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0521297605 - *Othello as Tragedy: Some Problems of Judgment and Feeling*

Jane Adamson

Excerpt

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## Introduction

Although *Othello*, unlike *Coriolanus*, is generally considered one of the great Shakespearean tragedies, it is also quite widely thought to be the most limited of them. For anyone like myself who does not share that limiting view of it, the prime critical task must therefore be to explain why not – to explain how the play is tragic in the fullest sense of the word, and why its alleged limitedness is actually the reflection of the reader's own rather cramping moral and artistic preconceptions.

We can see clearly enough the disabling effect of such preconceptions in the views of earlier times – Rymer's is only the most notorious case – yet it is probably no less in our own. To a quite peculiar extent, the growing mass of commentary about *Othello* in recent decades seems to have become stuck in old ruts, old debates and circularities. Particular aspects of the play have been written about very finely, of course; nevertheless, we do not seem to be much closer to any generally shared understanding of it as a whole. As with no other of Shakespeare's tragedies, criticism of this one seems to have become arrested or split into two intransigent camps – not, I think, because of any special daftness in *Othello's* very various readers, but because of certain essential features of the play itself. At any rate, the critical stalemate suggests that as well as reviewing the common arguments and counter-arguments about it, we

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need to re-consider the tragedy in a rather more fundamental way. Hence this book: it is an attempt to turn back to the play again and ask *why* has it proved so hard for critics to reach even a rough general agreement about its basic tenor, about what we make of its hero, and about the kind, depth and scope of the demands it makes on us.

From Albert Gerard's brief and usefully oversimplified summary in 1957 we can perhaps take some bearings on how things have or have not changed in *Othello* criticism since then.<sup>1</sup> Gerard distinguished three main 'schools': a 'traditional' school of 'naturalistic' interpretation; a 'symbolic' school, which tries to 'explain away the difficulties inherent in the traditional psychological interpretation of the Moor by turning the play into a mythic image of the eternal struggle between good and evil'; and another school, according to which 'this tragedy ought to be treated as a purely dramatic phenomenon, created by Shakespeare for the sake of sensation and emotional effect'.

In the twenty years since Gerard wrote, a few changes have taken place. The last-mentioned 'conventionalist' school, for instance, seems to have pretty well faded away (on the subject of *Othello*, at least, though alas not with some of the other plays). Nowadays, it is commonly agreed that *Othello* lends itself best to 'naturalistic' interpretations, and discussions of it in these terms far outnumber the symbolic, allegorical, sociological and other sorts of readings. Even so, it is in this commonest sort of criticism, which addresses itself primarily to questions of character and psychology, that the critical stalemate or impasse has been

<sup>1</sup>Albert Gerard, "'Egregiously an Ass": The Dark Side of the Moor', *Shakespeare Survey*, 10 (1957), pp. 98–106. For a fuller, more challenging discussion of the play's critical history see Helen Gardner, 'Othello: A Retrospect, 1900–1967', *Shakespeare Survey*, 21 (1968), pp. 1–11, and Robert Hapgood's more recent survey, 'Othello', in *Shakespeare: Select Bibliographical Guides*, ed. Stanley Wells (London, 1973), pp. 159–70. Gerard's and Gardner's articles are now conveniently available in *Aspects of 'Othello'*, ed. Kenneth Muir and Philip Edwards (Cambridge, 1977).

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most acute; and consequently more and more critics in recent years have tried to start (as I shall) by looking once again at the forty-year-old dispute between those who argue for 'noble Othello' and those who denounce 'Othello the egotist'. Generally speaking, the results have not been encouraging. Most attempts to review the dispute seem to end up caught within the very same terms themselves, either modifying and then re-arguing the case for one side or the other, or urging some kind of enlightened compromise. It is hardly surprising that other critics have chosen to side-step the dispute altogether, presumably on the principle of letting sleeping dogs lie; but here too there has been little fundamental change, since the dogs are not really asleep. The issues cannot be resolved by ignoring them. Again and again, therefore, discussion of the play comes back to much the same opposing answers to the same central questions: how are we to see and respond to what Othello is and says and does?

The only way to begin resolving this state of affairs, I believe, is to ask what it is about the play itself that produces it. Clearly, it will not cut much ice simply to announce one's own point of view and illustrate it from the play. Any reading needs more support than that, and what is really needed with *Othello* is an account that includes some thinking about the complicated process by which any view of the play is reached, one that explores the nature and the 'cause' of our own and others' feelings and judgments. In fact, the play's most radical effect is to press us to do just that.

