

Othello Re-read

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Rereading is all the rage. Since Peter Widdowson edited a collection of essays in 1982, entitled *Re-Reading English*, the verb 'to reread' seems in some critical circles to have replaced completely the more ordinary 'to read' and, moreover, to have been appropriated for the exclusive use of those critics who, applying contemporary critical theory to the standard works of English literature, want to offer what they feel are radical reappraisals, reinterpretations, revaluations. There is nothing new in that, as the familiar ring of such words indicates. There are several series; the rereading of Chaucer or Shakespeare or Donne or Pope, or whatever revered figure happens to come into the sights of the rereader, goes on apace. The stated aim is usually to demystify or deconstruct or dismantle or problematize the work, or the canon, or the author. They are an active lot, the contemporary critics, unlike the passive liberal humanists, whom they so bitterly oppose, and a very verbal lot as well, claiming to liberate reading from the constrictions imposed on it for centuries by the literary establishment.

Yet rereading has been going on for as long as words have been written down, and every work of literature that has any claim to merit has been reread millions of times, by millions of readers. Each of those readings has been what is now called a rereading, the creation of a new version of the text, in the individual consciousness, by an interaction between the words on the page and the perceiving mind of the reader, a process close to that which the notorious liberal humanist William Wordsworth described in 'Tintern Abbey' as half creation and half perception. That recreation will be unique to that reader, but since the work also exerts a control – the greater the work, the firmer that control — there will be recognizable similarities between the readings of, say, *Macbeth* in 1623, or 1904, or 1988. It is not a mid-twentieth century discovery that we all read and understand and evaluate with our own consciousnesses, which are formed by our individual experiences, actual, imaginative, intellectual, emotional, political or whatever. These experiences, in turn, stand in some complex relationship to the political, social and economic conditions of our lives, which is to say to the conditions of the society in which we live.

The same is true of the relationship between the consciousness of the author and the society in which he or she lived or lives, though in the case of an author not living now, that relationship is even more difficult to discover. That, too, is generally accepted, which is why most responsible readers or critics try, and have usually tried, to discover as much as they can about the period and author of a particular work, though the relevance of that information, information which must always be only partial, is a matter for individual judgement.

To take an example: it is highly unlikely that the conditions of production of a work like *The Tempest* can be established from this distance in time, but even within the fragmentary information that is available, some literary critics, happy to be called New Historicists, seem willing to make a selection even from it, and to accept, as an accurate picture of a vanished society and its values, that account of it which will allow the interpretation or reading which they wish to discover in the text. And even if one supposes, for the sake of argument, that a reasonably accurate account of Shakespeare's England in 1611 could be constructed, there is no reason in the world to suppose that Shakespeare's relation to it was not a highly complex one, certainly no less complex than that, let us say, of a Marxist critic today who may find nothing odd about maintaining that the only serious issue is the need for a social, economic and political revolution, and then claiming to further it by writing works of abstruse literary theory from the security of a tenured University position.

The point is so obvious that it hardly seems worth labouring, but perhaps a South African analogy may be instructive. Athol Fugard has said, and plays like *Master Harold and the Boys* confirm, that he grew up as an ordinary white South African lad, accepting without question his position of privilege and power, even as a child, over grown men and women of a different colour, until one day he realized he could accept it no longer, since when he has written and fought against the whole monstrous system of *apartheid*. Millions of other white South Africans have never had that realization; who then is responding to the conditions of that society: Fugard, or the others? My example is, of course, deliberately chosen. It is the artists in a society rather than the critics and all the rest of us, who are least likely to accept society's values, and who will criticize, ridicule, expose and seek to alter what they find unfair, unjust and evil. Many works of literature have been banned in totalitarian states of every persuasion. I am not aware of many works of literary

criticism that have suffered the same fate. The French intellectual theorists, who in the late sixties seemed for a while able to exert an influence in the real political world, have given up the attempt, and withdrawn from the arena. France is as conservative as ever it was, and Derrida has gone to the west coast of the United States. California may be badly in need of a revolution, but it is unlikely to start from the campus of the University of California at Irvine.

