

‘A good soft pillow for that good white head’:
Othello as comedy¹

PETER J. SMITH

Writing in 1817, William Hazlitt suggested that *Othello* is set apart from the other three major tragedies by virtue of its very ordinariness:

The moral it conveys has a closer application to the concerns of human life than that of almost any other of Shakespear’s plays. “It comes directly home to the bosoms and business of men.” The pathos in *Lear* is indeed more dreadful and overpowering: but it is less natural, and less of every day’s occurrence. We have not the same degree of sympathy with the passions described in *Macbeth*. The interest in *Hamlet* is more remote and reflex. That of *Othello* is at once equally profound and affecting.²

It is the present and quotidian nature of *Othello* that makes it so powerful. For Hazlitt the play’s intensity lies in the capacity of the reader to empathise with the sufferings of the play’s protagonist. Distanced from the regal madness of Lear by his obsessive and reiterated eminence—‘they cannot touch me for coining ... [I am] every inch a king’ (xx, 83-105)—the audience registers

¹ The title comes from *Henry V* (IV. i, 14). Quotations from *Othello* are from E. A. J. Honigmann’s Arden III edition (Walton-on-Thames, Surrey: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1997). All other references to Shakespeare are from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). I am grateful to Michael Davies and Greg Walker for their enlightening (and unpaid) seminars on *Othello*. Jill Orofino kept me abreast of the Moor in the USA and lectured me on pugilism. Sara Schivazappa personified the threat of which the French King speaks—‘Those girls of Italy, take heed of them’ (*All’s Well*, II. i, 19)—and for this reason, this essay is fondly dedicated to her.

² *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. Jonathan Bate (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 489.

his insanity less as a portrait of senile infirmity than an elemental image of the apocalypse: 'Is this the promised end?', asks Kent (xxiv, 259).³ Similarly the historically isolated brutalism—not to mention the strange, folkloric supernaturalism—of ancient Scotland, insulates the audience from the tragic vision of *Macbeth*. Finally *Hamlet*'s ponderous psychology (what Hazlitt means by 'reflex') renders its hero's pensive interiority too 'remote' for audience pity. The play's challenges are intellectually and philosophically rarefied; it is, therefore, unrivalled but, by the same token, inaccessible.

Othello, on the other hand, is a play striking in its everydayness; as Barbara Everett points out, '*Othello* is Shakespeare's only tragedy set entirely in the present.'⁴ The play is contemporary in time, space and occurrence: it is merely about infidelity (or rather suspected infidelity), about jealousy, about petty rivalry (one soldier is promoted over the head of another), and about the ubiquity and tyranny of desire. *Othello*, for Hazlitt, is steeped in the problems of 'every day's occurrence', set amid the commonplace, the customary and the plain, what Wordsworth refers to as 'earth's diurnal course'.⁵ *Othello*'s ordinariness is a feature of the play remarked upon by successive generations of critics. A. C. Bradley called it 'a drama of modern life' and, like Hazlitt, he singled out the play as being less tragically transcendental than the others:

Othello is less unlike a story of private life than any other of the great tragedies. ... The characters come close to

³ These quotations are from *The History of King Lear* rather than *The Tragedy*. Wells prints both.

⁴ Barbara Everett, *Young Hamlet: Essays on Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 40.

⁵ William Wordsworth, 'A slumber did my spirit seal', *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 164.

us, and the application of the drama to ourselves (if the phrase may be pardoned) is more immediate than it can be in *Hamlet* or *Lear*. Besides this, their fortunes affect us as those of private individuals more than is possible in any of the later tragedies.⁶

Over a quarter of a century later George Wilson Knight still shared this sense of the play as being peopled with recognisable characters, each complete with his or her own idiosyncrasies: 'In *Othello* we are faced with the vividly particular rather than the vague and universal ... The persons tend to appear as warmly human, concrete.'⁷ Again, the play is judged unusual alongside the metaphysical dimensions of the other tragedies: '*Othello* is a story of intrigue rather than a visionary statement.' Even F. R. Leavis, whose essay on *Othello* turns out to be a withering attack on the 'wrongheaded[ness]' of *Shakespearean Tragedy*, is at one with Bradley on the play's uniqueness: '*Othello*, it will be very generally granted, is of all Shakespeare's great tragedies the simplest ... The effect is one of a noble, "classical" clarity—of firm, clear outlines, unblurred and undistracted by cloudy recessions, metaphysical aura, or richly symbolical ambiguities.'⁸ *Othello* is characterised as

⁶ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904; London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 146. For Bradley's approach to the play see Mark Gauntlett, 'The Perishable Body of the Unpoetic: A. C. Bradley Performs *Othello*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 47 (1994), 71-80.

