

OTHELLO: THE EPITHALAMIUM OF BLACKNESS*

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1. One That Loved Too Well ?

With unprecedented frequency we find ourselves being dissuaded from the “Romantic reading” of *Othello* (1604);¹ the myth of passionate lovers almost seems to have ceased, while the defence of the wicked ancient is being more loudly proclaimed. Critics have begun to scent out some turbid factors behind the long-lauded love of Othello and Desdemona, whose propriety scarcely seemed to have been called in question.

That *Othello* was not intended as another *Romeo and Juliet* is obvious when we reset the play in its chronological order. In his five plays beginning with *Hamlet* (1600-1), Shakespeare retains his cynicism towards love, still harping on the same string of matrimonial crisis: in *Hamlet* we observe a serious case of incestuous murder, *Troilus and Cressida* (1601-2) deplures falseness of women, *All's Well That Ends Well* (1602-3) discusses a mismatch which threatens to violate the social structure, *Measure for Measure* (1604) presents the decay of public morality which may endanger the very system of matrimony, and finally *Othello* narrates a rupture in “sanctimony and a frail vow betwixt an erring barbarian and a super-subtle Venetian” (I.iii.355-6). In each of the four plays preceding *Othello* the crisis of matrimony is closely related to the universal disorder, viz. in Denmark, in Troy, in France and in Vienna respectively. Ironically Othello declares that his forced match with Desdemona is “the very head and front of” his “offending” (I.iii.80), and Desdemona admits that her sins are nothing but loves she bears for Othello (V.ii.39-40).

Although our contemporary sense may regard the “act” of marriage as a matter of personal concern, at that time it was a sacred “rite” to be performed in public, since it was considered to signify the harmony and fertility of nature as is depicted in many extant wedding masques. The idea of matching a daughter of a Venetian senator with a nonwhite mercenary itself would have been enough to raise a scandal: there are more than ten passages which account it to be “against all rules of nature”,² and we can find

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an example of the strongest antipathies to it even a century later.³ If that kind of marriage was to be avoided as subversive, consequently the act of the “villain” who destroys their bond may be allegorically justified, in contributing to the upholding of the order of the community.

Until fairly recently the “Romantic” interpretation seemed to have blinded us to the historical background which indicates otherwise. The careful rereading of *Othello* in its original context may release us from our prejudice: Iago may emerge as an able commentator upon his age which was indulging or even nurturing folly and vice at a turning-point in its history, and the tragedy may recover its “universal grandeur” by sloughing off its diminutive epithets, such as “a bloody farce,” *The Tragedy of Handkerchief* and “domestic drama.”⁴

2. Brave Iago, Honest and Just

Around the year 1600 Shakespeare was at the start for his “dark years” with *Hamlet*, which was not unconnected with the then current literary fashion in England. According to O. J. Campbell, between 1598 to 1608 many works of English literature had a tinge of irony, due to the vogue of both formal and comical satires, and Shakespeare’s satiric plays after 1600 had all been clearly drawn from Ben Jonson’s *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599) which was performed by the Chamberlain’s Men and received with enthusiasm.⁵ Recently R.A. Foakes has followed this to point out the analogy of Iago with Macilente.⁶

After all attempts to classify this villain into some category, Iago seems to be seated most comfortably among his fellow “malcontents.” Iago, like Macilente, belongs to a breed of men who have fallen into a satiric vein through displeasure with their own “unfair” obscurity in society. Their grudge arises from *fortunam caecitatem* that favours those who are unworthy of it. Seeing that the expression “fortune’s favourite” is more often than not a periphrasis of a fool,⁷ it is not surprising that their envy, with its devilish nature, sometimes works in the cause of justice. Their function of punishing vice and folly paradoxically justifies them as reformers of the fallen world. As some scholars have agreed, Iago does not so much drive his victims to ruin as merely draw out what is already there.⁸ His self-definition is “nothing if not critical” (II. i .119) — besides the meaning of faultfinding, it etymologically implies the infallibility of his judgement.

