

Othello and the Sense of an Ending

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"But the *Othello* of Shakespeare cannot be acted." I misquote Charles Lamb, substituting *Othello* where he said *Lear*, to express a doubt concerning the artistry of this indisputably fine tragedy. It is a doubt that was enlarged rather than reduced by the 1978 Australian tour of the Chichester Festival Theatre Company. With a wealth of talent at work — Peter Dews directing, Keith Michell playing Othello, Roy Dotrice playing Iago, and in some performances the gifted young Jessica Turner as an incomparably moving Desdemona — this company's presentation of the play nevertheless left many of its viewers obscurely unsatisfied. Something had failed to connect. Part of the trouble stemmed from Dotrice's extrovert and ultimately nonsensical Iago: Peter Dews had allowed him to signal to audiences that a suppressed passion for Desdemona lay at the heart of Iago's vicious machinations, while most of the Iago performance (perhaps broadening as the tour went on) could only be described as cheerful. But aside from and running beyond this easily-locatable misjudgement, there was a feeling that even Keith Michell's much better controlled performance had missed its mark in the second half of the play — not through any perversity of interpretation, and certainly not through any shortcomings in the technique of this great actor. The fault, I wish to suggest, was Shakespeare's. The dramatic logic of *Othello* falters in the last act, and falters in such a way that the better the actor playing the Moor the deeper the emotional confusion created in him and thence in his audience.

To try to identify the method of this play with precision, it is useful to seek agreement about what it is *not*: it is not the powerful but sordid story of a garrison intrigue, which is how Dame Helen Gardner has rightly described the source of its plot, Giambattista Giraldi Cinthio's story of Disdemona and the Moorish Captain.¹ Essential differences between the short story and the play begin early. Shakespeare increases the tragic potential of the subject-matter significantly when he takes the trouble to describe in detail the surprising beginnings of the Othello-

1 Helen Gardner, "The Noble Moor", British Academy Shakespeare Lecture, 1955, reprinted in Anne Ridler (ed.), *Shakespeare Criticism 1935-60*, London 1963, p. 367.

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Desdemona relationship. Like *Troilus and Cressida* before it and *Antony and Cleopatra* after it, this tragedy is to enact the destruction of a love affair, and our appreciation of its intensity is heightened by suggestions that each of the lovers was particularly lonely before it all began. Desdemona, we learn, was the cosseted property of a rich father who emerges as the one despicable figure in the play ("Look to her, Moor, . . . / She has deceived her father, and may thee"). Othello, for all his success in his professional military sphere, is always a foreigner in Venice. During the Senate scene, I.iii, he is "the Moor" much oftener than "Othello", even in Desdemona's speeches, and most references to his black skin carry the usual Jacobean secondary sense for black, "ugly"; as when the Duke playfully rhymes,

If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.²
(I.iii.289)

The marriage of this black man to Desdemona could come about only by elopement or some similar coercion of her father, but Shakespeare further emphasizes the mutual act of trust between Othello and Desdemona through the carefully dramatized narration of their wooing. Given the sequence of events of scenes i-iii, "My life upon her faith!" is no empty oath. And Desdemona, for her part, carries equal conviction, responding with all her being to what Wilson Knight called "the Othello music" when she pleads with the Senate to be allowed to go with her husband to Cyprus.³

Politely but firmly, then, these two enter into a total commitment to one another. It is made less starrily than the commitment of Romeo and Juliet, but it is no less absolute and no less idealistic; and, as always in serious theatre, the ideal will now be tested by the real. "The real", in its more aggressive manifesta-

2 Quotations are from the Pelican Shakespeare *Othello*, ed. Gerald E. Bentley, rev. edn, New York 1970. The intricate matter of Shakespeare's rejection of crude Elizabethan expectations of a Moor or blackamoor is helpfully explored in Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*, London 1965, pp. 86-109. "He transformed the Moor with all his unfavourable associations into the hero of one of his most moving tragedies. It is ironical that, because of his success, many nineteenth-century critics (and a few in this century) have refused to accept the fact that he could have started so far away from his end, by using a figure who had far from tragic significance for his contemporaries — a black Moor or Negro" (p. 109).

3 See G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, rev. edn, London 1949, pp. 97-119.

tions, can take the human form of a Tybalt. Less commonly, but still quite imaginably, it can be embodied in an Iago.