⁷ G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (1930; London: Methuen, 1962), p. 97. Ned B. Allen is even more forthright on the rounded humanity of Shakespeare's characters: 'Iago, Othello, Desdemona, Emilia, and Cassio are so lifelike, so convincing that ... we suffer with them - in the study as well as in the theatre' ('The Two Parts of *Othello*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 21 (1968), 24).

⁸ F. R. Leavis, 'Diabolic Intellect and The Noble Hero: A Note on *Othello*', *Scrutiny* (1937; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), VI, 259.

a play that is remarkable for its straightforwardness, unusual in its usualness, and it will be the contention of this essay that this surprising critical consensus is predicated upon the play's departure from a number of tragic conventions—that is, that *Othello* is not really a tragedy at all, but, in its very fabric, it employs a series of devices that are closer to the standard mechanisms of comedy.

Of the three tragedies with which *Othello* is contrasted here—that is, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*—we might suggest that their common shape is towards increase; the world of the plays grows, not merely in setting but in import. The consequences of Claudius's murder of King Hamlet draw both England and Norway into the action. His incestuous marriage to Gertrude brings about the Prince's revenge mission, the accidental murder of Polonius, Ophelia's suicide and the furious return of her brother Laertes. The devastating concatenation of doomed events has its origin in the fraternal murder that takes place even before the play has started. Likewise, Lear's voluntary abdication in the first scene unleashes a series of rivalries between his daughters which brings about the undoing of the kingdom and the ravaging of Albion (and Lear's mind) by an apparently cursed Nature. Finally, the assassination of Duncan necessitates, as a direct consequence, the slaughter of his guards, the ambush and murder of Banquo and the merciless butchery of Macduff's family. Each of these tragedies is steeped in the horror of an irrevocable logic of destruction. It is this intractable force that prevents Macbeth's reversal: 'I am in blood / Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er' (III. iv, 135-7). But *Othello* moves in the opposite direction; if Shakespearean tragedy tends to universal expansion, *Othello* is a black hole that draws everything to the centre. There are no widespread consequences, no elemental challenge to the stability of the nation, nothing resembling what J. W. Lever has

called 'the tragedy of state'.⁹ Instead there is a series of domestic wrangles between men and their wives, between officers and their soldiers and between rakes and their whores. *Othello's* island setting contains the randomness of its 'justice'. Lodovico is the only means whereby the story of the Moor is to be disseminated: 'Myself will straight aboard, and to the state / This heavy act with heavy heart relate' (V. ii, 360).

Alongside the absolute disintegration of the other plays, the upshot of *Othello* is comparatively trivial. By the end of *Hamlet* the dead include the hero, both his parents, his uncle, Polonius and his two children, Guildenstern, Rosencrantz and (almost) Horatio. Fortinbras occupies Denmark unopposed. Macbeth has killed Duncan, Duncan's bodyguards, Banquo, Lady Macduff and her children while Lady Macbeth has killed herself. Scotland has been ravaged by the tyrannical Macbeth:

Each new morn
New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows
Strike heaven on the face that it resounds
As if it felt with Scotland and yelled out
Like syllable of dolour.

(IV. iii, 4-8)

The dead of *King Lear* include the king, his three daughters, Cornwall, Gloucester and Edmund, while the suicide of Kent seems imminent. More significantly, Edgar's platitudinous 'Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say' (V. iii, 300) is crushingly hollow alongside the devastation that valorises it. What, we are entitled to ask, is all this suffering *for*?

