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Othello

The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare

VOLUME 25

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
EDITED BY JOHN DOVER WILSON



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THE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE

EDITED FOR THE SYNDICS OF THE
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

BY

JOHN DOVER WILSON

OTHELLO

EDITED BY

ALICE WALKER

AND

JOHN DOVER WILSON

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OTHELLO



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PREFATORY NOTE

Though this edition of *Othello* is the joint-product of Dr Alice Walker and myself, she has generously shouldered a good three-quarters of the burden by making herself responsible for the preparation of the text together with everything in the volume that comes after the text, leaving the introduction to me. Once we had made our drafts, however, they were exchanged and criticized freely. The Notes and Glossary, indeed, passed to and fro between us more than once, and readers will observe that we were not always able to find agreement even then. Textual scholars will also remark that the conclusions of the Note on the Copy, which is by right Dr Walker's alone, do not entirely tally with those reached by Sir Walter Greg in his recently published *The Shakespeare First Folio*. Such differences of opinion are in fact inevitable in the existing state of textual research, especially when dealing with a play like *Othello* where the origin and character of one of the two substantive texts can only be guessed at. Nevertheless, I believe Dr Walker has here succeeded in giving us a far cleaner text than that printed by any previous editor. And for myself it has been an exhilarating and encouraging experience to collaborate, after thirty-five years of editorial endeavour, with one whose masterly handling of textual problems is matched by so sensitive an appreciation of the aesthetic issues involved. Her next undertaking for 'The New Shakespeare' will be an even more difficult one—*Troilus and Cressida*.

Finally, the thanks of us both are due to Mr J. C. Maxwell for unflinching helpfulness.

J.D.W.

INTRODUCTION

I. *The Moor*

Shakespeare wrote two plays about Venice, the comedy or tragi-comedy of *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, the most conspicuous figure in both being an alien. Shylock is a despised outcast from the ghetto; Othello a distinguished general of the republic, honoured by the council of state, and trusted by the senators; yet isolation from the society of Venice is insisted upon in both cases. With Othello, indeed, it is kept constantly before our eyes on the stage from first to last by the mere fact that he is black. And whatever facial characteristics the actor who plays him may possess or assume, Bradley was undoubtedly correct in his belief that Shakespeare intended us to think of him as a Negro.¹ That is what 'Moor' meant to Englishmen in the Middle Ages and at the time of Elizabeth and James. Roderigo's contemptuous reference to 'the thick-lips' may be prejudiced evidence, but it should at least have warned nineteenth-century producers and their successors that to present the Moor of Venice as a bronzed and semitic-featured Arabian prince might seriously disfigure the play. We are not told how Othello's hair grows but we learn that Aaron 'the Moor' in *Titus Andronicus* is not only 'coal-black' and 'thick-lipped' but has a 'fleece of woolly hair', while in *The Merchant of Venice* (3. 5. 35-6) Negro and Moor are treated as identical terms. For me, however, the crowning proof of Othello's race is that I once had the good fortune to see him played by a Negro—that great African gentle-

¹ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 198-202.

man with the golden voice, Paul Robeson;¹ and I felt I was seeing the tragedy for the first time, not merely because of Robeson's acting, which despite a few petty faults of technique was magnificent,² but because the fact that he was a true Negro seemed to floodlight the whole drama. Everything was slightly different from what I had previously imagined; new points, fresh nuances, were constantly emerging; and all had, I felt, been clearly intended by the author. The performance convinced me in short that a Negro Othello is essential to the full understanding of the play.

The marriage between an African with a 'sooty bosom' and an Italian girl with 'whiter skin than snow' sets the racial problem in its extremest form, and most of Act I is given to bringing this out. We see it reflected first in the foul mind and disgusting language of Iago, next in the despairing horror of Desdemona's father who feels that such an unnatural union can only be explained by depravity in the girl or witchcraft on the part of her black seducer. Othello's colour was no bar to promotion, otherwise he could not have commanded the armies; and not all his officers shared Iago's contempt for it, since Cassio was even prepared to further his courtship with 'the divine Desdemona'.³ Yet when Emilia, at a later stage, speaks her mind and calls

¹ At the Savoy on 19 May 1930, the first night; Maurice Browne, who played Iago, being an old friend of Cambridge days.