Iago's motives, if any, strike me as unimportant to anyone except the actor who has to play the part. Coleridge was probably right to stress instead Iago's *lack* of motive.⁴ The character himself professes at different times so many different reasons for what he does — ambition, resentment, sexual jealousy, avarice, envy — that it feels impossible to entertain any of them as Shakespeare's proposed "fact". Perhaps it is best simply to remark that Iago embodies that recurrent tendency towards destruction and self-destruction that *homo sapiens* never seems to escape or control for very long. Beyond this, the special quality of Iago that does most to shape the plot is his envy: it is not only Cassio who "hath a daily beauty in his life" that makes Iago ugly, but Othello too. The Othello music, that thrilling, creative element in the hero's imagination that does so much to widen the poetic range of the whole play while at the same time increasing our sense of the stature of Othello himself — that whole side of Othello is another aspect of his idealism, and idealism in any form is abhorrent to Iago. Iago has his own kind of vibrant imagination, but its scope is narrow and squalid: "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe . . . I'll pour this pestilence into his ear . . . Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on? . . ." Such a mind, confronted by the absolute value that Othello and Desdemona place upon each other —

For know, Iago,
But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
I would not my unhousèd free condition
Put into circumscription and confine
For the sea's worth

(I.ii.24)

— will almost instinctively start planning to undermine their faith. Helen Gardner put it neatly:

Iago ruins Othello by insinuating into his mind the question, "How do you know?" The tragic experience with which this play is concerned is loss of faith, and Iago is the instrument to bring Othello to this crisis of his being.⁵

Shakespeare's depiction of that crisis throughout Acts III and IV is both powerful and consistent. "Perdition catch my soul, but I do love thee," says Othello, apostrophizing Desdemona at the start of III.iii, and almost all that follows could be described

4 Terence Hawkes (ed.), *Coleridge on Shakespeare*, Harmondsworth 1969, pp. 189-90.

5 Gardner, *op. cit.*, pp. 359-60.

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as an enactment or literalization of this. Jealousy brings in its train rage, pain, spite, panic, as Shakespeare depicts the nervous collapse of a man who had come to balance his entire life on a single emotional pivot, the love of Desdemona. But we are also shown the experienced general's urge to be just: "I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove . . . Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof . . . Give me a living reason she's disloyal. . . ." So there are lurching self-contradictions from Othello about trusting and not trusting Desdemona, leading to the devastating sense of futility that empties even his soldierly vocation of any possibility for self-fulfilment: "Farewell the plumèd troop, and the big wars / That make ambition virtue! . . . Othello's occupation's gone!" This neurasthenic loss of personal identity finds emblematic enactment when Othello falls in a fit at IV.i.43, and it also has its part to play in what often becomes in performance the most agonizing section of the entire tragedy — the "brothel" scene, IV.ii.19–94, with all its appalling cruelty to Desdemona.

Painful to watch though the dramatic process may be, in these middle scenes of the play, its logic so far cannot be faulted. Shakespeare, with all his much-discussed mastery of ambivalence, allows us enough glimpses of the heroic once-admirable Othello to prevent us from shrugging him off as merely gullible, arrogant and rash. The kind of spontaneous jealousy described by Emilia —

jealous souls will not be answered so;
They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they're jealous

(III.iv.159)

— is precisely what Othello has struggled against, however unsuccessfully. Within the toils wound about him by Iago he has at least *tried* to be fair and reasonable, and consequently even the obscurantism of "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul" (V.ii.1) can be understood and pitied. If it is cant, it is the self-persuading cant of the sleepwalker rather than of the revenger. As the murder scene builds up, Othello's bemused talk of Justice keeps reminding us of his sense of the primacy of that quality, obscured though it now is by the reversion to the primitive that set in towards the end of III.iii. Indeed, for a fleeting moment during Desdemona's last frenzied pleas for reason, there is room to hope that common sense may yet prevail:

OTHELLO

That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee
Thou gav'st to Cassio.

DESDEMONA

No, by my life and soul!
Send for the man and ask him.

(V.ii.48)

But it is already too late for Othello to heed such good advice, if only because he believes that Cassio is dead, and Desdemona's tears when he tells her this lead directly to the new fit of fury in which he murders her.