All of this is by way of preamble to my contention that the great critical discovery of our time, the liberating recognition that everyone has an ideology and writes from within its point of view, is neither liberating nor a discovery. Are we to suppose, for instance, that Dr Johnson, when writing the Preface to his edition of Shakespeare, wasn't aware that as an educated man he shared the literary suppositions of his time, and that he was being pulled in different directions by his critical conditioning and his responses to the plays? On the contrary; that tension gives the Preface much of its interest and value. Any adequate reader surely tries to be as aware of his or her prejudices and predilections as possible, and tries not to let them, no matter how sincerely they are held, distort a reading too much. To argue that any reading is a political reading, because people are political animals, may in a sense be true, but only at so broad a level of generality that the statement is virtually meaningless. Substitute sexual, or moral, or any other suitable adjective, and the statement remains equally true, and equally useless. It does not follow that every reading has a political axe to grind, or that all past readings have shared the political purpose of keeping the working class in its place. Or women, or the Welsh or the Irish or the Africans. Power may be very important to very many people, but to say that it is all-important to everyone is to lose any sense of proportion, or again, to widen the definition of power so as to include all human relationships and then to argue that therefore they are all concerned with power.

There are many critical ideologies in the market-place at present, and while, as an opening gambit, all usually deny that any exclusive truth is claimed for the particular method, most critics end by implicitly claiming that what is most significant in the work has been revealed by that method. Somehow the argument that by knowing one's own ideological bias one is always aware of the partial and provisional nature of one's judgements slides from the position of 'wouldn't it be interesting to look at it from this point of view?' to 'this point of view has exposed the truth'. But, as Harriet Hawkins has noted, even at best any kind of ideological scrutiny tends to

work like a pair of prescription spectacles.¹ What they are designed to allow you to see is in sharp focus, but everything else is a blur.

Othello is a play that has suffered a good deal lately from being reread, which sometimes seems like a euphemism for being done over. Responses to it have always been difficult, because of its subject. Our enlightened and sexually liberated age sometimes finds it incomprehensible that anyone should care enough about a sexual relationship to kill because of it,² but it happens very frequently, even in Australia in the eighties, as the newspaper posters reveal. Sexual jealousy, if treated seriously, can make an audience decidedly uneasy. It is not an exclusively male emotion, though some feminist accounts of the play may lead one to think so. It can be made funny, and certainly it is the basis for innumerable stage jokes down the centuries, but even the comic figures like Kiteley in Ben Jonson's *Every Man In His Humour*, or Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, attract a somewhat embarrassed laughter. Too many of us have felt the terrifying force of the emotion, and nobody laughs at Leontes or Othello. The success of Iago's destruction of Othello's faith in Desdemona, and therefore the destruction of the man himself, because the only man Othello can now be is the man her love has in large measure created, leads to the murder of the wife whose love has always been as true and as deep as his. That tragic course, which brings about his own death as well, has so terrible an inevitability, given the circumstances, and such a human plausibility as well, that many readers and critics have cast around to find ways of making the play less painful an experience.

Essentially, the way to do this is to find someone or something to blame. Dr Leavis's way is probably the most popular; he didn't invent it, but he gave it powerful expression.³ If Othello can be shown to be so despicable a person that he is unworthy of any sympathy, and if what he suffers can be seen as his own silly fault, then we need not be distressed by his agony. Accordingly, Leavis sought and found a conceit and a sentimental self-delusion so grotesque as to deny to Othello the right to the dignity of an ordinary human being, let alone to the status of tragic hero. In this reading, Iago is reduced to a mere plot mechanism; what happens to the innocent Desdemona is no doubt pathetic, but what the play is

1 Harriet Hawkins, *The Devil's Party* (Oxford 1985), p. 94.

2 See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, 1987), p. 123.

3 F.R. Leavis 'Diabolical Intellect and the Noble Hero' in *The Common Pursuit*, (London, 1953). First published in *Scrutiny* 6, 1937.

concerned with is the revelation of a central figure who, far from being in any way admirable, is soon revealed as contemptibly ignorant and self-satisfied, who learns nothing, and who goes to his death with his absurd opinion of his own worth unscathed. Leavis's account is no longer as widely accepted as it used to be — never very widely, by the way — for there is nothing quite as unfashionable as the immediate critical past, but similar attempts to demystify Othello persist, and in many an account of his psychopathology or male chauvinism can be heard a ghostly echo of Leavis's dismissal.