² See A. C. Sprague (*Shakespearian Players and Performances*, 1954, p. 1) for the impression Robeson made upon American audiences in New York and elsewhere with his performances in 1943. See also R. Withington ('Shakespeare and Race Prejudice' in *Elizabethan Studies in honour of G. F. Reynolds*, Colorado, 1945), who cites other evidence to the same effect, though not himself believing that Shakespeare had a Negro in mind.

³ 3. 3. 94-100.

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Othello a 'black devil' and Desdemona's 'most filthy bargain'¹ we cannot doubt that she speaks the mind of many an Englishwoman in the seventeenth-century audience. If anyone imagines that England at that date was unconscious of the 'colour-bar' they cannot have read *Othello* with any care.² And only those who have not read the play at all could suppose that Shakespeare shared the prejudice, inasmuch as Othello is his noblest soldier and he obviously exerted himself to represent him as a spirit of the rarest quality. How significant too is the entry he gives him! After listening for 180 lines of the opening scene to the obscene suggestions of Roderigo and Iago and the cries of the outraged Brabantio we find ourselves in the presence of one, not only rich in honours won in the service of Venice, and fetching his 'life and being from men of royal siege',³ but personally a prince among men. Before such dignity, self-possession and serene sense of power, racial prejudice dwindles to a petty stupidity; and when Othello has told the lovely story of his courtship, and Desdemona has in the Duke's Council-chamber, simply and without a moment's hesitation, preferred her black husband to her white father, we have to admit that the union of these two grand persons,

¹ 5. 2. 134, 160. The Devil, now for some reason become red, was black in the medieval and post-medieval world. Thus 'Moors' had 'the complexion of a devil' (*Merchant of Venice*, 1. 2. 125).

² Withington, *op. cit.* disputes this but ignores the sentiments of Iago, Roderigo and Emilia. See also E. E. Stoll, *Othello* (1915), pp. 45-6, and K. L. Little, *Negroes in Britain* (1947), pp. 195-6.

³ An important point, when considering the play in the light of modern opinion, which is apt to think of Negroes as either the descendants of slaves or members of illiterate and poverty-stricken African tribes.

so far from being unnatural, is that rare human event, the marriage of true minds and a real love-match.

Yet the difference in their complexions, and the atmosphere of colour-prejudice that attaches itself to it, cause both the shipwreck of the marriage and the tragedy that follows. How absurd, one often hears it said or reads it written, is the jealousy of Othello! Surely he might have trusted Desdemona a little? Shakespeare, as we shall see, moulded his plot in order to meet this very criticism. The point here, however, is that the trustfulness and simplicity, which Bradley among others notes¹ as Othello's, seem his by nature, when he is played by a Negro gifted with all the winning integrity of that race. As Iago contemptuously boasts,

The Moor is of a free and open nature
 That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
 And will as tenderly be led by th'nose
 As asses are— (r. 3. 397-400)

lines which may be said to sum up the relations between African and European for the past three and a half centuries.

Finally, the primitive yet dignified spirit which a Negro Othello brings to the play accounts at once for the mingled tenderness and ferocity of the murder-scene and the priest-like attitude in which he addresses himself to the sacrifice. Never too shall I forget the radiant bliss of Robeson's face as Othello first greeted Desdemona at Cyprus or its dreadful deformation when he became possessed with the 'green-eyed monster'.

¹ Bradley, *op. cit.* p. 190.

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II. *Date and Source*

Most students now agree that *Othello* follows *Hamlet* in the chronological order of Shakespeare's plays. Bradley stresses their 'similarities of style, diction and versification', and even detects 'a certain resemblance in the subjects'. 'The heroes of the two plays', he remarks, 'are doubtless extremely unlike, so unlike that each could have dealt without much difficulty with the situation which proved fatal to the other; but still each is a man exceptionally noble and trustful, and each endures the shock of a terrible disillusionment.'¹ Furthermore, though *Hamlet* is the most discursive and leisurely of Shakespeare's tragedies, and *Othello* the tensest and swiftest, they have much the same atmosphere. That of *Hamlet*, as Caroline Spurgeon first pointed out, is one of corruption, which Wolfgang Clemen later showed may be traced to the leperous disease that invades the body of Hamlet's father after his poisoning in the orchard. For, he says,

this now becomes the *leit-motiv* of the imagery: the individual occurrence is expanded into a symbol for the central problem of the play. The corruption of land and people throughout Denmark is understood as an imperceptible and irresistible process of poisoning.²

It seems possible that what primarily attracted Shakespeare's attention to the Othello story was that he saw it as a particular example of such 'an imperceptible and irresistible process of poisoning' at work upon a character of exceptional nobility, corrupting his very soul and dragging him down from the height of human happiness to the gates of Hell itself. The 'dram of evil',

¹ Bradley, *op. cit.* p. 175.