Even while showing us the murder, on stage, in all its cruelty, Shakespeare is careful to balance our responses. Once again he has Emilia at hand to overstate the case against Othello, as we should by now expect from this *femme moyenne sensuelle*: "O gull! O dolt! / As ignorant as dirt! . . . dull Moor . . . murd'rous coxcomb". The audience well knows that Othello, for all his rashness, was never as foolish as Emilia says. She has little understanding of either the all-engrossing love that made this cataclysm possible or the successive stages by which Othello was misled and misled himself. Above all, she cannot grasp the fact that the tragic hero's implacable sense of justice will extend to condemning himself too:

O, I were damned beneath all depth in hell
But that I did proceed upon just grounds
To this extremity.

(V.ii.138)

Once he sees his error, this same faith in the rock-like justice of "yond marble heaven" is what leads to anagnorisis — this, rather than Emilia's unravelling of Iago's plot, necessary though that is.

Now, how dost thou look now? O ill-starred wench!
Pale as thy smock! When we shall meet at compt,
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
And fiends will snatch at it.

(V.ii.273)

But now comes the difficulty. If the play were to end on this note of searing self-reproach, audiences might well feel that its demonstration of the "noble Moor's" nobility was complete and a tragic equilibrium attained. After all the blundering, cruelty and self-deception, Othello has at last achieved a full recognition of what he has done, as well as what has been done to him. Even the self-regarding quality of his suicide speech, which an earlier generation of critics deprecated,⁶ would not upset such a balance. A touch of the histrionic is fully in character for a general, and no less so for this general at the point of death than in earlier moments of decisive action such as "Put up your bright swords".

6 See T. S. Eliot, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" (1927), reprinted in *Selected Essays*, 3rd edn, London 1951, pp. 126-40; and F. R. Leavis, "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero" (1937), reprinted in *The Common Pursuit*, London 1952, pp. 136-59.

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There is nothing sub-tragic about "Soft you! a word or two before you go", with its groping recapitulation of simpler, less troubled days and an image of the speaker as he was before his ruin. To call this, as T. S. Eliot did, Othello cheering himself up, is not only reductive, but reveals a deficient sense of theatre. A serious play, like a serious symphony, needs its last-movement coda.

The difficulty is, however, that *between* the anagnorisis of "When we shall meet at compt" and the suicide speech there seems to come a sick reversion to self-deception:

LODOVICO

O thou Othello that wert once so good,
Fall'n in the practice of a damnèd slave,
What shall be said to thee?

OTHELLO

Why, anything:
An honorable murderer, if you will;
For naught did I in hate, but all in honor.
(V.ii.291)

This begs too many questions to be respectable, or even logically actable. "Honorable murderer" is another oxymoron, and its measure of truth needs much more exposition than just the flat assertion of the next line — an assertion that is itself unconvincing, with the fury of the killing still fresh in our minds. Othello's reply to Lodovico is, quite understandably, drained and flat — comparable, perhaps, with Desdemona's "Faith, half asleep" following the brothel scene. But it also shows Othello the public man being disingenuous, and that takes the edge off his tragic grandeur.⁷

I would suggest, then, that it is in this exchange with Lodovico, and not in Othello's final speech, that the logic of the work is slightly flawed, to the confusion of actors and audiences alike. Regretfully, I find myself forced to the opinion that this particular tragedy ends uncertainly, not in a steady balance of emotional or philosophic opposites like *King Lear*, nor in Shakespeare's successfully having it both ways as in *Hamlet* (where the vengeance against Claudius seems not to be vengeance at all). Perhaps the parallel case is *Coriolanus*, where the hero makes a disconcertingly abrupt transition from awareness that his sparing Rome may prove fatal to himself, to an almost cheeky claim that he has remained wholly loyal to the Volscians. Just as for Othello, an epic recapitulation follows: "Alone I did it." The flaw in

7 Here, and at several other points in the essay, I am indebted to conversations with Mrs Ann Parker, University of Sydney.

dramatic logic is not in the hero's final speech, but in the dialogue leading towards it.

One further point must be added. In neither *Othello* nor *Coriolanus* does the momentarily insecure sense of an ending impair the play's centre of value. *Othello's* sense of justice wavers in the conversation with Lodovico, but not for long enough to betray the idealism of his love for Desdemona. That still remains, grandly and indestructibly, the ultimate framework for the tragedy.

Nay, had she been true,
If heaven would make me such another world
Of one entire and perfect chrysolite,
I'd not have sold her for it.

(V.ii.144)

There exists, I believe, an old Chinese poem that says

It is better to be a crystal and be broken
Than to remain perfect like a tile upon the housetop.