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# SHAKESPEARE AND THE NATURE OF MAN

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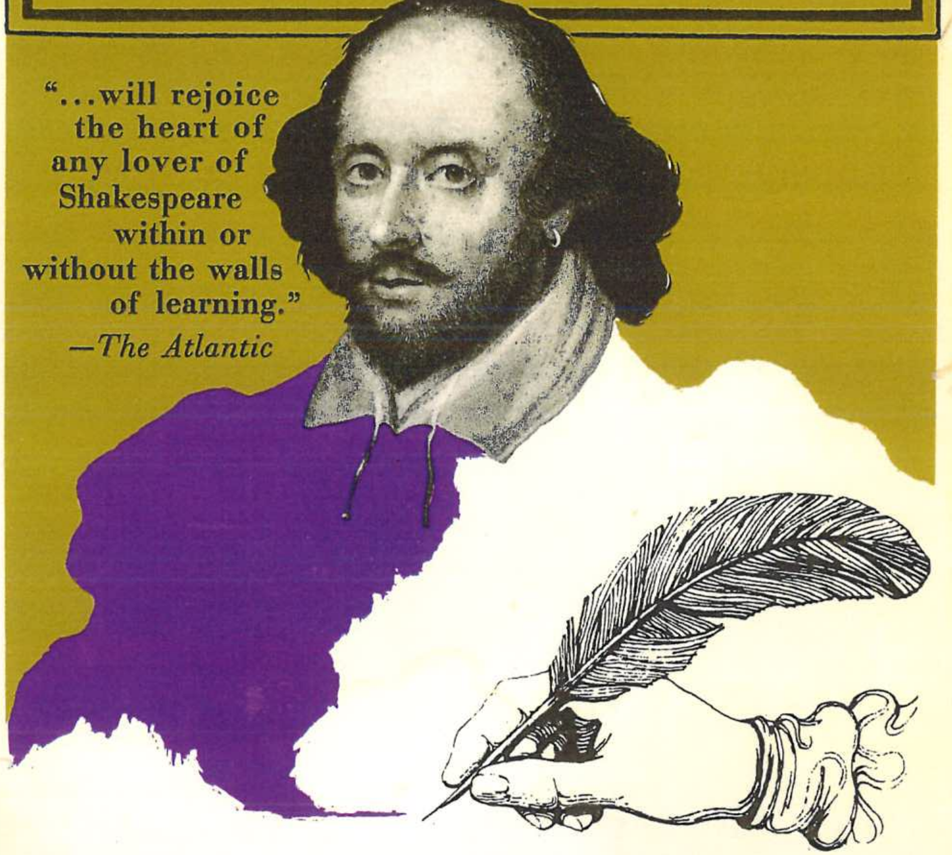
A study of the influences of Elizabethan life and thought on Shakespeare, an analysis of his craft, and detailed explications of the major plays.



**"...will rejoice the heart of any lover of Shakespeare within or without the walls of learning."**
—*The Atlantic*

SHAKE

his powers. Between 1605 and 1608 he wrote *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* and drafted *Timon of Athens*. He was, for the time being, a confirmed writer of tragedy, and it is our present business to discover how variously and how profoundly, in the light of what we know, and in the light of what *he* knew, he presented to his audiences his tragic picture of man.

## 2

In making a tragedy out of Giraldi Cinthio's story about an anonymous Moor (it had not even been translated into English), Shakespeare was entirely unhampered, or unassisted, by any previous dramatic treatment of the subject. He could assume—as he could not when he wrote about Troy—that the audience knew nothing of the plot; hence he was free to do with it as he pleased. What he did was to make it, almost more than any of his other plays, a tragedy of character. It is solely because Othello is the kind of man he is that a man like Iago can destroy him. Consequently, since *Othello* is a personal tragedy, we do not find in it, as we do in *Hamlet* and *Troilus*, much use of the political or cosmological hierarchies. It is more a close and intensive study of man himself, and of the terrible contrast between the good and evil, the nobility and the bestiality, of which he is composed.