² Wolfgang Clemen, *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery*, p. 113.

administered by Iago, douts for a while 'all the noble substance' in his victim; Iago himself pictures the operation as a process of poisoning; and when he says

I'll pour this pestilence into his ear,
 (2. 3. 349)

he seems to carry us back to the garden at Elsinore and Claudius pouring his leperous distilment into the ears of a sleeping brother.

These symptoms of affinity are borne out by external evidence of a close proximity, evidence mostly discovered or established within recent years. The earliest reference, for example, we have to *Othello* is an entry in one of the annual accounts of the Office of Revels which records the performance on Hallowmas Day (i.e. 1 November) 1604 by the King's Majesty's players (i.e. Shakespeare's company) 'in the Banketinge house att Whit Hall' of a play 'called The Moor of Venis', written by a poet whose name the official, evidently no theatre-goer, writes as 'Shaxberd'.¹ But this performance is the first of a number recorded in the Accounts between 1 November 1604 and Lent, 1605, including early plays by Shakespeare such as *The Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *The Merchant of Venice* which King James and Queen Anne, newly arrived in England, had not yet seen. It by no means follows, therefore, that *Othello* was a new play at this time. Indeed, the 'bad quarto' of *Hamlet*, published in 1603, sometime after 19 May,² contains four or five echoes from it, which suggest that the pirate-

¹ Though probably known to Malone and printed as long ago as 1842 these Revels' Accounts were suspected of being a forgery until their final authentication in 1930 by A. E. Stamp. See his *Disputed Revels Accounts reproduced in collotype facsimile*.

² Greg, *Bibliography of the English Drama*, i. 197.

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player or players, responsible for this memorial reconstruction, had been acting in *Othello* not long before. Further, in Part 1 of Dekker and Middleton's *Honest Whore*, published in 1604 and certainly written before 14 March, Hippolito, accused of murdering Infelice, is described as 'more sauage than a barbarous Moore', which sounds very like a reference to Othello.¹ The play, then, can hardly be later than early 1603, and may even belong to 1602; and that would bring it close to *Hamlet* which Edmund Chambers places in the summer or autumn of 1601 in his final review of the matter.² This dating accords, moreover, with passages in the play which some have explained as echoes of books published in 1601 and read by Shakespeare.

What he read for the plot itself, however, was the seventh *novella* of the third *deca* or decade of stories in the *Hecatommithi* by Giraldi Cinthio; and this he seems to have read in the original since there is no English translation known at this date;³ and indeed the play seems to suggest that he could read Italian with ease. In the first place Othello's account of the magical origin of the handkerchief given to Desdemona,⁴ not found in Cinthio, who merely relates that it was 'finely embroidered in the Moorish fashion', may well be

¹ See 1. 1. 37-8; A. Hart, letter in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 10 October 1935.

² E. K. Chambers, *Shakespearean Gleanings* (1944), pp. 68-70.

³ There have been three since: (i) in Mrs Lennox's *Shakespeare Illustrated* (1753); (ii) by W. Parr in a little volume entitled *The Story of the Moor of Venice...with two essays on Shakespeare*, 1795 (reprinted in J. P. Collier's Shakespeare Library, 1844; 2nd ed. by W. C. Hazlitt, 1875); (iii) by J. E. Taylor (1855) (reprinted in Furness's Variorum ed. of *Othello*). None of these is satisfactory.

⁴ See 3. 4. 73-8.

derived from the description in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* of Hector's magical tent which his sister the 'damsel' Cassandra, inspired by 'prophetic fury', had worked with her needle. If so, Shakespeare would, it appears, have had it from Ariosto direct, not from Sir John Harington's translation printed by Richard Field in 1591, because the English version has nothing corresponding to the words 'furor profetico' which Shakespeare echoes. Again, the passage in question comes from stanza 80, canto 46, which suggests an easy familiarity with the language on the part of one who not only knew *Orlando Furioso* well enough to remember an incident in it and adapt it to another purpose, but had presumably perused the earlier forty-five cantos before he reached it.¹ And there is a further point.

