OTHELLO THE MOOR OF VENICE

INTRODUCTION

Of the four tragedies commonly thought to be Shakespeare's greatest and the most distinguished examples of this form in the English language – *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* – *Othello* is the most tightly constructed and the narrowest in scope. The resultant concentration of emotion and action makes it a play of unusual forcefulness, powerful not only on the stage but in the study, sweeping from the confident and brilliant opening to the tragic close. All four tragedies came within a six- or seven-year span; *Othello*, the second, was probably written not long before November 1, 1604, when it was performed by the King's Men at Court, and it is interesting that it alone has this tight construction and headlong action.

Shakespeare gains this concentration in several ways. For one thing, here the time of action is condensed so that the events of only two or three nights and days appear to be set forth on the stage, and the only emphasized time-lapse is that required for the voyage from Venice to Cyprus. The other three tragedies span months or even years, and time-consuming events which occur between scenes have to be pointed out to the audience: for example, in *Hamlet* Laertes' trip from Elsinore to Paris and return; in *King Lear* Cordelia's sojourn in France; and in *Macbeth* Malcolm and Macduff's flight to England, the recruitment of an army there, and then the march of that army to Dunsinane. The elimination in *Othello* of all but one such emphasized space-breaks and time-breaks helps to give the play its headlong rush from the arrival in Cyprus to Othello's death.

Not only by a limitation of time has Shakespeare intensified the effect of rushing events, but also by an unusual concentration of the action in the three main characters, Othello, Desdemona, and Iago. One or more of these three is on the stage in each of the fifteen scenes of the play except for the brief proclamation scene (II, ii), whereas Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are absent from nine scenes of their play, Lear and his daughters fail to appear in six scenes of *King Lear*, and even in the one-man play of *Hamlet* both the protagonist and Ophelia are off-stage during four scenes totalling nearly five hundred lines. These observations afford, of course, no evidence of the comparative merits of the four tragedies, but they do point to Shakespeare's deviation from his customary practice in achieving the distinctive concentration of *Othello*. He has denied himself the development of any subsidiary interests in order to concentrate on the tragic destruction of Othello and Desdemona through the diabolism of Iago.

To the same end Shakespeare has minimized the number of characters in this play. Not only is the cast of *Othello* smaller than those of the other three tragedies – it has half to two-thirds the number of characters – but in it the secondary characters, Brabantio, Cassio, Roderigo, and Emilia, are undeveloped save for their relations to the plotting of Iago or the downfall of Othello and Desdemona. Even Iago's gulling of Roderigo, which might at first glance seem to be an underplot, is really only an instrument in the destruction of Othello; Roderigo is given little individuality beyond that of the uncomprehending gull to whom Iago may speak freely (thus further revealing for the audience his own character and plans) and who will carry out Iago's schemes for the disgrace and assassination of Cassio. Roderigo has no unrelated or parallel existence, like that of Lady Macduff in *Macbeth*, or Polonius and Fortinbras in *Hamlet*. All such secondary concerns, which add variety and depth of character-interest to Shakespeare's other major tragedies, and to *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus* as well, have been sacrificed in this play to give *Othello* that unique concentration and simplicity which make it more like modern tragedies in structure than any of Shakespeare's other tragic masterpieces.

Othello differs again from the usual Shakespearean pattern in the extent to which the power of evil is concentrated in one figure. The conflict of good and evil in an ostensibly Christian world was always a basic element in Elizabethan tragedies, and Shakespeare's presentation of the conflict is everywhere more subtle and complex than that of any of his contemporaries, but in the other Shakespearean tragedies the evil is more dispersed through various characters or even, as in *King Lear*, through the entire world of the play. Here the inherent weaknesses of Desdemona and Othello are made fatal through the maneuvering of Iago, whose cunning of the devil makes the finally disabused Othello look for his cloven hoof (V, ii, 286). This further simplification of the structure of the play not only makes possible the creation of Shakespeare's supreme stage villain – one of the most coveted roles in the history of the theatre – but it provides yet another device for the concentration of emotions in the tragedy. The play's excellence in structure and vividness in characterization seem even more impressive when *Othello* is compared with its source, a mediocre Italian tale by "Cinthio" (Giovanni Baptista Giraldi) told in the *Hecatommithi*, a collection of 1565.

Having planned his scenario to reduce the scope and variety made possible by the Elizabethan stage and familiarly exploited in tragedies like his own *Antony and Cleopatra* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Shakespeare could lavish his dramatic and poetic genius on the painful degeneration of the noble and assured Othello of Act I, scenes

ii and iii, to the pitiful dupe and the figure of passionate remorse we see in V, ii; on the battering of the proud and confident Desdemona of I, iii into the childlike and uncomprehending victim of Acts IV and V – all by means of the terrifyingly casual and joyous evil of "honest Iago." All the seeds of these tragic events are displayed to the audience in the first act, but they are so adroitly overlaid by a romantic and optimistic tone that the prosperity of the love of Othello and Desdemona is made to seem superficially possible.