Despite their apparent difference in moral attitudes, the role of Iago as a malcontent

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could be better understood when compared to that of Hamlet, who also has much of a Macilente in his own character. The play's objective is not so much a fulfilment of revenge as the anatomy of an infected world. Hamlet is already a malcontent before he sees his father's ghost: his chief complaint is that he has been usurped of the right of succession by his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle.⁹ This triggers off his melancholy, which plunges him into deep cynicism; it is not by mere chance that Hamlet reads to Polonius what is supposed to be a formal satire in II. i. He convinces himself that he was born to rectify the time which is out of joint. His "righteous" indignation is directed to the people around him, apart from Claudius who is called the "canker of our nature" (V. ii. 69) — Gertrude who is a loose wife with Ophelia as her prospective follower, Polonius an old "intruding fool," Rosencrantz and Guildenstern a couple of flatterers, and Osric an upstart courtier. Thus *Hamlet* can be called a satirical version of the old-fashioned revenge tragedy.

Likewise Iago's dissatisfaction is not groundless or unjust: right from the beginning we get involved in his complaint that with all his distinguished military service Othello neglected him and preferred Cassio, who knows nothing but "the bookish theoretic" of war (I. i. 24). His disappointment in his promotion gives rise to his revenge through the acts of "ensnaring" Cassio, Othello and Desdemona and unmasking their seeming innocence. It may be difficult for us to accept that only one "malicious" character in a world almost wholly good¹⁰ should paradoxically administer "justice," yet further examination will prove in due course that none of them are, at least allegorically, free of his clutches.

Iago succeeds in convincing Montano, Othello's predecessor as the governor of Cyprus, that the man who has thrust him aside is in fact not as competent a leader as public opinion reports (see I. iii. 224-6). Othello's undue preference for Cassio can be considered as a fatal flaw in his generalship. Cassio's carousing intoxication not only raises a riot in the island but betrays his inner pride — the first of the seven deadly sins — which was hidden beneath his seeming modesty. After remarking that "there be souls must be sav'd and there be souls must not be sav'd," Cassio insists that "the lieutenant [Cassio himself] is to be sav'd before the ancient [Iago]" (II. iii. 103-10). In wine there is truth, so we may suspect that it is Cassio, not Iago, who really is overtly ambitious. Moreover he commits the third of the cardinal sins in his connection with Bianca. We must not overlook that Shakespeare was extremely nervous of prostitution at this time of his career; or else why did he have to execrate Gertrude and Cressida so bitterly and condemn the poor Claudio to death just for his premarital love affair with his own

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fiancée?

Montano's anxiety is justified when Othello betrays himself as a wife-beater before Lodovico, who wonders if this is "the nature / Whom passion could not shake" (IV. i . 265-6). Before this we are given some ominous presentiment in II.iii, where Othello has a sudden fit of rage when he cannot see any cause for the riot that disturbed his wedding night. What Iago shows us is that this "civilized" Moor, for all his assumed self-control, cannot entirely get rid of his inherent savagery and may at any time turn into a "murderous coxcomb" (V. ii.233) when his judgement is overcome by his blood and passion. I do not mean that Iago is racist. Only he cannot endure seeing human beings transformed into "beasts," or rather "beasts" feigning "men."¹¹ His almost obsessive search for the definition of man reflected in his repetitive advice of "be a man"¹² indicates his keen sense of morals, perhaps keener than that of any other character. Hence both Othello and Cassio, with Roderigo in addition, are intolerable to this would-be defender of propriety.

Desdemona also irritates him with her double entendres. Although she has never intended to be unfaithful to her husband, there is still something in her character that insinuates her "shrewdness." Many critics have found it unsatisfactory, even unsavoury, of Desdemona to involve herself in a bawdy conversation with Iago (II. i) because it seems so contrary to her "supposed innocence."¹³ For a moment we hesitate to believe in the modesty or sincerity of a woman who would urge a reluctant rogue to praise her own beauty and wit. The very beginning of their love sounds stormy when Othello declares that his "story" would woo her: the fact that she pitied his misfortunes and shed her tears is pathetically impressive enough, but it is also true that she did "devour up" his bizarre story of cannibals or anthropophagi "with a greedy ear" like a monster (I. iii.149-50). We may even suspect her of perversion and analogize this to her "maimed" judgement which cannot be explained unless it were through black magic (I. ii .73, I. iii. 102). Eventually Iago manages to demonstrate to her kinsmen that she made a "most filthy bargain" (V. ii .157). And it is not a sheer coincidence that Iago, like Hamlet, is a destroyer of "unnatural" marriage.