Yet the state and the outside world of nature are by no means absent from the play; in fact they surround the personal situation like a kind of double shell, and only when we have pierced through them, do we arrive at the heart of the action, the conversion of man into a beast. In the first act Othello's position in the state is of almost equal importance with his position as Desdemona's husband, and the trust reposed in him by the Venetian Senators naturally enlarges our view of him. He is, as are all Shakespeare's characters, placed against the background of a given society.

External nature also plays its role, and the storm at Cyprus not only destroys the Turkish fleet, thus clearing up the public situation, and allowing us to concentrate on Iago and Othello, it also gives us a foretaste—a chaos in the macrocosm—of what is to happen within Othello's soul. We are not meant, of course, to apply it directly, but there can be no doubt that the vivid description of the tempest in external nature given by Montano and the two gentlemen is similar to the internal tempest shortly to be revealed to us:

> For do but stand upon the foaming shore,
> The chidden billow seems to pelt the clouds;
> The wind-shak'd surge, with high and monstrous mane,
> Seems to cast water on the burning bear
> And quench the guards of the ever-fixed pole:
> I never did like molestation view
> Of the enchafed flood.
>
> (ii, 1, 11)

The emphasis on the storm is clearly a deliberate invention by Shakespeare, for Cinthio's story says nothing about it; on the contrary Cinthio tells us that Othello and Desdemona arrived safely at Cyprus "with a perfectly tranquil sea—*con somma tranquillitá del Mare*—"[1] exactly the reverse of the situation in Shakespeare. Nor has Cinthio anything to say about a Turkish fleet; in his version the only reason why Othello leaves Venice is that the Signoria "made a change in the troops whom they used to maintain in Cyprus, and they appointed the Moor commander of the soldiers whom they dispatched thither." Shakespeare adds both the danger in the political world and the danger in the physical world as important preliminaries to the disaster in the psychological world, and that world is enlarged and intensified as a result.[2]

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[1] Furness Variorum edition, p. 378. It is tempting to guess that some technician in Shakespeare's theater, about 1604 or so, invented a new device for making off-stage noises, and that Shakespeare wrote storm-scenes so that it could be used. The richness of psychological and metaphysical overtones, in drama as in all art, is likely to be suggested by practical necessities, the physical conditions that shape the form, and these often can be, and should be (ask any playwright), the originating cause for the most striking dramatic effects. One of Shakespeare's most wonderful creations, the part of the Fool in *Lear*, was perhaps invented—as various scholars have supposed—because the well-known comic actor in Shakespeare's company, Robert Armin, needed a good role after the miserable one given him in *Othello*.

Nor are the heavens left out of the background to the psychological chaos. Just after Othello has killed Desdemona he exclaims:

O heavy hour:
Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe
Should yawn at alteration,

and he explains the murder to Emilia by saying:

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

Yet these images, as Mr. Wilson Knight very justly observes, are "something against which the dramatic movement may be silhouetted, but with which it cannot be merged. This poetic use of heavenly bodies serves to elevate the theme, to raise issues infinite and unknowable. Those bodies are not, however, implicit symbols of man's spirit, as in *Lear:* they remain distinct, isolated phenomena, sublimely decorative to the play."[3] The play itself is primarily concerned with the effect of one human being on another.

### 3

In presenting the character of Othello to his audience, Shakespeare emphasizes very strongly his grandeur, self-control and nobility. Almost as soon as we see him, he tells us, though his modesty has kept it previously a secret, that he is of kingly blood:

'Tis yet to know,
Which when I know that boasting is an honour
I shall promulgate, I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege, and my demerits
May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune
As this that I have reach'd.
(i, 2, 19)

He is "our noble and valiant general" (ii, 2, 1); Iago (and we can here take Iago at his word) describes him as being of "a free and open nature" (i, 3, 405), "of a constant, loving, noble nature" (ii, 1, 301). Before his frightful transformation he is, in Lodovico's words,

the noble Moor whom our full senate
Call all-in-all sufficient . . . the noble nature
Whom passion could not shake.
(iv, 1, 275)

