WRECKED IN UNKNOWN FATE

—Othello's Loss and Recovery of Self—

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I

Othello is a tragedy of love whose action rests on the underlying theme of self-knowledge, or lack of it. The dramatic background for the hero's voyage of self-discovery is built up with care, velocity and theatrical economy. The main concern of the plot, the love between the hero and heroine, is already under way when the action starts. A bird's eye-view of the general situation is quickly offered through fragments of information, but the details are kept blurred in a frustrating mist of ambiguity and secrecy. The opening dialogue between Roderigo and Iago teems with unspecified words and phrases, most of them pronouns, nicknames, and slanderous appellations, which later turn out to indicate the protagonists or their clandestine courtship:

> . . . thou, Iago, . . . should know of *this* (I. 1. 2–3)[1];
> If ever I did dream of *such a thing*, . . . (I. 1. 5);
> Thou told'st me, thou didst hold *him* in thy hate (I. 1. 7);
> Whether I in any just term am affin'd
> To love *the Moor* (I. 1. 39–40);
> What a full fortune does *the thicklips* owe (I. 1. 66);
> Call up *her* father (I. 1. 67).

Speedy and snappy as it may be felt, the action is intended to leave its core unsaid and unclear, strictly so until the right moment arrives. Vagueness and suspicion linger in the action, making the audience jittery, impatient and uneasy alternately. Titillations and tantalizations of this sort may spring from the internal need of the play's integral scheme of composition which incorporates the structure, characteriza-

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[1] All quotations from *Othello* are taken from the Arden edition of the play edited by M. R. Ridley (1958; rpt. London: Methuen, 1979).

tion and leitmotif into one whole organic unity.[1] For one thing, the technique of mental manipulation through calculated imperfection is to be freely exploited by Iago, the self-effacing virtuoso of destructive manoeuvers: he is assured that imagination can be agitated and wrought up even to the point of delirium by an elaborate application of fact and fallacy, of ambiguity and plausibility. For another thing, it is soon to be seen that facts and realities in this tragedy remain hidden right to the end behind the deceptive smoothness and cordiality of everyday life: when the closed door of this opaque domesticity is finally flung open, the sordid aspects of humanity and society tumble out to the audience's mixed feelings of horror, disgust and relief.

Obscurity then lends a hand to the concept and conduct of 'theft': this affiliation of potential impropriety is further interconnected with the theme of darkness, which will be discussed later. It may be undeniable that the act of stealing, both real and imaginary, physical and psychological, occupies a major part of the plot. Indeed, the plot is practically launched into action by a hysterical cry of alarm for burglary: "Awake, what ho, Brabantio! *thieves, thieves, thieves!*" (I. 1. 79). The dialogue has a number of figurative references to theft, particularly in the early sections of the play. For example, the Duke employs the metaphor to console and placate Brabantio, who is half dejected and half furious at his daughter's elopement:

> The *robb'd* that smiles, *steals* something from the *thief*,
> He *robs* himself, that spends a bootless grief. (I. 3. 208–9)

Iago resorts to the same figure of speech in misguiding Othello:

> Who *steals* my purse, *steals* trash, 'tis something, nothing,
> 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands:

[1] The artistic coherency of the play is highly praised by Rosalie L. Colie, *Shakespeare's Living Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U. P., 1974): she contends that "*Othello* is a remarkably integrated play, its action compressed, its imagery consistent, its language profoundly connected with the personalities of the various characters, as well as subservient to the needs of the plot, action, and theme" (p. 146). The same view is advocated by many critics, for example, Helen Gardner, "The Noble Moor", British Academy Shakespeare Lecture (1955), reprinted in Kenneth Muir ed. *Interpretations of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 161–179: she holds that "the play has a rare intellectual beauty, satisfying the desire of the imagination for order and harmony between the parts and the whole" (p. 161).

> But he that *filches* from me good name
> *Robs* me of that which not enriches him,
> And makes me poor indeed. (III. 3. 161–5)

Yet theft is not so easily noticed and so deftly paraphrased in the rest of the play as by Iago here, at least until its consequences take a heavy toll. Then sudden realization of loss shatters peace of mind and triggers a violent commotion in the soul, which sways in the dilemma of selection between spurious possession and total loss, between agony in knowing and peacefulness in ignorance, as Othello's ambivalent mentality demonstrates:

> What sense had I of her *stol'n* hours of lust?
> . . . . .
> He that is *robb'd*, not wanting what is *stol'n*,
> Let him not know't, and he's not *robb'd* at all. (III. 3. 344–9)

There is, however, no way to turn back the clock in the domain of cognition: one step into it annihilates all possibilities of returning to the pristine, tranquil state of innocence. The diabolical charm of knowledge, which is manifested in Othello's " 'tis better to be much abus'd / Than but to know't a little " (III. 3. 342–3), makes up a vital part of the intellectual climate of this tragedy.