3. O Curse of Marriage

As was mentioned above, the rites of marriage belonged to the community, not individuals. In the first place it signified peace. Ulysses refers to public order as "the unity and married calm of states" (*Troilus and Cressida*, I.iii.100), and Hymen knits

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the world in bonds of peace by joining four couples (*As You Like It* [1599], V.iv.108ff.). The matchmaking custom of those days makes us perceive its virtual effect on peacemaking: for instance Jonson's masque *Hymenaei* (1606), in which the author lays emphasis on an end to discord, was written for the marriage between a daughter of the Chamberlain and the Earl of Essex that had been arranged to heal a political feud between the two families.¹⁴ Besides peace, marriage stood for fertility brought by normal procreation. Wedding masques were accompanied by the epithalamium which mostly expects "prosperous issue" springing from the newlyweds.

Misalliances, on the other hand, were always cursed as ominous, since they were believed to play havoc with social order. Shakespeare illustrates this in his serial propaganda against matrimonial crisis: Gertrude's inconstancy turns the whole kingdom sterile and pestilent (II. ii .295-303); Helen's faithlessness involves two great civilizations in perennial war and Cressida's falsity confounds reason with its "madness of discourse" (V. ii .142); Helena's ambitious love for Bertram threatens to destroy the order of the heavenly sphere (I. i .85-90); in Vienna they see "corruption boil and bubble, / Till it o'errun the stew (V. i .318-9), for "most biting laws" against lechery have been let slip for fourteen years.

It may safely be said that *Othello* was composed as a sequel to that series. In Iago's words we see a reversal of epithalamium when he warns Brabantio that "an old black ram / Is tupping" his "white ewe" and that "the devil will make a grandsire of" him (I. i .88-91). Instead of proper issue which will heighten the blood and fame of the senator's house, Iago prophesies with a discordant clamour that their illegitimate miscegenation shall give successive birth to monsters. What he is doing here can be regarded as a variation of charivari, a kind of festive ceremony of public defamation, which was often performed by the neighbours to punish social eccentricity with "foul noise," their target being in many cases marital aberrations, especially ill-assorted marriage.¹⁵ We should be misled if we believed that Shakespeare was indifferent to external features; besides the much-cited remark that Aaron's wickedness coincides with his blackness or that Portia rejects the prince of Morocco simply because he has a dark complexion, we find a later example in *Hamlet* where the suspicion of foul play is aroused from the stupendous difference between the two husbands of Gertrude, the late Hamlet [Hyperion] and Claudius [Satyr].

Not that Iago corrupts their marriage, but the marriage corrupts itself. Apart from Iago's remarks there is a vast imagery of monsters which implies that nature herself is opposed

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to their union. Etymologically the word “monster” signifies “omen” of the sterility or disorder of nature. This concept is applied not only to their supposed issue: the news about the Turk becomes “disproportioned” and with “no composition” (I .iii.1-2); immediately after the confirmation of their marriage by the Duke, “monstrous” thought is engendered in Iago’s brain (I .iii.402-3); then a “foul and violent” tempest comes with high and “monstrous” mane (II. i .34,13); in Cyprus, the dreadful bell warning of “monstrous” quarrels (II.iii.217) “frights the isle / From her propriety” (II.iii.175-6); all of which together with many other passages helps to give birth to the ultimate “monster,” viz. “a horned man” (IV. i .62) in Othello’s mind. Iago touches the core of truth when he predicts to Roderigo that “thou shalt see an answerable sequestration” since “it was a violent commencement” (I .iii.344-5). Their elopement is made sinister by the very name of their lodging: the “Saggitary” is synonymous with “centaur,” a monster half-human and half-horse, which was considered as a taboo word or image in the nuptial rite with its association with bloodshed at the wedding of the prince of the Lapiths.¹⁶ What is worse, Othello hastens his ruin by giving a flat refusal to the music on the morning after the bridal night; his act is equivalent to the disturbance of harmony. After this Desdemona promises Cassio, overconfident of her own beauty and charm, to tease her husband for his reinstatement:

My lord shall never rest,
I’ll watch him tame, and talk him out of patience;
His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift

(III.iii.22-4)

Desdemona has turned into a female Petruchio who wishes to “tame” a male Katherina, or the wild “barbarian.” Again Iago’s prophecy comes true:

His soul is so enfetter’d to her love,
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,
Even as her appetite shall play the god
With his weak function.