His love for Desdemona is in keeping with such a character; entirely unlike the love of Troilus for Cressida, it has no sensuality in it; when he asks to be allowed to take Desdemona to Cyprus with him, he explicitly describes—in the terms of Elizabethan psychology—the exalted quality of his devotion:

I therefore beg it not
To please the palate of my appetite,
Nor to comply with heat,—the young affects
In me defunct,—and proper satisfaction,
But to be free and bounteous to her mind;
And heaven defend your good souls that you think
I will your serious and great business scant
For she is with me. No, when light-wing'd toys
Of feather'd Cupid seel with wanton dulness
My speculative and offic'd instruments,
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,

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[2] For an illuminating account of how the storm scene and Othello's arrival at Cyprus may be produced on a modern stage, see G. Wilson Knight, *Principles of Shakespearean Production*, London, 1936, pp. 134 ff. Mr. Knight's comments on Othello in his *Wheel of Fire*, Oxford, 1930, are also suggestive.

[3] *The Wheel of Fire*, p. 109.

Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and base adversities
Make head against my estimation!
(i, 3, 263)

Like Horatio, Othello appears to all the world as a man who is not passion's slave; his higher faculties, his "speculative and offic'd instruments" are apparently in complete control.

This control, and the nobility that goes with it, are reflected in the rhythm of his speech; in his lines there is an assured grandeur, an exalted authority, as he rises without effort to any emergency:

Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them. . . .

Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors,
My very noble and approv'd good masters. . . .

No one else in Shakespeare speaks like that, just as no one else speaks like Hamlet or like Lear.

This only is the witchcraft I have used:
Here comes the lady; let her witness it.

And yet there *is* a kind of witchcraft, or rather magic, about Othello. His remote origin, and the glimpses we have of his career—the "antres vast and deserts idle,"

The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders—
(i, 3, 140)

the magical handkerchief given by an Egyptian charmer to his mother—these things, which are part of his romantic past, add strangeness and mystery to his grandeur and self-possession. In his own eyes they have great importance. There is something remarkable to Othello himself about his own history, and when he refers to anything connected with it, he is at his grandest. Hence it is superbly characteristic of him that, when he recovers his lost control at the end, and he requests the Venetians to describe him as he is, he should recall, as the climax to his speech, an episode from his own past, an episode which showed his devotion to the state of Venice:

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him thus.

## 4

All this, this noble and remarkable career which has taken so long and has ranged so far, Othello has given over to Desdemona. She is the place, he says,

where I have garner'd up my heart,
Where either I must live or bear no life,
(iv, 2, 56)

and it is no wonder that when he thinks her unworthy, his whole being, that splendidly proportioned and controlled work of art, should be broken. "Excellent wretch!" he says to Desdemona,

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

And chaos—the disordered state of the elements before the world was created—does come again; in the microcosm of Othello's own world. Hamlet sees himself and his situation in relation to the universe, and his generalizations are generalizations about the world as a whole; Othello's generalizations, his expansion of his immediate situation into a wider realm of implication, are concerned with his view of himself. His is not a philosopher's mind—it is the mind of a man of action; but his generalization is none the less grand:

O! now, for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind; farewell content!

