

13. *Othello*

As I argued at length in the introduction to the chapter on *Troilus and Cressida*, I believe that the four plays Shakespeare wrote around the turn of the century, *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure* and *Othello*, are all, in a sense, about the same thing, the conflict within the human psyche between the mind and the passions. One way of describing this split is as a conflict between the most civilized part of a man and the most barbaric part (which is seldom far beneath the surface).

This has, of course, been a common theme in philosophical and psychological discussion since the beginnings of civilization. One of the most graphic presentations of it occurs in Plato's *Phaedrus*. In Plato's (or Socrates') parable, the mind or ego is the driver of a chariot drawn by two horses, one white (spirit) and one black (body). The parable seeks to justify any amount of cruelty to the body and its needs and desires:

The driver ... jerks the bit from between the teeth of the lustful horse, drenches his abusive tongue and jaws with blood, and forcing his legs and haunches against the ground reduces him to torment.

Christianity inherited this fundamental symbolism of white for purity, innocence, the spiritual, the heavenly, the angelic, and black for the basest elements of our nature, the bestial, the barbaric, the sinful. Before the issue of racism arose in Western consciousness, the language itself had been loaded against the black and the dark, almost guaranteeing a spontaneous horror at the sight or even thought of a black man. In Medieval plays and entertainments the devil himself was presented as black.

Othello himself is well aware of the precariousness of his position, given the colour of his skin: 'Haply, for I am black ...'. That he should have risen to a position of great respect and authority within the highly civilized Venetian state is remarkable, but he is able to retain that respect only by allowing himself to be defined purely as a military man who has done the state some service. In that capacity he is accepted as a guest in Brabantio's home. But the moment he steps out of that role and becomes the lover, all the suspended prejudices are awakened: 'An old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe', 'the devil will make a grandsire of you'. This is not just Iago's foul mind. He carefully chooses those phrases he knows will find a ready answer in Brabantio, who is later to say to Othello's face 'the sooty bosom of such a thing as thou'. He cannot believe that his daughter would 'fall in love with what she fear'd to look on'; being 'against all rules of nature', that could be explained only by 'practices of cunning hell'. It is only at a fairly superficial level that it matters that Othello is a Moor. The imagery the colour of Othello's skin makes available functions in the same way as the imagery of night in *Macbeth* or storm in *King Lear*.

The imagery deriving from Othello's race and colour is closely linked to the imagery of place. Venice is the city, sophisticated, a citadel of law and order, reason and control. When Brabantio loses his daughter he virtually says, 'such things don't happen in Venice'. Beyond lies the encafèd flood, with marauding destructive forces, the barbarian Turks. Beyond that the still more barbarous, indeed monstrous, people (if they are people) and places described by Othello, 'the Cannibals, that each other eat; / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / do grow beneath their shoulders'. Contrasting

with the splendid civic and religious buildings of Venice, he describes ‘antres vast and deserts idle / Rough quarries, rocks and hills, whose heads touch heaven’.

Cyprus is the frontier between these opposed worlds, an outpost of civilization weakly defended, subject to storms and the buffeting of the sea, a ‘town of war yet wild’. Violence there is not merely a threat from without, but is near the surface of ordinary life. Iago hires to help him start a brawl

Three else of Cyprus, noble swelling spirits
That hold their honour in a wary distance
The very elements of this warlike isle.

His efforts to subvert the peace had failed in Venice, but succeed with ease in Cyprus.

The control of this constant threat of violence from within and without is in the hands of one man, Othello, himself a converted Christian of savage origins. He expresses his horror at the riot with the words ‘Are we turned Turks?’

Thus the racial and geographical symbolism clearly has its social and psychological parallels. Othello fails to maintain discipline in Cyprus; nor can he control his own passions. Before Iago says a word to him about Desdemona he says:

My blood begins my safer guides to rule,
And passion having my best judgement collied
Assays to lead the way.

He is already, it seems, turning Turk. But before we look more closely at this process, let us turn to Iago.

