

The "Compulsive Course" of *Othello*

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One tendency in *Othello* criticism in the twentieth century has culminated in an image of the Moor as "a kind of dazed, unhappy bull with Iago as a clever matador dancing round him".¹ This shows the continuing effect of the Bradleyan anxiety about where, in Shakespearean tragedy, the "responsibility" for the outcome is to be fixed, and how the blame is to be apportioned. Critics examining *Othello* from these premises have found the Moor only too accountable for the disaster that overtakes him. Even the apportionment of responsibility between himself and Iago has turned to Othello's disadvantage, with Dr Leavis concluding that the secret of Iago's power is that "he represents something that is in *Othello* . . . the essential traitor is within the gates".² The implication of this view, logically pursued, would be to cancel *Othello* from the list of Shakespearean tragedies. It would become the sordid chronicle of an ignoble figure who eventually meets the death he deserves. While this may be an accurate account of the tale Shakespeare found in Cinthio, I hesitate to apply it to the vastly different play he created from that material.

The Moor of the original story is a domestic figure, who happens to be a soldier by profession. Shakespeare's Othello is presented to us as a noble general, who takes his life and being from men of royal siege. He has been married to Desdemona for only a matter of hours when he leaves for Cyprus, while in Cinthio's narrative the Moor and his wife have been married for some time, with "never a word passed between them that was not loving".³ The ensign, in the source, has no consuming hatred for Othello from the outset; in the play, this becomes the main-spring of Iago's behaviour, and the action depends on placing the two in dangerous conjunction. The changes made in the play from the source all tend in the same direction. They show Shakespeare deliberately courting those dangers that modern

- 1 Helen Gardner, "Othello: A Retrospect, 1900-67", *Shakespeare Survey* 21 (1970), p. 5: representing the view of Wyndham Lewis.
- 2 "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero: or The Sentimentalist's *Othello*" in *The Common Pursuit* (London 1952: Peregrine edn 1963), p. 141.
- 3 From the translation of *Gli Hecatommithi* in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. G. Bullough (London 1973), VII.243.

critics have been most anxious for him to avoid. The heroic status conferred on Othello makes him all the more vulnerable; his relationship to Desdemona is subjected to strain at its time of greatest fragility; Iago's role is modified to expose Othello to greater hazard still. The risks seem deliberately built into the situation, so that what may flow from it is tragedy, rather than an intrigue leading to the conclusion "Thus did God avenge the innocence of Disdemona".⁴

It is the mode of the tragedy that has been mistaken. It does not yield to the Bradleyan approach — still pursued unconsciously by Dr Leavis as he seeks to fix responsibility and expose Othello's moral flaws — which tends to disqualify itself by the results it reaches. To what extent any Shakespearean tragedy is amenable to approaches based on "motivation" is doubtful; the word itself, as Harry Levin⁵ has remarked, is not recorded in the *OED* until 1873. With *Othello* the approach is more doubtful still. Certainly the play allows for the close study of a mind at odds with itself, worked upon by suspicion and tortured with doubt. The danger is that we may find the whole existence of the play in these processes, and overlook what is happening outside them.

Few students of Shakespeare encountering the following passage would fail to identify the play from which it comes:

For do but stand upon the foaming shore,
The chidden billow seems to pelt the clouds;
The wind-shaked surge, with high and monstrous mane,
Seems to cast water on the burning Bear
And quench the Guards of th' ever-fixèd pole.
I never did like molestation view
On the enchafèd flood.⁶

But hardly one in twenty can name the speaker of the lines. This is because the vogue of "character study", extensive as it is, has not yet encompassed the Second Gentleman at the beginning of Act II. The rhetoric and imagery of the passage identify the world of the play, and show that world being projected quite independently of the psychological processes we follow through it. The Second Gentleman is a nullity, who is dispensable from

4 *Ibid.*, p. 252.

5 "Othello and the Motive-Hunters" in *Shakespeare and the Revolution of the Times* (New York 1976), p. 149.

6 *Othello*, II.i.11-17. All quotations are from the Pelican text, ed. G. E. Bentley.

the psychological action, but his speech is not dispensable in the same way. It limns the world to which Othello belongs, and which his own utterance may conjure up:

Never, Iago. Like to the Pontic sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont,
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
Shall ne'er look back . . .

(III.iii.453-8)

— and indeed the “heroic” quality of Othello is repeatedly defined by reference to “moving accidents by flood and field”, “hills of seas Olympus-high”, and the challenges of war.

There is a dimension to the play, created especially by its imagery and styles of language, that reaches beyond “plot” and “motivation”. While this applies in all of the tragedies, its application in *Othello* is to suggest that some of the critical difficulties found in the play come from asking the wrong questions of it. Why does Othello believe Iago so readily? Why do the interviews between Othello and Desdemona make things worse? Why, with a little commonsense, cannot the misunderstandings be cleared up? These questions all depend on the supposition that the action can be deflected from the course on which it is set, that the process of misunderstanding can be stopped or turned back, that the outcome can somehow be averted. But all the time the play is indicating that it cannot. It is “the play” that indicates this, the entity which goes beyond what is purposed or transacted by the characters.

The pattern, crudely, is one in which one event or speech or image anticipates something still to come, and in which these anticipations all point to the same end. When Othello, landing in Cyprus, is reunited with Desdemona, he exclaims

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.

(II.i.187-91)

Othello here is not really entertaining the prospect of death, or pondering “unknown fate”, or imagining that his happiness will not extend beyond this moment: he is describing the height of happiness he has achieved in reunion with his bride. But the speech is proleptic, in ways the reader or audience may perceive, while Othello cannot. The only way of securing his

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happiness would indeed be to die at this moment; "unknown fate" will never offer another felicity like it.