And if the fault is not Othello's, it may be Desdemona's, or society's, or that of the institution of marriage. Desdemona used sometimes virtually to be charged with responsibility for her own murder — if the reading were currently fashionable, no doubt the line 'Nobody; I myself; farewell' would be cited as evidence — by critics anxious to establish a romantically blameless Othello. She has shown herself, after all, to have been forward in her wooing of Othello, wilful in her defiance of her father, tactless in her support of Cassio, a liar in the matter of the handkerchief, and so complacent in her sense of her own virtue that she cannot imagine why her husband is so distraught. In current rereadings, however, she is more likely not merely to be rehabilitated as an innocent victim but elevated to the status of the central tragic figure, who with sturdy independence opposes the power of the patriarchy, but is in the end destroyed by it. In such a reading it is the threat posed to the patriarchal society by women's sexuality that is reflected in Othello's readiness to believe Iago's lies; his outraged masculine possessiveness that regards Desdemona's chastity as a material possession that leads to the savagery of his revenge.⁴ Or perhaps the play is an indictment of the institution of marriage itself, which imposes roles on both Desdemona and Othello which they cannot carry out.

By creating in Desdemona a woman of intelligence, courage and self-confidence, Shakespeare intensifies the tragedy of her disintegration. Unable to discard her habits of thinking and speaking, she fails to adjust to marriage. Although Shakespeare creates in Iago a powerful agent for the destruction of Othello and Desdemona, the lack of communication between them, and the inability to transfer to marriage patterns of mutual respect practised when they were single made their tragedy inevitable. In this play, Shakespeare suggests the dangers of attempting to conform to stereotyped ideals of marriage, and the cost to husband and wife.⁵

4 Irene G. Dash, *Wooing, Wedding and Power* (New York, 1981). Dash sees Desdemona as '... a woman slowly tamed in the crucible of marriage', p. 104.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

This brief but I believe representative quotation makes the play seem a much less agonizing experience than it is usually found to be. There is nothing much wrong here, one feels, that a few sessions with a marriage counsellor wouldn't put right. And at the other end of the scale, how adequate does this comment seem, with its implications for the characters of both Desdemona and Othello?

His previous (i.e. before becoming jealous) 'love' for her is the sheerest narcissism: he wins Desdemona by military boasting, and is agreeably flattered by her admiration for his skill as a professional butcher.

That quotation, from Terry Eagleton's *William Shakespeare*,⁶ strikes the note of denigrating contempt with a deftness that Leavis himself could hardly have improved upon, but as an account of Othello's relationship with Desdemona, as reported to the Venetian Senate

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

it is wilfully misleading. The whole of Eagleton's account of the play is in fact an instructive example of the way in which some of the strategies of contemporary theory can be unscrupulously used. If one is less interested in what the characters say than in what one wants them to say, then this is what one will think they are, in fact, saying.

And, if challenged, one's response can always be that this is what they really mean; both psychoanalytical and deconstructionist theory can be used to sanction such a rereading. Othello, the character, may thus be turned into a 'case', to which a modern label, 'paranoid jealousy', can be attached. Once that identification is made, no further sympathy need be wasted:

It is in the nature of paranoid jealousy to overwhelm the object in this way. as a signifier without a referent, a monstrous hermeneutical inflation ('exsufflicate and blown surmises' as Othello calls it in his customary jargon) which feeds off itself without the frailest rooting in reality.⁷

Whose jargon, one may fairly ask? But the purpose is clear enough. Such a character, pathologically jealous, culpably gullible, could be expected to make a series of mistakes that no normal, well-adjusted critic would be capable of.