Coleridge spoke of ‘the motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity’. Indeed, Iago puts forward so many motives, envy of Othello’s standing and of Cassio’s promotion, suspicion that Othello has usurped his bed with Emilia, and all of them with so little conviction, that it is clear that he cannot adequately account for his own behaviour in terms of what we normally think of as motives. He is clearly motivated by pride in his own ‘gained knowledge’, that is his skill in manipulating others, particularly those held generally in high esteem. But what has motivated him, apparently for many years, to devote so much of his life to acquiring such perverse knowledge he probably could not say; but Shakespeare gives us plenty of evidence.

Arthur Miller praised Shakespeare’s courage in daring to create a character motivated by the simple urge to do evil, knowing it to be evil. What Iago does is no doubt evil, but it is a particular form of evil which is also open to definition in psychological and philosophical terms, especially in relation to what I have said about the split between reason and passion in the human psyche, a split which had become critical in Shakespeare’s time and to which Shakespeare was super-sensitive.

At the beginning of the play Iago has already gained himself the sobriquet ‘honest Iago’. He presents himself as a man not easily taken in. His insistence that Desdemona, whatever her qualities, is still a woman: ‘the wine she drinks is made of grapes’ is

perhaps healthier than Othello's insistence that she be something more than a creature of flesh and blood, rather a jewel in his crown, a 'perfect chrysolite'. His description of Othello as 'loving his own pride and purposes' is only too true, as appears at its most disgusting extreme in his claim that it would not have mattered if every soldier in the army had had Desdemona provided he had known nothing of it. The travellers' tales with which Othello had wooed Desdemona were, stripped of their imposing rhetoric, little more than 'bragging and telling fantastical lies'. Reputation is Othello's highest value, which he equates with his integrity – 'Othello's reputation's gone'. With the hindsight of Othello valuing his own reputation above the life of his wife, we must sympathize with Iago's more sceptical attitude: 'I thought you had received some bodily wound; there is more offence in that than in reputation. Reputation is an idle and most false imposition'.

But of course Iago's scepticism extends well beyond such suspect values as reputation, and easily slides into cynicism. He appears to accept none of the values which are normally thought to make man's life better than beast's. Love he dismisses as 'merely a lust of the blood', but his soliloquies reveal that he has no idea what the word means:

That Cassio loves her, I do well believe it;
That she loves him, 'tis apt and of great credit:
The Moor, howbe't that I endure him not,
Is of a constant, loving, noble nature;
And I dare think he'll prove to Desdemona
A most dear husband: now I do love her too ...

The same presumably applies to virtue, which he dismisses as 'a fig!' Cassio, he claims, has a daily beauty in his life which makes his own ugly. But since he does not understand what constitutes that beauty, how it could be achieved, why it should be valued, his only possible response is to attempt to destroy it. Iago's critical intellect has cut him off from the intuitions which, in a whole person, would recognize and generate such qualities as love and virtue. As Othello is ruled and his 'safer guides' overruled by passion, so Iago is ruled by an analytical, sterile, disconnected intellect which can allow passion no place at all in a man's life, except, perhaps, the passion to destroy.

Othello has often been read as a drama of intrigue, or as a bullfight in which the consummate skill of the matador (Iago) gradually outwits and outmanoeuvres the dangerous, the splendidly powerful bull. Of course this is an aspect of the play, but again, it seems to me, only at a fairly superficial level. It would be perfectly possible to write Iago out of the play (as one could write Mephistophilis out of *Dr. Faustus*). The play would become much less dramatic, and might work better as a novel, but the essential meanings would be unaffected, and there would be something gained in that we would remove the temptation to shift responsibility for what happens from Othello to Iago, who in some productions becomes the centre of dramatic interest. Earlier critics seemed unable to resist accepting Othello's own evaluation of himself as an 'honourable murderer', as 'one that lov'd not wisely, but too well', as 'one not easily jealous, but being wrought / perplex'd in the extreme'. If this were true it would make *Othello* the

only tragedy in which the hero is brought down by an agency external to himself. To take Othello's account at face-value is to misread the whole play. In fact Iago's task is made ridiculously easy by the fact that he is merely required to accelerate and make more violent a process that would have happened anyway, to get the tip of his wedge into an already-existing crack. I do not mean Othello's temperamental propensity to sexual jealousy, nor even his racial insecurity (though both of these help), but rather his lack of self-knowledge, of psychological balance, and of any real knowledge of the woman he loves.