(II.iii.345-8)

And when Othello answers “I will deny thee nothing” (III.iii.76), being overwhelmed with her sharp tongue and perhaps with her charm, she is indeed “our great captain’s captain” (II. i .74). In this sexual reverse we can observe a manifest emblem of disorder, “the world upside-down.”¹⁷ Yet it would be too hasty to put all the blame to our hero and heroine; there might be more things behind this tragedy.

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4. This Is Venice

When Iago warns him of the abduction of his daughter, Brabantio tries to refute his report by pointing out that he lives in Venice, not in a grange; the slightest possibility of robbery does not occur to him who firmly believes in the constitutional order of the civilized nation (I . i .104-5). Even after he recognizes the truth, the old father thinks that the duke and other statesmen cannot let pass such actions (I . ii .95). But here he utterly forgets that Venice has another face as the centre of trade, on which point the main issue was taken in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-97). Moreover, monetary principle is here far more influential than that of the comedy written eight years before, where the victory of the Christian benevolence over the Jewish strict, penny-pinching ethic is celebrated in an optimistic tone. In *Othello* the application of a trading image to personal affairs, e.g. matchmaking, is quite elementary;¹⁸ we see a fatal pecuniary combat fought between two nations, or rather between the two major powers, Christian and Islamic, in the vast arena of the Mediterranean.

From the start Iago guesses right as to the dismissal of Brabantio's appeal by the duke: the state cannot cast Othello aside for its "safety" (I . i .147-9). Othello himself knows as well that his military "services" he has done for the government "Shall out-tongue his [Brabantio's] complaints" (I . ii .18-9). First the Duke shows sympathy with the old leading figure in civil service by remarking that if it were his own son Brabantio should read "the bloody book of law" "in the bitter letter" (I .iii.67-70). But no sooner has the accused turned out to be the supposed defender (of the interest) of his nation than the Duke gives Othello an exceptional opportunity of excusing himself instead of an instant execution: pretending to have been moved by the tear-jerking story of the Moor, he blames Brabantio for his "discriminating" narrow-mindedness and exercises the supreme power on the confirmation of their marriage.¹⁹

We may suspect this to be quite unusual, comparing it with the opening scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-96). Egeus implores Theseus to let him exercise "the ancient privilege of Athens" with which the father "may dispose of" his daughter who attempts to marry without his consent. To this the duke passes immediate sentence on the stubborn daughter: "Either to die the death, or to abjure / For ever the society of men" (I . i .65-6). In Shakespeare's days disobedience to the patriarchal authority was considered to be a manifest symptom of the disorder of the community. By and by we

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perceive that Hermia's rebellion is one of the repercussions of the universal convulsion: the "dissension" between Oberon and Titania has created all sorts of abnormal weathers under which the whole country is suffering from epidemics and crop failures (II. i. 82-117). So the law had to be thus harsh against disobedience to the father, even though the couple had "a sympathy in choice" (I. i. 141); still more in the case of Othello and Desdemona which utterly neglects the difference in "nature," in "years," in "country," in "credit," in "every thing" (I. iii. 96-7). Towards the end we are told that Brabantio died shortly after that, torn apart by "pure grief"; the match was "mortal" to this aged father (V. ii. 205-6) who embodies the waning of patriarchy. One year later in *King Lear* (1605) Shakespeare is to probe into this problem over again.

Desdemona is, as it were, made a human sacrifice to the black "devil" who will protect the state, or more correctly, the profit of the state in that mercantile war. They would sooner part with a senator's daughter than let the Turk beguile them of Cyprus (I. iii. 210-11). "Th' affairs of state" must have a priority (I. iii. 220), so the double-faced governor of Venice intentionally dares to destroy the balance of nature with the universal chaos.