Very broadly, the gist of my argument is that, while all great works of literature enlarge our understanding of how people interpret or make sense of their own experience, *Othello* does so in a unique and challenging way. For it is remarkable how explicitly the play dramatizes and explores the ways and means by which different people 'make sense'

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of what happens in their lives, including what they merely imagine to be happening. The whole action might be said to germinate from the sort of observation Shakespeare's Cicero makes in *Julius Caesar* (1, iii, 33–5):

Indeed, it is a strange-disposed time;  
But men may construe things after their own fashion,  
Clean from the purpose of the things themselves.

Throughout *Othello* we watch how every one of the characters construes and misconstrues things, how they all 'fashion' their view of others to fit with their sense of themselves (or vice versa); and increasingly we become aware – as they themselves never do – of how their fears and desires and needs lead to various kinds of emotional confusion and inflexibility, and how this in turn blocks or deforms their sense of what is and what is not. Time and again we see people who, in trying to comprehend what is happening to them (especially when they feel under threat), arrive at some conception or misconception of things, and then, once their mind is 'made up' – to use the common and significantly ambiguous phrase for the process – cannot or will not change it.

Yet if we can allow ourselves to respond fully to what the play puts in front of us, I do not think we can remain so detached and impartial in our own judgments as that kind of description may suggest. Even while we see how the characters ensnare themselves in the traps that feeling lays for judgment and action, we do not always prove much better at avoiding the same sort of traps ourselves. The more deeply we become engaged by the play, the more urgently we too feel pressed to 'make sense' of what is going on; the more readily, therefore, do we ourselves leap to or fall in with some clear-cut, often partial or misguided, but at least decisive, view of things. Like the characters, we too are prone to 'make up' our minds in some inflexible attitude, especially if it is plausibly put to us by others, and

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(again like the characters) to cling to our judgments through thick and thin, adducing anything and everything as ‘confirmations strong’ and so tending to overlook, ignore or vehemently deny whatever might disturb our moral certainty. And it is this – the relationship between (on the one side) the characters’ treacherous habits of thought and feeling and judgment, and (on the other side) our own in response to them – that is the central focus of my argument. For it seems to me that the power and stature of *Othello* as a tragedy are founded in its power to make us recognize, very painfully, how much we share as human beings with each and every character – even the worst – because of this fundamental link between our needs and our fallibility.

To speak of the play’s power to challenge us and bring us to various kinds of awareness implies, of course, that it is a carefully constructed whole, that Shakespeare’s imagination pervades and informs the entire dramatic action – creating, construing and organizing *everything* he thereby gives us to construe. To meet it adequately therefore calls for a detailed understanding of the play’s construction and of the way its meaning develops. This is why I have tried to make any discussion follow the sequence of that unfolding structure, and why my account of the play is designed (as I hope it will be taken) as a single, continuous whole. However, it will be plain that by ‘structure’ – unhappily a rather ambiguous word these days – I mean to include all aspects of the play, not just some, and especially not just those which are often described as forming a ‘triadic’ or ‘five-part’ pattern. Accounts of the structure of any Shakespearean play in those terms usually oversimplify, focusing attention on the hero to the virtual exclusion of everything else. *Othello* is at the centre of the play, but he is not the whole of it. I am concerned, not with character-analysis in the usual sense, nor static ‘patterns of imagery’, but with the developing insights that emerge in the organization of recurring ideas, words, deeds, images, situations.

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It will be clear that my whole procedure (like any) has theoretical implications, but I have spelt these out only occasionally. In so far as my account of this particular play does spring from a general view or advocate one, I suppose it could be summarized in two main points: that the meaning of a Shakespearean play lies in nothing less than its total dramatic action, and that the significant 'action' is that which Shakespeare's art produces and activates, or causes to take place, in *our* consciousness as we discern and respond to all the salient details of speech and deed and inter-relationship in which he simultaneously creates, embodies and explores a particular set of lives. The lameness of this abstract formulation really underlines my point, however: the significance and value of the dramatic whole can be realized only in, and as, the specific experience of a mind responding to it as fully and precisely as possible. This is not a new observation, of course, though it is far from being widely accepted or even properly understood. It is certainly not an invitation to mere subjectivism or to any indulgence in one's own private feelings about the kinds of behaviour and situation the play presents, nor is it a symptom of despair about reaching any measure of agreement with others who necessarily see and respond differently. The question for every reader is always what is actually there, in this particular work, to be experienced; and although the question always remains open, it is never, it seems to me, wholly and absolutely open: some interpretations are demonstrably less accurate and adequate than others, and some indeed are demonstrably false.

