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On the 'Temptation Scene' of *Othello*

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In some tragedies, Shakespeare depicts love as a force which unites human beings in spite of disparities. In *Romeo and Juliet*, love surmounts the feudal conflict between the Capulets and the Montagues. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, love transcends the war between Rome and Egypt. In *Othello*, love manages to tie a Venetian girl and a Moorish general in spite of the differences in race, complexion and years. If in his *Hecatommiti* Cinthio is hardly concerned in the love of the Moor and his girl, in his *Othello*, Shakespeare is very much concerned in the love of Othello and Desdemona. Cinthio records their love in a few inert lines, while Shakespeare succeeds in turning Cinthio's inert record into an impressive story of love. As H. B. Charlton points out, the love of Othello and Desdemona is 'the sort of love which might become a never-fixed mark to look on tempests and be never shaken.'⁽¹⁾

But the love ends by being destroyed. Shakespeare so constructs the play that a white Venetian girl and a black Moor come to love each other in the world not free from race prejudice and his ancient, a strong man of race prejudice, corrodes their love. If the love of Romeo and Juliet, as Frederick Turner says, is destroyed by 'physical enemies'⁽²⁾ of love' and the love of Troilus and Cressida by 'love's psychological enemies', the love of Othello and Desdemona is defeated by 'moral

opponents of love'.

Now, A. C. Bradley argues that the success of Iago's plot is essentially connected with Othello's comparatively simple character and adds:

His tragedy lies in this—that his whole nature was indisposed to jealousy, and yet was such that he was unusually open to deception, and, if once wrought to passion, likely to act with little reflection, with no delay, and in the most decisive manner conceivable.⁽³⁾

On the other hand, F. R. Leavis, denouncing the traditional interpretation of Bradley's, insists that Iago's prompt success depends not so much on Iago's diabolic intellect as on Othello's readiness to respond to his insinuation and that that is because Othello's love for Desdemona

is composed very largely of ignorance of self as well as ignorance of her: however nobly he may feel about it, it isn't altogether what he, and Bradley with him, thinks it is. It may be love, but it can be only in an oddly qualified sense of love of her: it must be much more a matter of self-centred and self-regarding satisfaction—pride, sensual possessiveness, appetite, love of loving—than he suspects.⁽⁴⁾

G. R. Elliott, developing Leavis's view, asserts that the tragic flaws in Othello are 'pride and purposes', and adds:

... we were shown that his "purposes" were good, his "pride" and therewith his self-control, in the main, noble. But increasingly we were made to feel that those two traits, so excellent in his politico-military profession where they were entirely subordinate to his sense of public duty, were dubious in the realm of love, wherein his "purposes", in striking contrast with his wife's, were very much self-centered.⁽⁵⁾

Elliott insists that on account of these two traits Othello does not learn to love Desdemona with the same 'fullness' as she until 'her way on earth is ended', which is the 'blackness' of the tragedy; Othello's pride prevents him from being frank with Desdemona and from 'cross-examining his old friend Cassio'. Most recently, John Money says that Othello's love for Desdemona is 'subtly presented from the beginning⁽⁶⁾

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as inadequate'; 'the nature of this inadequacy', which becomes gradually apparent with the development of the play, is 'the material upon which Iago goes to work.,'⁽⁷⁾

It is true that at least in the latter part of the temptation scene Othello seems to be ready to respond to Iago's insinuation. When Othello asks for the ocular proof" (III, iii. 366), Iago tells Othello of Cassio's supposed lecherous dream:

In sleep I heard him say "Sweet Desdemona,
Let us be wary, let us hide our loves;"
And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand,
Cry out, "Sweet creature!" and then kiss me hard,
As if he pluck'd up my lips, then laid his leg
Over my thigh, and sigh'd, and kiss'd, and then
Cried "Cursed fate, that gave thee to the Moor!"

(III. iii. 425-432)

and refers to the handkerchief which Othello has given Desdemona as a token of love:

I am sure it was your wife's—did I to-day
See Cassio wipe his beard with.