As was often reported in Shakespeare's days, Venice was also notorious for its courtesans,²⁰ which, I think, has much to do with the scenes in Cyprus. Unfortunately Cyprus is not another Belmont: in *The Merchant of Venice* we saw that the locality of Belmont, with its indulgent charity, had an effect on the mitigation of the rigorous law represented by the Jewish Scriptures; but here Cyprus works only towards the amplification of the vices of Venice. Cyprus is known as an island sacred to Venus, on which she is said to have made her first tread after her birth in the sea. Most likely Shakespeare has made most of the legend of this island, to which Cinthio's original refers only by name. In his unfinished masque in *The Tempest* (1611), the presence of Venus with her son Cupid is shunned for the reason that she is scandalous (IV. i. 90-1): they are afraid, according to the convention of the wedding masque, that "No father can himselfe a parent show / Nor any house with prosp'rous issue grow" (see *Hymenaei*, 336-7).

As is implied in its adjective form "cyprian," the air of Cyprus makes everyone wanton and defenseless to the allurements of the opposite sex: on this island Cassio first gives the "bold show of courtesy" (II. i. 99), kissing three fingers in the Italian way (II. i. 173), which betrays "his salt and most hidden loose affection" (II. i. 240-1) and gives Iago an ample chance of "ensnaring" him; on this island Desdemona engages in obscene jokes with Iago when Othello's safety is still uncertain; on this island Othello shows the first

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symptom of a man doting on his wife by prattling “out of fashion” (i.e. violating propriety; II. i .206); on this island Cassio enjoys the favour of a courtesan, taking advantage of her blind love, only to reap “the fruits of whoring” (V. i .116); ultimately on this island, these seemingly unconnected events are woven into “the net / That shall enmesh them all” into the catastrophe (II.iii.361-2). Here we may remember that Othello has committed profanation against the son of the Cyprian goddess, swearing that the attendance of his wife to the island shall not interfere his work:

No, when light-wing'd toys,
And feather'd Cupid seel with wanton dullness
My speculative and offic'd instruments,
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and base adversities
Make head against my estimation! (I .iii.268-74)

Ironically it turns out the contrary, and his estimation is “begrin'd and black” as his own face (see III.iii.387-8).

Now let us take up the much-discussed theme of jealousy. It is a “disease” resulting from the “civilization” of Venice which has driven nature in disorder by her plutocratic policy, e.g. the enforcing of a marriage “For nature so prepost'rously to err” (I .iii.62). Iago speaks of their “country disposition”: in Venice wives “do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands” (III.iii.201-3). This lavishly produces horned men, or “many a beast . . . in a populous city, / And many a civil monster” (IV. i .63-4). It is noteworthy that Iago himself is infected with “this forked plague” (III.iii.276): the fantasy that Othello has cuckolded him “Doth (like a poisonous mineral) gnaw” his “inwards” (II. i .297) and turns his wit “the seamy side without” (IV. ii .146), so that nothing can content his soul until he is “even'd with him, wife for wife” (II. i .298-9). After all what Iago accomplishes is the persecution of his other self, who is suffering from “the blacke poison of suspect”²¹ embodied in the blackness of Othello. He also is a victim; he may be revenging himself upon society for the “disease” by spreading about his “poison” (III. iii.325).

At length he manages to destroy the unnatural bond with all his devilish wiles. Embleatically the marriage of Othello and Desdemona is reduced to an unsavoury relationship between “a subtle whore” and her amorous customer, with Emilia likened to a bawd (IV. ii). Through this the marriage is identified with prostitution and housewives with courtesans. As Harry Levin suggests, when Iago abuses Bianca by calling her

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“a huswife,” he is punning upon housewives in general: both are identical in buying their “bread and clothes” by “selling her [their] desires” (IV. i .94-5).²² Ironically Bianca claims that she is “as honest as” Emilia who calls her “strumpet” (V. i .122-3). Desdemona closes her fateful life as if to expiate her own “sins”: she is to be shrouded in their wedding sheets, the very proof of her love to Othello (see IV. ii .105; IV.iii.24-5).

5. Like the Base Indian

One of the most conspicuous deviations from Cinthio’s tale would be the account of the weather on the way to Cyprus. There is no mention of “foul and violent tempest” in the Italian version: it only reports that “they pursued their voyage, and with a perfectly tranquil sea arrived safely at Cyprus.”²³ Shakespeare, on the contrary, impresses us with catastrophic fury of his tempest:

The wind-shak’d surge, with high and monstrous mane,
Seems to cast the water on the burning Bear,
And quench the guards of th’ ever-fixed Pole; (II. i .13-5)

Scarcely has the first act ended before we are informed that the tempest has worked “the mere perdition of the Turkish fleet.” Generally the Battle of Lepanto in 1577 is considered to have offered *Othello* its military background, with the Venetian navy fighting against the Ottomans who had threatened to dominate the Mediterranean by occupying Cyprus. Yet the situation is closer to that of the defeat of the Invincible Armada in 1588 where a tempest had played the principal role in “the mere perdition” of the Spanish fleet. In this battle, deadly fought between the two countries, Catholic and Protestant, either side was nothing else but “pagan” to each other.