Othello is a man of action whose achievement was immediately obvious to an Elizabethan audience, in spite of his exotic color and background, because of his position as the commanding general for the greatest commercial power of the preceding century. He is first presented in a situation in which his experience and reputation make him easily the dominant figure on the stage. In the second scene of the play, as the drawn swords flash about him, Othello, the object of the attack, stands quietly confident, his weapon still in its scabbard, and speaks to these incensed men like a veteran to excited boys: "Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them."

At Othello's second appearance, in the third scene of the play, he dominates not a mere cluster of street fighters but the Duke and senators of a powerful Renaissance state assembled in formal council. The scene is skillfully contrived at the beginning to draw the audience into the crisis of a national emergency; then a principal senator arrives who focuses the attention of the council on his just indignation against the unnamed seducer of his daughter. Unhesitatingly the Duke accepts Brabantio's story and unhesitatingly promises him the bloody punishment of the culprit, though the man be the Duke's own son. But when Brabantio explains that the unnamed seducer is their great general, the attitude of Duke and senators changes sharply. Respectfully they listen as the black Othello describes his courtship of the daughter of a great Venetian magnifico; they watch sympathetically as Desdemona confesses her duty and obedience to the Moor above her duty and obedience to her father; the Duke in the presence of the other senators advises Brabantio to make the best of his new son-in-law; and Duke and senators proceed to reiterate their confidence in Othello by assigning him the command at Cyprus as though Brabantio had never spoken. Again, as in scene ii, the assured power of Othello over great men in council as well as over lesser men in action is dramatized before the audience.

Yet under this dominating impression of a commanding and unshakeable personality the weaknesses of Othello have been less vividly suggested. In the second scene he speaks confidentially to Iago as to a trusted friend, and toward the end of the third scene he commits his beloved wife to the protection of Iago, whom he calls a man "of honesty and trust." But the audience had been introduced to Iago before they had been to Othello. In the opening scene of the play Iago was heard to admit his hatred of Othello, to declare his moral code as unscrupulous self-aggrandizement, and to assert his policy of consistent insincerity. And in the council chamber scene, immediately after the exit of Othello, the trusted Iago again declares his principles of calculated self-seeking and closes the act with a soliloquy in which he reasserts his hatred of Othello and plots the general's betrayal. Can Othello's assured mastery of threatening situations be so unshakeable as it has seemed in the two big dramatic scenes of the act if he is so naive in his judgment of Iago?

And what of the romantic marriage with Desdemona so touchingly presented? Othello says of his wife that

> She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
> And I loved her that she did pity them.

The lines are beautifully evocative, but many members of the audience might have an uneasy feeling that Desdemona really knew very little about Othello. And they would feel uneasy again at Brabantio's bitter parting jibe at Othello,

> Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:
> She has deceived her father, and may thee,

a jibe made in a spirit of animosity and not of thoughtful analysis, yet reminding us that romantic ignorance often prepares the way for deception. The Elizabethan ideal of respect for parents was much stronger than ours, and this emphatic couplet was calculated to make a sharper impression on an audience than a more elaborately rational statement would have made. Even the phrase "if thou hast eyes to see" has an ominous relevance, for Othello has already shown he has no eyes to see the true character of Iago. Does he know more of Desdemona?

And so carefully planned concentration on Iago, Othello, and Desdemona in the first act of the play leaves a dominant impression of a resourceful and confident general, triumphant in a seriously threatened love affair, off for new triumphs in the field of his greatest competence, so fortunate that as he sets out to meet the challenge of a military emergency he is not even required to forgo the company of his bride. And yet here, less dominantly presented in this opening movement, are all the seeds of the fifth act. Othello is a proud and confident man, but his experience, as he himself points out, is almost exclusively military; his appealing new wife knows little of him save for his military honors and adventures, and he knows little of her save for her admiration of his exploits; his trusted ensign is an unscrupulous opportunist who prides himself on his insincerity. In these terms the play is to develop.

The transfer of the action to Cyprus for the developments of the last four acts is significant. From Desdemona's native world of wealthy, sophisticated, pampered Venice, where Othello is out of his usual campaign environment, the action moves to an outpost under martial law, a setting alien to Desdemona. Here, like most of Shakespeare's tragic heroines, she is isolated from her accustomed friends and supporters, while Othello is in a setting familiar, as he has said, from childhood:

> For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith
> Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used
> Their dearest action in the tented field.