There are many things about the play that I have not mentioned, of course, since it would be insane even to aim at comprehensiveness, and no doubt also many more I have not seen; but a few of my deliberate omissions perhaps call for brief comment. I have naturally concentrated on the issues I think most important. The old and much-battered question of 'double time' does not strike me as one of

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them. It may raise some interesting points perhaps, but it seems to me more of a (literally) academic question than one essential to our understanding of the play, tending as it does to lead our attention away from Othello's obsession, towards the kind of details that might obsess an Inspector from Scotland Yard. Another such question, that of Iago's 'motives', is also often treated as one requiring the skills of a detective. On those terms – as if a sleuth could conscientiously sift the evidence, make out a water-tight case for the prosecution, and thereby finally solve the mystery of the play – the question seems to me misconceived and misleading, and I have not discussed it in that form. Rather, for reasons I try to explain, I think Iago's behaviour calls for the same kind of attention we have to give to Desdemona's, for instance, or indeed to everyone else's. A third topic I do not discuss at all is the 'Christian elements' in the play: about these, silence seemed the best reply to those who claim, with great and no doubt sincere insistence, that these 'must' be of 'central importance' in any interpretation.

A better claim might perhaps be made for the importance of Othello's race, on which I have said very little. (On the absurd debate about the exact shade of his skin I say nothing at all.) But here again I think the matter has usually been over-emphasized by twentieth-century critics and producers, or given a quite wrong emphasis by being isolated from other elements in the drama. Othello's Moorishness, far from being a special and separable issue, matters only in so far as it is part of a much larger and deeper one, which does seem to me central: the distinction, which the action constantly leads us to consider and reconsider, between the given, indissoluble facts, and the more open and changeable areas, of people's lives. For the play makes us consider and reconsider not merely what aspects of one's nature and behaviour one can make and change and control, but also the relationships between various ways that things

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seem 'fated to us': between those that seem fated 'e'en then . . . when we do quicken' (as Othello himself revealingly puts it) – parentage, birth, physical attributes, natural talents and dispositions – and those which our own experiences, choices, actions, commitments, and so on, in all the given circumstances of our lives, gradually accumulate and form into our destiny. Throughout the play, the characters themselves keep confusing all these – as when Othello for example alleges that he is congenitally doomed to be betrayed. Yet their very confusions painfully underline and intensify our own difficulty in maintaining any clear-cut distinction between the 'fated' and the 'free' aspects of the self – especially during the last three acts of the play, when we are made so acutely aware of the baffling complexity of the emotional and moral realities that constitute the characters' experience, and, through them, our own. Are the feelings we cannot help having really 'fated' to us? And in what sense are we free or able to *do* anything about them? All these perennial questions lie at the heart of the play, and it is in terms of these larger issues that Othello's colour (and his temperament and his past) are best considered.

One other matter I have not much emphasized (at least not directly) is *Othello* in the theatre: the question of how it works or might work in performance. In obvious and unforeseen ways it is a magnificent but taxing work for the stage, and my account of it suggests both how and why I think this is so. A Shakespearean critic's job is much less like an actor's than like a producer's or director's, in that he has to concern himself with every role, every speech, every movement, and every relationship between these in the play. On the other hand, the critic's job also differs from the producer's in important ways – not least because the critic can allow for multiple possibilities of interpretation and performance at many points in the drama, whereas the producer has to commit himself to the one single

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interpretation he thinks best. Thus any critic can learn something – whether positively or negatively – from particular productions; but any critical interpretation worth its salt will also carry with it suggestions, even if they remain implicit, about how the play might best be produced, whether in an actual theatre or in the theatre of the mind.

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## I

## The 'comforts' of praise and blame

nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice.

(*Othello*, v, ii, 338–9)

The crucial test of any view of *Othello* is its last scene, the culmination and climax of the whole drama. We have had to watch the hero vilify and strike his wife; we now have to watch while he kills her for a 'sin' we know she never committed, and then watch while he kills himself as well. At this point, the central critical questions become acute. What does the play eventually bring us to think and feel about *Othello*? How far, here and all through, are we brought to consider him as the victim, and how far the agent, of his fate? What bearing does our sense of these issues have on our estimate of the nature, scope and quality of the play as a whole? In relation to Shakespeare's other tragedies is *Othello* really a 'comparatively simple', 'rather limited' play, as we have so often been told?

On the first of these questions – what we are to make of *Othello*'s behaviour, especially during the second half of the play – most people seem to have very fixed views. Generally speaking, they tend to take one of two positions about the play: to some, Shakespeare's main impulse is evidently to present the case *for* his hero; to others, it is evidently to present the case against him. On the one side, it is *Othello*'s vulnerability that seems most important. Arguing on much the same lines as Coleridge and Bradley, for example, many critics see *Othello*'s conduct as the natural, and therefore condonable reaction of such a man