¹ This parallel with Ariosto was first pointed out in 1898 by G. Brandes (v. p. 445 of his *William Shakespeare*, 1916 ed.) The original stanza and Harington's translation run as follows:

Ariosto

Eran degli anni appresso che duo milia,
 Che fu quel ricco padiglion trapunto.
 Una donzella della terra d'Ilia,
 Ch' avea il furor profetico congiunto,
 Con studio di gran tempo, e con vigilia
 Lo fece di sua man di tutto punto.
 Cassandra fu nomata, ed al fratello
 Inclito Ettore fece un bel don di quello.

Harington

Two thousand yeare before, or not much lesse,
 This rich pavilion had in Troy bene wrought,
 By fair Cassandra, that same Prophetesse
 That had (but all in vaine) in youth bene taught
 Of future things to giue most certaine guesse
 For her true speech was neuer set at naught:
 She wrought the same with help of many others,
 And gaue it Hector, her beloued brother.

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Shakespeare speaks of a sibyl; Ariosto of the damsel Cassandra. But Boiardo in a similar connexion, which Ariosto obviously had in mind, also speaks of a sibyl. Had Shakespeare read Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* as well as its sequel *Orlando Furioso*? The possibility cannot be ruled out.¹ A French translation, which we have not seen, of Cinthio's story appeared, it is true, in 1584,² and Professor Charlton tells us 'it follows the original with a literal fidelity' so close 'that it provides not the slightest clue as to whether Shakespeare had the tale from the Italian or the French'.³ Since, however, what Othello says at 3. 3. 361-6 ('give me the ocular proof.... Make me to see't') corresponds with Cinthio's 'se non mi fai...vedere cogl'occhi...', whereas the French gives us only 'si tu ne me fais voir', we seem to have here a pretty definite clue pointing to the Italian, especially if we remember that the word 'ocular' is not found elsewhere in Shakespeare.⁴ There are other passages in the play also which may well echo the Italian of Cinthio,⁵ while a familiarity on Shakespeare's part with Italian proverbs would go some way towards clearing up the vexed problem of the line,

A fellow almost damned in a fair wife.⁶

Observe finally that the only character to whom Cinthio

¹ The Boiardo parallel (*Orlando Innamorato*, Bk. II, xxvii, st. 51) was pointed out by Professor Alexander in *R.E.S.* (1932), p. 100. See Brandes, *loc. cit.*, for another.

² Gabriel Chappuys, *Premier Volume des Cent Excellentes Nouvelles de M. Jean Baptiste Giralduy Cynthien* (Paris, 1584), pp. 323-33.

³ Charlton, *Shakespearian Tragedy* (1948), pp. 114-15 n.

⁴ W. Wollatsch, *Archiv*, CLXII (1932), pp. 118-19. We owe this reference to Mr Maxwell.

⁵ See notes 1. 3. 330; 3. 3. 186.

⁶ See note 1. 1. 21.

gives a name is Desdemona, or Disdemona as he spells it; all the other names in the play appear to be of Shakespeare's invention and are Italian in formation. One has only to compare them with the names in *Hamlet* to see what shifts he is put to when dealing with a country whose language is unknown to him: the rag-bag, Claudius, Horatio, Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia, Marcellus, Barnardo, Francisco, Reynaldo, suggest anything but Denmark.

Cinthio (1504–73) was a professor of philosophy at Ferrara and a dramatist who both by theory and practice exercised a considerable influence upon the development of drama in Italy and Europe generally from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards. Tragedy had until his time been almost wholly Senecan in form and spirit. He now made tragic-comedy fashionable, that is to say a type of drama which, though still compounded for the most part of the Senecan ingredients of blood and horror, took a new turn shortly before the end so as to close on a happy note. And he also started a new fashion in dramatic themes by taking his plots from stories of modern life, especially love-stories borrowed from Boccaccio and other writers of *novelle*, instead of following his predecessors by drawing upon the plots of Seneca and other classical dramatists. It is, in fact, difficult to avoid the suspicion that Shakespeare owed more to him than the plots of *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*. Professor Charlton, who speaks with authority on these matters, has for instance pointed out that after trying his hand on two thoroughly Senecan tragedies, *Titus Andronicus* and *Richard III*, Shakespeare gives us in *Romeo and Juliet* one founded on a fictitious tale of a romantic love derived from a volume of Italian *novelle*, in a word one that follows Cinthio's prescription. And if Shakespeare read Italian, it is more than likely that he was familiar