(III. iii. 444-445)

As he says later, Othello accepts these two alleged proofs as truth without examining their validity. It is also true that in a sense Othello's love for Desdemona is 'composed very largely of ignorance of her' and is 'dubiously grounded in reality' as Leavis notes,⁽⁸⁾ but it is questionable whether it is based on his egotism. The love of Othello and Desdemona is based on the intuitive recognition of each other's identity, but Othello's love impresses us as having something passive. Desdemona virtually offers a proposal of love: that is, the love of Othello and Desdemona originates with her initiative. Othello says in his apologia:

..... If I had a friend that loved her,

I should but teach him how to tell my story,
And that woo her. Upon this hint I spake;
She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd,
And I lov'd her that she did pity them.

(I. iii. 164-168)

Her initiative in their love is supported by Iago's cynical comment: "Mark me with what violence she first loved the Moor" (II. i. 219-220). In addition, Othello's love is not so desperate as Desdemona's. This is shown by her words:

That I did love the Moor, to live with him,
My downright violence, and scorn of fortunes,
May trumpet to the world: my heart's subdued,
Even to the utmost pleasure of my lord;
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honours, and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.

(I. iii. 248-254)

We shall quote their dialogue which shows that her love exhibits a striking contrast to his. In the love-duet, Othello says:

..... 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. 186-190)

while Desdemona replies:

The heaven forbid
But that our lover and comfort should increase,
Even as our days do grow!

(II. i. 191-193)

Desdemona's love is as dynamic as Othello's static and ominous. W. H. Auden may well say that her love is 'the romantic crush of a silly school girl rather than a mature affection'⁽⁹⁾, but her love can be said to

be desperate. Thus, Othello's love is not so desperate, but we cannot always find any measure of egotism in his love. Therefore, it is not because Othello's love is based on his egotism but in part because Othello's love is 'dubiously grounded in reality' that he succumbs, apparently easily, to Iago's insinuation.

But the fact is that Othello succumbs easily to Iago's insinuation in the latter part of the temptation scene and that it is mainly because Othello has his reasoning confused and benumbed so much. When Othello asks for "the ocular proof", he has already changed with Iago's "poison" as Iago says (III. iii. 330). As Irbin Ribner points out, Othello has his reasoning benumbed by jealousy, and he is now 'ready to accept as truth whatever proof Iago has to offer'⁽¹⁰⁾. In other words, Othello is convinced of what he has already allowed himself to believe. By this time, his reasoning is so much confused and benumbed that he accepts those two alleged proofs as true without examining their validity. In this sense Iago is right when he says that "trifles light as air Are to the jealous, confirmations strong as proofs of holy writ" (III. iii. 327-329).

In III. vi, Desdemona insists on Cassio's reinstatement, while Othello asks earnestly for the handkerchief which he has given her as a token of love. They speak at cross purposes and misunderstand each other. This kind of inadequate response also occurs in IV. ii. When Desdemona asks Othello, "To whom? with whom? How am I false?" he only gets angry and answers the crucial question thus:

O Desdemona, away! away! away! (IV. ii. 42).

G. R. Elliott attributes these tragic inadequate responses entirely to Othello's 'pride and purposes', but this interpretation is not necessarily convincing. When Othello asks for "the ocular proof" and wishes that "I were satisfied" (III. iii. 397), he has already been "eaten up with

passion" (III. iii. 397) as Iago says. And then he is shown "the ocular proof" and is satisfied: he is firmly convinced of his wife's unfaithfulness. It is quite natural that, once he is deeply possessed with delusion, he should do as he does. It is no wonder that Othello should not go out of the way to mention the name of Cassio or to send for him to discuss the problem with him. At last, however, the name of Cassio comes out from Othello's lips, but it makes no difference. Desdemona insists that she is innocent of his charge and begs him to send for Cassio and let him confess the truth, but Othello will never lend his ear to her and says:

Sweet soul, take heed of perjury,
Thou are on thy death-bed.

(V. ii. 51-52)

and

By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in his hand:
O perjured woman, thou dost stone my heart.