In gestures which embody the woeful dimensions of their conclusions, the tragedies end with public rituals of State. Fortinbras orders that Hamlet's body be displayed upon a stage and that 'soldiers' music and the rites of

⁹ J. W. Lever, *The Tragedy of State* (1971; London: Methuen, 1987).

war / Speak loudly for him' (V. ii, 353-4). They are commanded to shoot a salute over his corpse. At the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Caesar orders that the lovers be buried together in the monument and that 'Our army shall / In solemn show attend this funeral' (V. ii, 357-8). At the end of *Macbeth* and Marlowe's *Edward the Second* the severed heads of the plays' villains are brought on and displayed to demonstrate their defeat. But in *Othello* the bodies are hidden hugger-mugger by Lodovico who draws a sheet over them or conceals them behind a curtain: 'The object poisons sight, / Let it be hid' (V. ii, 362-3). *Othello* ends with the private deaths of Othello and Desdemona and the unfortunate but unpremeditated stabbing of Emilia. (Roderigo has also been dispatched but the death of such a self-interested and corrupt hanger-on causes little audience anxiety.) Venice remains politically untouched by the tragedy; Gratiano receives the material legacy of the Moor while Cassio smoothly succeeds him as governor. Desdemona leaves no relatives since her father has predeceased her (V. ii, 202).¹⁰ In short, there is no lasting damage from the domestic crime; its ramifications are firmly contained and the State goes on as normal. Moreover the very action of the play itself is unusually bounded by the setting. There are no on-stage battles as there are in *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Cymbeline*, or the history plays. There are no scenes of torture like the putting out of Gloucester's eyes or the amputation of Titus's hand. There are no instances of sadism like Lavinia's horrendous suffering or the savage taunting of the Duke of York, forced to wipe his tears with a napkin dipped in the blood of his son. There are no episodes of child murder like the vicious slaughter of Macduff Junior or the luggage boys in *Henry V*. There is no cruel imprisonment like that of Richard II. There are no

¹⁰ In the source the relatives of Desdemona eventually avenge her death on the Moor. See Giovanni Battista Giraldo Cinthio, *Gli Hecatommithi*, trans. Geoffrey Bullough in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1973), VII, 252.

bungled or protracted suicides like those of Romeo or Antony. There are no ritualised obscenities like the blood-baths that follow the assassination of Julius Caesar (wherein the murderers dip their hands in gore up to the elbows) or the daubing of Innogen's face from the neck of a headless corpse which she takes for that of her husband. What there is is a bloodless suffocation of an innocent woman and the instantaneous suicide of her murderer; justice is immediate and it is seen to be done.

In contrast to the political and (in the case of *King Lear*) metaphysical wreckage left in the wake of Shakespearean tragedy, *Othello* is, as Iago would say, 'small beer' (II. i, 160). Usually Shakespearean tragedy lays waste to its world, it demonstrates the unspeakable devastation in politics and in Nature that flows from usurpation, fratricide, or dynastic rivalry. Up until the last scene, the worst that has happened in *Othello* is the blow inflicted on Desdemona (which, for Bradley, is 'rather sensational than tragic') and the cynical disposal of Roderigo.¹¹ Othello's fury is most exercised over the apparent loss of a handkerchief. Thomas Rymer, whose irascible attack on *Othello* was published in 1692, was unflinching in his condemnation of the mismatch between the trifling object and the profound consequences of its loss:

So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief! Why was not this call'd the *Tragedy of the Handkerchief*? ... Had it been *Desdemona's* Garter, the Sagacious Moor might have smelt a Rat: but the Handkerchief is so remote a trifle, no Booby, on this side *Mauritania* cou'd make any consequence from it ... Yet we find, it entered into our Poets head, to make a Tragedy of this *Trifle*.¹²

¹¹ *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 149.

¹² 'A Short View of Tragedy', in *The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*, ed. Curt A. Zimansky (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), pp. 160-3.