No doubt Shakespeare gave “the desperate tempest” an implication of some violent change, on a symbolic level, besides its outer meteorological meaning. The repulse of the Hispanic invasion paved the way to freer trading or plundering expeditions through generations thereafter. It worked a “tempestuous” change in the mentality of the English people: they felt themselves rapidly transformed from defenders to aggressors, while their country was claiming the command of the sea. Indeed the tempest did raise monstrous billows which might wash the Polar Star, until at the turn of the century it carried away with its final trend the major national heroes — Hawkins, Drake, Sidney, Essex et al. — who had valiantly faced it out. What was left behind was a dead calm of drossy water, which cultivated “the impostume of much wealth and peace.”

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In *Othello* we observe a desperate resistance to that profound and inescapable transition from heroic prowess to civilian tactics. As Iago complains, the new age has begun to prefer “bedwork, mappery, and closet-war” of Ulysses to the sword of Ajax. The time-honoured glory of errant knights has been replaced by the mercenary “business” of “an erring barbarian” (I .iii.355-6), or “an extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and every where” (I . i .136-7). On the surface the tempest seems to favour Othello, in gaining him easy victory. But the very fact of his winning without fighting works fatally to him. It is difficult for a man, who is accustomed to “the flinty and steel couch of war” (I .iii.230), to secure his own place in the new scene of Cyprus, where courtly wisdom for a peaceful age gains the highest opinion. Still more difficult, when “Bond-slaves and pagans” are not permitted to be the statesmen (I . ii .98-9). Consequently his governorship in Cyprus is ephemeral: in no time the Venetian government replaces him with Cassio, a court-bred, who promises to be a leader more suitable for the new mercenary age, as “a great arithmetitian” as well as master of cyprian arts.

The death of Othello relates most eloquently the sudden lapse of circumstances. In short, “Othello the Venetian executes Othello the pagan in the name of Venice,” as is aptly pointed out by Catherine Belsey. Only I cannot agree with her on her comment that by punishing himself he regains his lost autonomy,²⁴ for it seems least likely that Shakespeare is giving out innocent praise to the victory of the Christian civilization against the pagan barbarity. Things have changed from the days of *The Merchant of Venice*, where Shakespeare was still putting his hopes on the coming age. In this tragedy Christian “debtors,” “creditors,” and “counter-casters” flock together to tear apart a “noble” soul who was born under the sun that dispels any kind of suspicion (see III.iv. 29-30). The businesslike settlement of the whole tragedy — the readiness of the disposal of Othello’s property and the hasty reaction of trying to lose no time in submitting a report to the state — bespeaks soulless barbarity beneath “the mere form of civil and humane seeming.” If “*The Tragedy of the Moor of Venice*” arouses pity among us, it is because he is kept ignorant to the last; he dies blaming himself and cursing Iago, the “demi-devil,” except whom all seem innocent as sheep, with their hands untainted.

Now Iago’s early comment comes back to us with its prophetic precision:

You shall mark
Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave
That (doting on his own obsequious bondage)
Wears out his time, much like his master’s ass,
For nought but provender, and when he’s old, cashier’d. (I . i .44-8)

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Othello believed that his service was almighty. So it was while the Turks were prevailing and Venice needed his help; it even justified his crime of abduction. But he failed to anticipate that it would lose its universal currency once he is out of use. This time he is not allowed a moment to speak out but is deprived of his sword, the very emblem of his identity. Another weapon concealed in the room barely gains him “a word or two,” which sums up his mortification: “I have done the state some service, and they know ’t —/ No more of that” (V. ii .339-40).