(V, ii. 63-64)

We can see the deepness of his delusion in these words of his: "perjury" and "perjured".

As we have examined, though there are some grains of truth in those interpretations which ascribe the tragedy of *Othello* to his flaws in character, we cannot feel that they have explained it away. Now we would like to make an interpretation in another direction: we would like to look into the essence by answering the question why Iago succeeds in confusing and numbing Othello's reasoning so much that Othello can easily accept "the ocular proofs".

Iago is so bold as to suggest that Desdemona falls into illicit love with Cassio and conceals it from Othello. Iago says to Othello:

..... I speak not yet of proof;
Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio;

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Wear your eye thus, not jealous, not secure.
I would not have your free and noble nature
Out of self-bounty be abused, look to't:
I know our country disposition well;
In Venice they do let God see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands: their best conscience
Is not to leave undone, but keep unknown.

(III. iii. 200-208)

and

She did deceive her father, marrying you.

(III. iii. 210)

Then Iago offers as the reason for her change of mind her awareness of the error of her marriage with a man who differs in race, complexion, years and customary way of life. Iago says to Othello:

Not to affect many proposed matches,
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Whereto we see in all things nature tends,
Fie, we may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportion; thoughts unnatural.
But pardon me, I do not in position
Distinctly speak of her, though I fear
Her will, reconciling to her better judgement,
May fall to match you with her country forms,
And happily repent.

(III. iii, 233-242)

Iago's suggestions gives Othello a great shock and shakes his inner being to its depths. Iago almost shatters Othello's love and faith with these blows: that is to say, Iago succeeds in confusing his reasoning so much at this stage of the temptation that Othello can accept as true whatever proof Iago may offer. In fact, Othello says to himself:

She's gone, I am abus'd, and my relief
Must be to loathe her: O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad,

And live upon the vapour in a dungeon,
Than keep a corner in a thing I love,
For others' uses: yet 'tis the plague of great ones,
Prerogativ'd are they less than the base,
'Tis destiny, unshunnable, like death:

(III. iii. 271-279)

Othello has his reasoning confused and almost believes that Desdemona "is gone" and that he "is abus'd".

When Iago says that the "conscience" of the Venetians is not to leave adultery undone but to keep it unknown, Othello is not sure whether he knows the Venetian "disposition" as well as Iago. Othello regards Iago as an authority on human natures and says to himself:

This fellow's of exceeding honesty,
And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit,
Of human dealings.

(III. iii. 262-264)

Othello is "an extravagant and wheeling stranger" (I. i. 136) in Venice, and has lived there for only less than a year. Othello knows that Desdemona is one of the Venetians and really deceived her father. Judging from these circumstances, we find it rather natural that Othello should not resist Iago's insinuation; he should confound the general or abstract with the particular or concrete: that is, he should accept Desdemona as one of the Venetians who are well known for their disposition of marital deception.

Othello cannot defy Iago's picture of Desdemona as a "super-subtle Venetian" (I. iii. 357), much less his description of their love as "unnatural". It is true that the love of Othello and Desdemona is presented as romantic and as transcending the disparities, but the hard fact is that their love impresses the majority of Venetians as unnatural. Shakespeare's Venice is a cosmopolitan and mercantile society. The purpose of the society is to get as much wealth as possible. But

Venice ought to have enemies in trade and commerce, and it must defend itself against the enemies. Therefore, the mercantile state needs mercenaries, and, above all, the best general that it can employ to defend itself. In this professional army, their military promotion depends not on their social status but on their military efficiency. In spite of the fact that he is a black Moor, Venice hires Othello as the most excellent general. Indeed, Brabantio invited Othello to his house very often and loved him as long as Othello told his adventurous and romantic story of his life. But the moment his daughter has fallen in love with the Moor and married him, Brabantio's race prejudice shows itself vividly. To him, Othello again becomes a "thing to fear, not to delight" (I. ii. 71) or what she fear'd to look on" (I. iii. 98). Such was Brabantio's race prejudice that he would not reconcile himself to the love and marriage or accept Othello as a son-in-law. As G. M. Matthews points out, Brabantio's attitude towards Othello is 'an attitude held by the Venetian ruling class when forced into human relationship with a Moor'⁽¹¹⁾. This is also what W. H. Auden indicates: most of the Venetians are no more willing to accept Othello as 'a brother'⁽¹²⁾ than Shylock. G. R. Hibbard suspects that, if it were not for 'the military crisis', 'the attitude of the Duke and the Senate towards the marriage might well be rather different'⁽¹³⁾. Othello lives as a black alien in the society which, though cosmopolitan, is not essentially free from race prejudice.