Rymer suggests, sarcastically, that the moral of the play 'may be a warning to all good Wives, that they look well to their Linnen.'¹³

Perhaps the most visible means whereby Shakespeare has deliberately constrained the scope of this 'tragedy' is in his manipulation of his sources at the point of Desdemona's murder. In Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi* (1566), Desdemona is beaten to death by the Ensign and the Moor (the Iago and Othello characters are unnamed). She is attacked from behind and the sinister weapon is 'a stocking filled with sand ... Thus there will not appear on her any sign of the blows.'¹⁴ In another possible source, Bandello's *Certaine Tragical Discourses*, translated by Geoffrey Fenton (1567), the description of the wife's murder is sickening:

he saluted her with ten or xii estockados [stabs], one in the necke of another in diverse partes of her bodye, renewynge the conflict with no less number of blowes in her head and armes; and because no parte shoulde escape free from the stroke of his malice, he visyted her white and tender legges, with no less rage and furye then the rest.¹⁵

Shakespeare then had two patterns available to him for the murder of Desdemona and if Othello's honour (or squeamishness) ruled out the blood-letting of the second—'I'll not shed her blood / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow (V. ii, 3-4)—the beating which figures in the first source, and which is guaranteed not to damage the corpse, would seem appropriate. But in spite of Othello's initially furious threats, 'I'll tear her all to pieces!' (III. iii, 434) and 'Thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted' (V. i, 36), Shakespeare stages

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁴ *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, VII, 250.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, VII, 260.

the murder not with a dagger or an improvised club but with a more risible murder weapon—a pillow.¹⁶

Pillows have been fatal in Shakespeare before now. Tyrrell's account of the murder of the princes in the Tower is, in his own words, a 'piece of ruthless butchery' (*Richard III*, IV. iii, 5):

'A book of prayers on their pillow lay,
Which once', quoth Forrest, 'almost changed my mind.
But O, the devil'—there the villain stopped
When Dighton thus told on, 'We smotherèd
The most replenishèd sweet work of nature,
That from the prime creation e'er she framed.'

(ll. 14-19)

But this is a reported scene without the potential clumsiness of an on-stage stifling. The focus of Tyrrell's account is on the innocence of the princes and the offence against Nature of their taking off. *Othello*, on the other hand, emphasises the comic absurdity of this mode of killing:

DESDEMONA Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight!
OTHELLO Nay, if you strive—
DESDEMONA But half an hour!
OTHELLO Being done, there is no pause—
DESDEMONA But while I say one prayer!
OTHELLO It is too late.
DESDEMONA O Lord! Lord! Lord! [*He smothers her.*
EMILIA (*within*) My lord, my lord! what ho, my
lord, my lord!
OTHELLO What noise is this? Not dead? not yet
quite dead?
I that am cruel am yet merciful,
I would not have thee linger in thy pain.
So, so.

¹⁶ Shakespeare may well have got the idea for the pillow from the fact that the dagger, in Fenton's version, had been hidden 'under the bolster of his bed' (*Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, VII, 259).

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EMILIA [within] O good, my lord, I'd speak a
 word
 with you.
OTHELLO Yes. 'Tis Emilia.—[to Emilia.] By and
 by.—She's dead.

(V. ii, 79-90)

Desdemona's last-minute pleading has a desperate fruitlessness about it. At the other end of the scale, as Dr Faustus clutches at his last minutes, his language achieves the heavenly apotheosis that he is so bitterly denied: 'See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament! / One drop would save my soul, half a drop. Ah my Christ!—... O soul, be chang'd into little water drops, / And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found.'¹⁷ In comparison with 'Marlowe's mighty line', Desdemona's pleading is etiolated and feeble.¹⁸ Her repeated cries of 'Lord' followed by Emilia's panic from without—'My lord, my lord! what ho, my lord, my lord!'—threaten to undermine the moment of her death with an unfortunate echo effect. Othello is caught between the noises off and the immediate problem of making sure his wife is properly dispatched. His clumsy curiosity—'Not dead? not yet quite dead?'—take the moment dangerously close to the edge of bathos. But Desdemona is not finished. Twenty-five lines later, she cries out, protesting her innocence: 'A guiltless death I die' (l. 121) and goes on to clear her husband of any blame before relapsing into silence. The comic effect of just such a protracted death and unexpected resurrection can be seen in the melodrama of Pyramus's suicide (played by the virtuoso of am-dram, Nick Bottom), the 'tragic' climax of the insert play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. That the deaths bear comparison indicates the

¹⁷ Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. John D. Jump (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962), xix, 146-86.