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with the *Discorso* in which Cinthio expounded his theory of tragedy.¹

Cinthio had himself written seven plays before 1565, when his *Hecatommithi* appeared, and this volume was, as it were, a present to his countrymen of a hundred new plots suitable for the type of drama he advocated, some of them being dramatized by himself later. Moreover, as a professor he was inclined to emphasize the moral or at least the educational function of drama though every dramatist at that period professed to do so more or less. Like the *Decameron*, his collection of stories opens with a Proem and Introduction explaining the circumstances of the persons who are to relate them. But whereas Boccaccio's is a group of seven girls and three men, the group in Cinthio's Introduction is of men only, one of them a senior who guides the discussion and in the end directs it towards a definite problem, that of success in married life, for all the world like a professor with his seminar. The secret of such success, the leader insists, must be looked for in a spiritual union of the partners, though he suggests that this kind of union is difficult to maintain if husband and wife, owing to the circumstances of their birth or upbringing, have a different outlook on life or have been accustomed to different modes of living. After this, the Introduction ends with a proposal by one of the young men that the thesis should be illustrated by tales, since 'examples' may do more than discussion to show where the truth lies. Though, as Dr Walker suggests, little more than a tissue of late medieval commonplaces,² the foregoing

¹ Charlton, *op. cit.* pp. 49 ff., the best and fullest account of Shakespeare's handling of Cinthio's tale. Cf. also Charlton's *Senecan Tradition in Renaissance Tragedy* (1946), pp. lxxii-lxxv, and his lecture on *Othello* in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, vol. xxxi, no. 1 (January, 1948).

² For which reason perhaps ignored by Charlton.

discussion may well have been before Shakespeare's mind when he set about the writing of his play sometime in 1601 or 1602.

III. *Cinthio's Moor and Shakespeare's Othello*

Certainly one theme, if not the central theme, both of *Othello* and of Cinthio's tale of the Moorish Captain, his Venetian lady and the wicked Ensign, is that of a marriage which begins as a spiritual union but is brought to disaster through differences of race and social tradition. Disdemona, Cinthio tells us, is attracted to the Moor not by physical desire but by his great and valorous spirit (*dalla virtù del Moro*), while he on his side falls in love with her beauty and the nobility of her mind (*dal nobile pensiero*). And Disdemona points the moral of the story when she declares to the Ensign's wife [Emilia] that her fate is a warning to Italian girls not to marry a man divided from them by race (*la Natura*), religion (*il Cielo*) and manner of life (*il modo della vita*).

Shakespeare turns Cinthio's hint of a spiritual union to great account. It is implicit in Othello's description of the courtship, and in everything they say to or of each other before Iago's poison begins to take effect. Moreover, if we forget it we miss, as some critics seem to have missed, the whole meaning of Othello's speech and action in the last scene. Perhaps, indeed, the difference between Shakespeare's Othello and Cinthio's Moor is seen most glaringly in the different manner of the wife's murder. Shakespeare shows us the pitiful yet stern minister of justice offering her up as a sacrifice to outraged Chastity. In Cinthio, Moor and Ensign combine to batter her skull to pieces and then, loosening a beam above the bed, give out that the ceiling has fallen and crushed her, thus escaping all suspicion for the deed. No 'honourable murder' this! Yet though

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Cinthio has nothing corresponding with Othello's final speeches, their burden—an agonized realization of the spiritual divorce from her which faces him for eternity—is a development of the hint in Cinthio above mentioned. Again, although Cinthio's heroine possesses something of Desdemona's courage, gentleness and humility, his Moor altogether lacks the dignity and nobility of Shakespeare's Othello. The latter retains sufficient resemblance nevertheless to show it to be a transfiguration of the other.