Othello finds himself surrounded by the people who do not feel like accepting a black Moor as a brother of the society. Othello lives in this latently hostile situation and is lacking in "loveliness in favour" and other things. As Iago says, Othello is defective in "these requir'd conveniences"—"loveliness in favour, sympathy in years, manners and beauties" (II. i. 228-229). When Brabantio makes accusations against

Othello in this situation, it is no wonder that Brabantio's words should have submerged as an ethnic anxiety in Othello's subconscious mind. Brabantio has said to Othello:

..... and she, in spite of nature,
Of years, of country, credit, everything,
To fall in love with what she fear'd to look on?
It is a judgement maim'd, and most imperfect'
That will confess perfection so would err
Against all rules of nature.

(I. iii. 96-101)

Iago practises on Othello's subconscious ethnic anxiety by referring to "nature" repeatedly. Iago inverts the meaning of Othello's words: "nature erring from itself", by which Othello means that it is strange that she should cease to love him, and tells Othello that "nature" tends to matches of the same race, complexion, and customary way of life; and therefore it is an "unnatural" thought to turn down many such proposed matches. We can easily imagine that Iago's words reminds Othello of Brabantio's words full of race prejudice—"in spite of nature", "Against all rules of nature". These words of Iago's, together with Brabantio's, are enough to confuse and benumb Othello's reason, and to make him take the general or abstract for the particular or concrete. Othello cannot resist Iago's insinuation by insisting that Desdemona is the last person to commit adultery. Othello at last says to himself:

Haply, for I am black,
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chambers have, or for I am declin'd
Into the vale of years,—yet that's not much—
She's gone, I am abus'd.

(III. iii, 267-271)

Thus Iago is right in a sense when he says that the vow between

"an erring barbarian" and "a super-subtle Venetian" is "frail" (I. iii. 356-357). Iago succeeds in confusing and numbing Othello's reason so much that the "trifles light as air" can convince him of his wife's treachery and succeeds in the temptation by working on Othello's ethnic anxiety. The tragedy may be said to lie in this—that Othello and Desdemona fall into love with each other in the world which is not free from race prejudice.

Notes:

- * The text used in this paper: M. R. Ridley, ed., *Othello* (The Arden edition of W. Shakespeare) (London: Methuen, 1967)
- (1) H. B. Charlton, *Shakespearian Tragedy* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1948), p. 130.
 - (2) Frederick Turner, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Time* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 99.
 - (3) A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1971), p. 151.
 - (4) F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 145.
 - (5) G. R. Elliott, *Falming Minister* (New York: AMS Press, 1965), pp. 125-126.
 - (6) *Ibid.*, p. 36, p. 67, p. 117.
 - (7) John Money, 'Othello's "It is the cause..." An Analysis', *Shakespeare Survey* 6 (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1953), p. 102.
 - (8) F. R. Leavis, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
 - (9) W. H. Auden, 'The Joker in the Pack', *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), p. 268.
 - (10) Irving Ribner, *Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 107.
 - (11) G. M. Matthews, 'Othello and the Dignity of Man', *Shakespeare in a Changing World*, ed. Annold Kettle, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1964), p. 127.
 - (12) W. H. Auden, *op. cit.*, p. 263.
 - (13) G. R. Hibbard, 'Othello' and the Pattern of Shakespearian Tragedy', *Shakespeare Survey* 21, p. 41.