¹⁸ The description is from Ben Jonson's commendatory poem, 'To the Memory of my Beloved, the Author, Master William Shakespeare and what he hath left us', l. 30.

incipient absurdity of Desdemona's suffocation. Rymer is characteristically churlish: 'We may learn here, that a Woman never loses her Tongue, even tho' after she is stift'd.'¹⁹

It is not only during its final moments that the play seems reluctant to conform to a tragic scheme. *Othello* is notable for a singular lack of dramatic action. There is no hint of political disaffection let alone rebellion since, even before the play opens, Othello has achieved military supremacy and marital fulfilment. The outcry of Brabantio is quickly put to rest in abeyance to a more pressing problem—Turkish aggression. Although Cinthio's story is set in Cyprus, the imminent invasion of the Turks is one of Shakespeare's interpolations. And yet, in spite of the emergency Senate meeting of I. iii, and the impending sense of military crisis which requires that Othello depart for his commission even before consummating his new marriage, this threat of war simply evaporates. The sabre-rattling of young Fortinbras, which causes the frantic military preparations of which we hear reports at the beginning of *Hamlet*, is seen to come to devastating fruition at the play's end but, in *Othello*, the menace of the Turkish campaign simply disappears. The perfunctory announcement of the awkwardly functional Third Gentleman must have struck the play's first audiences (accustomed as they were to Shakespeare's staged battles) as anti-climactic, 'News, lads: our wars are done!' (II. i, 20). Othello's bland reiteration does not even seem to justify much reformulation: 'News, friends, our wars are done' (I. 200). The Turkish threat then vanishes wholly from the play (with the exception of providing a pretext for the party announced in II. ii) not as a result of their being defeated in battle but because of a fortunate change in the weather: 'The desperate tempest hath so banged the Turks / That their designment halts' (II. i, 21-2). Despite the fact that, in the first place, Othello was stationed in

¹⁹ 'A Short View of Tragedy', p. 161.

Cyprus to defend it against the Ottomites, this pressing political concern vanishes completely as the play narrows its focus onto the household affairs of the island's governor. Correspondingly, very little *happens* in the last three acts of the play. What we have instead of action is a deluge of gossipy stories not so different from the scandal and chatter that comprises standard Shakespearean intrigue comedy and occupies the populations of Messina or Illyria—places in which (just like Cyprus) characters eavesdrop on each others' conversations, lovers are accused of infidelity, gulls imagine themselves consummating impossible affairs and jealousy all but destroys the possibility of lasting happiness.

Iago is at the centre of this web of deception, spinning yarns in every direction. Alan Sinfield calls him 'the great manipulator of the prevailing stories of his society' and we see him as the master tell-tale, the comic impresario, stage-managing the delusions of others.²⁰ The critical commonplace is that the naive and credulous Othello is deceived by the chameleon wit of Iago but this is to let Emilia, Desdemona, Roderigo and Cassio off too lightly. All are deceived by him—no one sees through his much acclaimed 'honesty'. In 'The Improvisation of Power', Stephen Greenblatt compares Iago's to the comic intelligence of Mosca (in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*) noting that what they share is the ability to extemporise their way forward no matter what situation arises to meet them. Each character is 'fully aware of himself as an improviser and revels in his ability to manipulate his victims.'²¹ Like Mosca, Iago is a story-teller and his success lies in telling people what they most want to hear or what confirms their own most secret fears. The play opens with Roderigo's rejection of Iago's version of events, 'Tush, never tell me

²⁰ Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 29.

²¹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 233.

...’, but within minutes, the gull has fallen under the spell of the trickster’s unctuous plausibility. It is in his reconfiguring Othello’s new wife into the ‘cunning whore of Venice’ (IV. ii, 91) that Iago demonstrates most effectively his power of improvisation. As Greenblatt writes, ‘Iago knows that an identity that has been fashioned as a story can be unfashioned, refashioned, inscribed anew in a different narrative.’²² It is this peculiar dismantling of identity that constitutes the improvisational power which Greenblatt describes. Mosca, like his companion, the appropriately named Face in *The Alchemist*, is a master of disguise, providing his dupes with the fulfilment of their delusory dreams. This comic flexibility (Face adopts a different disguise for each sucker in turn) is inimical to a stable personality; it necessitates a complete abnegation of a fixed identity. Iago’s is a floating selfhood as the play insists upon his comic mutability—‘Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago’ (I. i, 56), ‘I am not what I am’ (I. 64), ‘I must show out a flag and sign of love [to Othello], / Which is indeed but sign’ (II. 154-5). The caustic hypocrisy of Iago insisting on the match between inward essence and outward show belongs to a long tradition of comic irony: ‘Men should be’, he pronounces with feigned sagacity, ‘what they seem / Or those that be not, would they might seem none’ (III. iii, 129-30). As Emilia conjectures that Desdemona’s chastity is the object of a slur and that ‘Some cogging, cozening slave [has] devised this slander’ (IV. ii, 134-5), Iago can only respond by confirming the vacuum that constitutes his identity, ‘Fie, there is no such man, it is impossible’ (I. 136). Behind his mask, Iago is nothing and this is why, at the end of the play, when the real Iago is uncovered, he has nothing to say: ‘What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word’ (V. ii, 300-1).