> Farewell the plumed troop and the big wars
> That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!
> Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,
> The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,
> The royal banner, and all quality,
> Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
> And, O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
> The immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
> Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!
> (iii, 3, 348)

It is this magnificent human being who is turned by Iago into chaos, into a beast. The passion which he apparently has under such superb control masters him; he is possessed by a monster; and there is nothing to distinguish him from an animal as he cries "O! blood, blood, blood!" In him, under the devilish machinations of Iago, the psychological hierarchy horribly breaks down, and we find an appalling reality under the noble appearance. Gertrude's lust had made the idealistic Hamlet see the whole world as an unweeded garden, but he could find some relief in universal speculation through his unequalled command of words; Othello, the man of action, who is his own world, and has given that world to Desdemona, when he finds lustfulness, as he thinks, in *her*, can for the time being only grovel on the floor. His period of actual bestiality, to be sure, does not last long, and though he strikes Desdemona in public, and with hideous irony treats her as an inhabitant of a brothel, when he actually comes to kill her, he does it from the noblest motives. That is what is so terrible. For in the pursuit of his misguided aim he uses all those resources of grandeur and nobility which are part of his character, and he sees himself, victim of appearance that he is, as the instrument of universal justice.

> It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul;
> Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!
> It is the cause.

## 5

Iago exists in other dimensions. If we look at him from the formalistic point of view, keeping the moralities and the interludes in mind, we can see him as the equivalent of the Vice, who manipulates all the action, until he is exposed at the end. From another point of view we can think of him as the typical Machiavellian, all intrigue, egoism and *virtú*, who enjoys evil, like Marlowe's Barabas, for its own sake. Or we can think of him as a neo-Senecan villain-hero, out to justify himself against a set of circumstances that have combined to oppress him. Literary historians have seen him in all three aspects, separately or combined, and if we enjoy being literary historians it may help us to understand him to think of him in these terms. But I doubt if Shakespeare thought of him in such a fashion, and it is perhaps wiser to discuss Iago in more direct relation to human nature.

In his earlier plays, the plays of the 1590's, Shakespeare, as we know, had made various experiments in portraying the bluff, honest man, the man who, like Mercutio, Berowne, the Bastard, and Hotspur, saw through all pretensions and stood up for the facts. It is apparently a favorite type with Shakespeare, and in the 'nineties he always presents it favorably. But as his awareness of evil expands, he sees that even this type of man may be only an appearance. For Iago is this type of man gone wrong. Shakespeare himself, in another play, gives an admirable description of one aspect of Iago's character. In *King Lear* Cornwall mistakenly describes Kent as follows:

> This is some fellow,
> Who, having been prais'd for bluntness, doth affect
> A saucy roughness, and constrains the garb
> Quite from his nature: he cannot flatter, he,
> An honest mind and plain, he must speak truth. . . .
> These kind of knaves I know, which in this plainness
> Harbor more craft and more corrupter ends

Than twenty silly-ducking observants,
That stretch their duties nicely.
(ii, 2, 101)

It is a poor description of Kent, as it is meant to be; but it is an admirable description of Iago.

The terrible thing about Iago, if we think of him (as Shakespeare thought of him) in terms of Elizabethan psychology, is that he is a thoroughly rational human being. As Bradley says, "not Socrates himself, not the ideal sage of the Stoics, was more lord of himself than Iago appears to be."[4] Othello's nobility, his apparent control of his passions, was directed, until Iago got hold of him, to good purposes; to the service of the state, to the right kind of love. But Iago is a man without passions; he is an embodiment of one layer of human activity which has no relation to any other layers; he is separated from ordinary human beings on both sides of his nature, the lower and the higher. He has no lust to link him with the animals, and he has no capacity for seeing himself in relation to the state or the universal order of things. He is an unscrupulous individualist.

"Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, . . . either to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry, why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills."[5]

(i, 3, 322)

He knows all the right things, but he perverts the familiar doctrine to his own cynical ends:

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[4] *Shakespearean Tragedy*, London, 1904, p. 218.

[5] Gardens, as microcosms of the world of human nature, occur very frequently in Shakespeare. The gardener in *Richard II* (iii, 4) delivers an elaborate, characteristically externalized, homily in the manner of the early plays, on the parallel between a garden and a commonwealth; Hamlet's first thought is of the world as an "unweeded garden"—in fact the image is everywhere, and if we follow Shakespeare's use of it, from the earliest plays to the latest (where flowers, not weeds, abound), we may find a kind of symbolic microcosm of the macrocosm—Shakespeare's changing view of man—which it is the aim of this book to describe.

