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

Jane Adamson

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To
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Preface

Like all readers of Shakespeare, I have been greatly stimulated, helped, provoked and incensed by the views of a great many critics. But I especially wish to acknowledge my two largest debts: a long-standing one to the work of L. C. Knights; and an immediate and extensive one to S. L. Goldberg's *An Essay on 'King Lear'* (Cambridge, 1974) – a more radically original book than its modest title may indicate, in its view not just of *Lear* but of Shakespearean tragedy generally, especially in what it suggests about the nature and function of characterization, about the connections between the characters' experience and ours as we engage with the play, and about the argumentative requirements any interpretation has to meet. Neither has written much specifically on *Othello*, but the implications of their work on Shakespeare triggered my own thinking about why this play might in fact be far richer than the comparatively circumscribed one it is usually said to be. On *Othello* itself I owe most to A. C. Bradley and to F. R. Leavis, whose classic but contrary accounts keep pushing one back to the play to work out where each is right, why neither will do, and what they both ignore. On points of detail in the play I have inevitably found myself in agreement with dozens of critics, including many whose over-all sense of it differs from mine, though I have not generally noted such agreements; it seemed on the whole more useful

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to restrict the notes mainly to citing views different from mine and to acknowledging conscious debts.

I should perhaps add two further points about the writing of this book. It was originally completed in 1976, very much in its present form, but as part of a larger study of some narratives and plays about lovers whose relationship ends in disaster. I mention this because of my otherwise perhaps rather puzzling concentration on critical writing before that date, and the references I make to poets such as Chaucer and Henryson. It was through thinking about some of their poetry (and, by contrast, Marlowe's) that I first began to realize what makes *Othello* so compelling. The second point concerns the word 'vulnerable', which recurs here quite often. I have used it unabashedly throughout, since some such term is indispensable to my account of the play and I cannot find any accurate alternative. It was once a clear and uncluttered word, and I hope that those for whom in recent years it has been trivialized by self-advertising gestures of 'sensitivity', or tarred with the brush of lonely hearts, will be able to rehabilitate it – at least while thinking about *Othello* as tragedy.

Except where otherwise noted, I have quoted throughout from the following editions: *Othello*, ed. Kenneth Muir, New Penguin Shakespeare (Harmondsworth, 1968); for all other works by Shakespeare, *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Alexander (London and Glasgow, 1968 [1951]).