Desdemona is often presented as a merely pathetic figure. She is, like all Shakespeare's heroines from now on, extremely strong, much more honest and whole and psychologically well-balanced than any of the male characters. Her astonishing confidence and maturity are evident in the speech in which she begs the Duke and Senators to allow her to accompany Othello to Cyprus. Here she claims, quite unambiguously, that she loved Othello 'to live with him', that her heart is subdued 'even to the utmost pleasure of my lord', and that if she be left behind 'the rites for which I love him are bereft me'. In other words the whole purpose of her marriage will be denied if it remains unconsummated. Othello, who has clearly not listened to a word she has said, then says exactly the opposite, that he is too old to have any sexual feelings, and wishes to have Desdemona with him only 'to be free and bounteous of her mind'. That for which Desdemona has consecrated her soul and fortunes, sexual love, is dismissed by Othello as 'toys' which would corrupt and taint his reputation.

The contempt he here expresses for sexual love prepares us for the fact that once the floodgates have been opened, Othello is overwhelmed. Iago forces him to contemplate his wife 'naked in bed', and the image so disturbs him that his imagination is flooded with images of bestiality, licentiousness and corruption: 'goats and monkeys!'. His imagination can cope with sexual feelings only by distancing, sanitizing, aestheticizing and refrigerating them. Having failed to preserve his image of Desdemona as angel, Othello relegates her first to the bestial, then, still lower, to the mineral. Her human body and beauty is something his mind cannot cope with. To escape the intolerable attraction of warm flesh and balmy breath (divorced from any knowledge of or interest in Desdemona beyond her beauty) he tries to convert it imaginatively into the cold and hard forms of non-human beauty which do not engage his passions, snow, monumental alabaster, chrysolite, pearl. All these are lifeless ('cold, cold, my girl'). It is safer, for his self-esteem, to kill her first and love her after.

Thus Iago's function is not to corrupt Othello, but to pull the plug and release the pent-up corruption beneath Othello's apparent all-in-all sufficiency – a perfection as vulnerable as Angelo's. Like Angelo Othello is so unbalanced in one direction, that once he loses control he experiences enantiodromia (see the chapter on *Measure for Measure*), a sudden switch to the opposite extreme. By trying to overrule, repress and deny his natural passions, he demonizes them and becomes their slave. The apparent saint becomes a devil.

Iago succeeds so easily not because he has a Machiavellian intellect, but because he finds such a ready ear for his insinuations, he is preaching to the half-converted. He is merely giving voice to a logically extreme form of Othello's own suspicions – not suspicions about Desdemona specifically, but about women and sex in general. Othello's attitude to women is an unholy combination of the romantic and the puritanical, each

equally denying the woman her full humanity, projecting onto her the man's impossible image. All women are (or ought to be) pure, untouchable, almost bodiless; but if they fail to match up to this, they are condemned as whores.

Hamlet is his own Iago, voicing those doubts obsessively from the first soliloquy onwards. Othello's blood and judgement are so ill-commingled that he becomes a pipe for Iago's finger to play what stop he please. If there were no envious and calumniating Iago to push the pedestal into the ditch, envious and calumniating time would do it sooner or later. Othello half realizes that only death can preserve perfection:

If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute,
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.

Behind the rhetoric of this, Othello is saying to Desdemona, at the threshold of the consummation of their marriage, that from here on their lives can only go downhill. Desdemona is rightly alarmed by this sombre prospect:

The heavens forbid
But that our loves and comforts should increase,
Even as our days do grow.

But the absolute content Othello strains for is by definition outside time, and therefore outside the world of process, the natural world where things increase and grow, and die in due season.

Thus Shakespeare is at pains to reveal to us that just as Hamlet was incomplete, tainted in his mind, before the Ghost undermined him, so Othello is not 'all-in-all sufficient' before Iago begins his work. He is already dry tinder awaiting the spark Iago supplies. He is a mature version of Adonis or Troilus for whom if love cannot be an absolute outside time it might as well be as Iago defines it 'merely a lust of the blood', in which case it can be left to goats and monkeys. The goddess, as always, once denied, appears in her ugly and destructive aspects, the only aspects in which Iago has ever seen her. Iago is but the externalization of what is left in Othello's psyche when his attempt to exclude the goddess altogether fails.