But this transfiguration gave rise to a difficulty with the plot. The fundamental cause of the catastrophe in both story and play is, of course, the husband's lack of confidence in the wife, which the Ensign merely awakens and then plays upon. In the story this required little motivation: husbands in Cinthio's world, as in Emilia's, are distrustful of wives by nature:

They are not ever jealous for the cause,
 But jealous for they're jealous. (3. 4. 164-5)

Coleridge and Bradley have been taken to task for maintaining that jealousy is not the main point in Othello's character:¹ 'I take it to be', Coleridge is reported to have said,

rather an agony that the creature, whom he had believed angelic, with whom he had garnered up his heart and whom he could not help still loving, should be proved impure and worthless. It was the struggle *not* to love her. It was a moral indignation and regret that virtue should so fall: 'But yet the *pity* of it, Iago! O Iago! the *pity* of it, Iago!'²

And many other readers and spectators reach the same conclusion. *Othello*, the most popular of Shakespeare's

¹ See e.g. F. R. Leavis, in *Scrutiny* VI, pp. 262 ff.

² *Table-Talk*, cited in Raysor's *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ii. 350.

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plays in Soviet Russia where it is played in sixteen different languages in different countries of the Union, is apparently always produced there according to Pushkin's prescription: 'Othello was not jealous by nature, he was trustful.'¹

The point is not that Othello never becomes jealous—his jealousy, 'being wrought', is terrible—but that he is not 'jealous by nature'. On the contrary, he is one of the great lovers in the literature of the world, the greatest lover in Shakespeare.² Not only is physical passion a trifling thing compared with the delight he takes in his lady's conversation³, but association with her becomes the meaning of life, so that the mere sight of her after a brief parting fills him with ecstasy.

It gives me wonder great as my content
 To see you here before me. O my soul's joy!
 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.⁴

It confirms his faith in the harmony and stability of the universe, as he implies at 3. 3. 91–3:

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

¹ Pushkin was killed in a duel in the same year that Coleridge's *Literary Remains* were published, and could therefore have known nothing of his views.

² Bradley, *op. cit.* p. 189. ³ Cp. 1. 3. 261–65.

⁴ 2. 1. 180–90. Granville-Barker's comment (*Prefaces to Shakespeare, 4th Series* (1945) p. 20) on these lines that they give us 'the already ageing, disillusioned man', I find incredible. True, they are spoken before the wedding night, but by this placing of them Shakespeare surely meant to emphasize what Othello has said already at 1. 3. 260 ff.

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And it gives a deeper significance to his religion. So at least I interpret Iago's sneer that for her sake he would be prepared to

renounce his baptism,
 All seals and symbols of redeemed sin;
 (2. 3. 336-7)

and so I interpret also the terrible lines envisaging an eternity of separation at 5. 2. 276-84. When, therefore, he is brought to think her false, everything else becomes false, meaningless, empty, even the profession he had served from 'boyish days' with ever-increasing fame and ever-increasing devotion to the state, the profession which had won him the heart of Desdemona herself.¹ 'Chaos is come.'

How could such a lover descend to the vulgar and degrading depths of sexual jealousy? How could Shakespeare in other words so arrange matters as to convince his audience that in truth the thing happens? Not a few critics feel that he fails to convince, but only, I think, because they read *Othello* like a novel, or take memories of such reading to the theatre with them.² Bradley at any rate, though often accused of this kind of misreading, is not here guilty of it. The tragedy of Othello, he writes,

lies in this—that his whole nature was indisposed to jealousy, and yet was such that he was unusually open to

¹ 3. 3. 349-59.

² Robert Bridges (see *The Influence of the audience on Shakespeare's drama*, Collected Essays, Papers, etc. 1, pp. 23-5) is an eminent example of recent times. But Thomas Rymer's *Short View of Tragedy* (1693) raised much the same objections though from the neo-classical standpoint, and T. S. Eliot considers that 'Rymer makes out a very good case' (*Selected Essays*, p. 116 n.) of which he has 'never seen a cogent refutation' (*ibid.* p. 141 n.; cf. also p. 126).

deception, and, if once wrought to passion, likely to act with little reflection, with no delay, and in the most decisive manner conceivable.¹

This, like the next quotation, owes something to Coleridge. Yet it is a brilliant summary: as ever with Bradley every word is weighed and, as usual, every stroke is just. Equally unanswerable are his observations on the other arm of the tragic balance, Iago's 'honesty'. That Othello puts entire confidence in Iago implies, he asserts, no stupidity on Othello's part:

For his opinion of Iago was the opinion of practically everyone who knew him:² and that opinion was that Iago was before all things, 'honest', his very faults being those of excess in honesty. This being so, even if Othello had not been trustful and simple, it would have been quite unnatural in him to be unmoved by the warnings of so honest a friend, warnings offered with extreme reluctance and manifestly from a sense of a friend's duty. *Any* husband would have been troubled by them.³

His use of the past tense shows, it is true, that Bradley writes as if *Othello* were history or a piece of real life. But what he says is nevertheless relevant to the verisimilitude of the stage, provided Iago is played as Shakespeare intended.