"If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions; but we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts, whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion."

The last phrase gives him away—"I take this that you call love"; it is obvious that he knows nothing about it. He is an emotional eunuch. That is why he talks so much about lust. Lust is something that as a man of the world he has always heard about, and so he attributes it to everybody, even himself, since he wants to be like other people. For example, he urges himself forward to his attack on Othello by forcing an artificial set of emotions, based on a sexual jealousy about which he really knows nothing:

Now, I do love her too;
Not out of absolute lust,—though peradventure
I stand accountant for as great a sin,—
But partly led to diet my revenge,
For that I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof
Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards.
(ii, 1, 303)

Coleridge's notorious phrase about Iago's soliloquies, that they represent the "motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity," is true in one sense, for although we do not have to think of Iago as an abstract personification of evil, he does, in the very reasons (none of them followed up) that he gives for his villainous actions, try to see himself in relation to ordinary human motives and behavior. He gives one explanation after another for his hatred of Othello, partly to make his behavior superficially plausible, and partly to assure himself that it is justified. But none of these reasons is convincing; they do not even sound convincing to Iago himself—"the thought whereof doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards": this is fairly stagey language; it has no real feeling in it, and we are not surprised never to hear of Iago's jealousy again. That venomous opportunist has merely conjured it up as one of his several attempts to make himself seem natural, and to make his villainy seem natural to the audience.

We can obtain further light on Iago's character if we think of him in relation to the difference between appearance and reality. In one of his earliest speeches, where he is revealing himself to Roderigo and the audience, he first describes himself as a thorough-going egoist:

> Others there are
> Who, trimm'd in forms and visages of duty,
> Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
> And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
> Do well thrive by them, and when they have lin'd their coats
> Do themselves homage: these fellows have some soul;
> And such a one do I profess myself.
>
> (i, I, 49)

This is in the familiar tradition of Elizabethan villainy, but Iago, developing it, goes on to tell us that the outward appearance he gives to the world bears no relation to the reality inside:

> Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago:
> In following him, I follow but myself;
> Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
> But seeming so, for my peculiar end:
> For when my outward action doth demonstrate
> The native act and figure of my heart
> In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
> But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
> For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.

In fact we may think of Iago as being compounded of three concepts of human nature—not merely literary concepts—that were at this time familiar to both Shakespeare and his age: the

concept of the difference between outer show and inner fact, the concept of the evil man as an individualist, and, connected with this, the concept of the evil man as the *incomplete* man, the man who does not contain all the psychological levels that should make up a human being. Shakespeare's vision of evil probed very deep when he conceived Iago, for the frightening thing about Iago, as I have said, is that from one point of view he represents the Renaissance ideal of the man whose reason controls his passions, and yet he is wholly bad.

The concept of the difference between outer show and inner truth is not only important as a part of Iago's character; it permeates the whole play. The essence of Othello's tragedy is that he judges wrongly by appearances; he thinks that Iago is honest and that Desdemona is false, and he thinks that he is performing a just action in cruelly murdering his spotless wife. And when he finds out the true reality, that noble nature can only say of himself, "O fool, fool, fool!" No suicide was ever more dramatically inevitable than Othello's. He had given his world to Desdemona; she had apparently betrayed him; as a minister of justice he had killed her. But her lustfulness was only an appearance; the evil lay elsewhere—in the "demi-devil" Iago who seemed the soul of honesty. When Othello stabs himself at the end he is restoring for a final moment that lost self-respect which can only be reclaimed, since he has already killed his world in killing Desdemona, by killing himself.

## 6

Shakespeare uses the three inter-related hierarchies given him by the assumptions of his age to make *King Lear* the largest and the most profound of all his plays. Nowhere else does he so completely fuse the contemporary concepts of the world, the individual and the state into a single unity; correspondences and parallels between them, amalgamations of one concept with another, are everywhere; they embody the vision of life and