Iago accomplishes his purpose in a single scene. At the beginning of that scene Othello is still maintaining his pose of perfection:

I'll see before I doubt, when I doubt, prove,
And on the proof, there is no more but this
Away at once with love and jealousy.

Within eighty lines, during which Iago has produced not a shred of proof, Othello is reduced to

She's gone, I am abused, and my relief

Must be to loathe her.

The actor is given every indication of how he must play this scene. The dialogue is punctuated with Iago's fascinated commentary: 'You are moved', 'I see you are moved', 'You are eaten up with passion'. Othello must roll his eyes and pace like a caged tiger. The scene which began with

I do love thee, and when I love thee not
Chaos is come again

ends with

I'll tear her all to pieces.
Damn her, lewd minx.

Not once in all this does Othello consider Desdemona's 'mind'. For all he knows she is just another 'supersubtle Venetian'. His only evidence for her innocence has been her beauty, and at the end it is not her pleas of innocence but her 'body and beauty' which he fears might cause him to relent. For all his protestations to the contrary it becomes obvious that he is, in fact, obsessed with her 'sweet body', but to admit such feelings to himself would undermine his self-esteem and the image of whiter-than-white he seeks to project. I imagine Othello when we first see him dressed in dazzling white. He probably employs a better tailor than any of the Venetian grandes. His whole life effort has been to repudiate everything he and the world associated with blackness – his passions, his kinship with the whole animal creation. To acknowledge this part of himself would be to see himself as Iago sees him – the 'lascivious Moor'.

It has been claimed that Othello, more than any other character in Shakespeare, is a poet. If poetry is truth-telling, an attempt to understand and articulate the self, others and the world, as in the speech of Cordelia, then Othello is not a poet. His 'poetry' is impressive rhetoric designed to create an effect, to strike a pose: 'Put up your bright swords or the dew will rust them'. He is, rather, an actor. The first role in which we see him is that of omnicompetent soldier and adventurer, a role in which he has never been challenged to navigate the stormy sea of his own unconscious. His disciplined military life and apparently complete acculturation to Venetian civilization have so far successfully protected him from exposure to it. His second role, as lover, begins as an extension of the first: his exploits require an admiring sympathetic audience:

She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd,
And I lov'd her that she did pity them.

But of course marriage soon takes him into much deeper waters than this. The third role is as dauntless revenger: 'Away at once with love or jealousy' (a role not dissimilar from that of Laertes who, once assured of the identity of his father's killer, would 'cut his

throat i' the church'). The fourth role is that of an exalted instrument of Justice: 'It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul'. Othello has now recovered his self-possession. He believes his reputation can, to some extent be salvaged as an 'honourable murderer'. He has someone else to blame, and his final role as tragic hero allows him to regain his full stature as fearless warrior, defender of Venice and Christendom. This he expresses both in the grand dramatic gesture and in the 'Othello music' of his finale:

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where malignant and turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian, and traduc'd the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him thus.

Because he is the only one in whom the tragic flaw is externalized, Othello seems to have less of an inner life and to be less capable of radical change than the other tragic heroes. It remains possible for him to believe to the end that he has done 'all in honour', loved 'not wisely but too well'. Hamlet matures from eighteen to thirty in the space of a few months. Troilus is utterly transformed. Lear is reborn. Macbeth gazes horrified into the void at the centre of himself. Othello simply exchanges one self-aggrandizing role for another.

Some critics, readers and theatregoers have been taken in by this. Almost all were until well into the twentieth century. Shakespeare was expected to speak for nobility and all the romantic ideals. But take away the role-playing and the rhetoric, or rather recognize them for what they are, and Othello's behaviour is the opposite of noble. Desdemona is killed by lies; not so much the sordid lies of Iago as the glamorous, self-deceiving lies of Othello. Another noble woman gives her life that the truth should be told, Emilia, who says to Othello's face: 'O gull, O dolt, / As ignorant as dirt', and who speaks the most truly poetic words in the play, words stripped of rhetoric, words of monosyllabic simplicity and truth: 'What should such a fool / Do with so good a woman'.

[© Keith Sagar 2001. This essay may be quoted with due acknowledgement.]