IV. *Iago*

This proviso is essential; and there can, I think, be little doubt that the main cause why we are often dissatisfied with *Othello* in the theatre is that the tragic balance just alluded to is upset by the pitiful ambition of the actor impersonating Iago. 'The tragedy of

¹ Bradley, *op. cit.* p. 186.

² i.e. Shakespeare showed it to be their opinion.

³ Bradley, *op. cit.* p. 192.

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Othello', Robert Bridges roundly declared, 'is intolerably painful; and that not merely because we see Othello grossly deceived, but because we are ourselves constrained to submit to palpable deception.'¹ Yet that the deception should be neither gross nor palpable is evident from the account of Bensley's Iago given by Lamb, who, despite his oft-quoted and often condemned remarks on *King Lear* as a stage-play, is one of our most interesting dramatic critics. Robert Bensley, he tells us,

betrayed none of that *cleverness* which is the bane of serious acting. For this reason, his Iago was the only enduring one which I remember to have seen. No spectator from his action could divine more of his artifice than Othello was supposed to do. His confessions in soliloquy alone put you in possession of the mystery. There were no by-intimations to make the audience fancy their own discernment so much greater than that of the Moor—who commonly stands like a great helpless mark set up for mine Ancient, and a quantity of barren spectators, to shoot their bolts at. The Iago of Bensley did not go to work so grossly. There was a triumphant tone about the character, natural to a general consciousness of power; but none of that petty vanity which chuckles and cannot contain itself upon any little successful stroke of its knavery—as is common with your small villains and green probationers in mischief. It did not clap or crow before its time. It was not a man setting his wits at a child, and winking all the while at other children who are mightily pleased at being let into the secret; but a consummate villain entrapping a noble nature into toils, against which no discernment was available, where the manner was as fathomless as the purpose seemed dark, and without motive.²

This appears to me the best criticism we have of Iago's character because it tells us not why he behaves as he

¹ Bridges, *op. cit.* I, p. 23.

² On Some of the old Actors, *Elia*, 1823.

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does but how he should behave, or rather how the actor who plays him should. The question 'Why' which Othello bids them demand of Iago in the last moments of the play, Bradley remarks 'is *the* question about Iago, just as the question Why did Hamlet delay? is *the* question about Hamlet'. And he asserts that, though neither character could solve his own problem, 'Shakespeare knew the answer, and if these characters are great creations and not blunders we ought to be able to find it too'.¹ Shakespeare no doubt put that question into Othello's mouth in order that Bradley and the rest of us should ask it, or because he expected us to ask it. But the only answer he gives us and the only one we shall ever get is Iago's own—

Demand me nothing: what you know, you know;
 From this time forth I never will speak word.

And this answer is Shakespeare's crowning stroke, his final touch to the portrait of a consummate villain, with a manner as fathomless as his purpose seems dark and without motive. For 'Demand me nothing' shuts the door firmly and finally. That critics try to force it open, and will continue to try, is of course a tribute to Iago's overwhelming verisimilitude and fascinating inscrutability, which put him in a class above Goethe's Mephistopheles.² None succeed, however; or can ever succeed in convincing the rest of the world. In Iago, as in Hamlet, Shakespeare created a character which, while intensely lifelike both on the stage and in the book, defies and will always defy all attempts to analyse or explain it.³

Yet to leave the matter there would be to leave

¹ Bradley, *op. cit.* p. 222.

² As Bradley, *op. cit.* (p. 208) remarks, Mephistopheles 'has Iago for his father', though he is less human.

³ Cf. *What happens in Hamlet*, pp. 217–29.