Even before Iago has begun the work of poisoning Othello's mind, the play is cutting off any prospect that its movement can be altered. It is at Iago's instigation that Michael Cassio asks Desdemona to intercede for him, and her vivacious pleas for Cassio's reinstatement prompt Othello's comment as she leaves the stage:

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.

(III.iii.90-92)

This is said before Iago has addressed himself to Othello; the only move in his campaign so far has been to remark on Cassio's "guilty-like" departure as they approached. "Perdition" is a word lightly spoken here, as "soul" is a word lightly spoken. But the association is made between Othello's soul and the damnation to which the loss of Desdemona may draw it, just as the words that are unprophetic to him become prophetic to the hearer:

when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.

An affectionate exclamation ("Excellent wretch!") is followed by an indulgently extravagant assertion of his love ("Perdition catch my soul/But I do love thee!"), and by a confession, true but still extravagant, that his whole existence now depends on Desdemona ("when I love thee not,/Chaos is come again"). So far as they reflect Othello's state of mind at this time, these lines can hardly be interpreted any further. In the pattern to which they contribute, however, they show the play, even before Iago has gone to work, set on its "compulsive course."

As he begins to feed suspicions to Othello, Iago warns him of jealousy. This Othello brushes aside:

Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy,
To follow still the changes of the moon
With fresh suspicions? No! To be once in doubt
Is once to be resolved. Exchange me for a goat
When I shall turn the business of my soul
To such exsufflicate and blown surmises,
Matching this inference.

(III.iii.178-83)

Not only do these lines describe the condition into which Othello will fall, but the dismissive "Exchange me for a goat" is cruelly proleptic. It prefigures the way the images of goat and monkeys

that properly belong to Iago's level of thinking will come to infect Othello's mind (III.iii.403, IV.i.256), showing the subjugation of the higher nature to the lower. Similarly his later declaration

I had rather be a toad
And live upon the vapor of a dungeon
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others' uses

(III.iii.270-73)

anticipates the time when the fountain of his being will become "a cistern for foul toads/To knot and gender in" (IV.ii.61-2).

The pattern is seen in an extended form in the "willow" scene (IV.iii). This itself is anticipated in the scene preceding, in Desdemona's instructions to Emilia to make her bed with her wedding sheets. The willow scene is studied and calculated, in its mood, its music, its almost ritual quality. Desdemona sees her wedding sheets as her shroud; she sings the song of the maid who died when "he she loved proved mad/And did forsake her"; she feels an itch in her eyes which may bode weeping. No one at the close of the willow scene could possibly imagine that Desdemona will now survive.

At one level, therefore, the misunderstandings continue and the possibility nags us that they could so easily be cleared up and set right; at another level the play keeps indicating that it cannot be turned from its course, that its movement is irreversible. It is in this that the tragedy consists. *Othello* conveys a tragic vision that will grow darker in *King Lear*. It shows that any pattern of events in which a man is caught must extend beyond the scope of his responsible actions, and that those actions may shift the pattern even further beyond his control. It is not a matter of anxiously determining blame, for that determination is apt to yield one verdict as readily as its opposite. Othello's willingness to credit Iago — it can be argued — springs from the worst in his nature, for his love for Desdemona must be defective if Iago can make such an impression on him. It springs from the best in his nature — the counter-argument runs — as his openness and innocence make him vulnerable: if he had not been Othello, but Uriah Heep, he would have been a match for Iago on his own level.⁷ But neither verdict is altogether material, except in confirming that this is a situation in which

7 See A. J. A. Waldock's comments on *Oedipus Rex* in this perspective in *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge 1951), pp. 145-7.

Othello cannot win. The anecdotes of audience protest at the drift of the play — like the agonized interjection, “O you great black fool, can’t you see?”⁸ — witness to the same propensity in it. It is time that the Bradleyan concern with “responsibility” relaxed its stranglehold on interpretation. *Othello* is a tragedy constructed to show that while so much of our fate may lie within our own control, the whole of it never does, and the characters are caught in a process to which their actions have contributed, but which they are powerless to arrest or reverse.

Yet the affinity of *Othello* remains with *King Lear*, rather than with a tragedy like *Romeo and Juliet*. Othello and Desdemona are not “a pair of star-crossed lovers”, in the sense that we need to postulate some “fate” as being in the ascendant in the play. Individual action — limited as it is by circumstance, and by the agency of others — preserves its dignity still. The balance between human activity as significant, and human activity as un-availing, is tantalizingly held, and one function of Othello’s valedictory speech is to reassert the dignity of the individual at the end. It not only allows him that “special privilege of comment”⁹ which may be exercised at the end of the tragedies; it also reinstates him in his heroic role. Another of Shakespeare’s departures from the source has been to introduce the opposition of Turk and Christian, and perhaps to express this within the behaviour of Othello himself. If Iago has succeeded in releasing a barbarian within him, the Christian in Othello reasserts himself at the end, and by reliving a past episode in Aleppo, brings that other unworthy self to justice, and execution:

Soft you! a word or two before you go.
 I have done the state some service, and they know’t.
 No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
 Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
 Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
 Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
 Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
 Albeit unuse’d to the melting mood,
 Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
 Their med’cinable gum. Set you down this.

8 Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare’s Sources* (London 1957), p. 137.

9 See John Holloway, *The Story of the Night: Studies in Shakespeare’s Major Tragedies* (London 1961), p. 55.

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And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcisèd dog
And smote him — thus.

He stabs himself.

(V.ii.338-56)