Here we have an afterthought that Iago himself may have been “a duteous knee-crooking knave” that he is ridiculing. He has tasted “the curse of service”: his devoted services “at Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds / Christen’d and heathen” amounted to nothing where “Preferment goes by letter and affection, / And not by old gradation” (I. i .36-7). It should not be overlooked that he had been a duteous soldier before he found himself having been exploited, “doting on his own obsequious bondage.” Suddenly he learned to his cost the unmistakable fact that he belonged to an endangered species of swashbucklers. Who could blame this young man of twenty-nine if he decided, in order to survive, to carry a new ensign of “love yourself” after the fashion of the world?

Nor could we attribute the very trigger of the tragedy, i.e. that unusual preference for Cassio, only to the incompetence of Othello. Suppose Desdemona was a bribe offered by the would-be lieutenant, that beauty too irresistible to decline. In fact it was Cassio, not Emilia, who worked as an original “pander” of their unnatural relationship. As Desdemona mentions he “came a-wooing” with Othello and often took his part when she dispraised him (III.iii.71-3). This gives us another tableau of Troilus and Cressida, with Pandarus, their broker-between. It might have been that Othello was “enchanted” by a Florentine philander and “a super-subtle Venetian” to his own ruin. Although neither of them may have ever dreamt of doing any harm to this uncultivated man, and so in a strict sense they may be innocent, still it is the result of their behaving instinctively: their civilization has nursed them with its endemic “disease.”

Like Hamlet Iago ends his part with “the rest is silence”:

Demand me nothing; what you know, you know:
From this time forth I never will speak word. (V. ii .303-4)

The only resistance that he manages to put up to the authorities is to break the bond of the unnatural wedlock arranged by scheme and confirmed by force, which has brought about the corruption of nature. He accomplishes his task, singing a black epithalamium

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like “the raven o’er the infectious house” (IV. i .21) all through the tragedy. We have observed that the seed of the tragedy lies somewhere else, far from Iago’s envy. As was discussed above, Othello is an alter ego of Iago as a classical type of a soldier as well as a jealousy-tormented husband. The tragedy is also a requiem devoted to a hero who was born a little too belated for his prowess. Iago is burying a warrior who once dwelled in his heart, by delivering the *coup de grace* to “the warlike Moor.” He will remain silent under any torture, for he has known every quirk of the labyrinth of the mechanisms of state power, which is too enormous for a poor ancient to cope with. What he leaves behind is a practical ethic of defending oneself by distinguishing, “betwixt a benefit and an injury” (I .iii.312-3). If you wear your heart upon your sleeve, even daws [or doves] will peck at it (I . i .64-5), just as Othello must needs let “every puny whipster” (V . ii . 244) take his sword. By way of induction to the tragedy Iago warns us to throw only “visages of duty” or “shows of service” in order to outlive that cut-throat climate of the “civilized” nation.

It appears that Shakespeare timidly maintains his ambiguity as to which side he really commits himself to and only leaves ubiquitous yet very subtle hints as to what he really thinks. Every line might be misleading if taken at its face value. There are more things than are dreamt of by our modern philosophy, so we should also resort to the conventions of his day, struggling through the cross-woven webs of equivocal statements. Thus we have found Iago the *de facto* mouthpiece of the author, as malcontents of the day were usually intended to be. Most critics still find it difficult to give support to Iago, for fear of the supposed brand of racist or atheist. Yet it is also true that only under the guise of immorality (sometimes insanity) could malcontents work with any delicate problem without incurring accusations against the poet by the authorities, for very few would take in earnest whatever they said or did. The righteous Asper could not exercise justice without assuming the envy of Macilente, and Hamlet had to feign madness not only for himself but for the sake of the author. Iago, like Hamlet, divines some foul play behind the manifest misalliance and embarks upon the unfolding of the whole design. We see the villain anatomizing and dissecting the foul body of the world — entangled by the mystery of politics and corrupted by the new materialistic ethics — in which we can no longer discern between vice and virtue. What he does is not the mere demystification of those things; cynical as he appears, we are given hints that he is, or at least *was*, no less “Romantic” than any other character in the larger scale of the word. He is the embodiment of the old values of chivalric love and valour who, when frustrated, turns into a

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revenger, just as Coriolanus and Timon were to follow the similar course.