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unsaid one of the most significant things about Iago, and about the play as a whole. Iago has the devil's own cunning, but he is a human being nevertheless and on one point a stupid human being at that, while it is this stupidity which brings his nemesis upon him. For, as R. G. Moulton puts it,

The principle underlying this nemesis is one of the profoundest of Shakespeare's moral ideas—that evil not only corrupts the heart, but equally undermines the judgement... It is because he knows himself unfettered by scruples that Iago feels himself infallible, and considers honest men fools; he never sees how his foul thoughts have blinded his perceptive power and made him blunder where simple men would have gone straight. He thought he had foreseen everything: it never occurred to him that his wife might betray him with nothing to gain by such betrayal, simply from affection and horror.¹

In our reaction against the rather crude moralising of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century criticism, we are apt to forget that Shakespeare is one of the great moral forces of the world. This does not of course mean that he had any ethical purpose in writing *Othello*. 'The Poetical Character', Keats tells us,

has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the chameleon Poet.²

But when the chameleon poet who has penetrated deeper into the mysteries of human nature than any other finds that a certain obtuseness is a necessary

¹ R. G. Moulton, *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*, 3rd ed. (1892), pp. 238–9.

² Letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818.

ingredient in the composition of a moral anarchist, we simple wayfaring men may take courage.

Iago, then, like most of the characters in the canon, exists dramatically in his own right, and he is so great a figure that he seems to stand right out of the framework of his play. Yet he is made to fit into the frame and is not even the most important character within it, his primary function being to render the development of Othello's character more credible. He bears in fact the same sort of relation to Othello as Falstaff does to Prince Hal in *Henry IV*. Shakespeare had to make Falstaff so fascinating a tempter in order to provide his Elizabethan audience with a satisfactory reason why Henry of Monmouth, the most august of English Kings, stooped to folly in his youth,¹ and he made Iago a 'demi-devil' to help us understand why the noblest of his lovers falls a prey to jealousy. As Raleigh notes:

Everything, . . . up to the crisis of the play, helps to raise Othello to the top of admiration, and to fix him in the affections of the reader. Scene follows scene, and in every one of them, it might be said, Shakespeare is making his task more hopeless. How is he to fill out the story, and yet save our sympathies for Othello? The effort must be heroic: and it is. He invents Iago. The greatness of Iago may be measured by this, that Othello never loses our sympathy.²

And the process of this invention is best explained in relation to the source, as was brilliantly expounded by Lytton Strachey, who writes:

The Ancient in Cinthio's story concealed his wickedness under a heroic guise; he wore the semblance of a Hector or an Achilles. Now it is obvious that, in Shakespeare's

¹ Cf. *The Fortunes of Falstaff*, p. 23. See also Swinburne, *Study of Shakespeare* (1880), p. 182, and Middleton Murry, *Shakespeare*, (1935), pp. 320-1.

² *Shakespeare* (1907), p. 141.

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scheme, this would not do. . . . The cloak of Iago's villainy must be of an altogether different stuff; clearly it must be the very contrary of heroic—the downrightness, the outspokenness of bluff integrity. This conception needed no great genius to come by. . . . but Shakespeare's next readjustment is of quite another class. In Cinthio's story, the Ancient's motive for his villainy is—just what we should expect it to be: he was in love with the lady. She paid no heed to him; his love turned to hatred; he imagined in his fury that she loved the Captain; and he determined to be avenged upon them both. Now this is the obvious, the regulation plot, which would have been followed by any ordinary competent writer. And Shakespeare rejected it. Why? . . . Othello is to be deluded into believing that Desdemona is faithless; he is to kill her; and then he is to discover that his belief was false. This is the situation, the horror of which is to be intensified in every possible way: the tragedy must be enormous, and unrelieved. But there is one eventuality that might, in some degree at any rate, mitigate the atrocity of the story. If Iago had been led to cause the disaster by his love for Desdemona, in that very fact would lie some sort of comfort; the tragedy would have been brought about by a motive not only comprehensible, but in a sense sympathetic; the hero's passion and the villain's would be the same. Let it be granted, then, that the completeness of the tragedy would suffer if its origin lay in Iago's love for Desdemona; therefore let that motive be excluded from Iago's mind. The question immediately presents itself—in that case, for what reason are we to suppose that Iago acted as he did? The whole story depends upon his plot, which forms the machinery of the action; yet, if the Desdemona impulsion is eliminated, what motive for his plot can there be? Shakespeare supplied the answer to this question with one of the very greatest strokes of his genius. By an overwhelming effort of creation he summoned up out of the darkness a psychological portent that was exactly fitted to the requirements of the tragic situation with which he was dealing, and endowed it with reality. He determined that Iago should have no motive at all. He conceived of a monster whose