Typical of Iago’s cynical, manipulative prowess is his treatment of Roderigo. He plays Sir Toby to Roderigo’s

²² *Ibid.*, p. 238.

Sir Andrew conning and coaxing his gull for financial gain—‘Put money in thy purse’ (I. iii, 340). He encourages Roderigo to plough his realised assets into what is a futile pursuit of Desdemona just as Toby tells Andrew to persevere with his suit to Olivia. He goads him to pick a fight with Cassio (II. i, 265) just as Toby bolsters Andrew’s confidence to challenge Cesario, and when Roderigo whines about the profligacy of his pursuit of Desdemona (with whom Iago is supposed to be interceding on his behalf), Iago, in the teeth of the evidence, manages to sound optimistically upbeat: ‘How poor are they that have not patience! ... Does’t not go well?’ (II. iii, 365-9). In IV. ii, 174f, Iago’s mixture of mock-indignation and gentle reassurance ensures that Roderigo will attack Cassio in an effort to keep Desdemona from travelling to Mauretania with her husband (of course, no such journey is intended). Iago’s capacity to manage those around him by stealth rather than authority makes him another version of the comic dissembler. His descriptions of his next plan of action, aired with disarming candour to the audience, are a marked proclivity of the comic Machiavel that Shakespeare had so brilliantly developed in his characterisation of Richard III. But in his particular antipathy to the state of married happiness Iago is closer to Don John who, when he hears of an impending marriage, growls malevolently, ‘Will it serve for any model to build mischief on? What is he for a fool that betroths himself to unquietness?’ (*Much Ado*, I. iii, 42). Like Don John, Iago’s *raison d’être* seems to be a mixture of self-justification and what Coleridge referred to as a ‘motiveless malignity.’²³

²³ Coleridge’s *Criticism of Shakespeare: A Selection*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Athlone Press, 1989), p. 113. In the source, the Ensign’s motivation is clear: he ‘fell ardently in love with Desdemona, and bent all his thoughts to see if he could manage to enjoy her ... if he himself could not enjoy the Lady, then the Moor should not have her either’ (*Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, VII, 244).

Iago's own misogynous account of women suggests the dysfunctional nature of his own marriage:

Come on, come on, you are pictures out of doors,
Bells in your parlours, wild-cats in your kitchens,
Saints in your injuries, devils being offended,
Players in your housewifery, and housewives in ...
Your beds. ...
You rise to play, and go to bed to work.

(II. i, 109-15)

This crude cataloguing of women, its disproportionate hyperbole together with the rhetorical inversion of the last line, suggests that it is an ironic declamation—not that Iago is not a misogynist (he may well be)—but the effect of such a mischievous speech is to deride its sardonic claims. Desdemona and Emilia enter the jovial spirit of the denunciation prompting him to discourse further on ‘black and witty’, ‘fair and foolish’ and other stock female types; Iago's is the role of the insolent jester, part-Feste, part-Touchstone. It is no surprise then, as he eclipses the Moor's dramatic centrality by means of his candid relationship with the audience, that the epic tone of high tragedy is also thrown into shadow. His presiding comic intelligence, like that of Mosca and Face, is finally more *interesting* than that of the dupes (including Othello) that surround him. Kiernan Ryan ventures: ‘we are encouraged throughout to identify more with the viewpoint and values of Iago than with Othello.’²⁴ Edward Pechter is even more forthright, ‘The play writes us into Iago's perspective at the beginning and in one way or another succeeds in sustaining this alliance, no matter how unholy we understand it to be, up to the end.’²⁵

It is not only the presence of Iago's ironic malevolence that makes *Othello* more comic than tragic (after all

²⁴ Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare* (London: Harvester, 1989), p. 54.