6 Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1986), p. 68.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Systematically mistrusting appearances, the paranoiac cannot accept that everything lies open to view, that the world is just the way that it is, with no secret essence that what he is seeing are not appearances, but amazingly, the real thing.⁸

Is Eagleton reading anything remotely resembling the same play that I, and, to judge from recorded impressions of it, most of the rest of us, are reading? It is not that Othello simply mistrusts appearances. He believes in some of them, and the major deceptive appearance is the character of Iago himself. Nobody in the play, not Roderigo whom he is deceiving, nor Cassio, nor his wife Emilia, nor Desdemona, who, heartbreakingly, appeals to him for help, and not of course, Othello, ever suspects that he is not what he appears to be — honest, honest Iago. That being so, Othello's great mistake is that he accepts as true the apparent concern with which Iago, his honest friend, breaks to him the painful 'truth' that he has been and is being deceived by Desdemona. And since this information strikes not first at his vanity, but confirms his sense of his own unworthiness, Othello cannot resist the attack. He is, of course, wrong. Confronted with the appearance of honesty in Iago and the reality of honesty in Desdemona, he is deceived and tormented, for reasons the play makes painfully clear, into the wrong choice. Amazingly, the love is real, and the apparent mismatch between the beautiful young Venetian heiress and the black, ageing soldier, that surprises Venetian society, horrifies her father, and is so improbable an event that even the threat of a Turkish invading fleet must be pushed aside until it has been established that there has been no sorcery or other foul play, is indeed founded upon mutual love. But love cannot protect itself, and that is the tragedy.

Since the difficulty of distinguishing between appearance and reality is a fact of life, and not a pathological condition to be found only in paranoiacs, it is no surprise that Shakespeare should return to it throughout his work. The 'reality' which Iago so cleverly, and with such apparent reluctance, reveals to Othello, is what he fears most of all, the loss of what he most values. Anyone who has ever loved and been loved in return is familiar with the feeling of being unworthy of such happiness and good fortune.

For how do I hold you but by thy granting
And for that riches where is my deserving . . . ?

8 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

Shakespeare asks in Sonnet 87. Desdemona has become Othello's whole life: 'The fountain from the which my current runs / Or else dries up . . .' and to be told that a dependence of this kind is based on a delusion is to hear a sentence of death. To explain that total destruction of any sense of the value of living in terms of a pathologically selfish state, or a fear of female sexuality,⁹ or to see it as a function of Desdemona's refusal to accept her place in a male-dominated society,¹⁰ or, venturing into somewhat wilder speculations, the result of the homosexual attraction that Iago feels towards Othello¹¹ or of Desdemona's emergence as 'a masculine woman with a need to dominate Othello in terms of phallic rivalry'¹² is to reduce the characters, the play and the whole human condition to the level of triviality. We are excused from responding to the terror of what happens to Othello and Desdemona, because it will never happen to us.

To argue thus is to mistake the nature of art in general and of the literary art in particular. Art deals in general truths, but it must communicate them through a particular situation, and one of an acceptably complex credibility. No play will have the complexity of life itself, but it must appear to have a complexity of that order if we are to believe in it at all, and not see it simply as a vehicle for a simple ideological message. The idea of Desdemona as the victim of a patriarchal society, for instance, was the topic for an essay by an intelligent student, relatively inexperienced in the reading of literature, which I recently had occasion to read. Certainly, some aspects of Desdemona's situation were illuminated by the approach, though the writer, while trying to do justice to the topic, was puzzled by Desdemona's ability to defy her father, when she was so much the patriarch's victim, and to defend her love for Othello successfully to the whole Venetian Senate. She was even more puzzled by the fact that Othello, though a man, seemed even more of an outsider, and that a play which she had been asked to see very much in terms of sexual politics and the oppression of women should be so much concerned to establish the value of Othello's and Desdemona's love, and the agony of its destruction, as much for him as for her. At the end, she was genuinely perplexed; if the play was most importantly about the oppression of women, why had

9 Cappelia Kahn, *Man's Estate* (California, 1981) 'The Savage Yoke', pp. 141-6.

10 Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters* (Brighton, 1983), pp. 119-22

11 Martin Waugh, 'Othello: the Tragedy of Iago', in *The Design Within: Psychoanalytical Approaches to Shakespeare*, ed. Melvin D. Faber.