For all that, we may still wonder why Shakespeare had to be so nervous as to render the standard of good and evil thus perplexing, and why he referred to marriage and love when his real intentions lay in depicting power relationships or the vices of the age; at least he might have provided, for instance, as many senate scenes as those of the bedroom. The key to solving this problem may be hidden in the report that after the prosecution of Jonson's *Sejanus* (1603) in the year before *Othello*, in which Shakespeare had played some part, censorship was tightened against the serious treatment of political, moral and religious issues, while the excess of sexual invectives and innuendoes was being overlooked without any censure.²⁵ More likely than not Shakespeare was echoing the voice of Iago behind the curtain thus muttering, "Demand me nothing, what you know, you know."

Notes:

- * This paper is based on my speech delivered at the Kansai Shakespeare Seminar, sponsored by the Shakespeare Society of Japan, held in Osaka on May 30th, 1987.
- 1. Allan Bloom with Harry V. Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics* (1964; rpt. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984) shows an early reaction against Romantic tradition with stimulating arguments, yet the conclusion appears a little too retrospective and conservative.
All quotations from Shakespeare and the supposed dates are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G.B.Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
- 2. See I .iii.62, 96, 101, 249, 344, II. i .231-5, 252-3, III.iii.227, 229-33, etc.
- 3. Bloom, p.35 introduces the view of the Earl of Shaftesbury in his *Characteristics* (London, 1727).
- 4. Harry Levin, *Shakespeare and the Revolution of the Times* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1976) refers to Thomas Rymer's sneering suggestion of terming *Othello* "a bloody farce" or *The Tragedy of the Handkerchief* and comments that the modern term *domestic drama* would come nearer the mark. Although he does not seem altogether to agree with Rymer, he represents the general opinion in remarking that the tragedy "does not attain the scale of the other three works treated in *Shakespearean Tragedy*."
- 5. O.J. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Satires* (1943; rep. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1963), pp.viii, 97.
- 6. R.A. Foakes, "The Descent of Iago: Satire, Ben Jonson, and Shakespeare's *Othello*" in *Shakespeare and his Contemporaries: Essays in Comparison*, ed. by E.A.J. Honigmann, (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1986). Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (New York and London: Methuen, 1986), p.126 also refers to Iago as a malcontent.
- 7. See Jonson, *The Alchemist*, Prologue, 1: "FORTVNE, that fauours fooles . . ." All references to Jonson's works are taken from *Ben Jonson*, edited by C.H.Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-52). Further citations will appear as "H & S."
- 8. Bloom, p.39; Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p.234; R.A.Foakes, p.27, etc.
- 9. See *Hamlet*, V. ii.64-5: "He that hath killed my king and whor'd my mother, / Popp'd in between th' election

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of my hopes ”

10. Foakes, p.24
11. cf. “*Cas.* . . . that we should, with joy, pleasance, revel, and applause, transform ourselves into beasts!” (II.iii.291-2.)
12. See “I would change my humanity with a baboon” (I.iii.316), “Come, be a man!” (I.iii.335); “We have reason to cool our raging motions” (I.iii.329-30); “Are you a man? Have you a soul? or sense?” (III.iii.374); “Would you would bear your fortune like a man!” (IV. i .61); “Good sir, be a man” (IV. i .65), etc.
13. Liza Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Brighton: Harvester, 1983), p.119.
14. H & S, X, p.465.
15. Ian Donaldson, *The World Upside-Down: Comedy from Jonson to Fielding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp.39-40.
16. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XIII, 210 ff. See also Jonson, *Epicoene*, IV. v .45-8.
17. Donaldson, pp.21-3.
18. See “*Oth.* The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue; / That profit’s yet to come ’tween me and you” (II.iii.9-10); “*Emil.* She was too fond of her most filthy bargain” (V. ii .157).
19. Bloom and Tennenhouse give similar views.
20. See Jonson, *Every Man In His Humour* (Folio of 1616), II. v .46 and *Volpone*, II. i .27-9.
21. *Every Man In His Humour* (Quarto of 1601), IV. i .217. Anne Barton made an enlightening observation that the name “Othello” is an anagram of “Thorello,” the jealous husband in this comedy and the speaker of the cited passage, in her lecture in Tokyo under the auspices of the Shakespeare Society of Japan, October 1986.
22. Levin, p.157.
23. *Othello*, ed. H.H.Furness (1886; rpt. New York: New Variorum, 1963), p.378.
24. Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), p.123.
25. Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1980), pp.37-8.