²⁵ Edward Pechter, “‘Have you not read of some such thing?’: Sex and Sexual Stories in *Othello*”, *Shakespeare Survey*, 49 (1996), 215.

Edmund in *King Lear* performs a similar role, though to a much lesser extent); it is its obsession with crude sexual scandal and the extensive use of obscene slang that prevents the play's comfortable grouping alongside the other tragedies. In this it allies itself closely with *Much Ado*, *Measure for Measure*, *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*. When, on the other hand, such obscenity appears in *Hamlet* (as at 'country matters' (III. ii, 111) or during the closet scene) it is part of a corrosive despondency which articulates a twisted contempt for what Blake refers to as 'The lineaments of gratified desire'.²⁶ Similarly Lear's use of obscenity is to signal a psychotic revulsion from woman, brought on by his rejection at the hands of his own daughters:

Down from the waist
They're centaurs, though women all above.
But to the girdle do the gods inherit;
Beneath is all the fiend's. There's hell, there's darkness,
There's the sulphury pit, burning, scalding,
Stench, consummation, Fie, fie, fie; pah, pah!
(*History*, xx. 119-24)

In contrast, obscenity in *Othello* has a traditional, comic ribaldry to it. Iago's anti-feminist descriptions of various types of women are, in Desdemona's opinion, no more than 'old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh i'th' alehouse' (II. i, 138)—that is, they are miles away from the venomous misogyny found in *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. Later in the play, as Emilia greets her husband with the gift of the handkerchief, she remarks, 'I have a thing for you -'. Iago fires back, 'You have a thing for me? it is a common thing -' (III. iii, 305-6). As E. A. J. Honigmann explains, 'Iago pretends to misunderstand *thing* as pudendum.'²⁷ This localised quibbling is closer to Feste's

²⁶ William Blake, 'What is it men in women do require?', *Poems*, ed. W. H. Stevenson and David V. Erdman (London: Longman, 1971), p. 167.

²⁷ Arden III ed., p. 228.

‘corrup[tion] of words’ (III. i, 35) than Lear’s or Hamlet’s mordant vision. Nor is it Iago alone who speaks what Mikhail Bakhtin calls ‘the language of the market-place’; Shakespeare puts it into the mouth of the play’s most delicate figure.²⁸ As Desdemona laments her husband’s accusation that she is a whore, she squeamishly resists saying the word: ‘I cannot say whore: / It does abhor me now I speak the word’ (IV. ii, 163-4). Not only do we relish the comic irony of her pronouncing a word that she can’t bring herself to say—she has to say it to tell us what it is she cannot say—but, as if that were not enough, Shakespeare requires her to say the word ‘abhor’ in the next line, the second syllable of which is homophonic with the taboo word. Desdemona’s protestations are laughably inadequate and her prissy self-consciousness is punctured by the playwright.

Bakhtin writes: ‘Within the system of grotesque realism and popular festive forms [obscenities] were an essential part of the imagery representing the material bodily lower stratum.’²⁹ Perhaps the most sustained example of this fascination with the comic potential of this ‘lower stratum’ is the bizarre interchange of the Clown and the First Musician:

CLOWN Why, masters, have your instruments
 been in
 Naples, that they speak i’t’h’ nose thus?
1 MUSICIAN How, sir? How?
CLOWN Are these, I pray you, wind instruments?
1 MUSICIAN Ay marry are they, sir.
CLOWN O, thereby hangs a tail.
1 MUSICIAN Whereby hangs a tale, sir?
CLOWN Marry, sir, by many a wind instrument that
 I know.
(III. i, 3-11)

²⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press, 1984), Chapter II.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

The clown's opening reference to the Neapolitan disease (the pox which attacked the nose) allows the conversation to develop via the *tail / tale* pun, into a ridiculous joke about the proximity of the penis ('tail') and anus ('wind instrument'). This vulgarity is quite unlike the sophisticated quibbling of the Gravedigger in *Hamlet* or the topical satire of the Porter in *Macbeth*. It is much closer to the irrepressible comic obscenities of *Measure for Measure*, for example. So pervasive is this language of the market-place, that moments of apparently high tragedy are undermined by its constant intrusion. At the play's tragic climax, Othello stands over the sleeping Desdemona, pondering the irrevocable act of murdering her:

But once put out thy light,
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume: when I have plucked the rose
I cannot give it vital growth again,
It needs must wither. I'll smell thee on the tree
... He [smells, then] kisses her.