12 Quoted by Harriet Hawkins in *Shakespeare Survey* 35, p. 161.

Shakespeare written so much, and so movingly about the lovers, and why, in spite of everything, was she still sorry for Othello. She had tried to 'reread' *Othello*, in the terms that had been defined for her, but the play had refused to be so confined.

Tragedy provides so moving an experience because it dramatizes for us the two most terrifying things about the conditions of our existence, that we are not ultimately in control of the way we live, or of when and how we die. It is interesting that accounts of 'radical tragedy', 'political tragedy', even of tragedy from a feminist point of view, have little to say about these central issues. Their assumption is that the villain, the destructive force, is always a social, economic, or political institution, something that can be put right and disaster so averted. But tragedy describes precisely that situation in which no solutions are possible, and in the end death itself cannot be avoided.

Contemporary critics too often take refuge in the belief that since everything is explicable, everything is able to be put right. If only the canon of English literature were abolished, or we were all allowed to read what we personally found most interesting (I don't know who is stopping us, but I suppose 'study' is what is meant) and say the things about them that are most interesting to us, then the pernicious effect that the study of literature has been exerting on our society for so long would be destroyed, and the world would become a better place. Such an argument presupposes a romantic belief in the efficacy of literature — and literary criticism — as an instrument of political oppression, and it also confuses individual tragedy with social justice; if only we recognize our ideologies, the knowledge will make us free. It seems unlikely. Literary criticism will turn into something else, become fragmented between cultural politics, sociology, social history and aesthetic theory, all of which are perfectly respectable fields of study in themselves, but which neither singly nor collectively can account for great works of art.

If that is allowed to happen, there will be no point in the discussion of plays like *Othello*. Since the ideology determines what will be found, all that will be necessary is for the approach to be identified and the rest will be deducible. But surely the power of the play resides in its ability to compel a recognition that Othello and Desdemona are destroyed not because of some clearly definable reason, but because out of the combination of all the pressures, a situation comes about in which the almost casual malice of an Iago, fashioning his plot as he goes along, is able to destroy something

that is at once uniquely valuable and yet also part of our common human experience. All love must eventually end in loss; the greater the love the greater the torment of losing it.

The play is therefore about something more fundamental than any diagnosis, no matter how perceptive, of a pathological state in an individual or a society can be. It is about the fragility of human happiness, about the closeness of love to possessiveness, about how dangerous it is to care for someone else more than one cares for the whole world, and how, nevertheless, the greatest human happiness and the clearest sense of one's self is to be found in such caring. Othello's and Desdemona's love, and the lovers themselves, are destroyed not because they loved too much, or not enough, or because Othello was too easily jealous, or because of their inexperience in love, or for any humanly avoidable reason. The intensity of feeling that produced the enchanted sense of happiness, in the eye of the storm, of their reunion on Cyprus — 'If it were now to die / 'Twere now to be most happy . . .' — is the same intensity that leads Othello to murder Desdemona, and her, with her dying breath, to defend her husband with a lie: 'Nobody; I myself; farewell'. All of that, and the horror of Othello's recognition of what he has done, are all equally real, all comprehended in Shakespeare's perception of what 'love' means. Love, and death, happiness and misery, any of the great imponderables of our lives resist simple ideological explanations. At the end of *Othello* it could be said of both the lovers, as it is of Othello, that they were 'great of heart'. By opening ourselves to as much of what the play offers as we have the capacity to accept, we may come to understand something of what that means, and of what it costs.

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