In such an environment one would expect Othello to be even more effortlessly dominant than in worldly Venice, and the first two hundred lines of the Cyprus action suggest that he will be, for all on stage are relieved at his arrival and eager to trust and serve him; even the fortunate dispersal of the Turkish fleet seems another triumph for lucky Othello. But it only seems so, for Othello's accustomed environment of war is suddenly removed, and in the last hundred lines of II, i Iago establishes the cynical, lecherous, intriguing tone of a decadent

Renaissance court more vividly than it was ever set in the first act at Venice itself. Othello's apparent good fortune in the transfer of the action from sophisticated Venice, where, as he says, "little of this great world can I speak," to the familiar setting of a town at war, with the added good fortune of the company of his bride, is a completely illusory triumph. Cyprus is not really an honest camp but an outpost of Venetian intrigue in which Othello is a helpless child; his new wife is not even a typical Venetian, for she is more naive and imperceptive than Othello, as her actions in the third and fourth acts and her conversation with Emilia in the last part of IV, iii so vividly show; Iago is not the trusty ensign who will fight at his commander's side but a Venetian devil incarnate, adept at hellish insinuations. As in so many Shakespearean tragedies, the great man of the first act enters a new set of circumstances and becomes "no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art."

It is only Iago who prospers in the new environment. The declared villain satisfies his hatred of his general and his lieutenant by creating for Othello the vivid illusion of Desdemona's infidelity with Cassio, and in the terrifying grip of this illusion Othello destroys his reputation, his happiness, his bride, and himself. Perhaps the most tragically terrifying aspect of this irrational destruction is the fact that Othello, like all mortals who only know in part, dimly realizes what he is doing at each step, but in the grip of the illusion he always misunderstands why he is doing it. As early as the middle of the third act he knows that his suspicious uncertainty of Desdemona has destroyed his peace of mind and his cherished professional career.

> O, now for ever
> Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!
> Farewell the plumèd troop, and the big wars
> That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!
> Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
> The spirit-stirring drum, th' ear-piercing fife,
> The royal banner, and all quality,
> Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
> And O you mortal engines whose rude throats
> Th' immortal Jove's dread clamors counterfeit,
> Farewell! Othello's occupation 's gone!

When he comes in to kill Desdemona he is painfully aware that his love for her is as deep as ever, that he destroys what he loves best. He kisses the sleeping girl.

> O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
> Justice to break her sword! One more, one more!
> Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
> And love thee after. One more, and that's the last!
> So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep,
> But they are cruel tears. This sorrow 's heavenly;
> It strikes where it doth love.

And a few lines later when she protests her innocence he partially and confusedly understands what he does:

> O perjured woman! thou dost stone my heart,
> And mak'st me call what I intend to do
> A murder, which I thought a sacrifice.

When, immediately after the stifling of Desdemona, Emilia enters the death chamber with news of the street murder, Othello again vaguely recognizes what he has done in the madness of his illusion, though he speaks in general terms:

> It is the very error of the moon.
> She comes more nearer earth than she was wont
> And makes men mad.

And when Emilia roundly asserts the fidelity of her dead mistress, Othello protests in half-realization of his illusion,

> Cassio did top her. Ask thy husband else.
> O, I were damned beneath all depth in hell
> But that I did proceed upon just grounds
> To this extremity. Thy husband knew it all.

Only in the last hundred lines of the play does he clearly begin to see himself and to comprehend what has happened to him:

> with this little arm and this good sword
> I have made my way through more impediments
> Than twenty times your stop. But O vain boast!
> Who can control his fate? 'Tis not so now.
> Be not afraid, though you do see me weaponed.
> Here is my journey's end.

And only in his final speech to the emissaries from the Duke and senators, just before he stabs himself, does the great general of Venice, like the great King Lear, truly know himself:

> 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.

This is the tragedy, then, of another deluded mortal who destroys what he loves best, so that his own death is only an appropriate corollary. King Lear and Coriolanus and Brutus do likewise, but they destroy themselves in a context of troubled kingdoms and empires, while the little world of Othello's tragedy is his own marriage and his false friend, "honest Iago." This narrowed scope of the tragedy reduces the generalized philosophic comments which characterize plays of more varied situation and looser structure like *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, but it intensifies the emotional impact of blind self-destruction.

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NOTE ON THE TEXT

Two versions of *Othello* have come down to us, one in a quarto of 1622 and another in the folio of 1623. Both are good, although they vary somewhat in details and their precise relationship is still subject to debate. The folio version is the fuller (by about 160 lines) and has been used as the basis of the present text; however, a number of readings from the quarto have been admitted, especially in contractions, oaths, and stage directions, where the corresponding words in the folio suggest editorial intervention. A few lines and brief passages of dialogue (I, iii, 372–75; III, iv, 92–93) omitted from the folio have been added from the quarto in square brackets. The act–scene division supplied marginally for reference is identical with that of the folio except for the indication of a new scene (II, iii) after the reading of the proclamation. (Unlike earlier quartos, that of *Othello* is partially divided into acts, with headings at II, IV, and V.) The extent of the use made of the quarto text is indicated in the Appendix as well as a listing of emendations.