(V. ii, 10-19)

The talk of smelling her (which leads Honigmann to interpolate the stage direction) might seem curious until we realise that 'to pluck a rose' is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'of women, to visit the lavatory, to urinate or defecate.' It cites the earliest printed instance of this euphemism for passing wind from Beaumont and Fletcher's *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, published in 1613, but first performed in 1607, less than five years after *Othello* was first staged. It is hard to believe that this use is not also being invoked by the olfactory emphasis of Othello's speech. As Edward Pechter has argued in an unabashed essay, 'Othello reverses his feelings about

Desdemona ... *because of her nasty smell*.³⁰ Iago too is explicit in his reference to anality remarking in aside of the meeting of Cassio and Desdemona, 'Very good, well kissed, and excellent courtesy: 'tis so indeed! Yet again, your fingers to your lips? would they were clyster-pipes for your sake!' (I. i, 174-7). Honigmann explains, 'A clyster was a medicine injected into the rectum. Ridley [editor of the Arden II *Othello*] glossed as "syringe for a (vaginal) douche".'³¹ *Othello* seems deliberately to undercut, with obscene reference or comic quibbling, its claims to high tragic status. These smutty jokes are not casual but are woven into the core of the drama. They signify the play's dominant theme of sexual jealousy, a theme which, both traditionally and in the case of Shakespeare, is a staple comic subject. Cuckoldry or fear of cuckoldry animates many of the other comedies—*Much Ado*, *Merry Wives*, *Cymbeline* and so on—while the motif of the young wife leaving her old husband for a younger lover goes back at least to Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*.³²

Thirty years ago Barbara De Mendonça conclusively demonstrated the affinities between *Othello* and *commedia dell'arte*.³³ Not only are the motifs of young wives and lovers, jilted older husbands and sexual scandals familiar from this dramatic mode, but even the bases for different kinds of character are generically determined. Iago is thus a *zanni* or confidence trickster; Desdemona an *innamorata*; Emilia a *servetta*; Bianca a courtesan and so on. Brabantio, looking out of his window (perhaps with a night-cap on his head like the roused Malvolio) is a version of Pantalone. His wringing of his

30 "Have you not read of some such thing?": Sex and Sexual Stories in *Othello*, p. 210.

31 Arden III ed., p. 174.

32 Othello does seem concerned that he is too old for Desdemona: 'I am declined / Into the vale of years' (III. iii, 269-70).

33 Barbara Heliodora C. De Mendonça, 'Othello: a Tragedy Built on a Comic Structure', *Shakespeare Survey*, 21 (1968), 31-8.

hands about the world turned upside down—‘if such actions may have passage free [Desdemona’s marriage] / Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be’ (I. ii, 98-9)—is an archetypal restatement of comic inversion. As De Mendonça notes, ‘from the initial dramatic situation, one does not expect tragedy but comedy.’³⁴ But as I have tried to show, *Othello* maintains *throughout* the employment of comic devices—in the use of its setting, its theme, its characterisation (especially in regard to Iago) and its widespread bawdy. Finally, in its murder scene, it stifles its tragic potentiality with nothing more belligerent than, in the words of my title, ‘a good soft pillow’. In the light of these observations we might credit Rymer’s bilious final verdict with rather more seriousness than it usually receives:

There is in this Play, some burlesk, some humour, and ramble of Comical Wit, some shew, and some *Mimickry* to divert the spectators: but the tragical part is, plainly none other, than a Bloody Farce, without salt or savour.³⁵

PETER J SMITH is Lecturer in English at Nottingham Trent University. His publications include *Social Shakespeare: aspects of Renaissance dramaturgy and contemporary society* (Macmillan, 1995), and *Hamlet: theory in practice* (co-edited with Nigel Wood, Open University Press, 1996).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁵ ‘A Short View of Tragedy’, p. 164.