and his military accomplishments far exceed those of the men around him. The most visible indicator of his outsider status is also the one that provokes the most poisonous responses: Othello is a black man in white Venice. Whenever characters such as Iago feel jealousy, fear, or simple hatred toward Othello, they give vent to their feelings by using racist slurs. For much of the play, Othello resists, ignores, or seems indifferent to the racism that dogs him. But eventually, he internalizes Iago's and others' idea that his blackness makes him barbarous. This belief, as much as his conviction of Desdemona's guilt, allows Othello to kill his wife. When he turns the race weapon against himself, he dooms both himself and Desdemona.

Among Iago's many repulsive qualities, his eagerness to hurl racial epithets is perhaps the most shocking. In an attempt to enlist Brabantio in his anti-Othello cause, Iago refers to the general as "the Moor," "the devil," and "a Barbary horse." These terms reduce Othello to a crude stereotype, turning him into a villain and an animal. When Iago tells Brabantio that "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe," he demeans a passionate and loving relationship between two intelligent adults by characterizing Othello as a mindless rutting animal who has soiled the pure Desdemona with his lust. Iago hopes to disgust Brabantio with this animal imagery and with the contrast between Othello's blackness and Desdemona's whiteness.

Like Iago, other Venetians resort to racial slurs to deal with their own feelings of inferiority or powerlessness. Roderigo, on the defensive and trying to present himself and Iago as a unified front, casually refers to Othello as "the thick-lips." This epithet is both an attempt to undermine Othello's military achievements with a cheap stereotype as well as a way to pit Roderigo and Iago's physical similarity against Othello's unfamiliar appearance. Brabantio, outraged at his daughter's elopement, expresses disbelief that Desdemona could shun the curly-haired young men of Venice in favor of Othello's "sooty bosom." Brabantio channels his own insecurity about his daughter's loyalty to him by expressing sneering disgust about Othello's race, implying that Othello's blackness is a dirty coating that threatens to soil Desdemona's purity.

While Othello is barraged by racism, he manages to resist its pull for some time. But in Act IV, he crumbles. Othello discusses his race throughout the play—usually in response to something a white Venetian says—but here he makes his first negative reference to it, suggesting that perhaps his blackness is to blame for his lack of conversational ability. It is a quiet moment, but a hugely significant one. It marks a turning point: Othello has fallen victim to the same racist logic (or illogic) that rules the thinking of people such as Iago and Roderigo. Like those men, Othello wants to place the blame for his feelings of inferiority somewhere and winds up laying that blame not where it belongs (in this case, at Iago's feet), but on his own skin. The floodgates have opened, and now Othello is in danger of believing all of Iago's racist nonsense. In the next lines, Othello compares himself to a toad living in a dungeon, as if he has begun to suspect that his blackness makes him a loathsome animal, somehow less than human. Only when Othello buys into the absurd idea that his race inherently makes him dangerous does he begin to creep toward the possibility of doing violence to his wife. When he sees himself through

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society's eyes, as a barbaric interloper, Othello begins to despise himself, and it is that self-hatred that allows him to kill what he loves most.

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