The action also abounds with anecdotes of theft and loss. The hero is called " O thou foul *thief* " (I. 2. 62) by Brabantio, who lodges the claim that his daughter is " abus'd, *stol'n* from [him] and corrupted " (I. 3. 60). While it is certainly a sin to trade one's soul, it may probably be great folly to have one's soul stolen. Roderigo attests to this axiomatic dimension of the action by losing himself and all his property for the beauty of Desdemona. Cassio also falls a victim to the same folly, robbed of his reason temporarily by liquor: " O God, that men should put an enemy into their mouths, to *steal away* their brains " (II. 3. 281–3). Cassio's is a model case of human weakness and self-loss, from which Othello fatally learns no lesson. At the other end of the spectrum of theft, Cassio turns from victim to perpetrator and steals Bianca's heart: " . . . 'tis the strumpet's plague, / To *beguile* many, and be *beguiled* by one " (IV. 1. 96–7). The word ' beguile ', with its implication of dishonesty and trickiness, aligns itself with the theme of theft in the action. Emilia filches a handkerchief

from her mistress upon Iago's insistent demand: " My wayward husband hath a hundred times / Woo'd me to *steal* it " (III. 3. 296–7). All in all, the entire cast is thus involved in one morally dubious act or another. Yet, amazingly and a little annoyingly, nobody reflects on his own misdemeanour or realizes the potential riskiness of his own situation. The tragedy seems to be framed in the condition of universal unawareness, within which most of the characters are deprived from the outset of the power of self-reflection and rational understanding of themselves and others.[1]

Nonetheless, there are two notable exceptions to this generalization. The Turk, in full knowledge of his hostile plans, attempts abortively to snatch Cyprus from Venice: " So let the Turk of Cyprus us *beguile* " (I. 3. 210). Likewise Iago remains fully aware and convinced of his deeds of apparent criminality. In a bid to remodel his living circumstances into a space of predictability of his own design, he works out a grim conspiracy and acts it out. He succeeds first in swindling money and jewelry from Roderigo, next in usurping the rank of lieutenancy from Cassio, and finally in depriving the hero of his reason, reputation, and ' self ' of all things. And yet his wrongdoing evades notice and reproach till the final moment: it never meets repentance or inner prosecution. He cannot be ' self-critical ', though one of his self-descriptive mottoes declares, " I am nothing, if not critical " (II. 1. 119). Moral scrutiny is entirely foreign to his intellectual fibre and self-consciousness. That is why Iago can walk nonchalantly on the tightrope of " contriv'd " (I. 2. 3) crime against innocent people without being entangled in the didactic web of conscience.

By means of abstraction, the plot of *Othello* can be represented as a conflict between two forces, or more precisely an attack of one force against the other. Underneath the episodes of theft lies the matrix of action that can be schematized by a well-planned onslaught of deception against honesty. Deception thrives most typically when it puts on a false mask of honesty and abuses the virtue, as Iago brags triumphant-

[1] This metaphysical setting of the play is pointed out by Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare's Tragic Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon P., 1979): " Like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* is a tragedy of unawareness " (p. 115) and " Iago's is the sole awareness, ... Othello, on the other hand, never learns until the end who is his adversary or even that he has one " (p. 117). See also John Bayley, *The Characters of Love: A Study in the Literature of Personality* (London: Constable & Co., 1960), p. 146.

ly more than once:

> . . . others there are,
> Who, trimm'd in forms, and visages of duty,
> Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
> And throwing but shows of service on their lords,
> . . .
> And such a one do I profess myself. (I. 1. 49–55)
>
> When devils will their blackest sins put on,
> They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
> As I do now. (II. 3. 342–4)

The highly psychological conflict between these opposite values is rendered in human terms and embodied first in the action by the Turkish campaign against the defenceless island of Cyprus: " 'Tis a pageant, / To keep us in a false gaze " (I. 3. 18–9).[1] The King of Turkey soon disappears from the surface of the plot but continues to cast a sinister shadow over the tragedy.[2] Associated closely with him is Iago, who takes over his slyness and greediness: " Nay, it is true, or else I am a Turk " (II. 1. 114). Iago impeccably plays the role of "A man . . . of honesty and trust " (I. 3. 284), yet he is double-faced inside as ' Janus ' (I. 2. 33) is outside and hides his menace under his innocuous guise of civility and decorousness. Like the forlorn island in the Mediterranean Sea, the Moor, noble but simple, with his chivalric integrity and asceticism bordering on primitive bigotry, appears almost doomed under the imminent threat of this street-wise, cold-blooded crook.

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[1] Philip McGuire, " *Othello* as an 'Assay of Reason ' ", in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, (Washington, D.C.: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1973), Vol. 24, No. 2, shrewdly remarks on the Senate scene: " In showing the Senate sifting through a welter of contradictory reports and accurately judging the designs of the Turkish fleet, this scene establishes the cognitive norm of *Othello* by enacting the human ability to discriminate between what seems to be and what is " (p. 200). See also Ralph Berry, " Patterns in *Othello* ", in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 23 (1972), No. 1, pp. 3–20.

[2] Giraldo Cinthio's original story, *Gli Hecatommithi*, whose close French version made in 1584 by Gabriel Chappuys is reputed to be Shakespeare's most likely source, has no allusion to the Turkish invasion. Emrys Jones, " *Othello*, *Lepanto* and the Cyprus Wars ", in *Shakespeare Survey*, 21 (1968), discusses addition of the Cyprus War as the playwright's tribute to King James's patronage (pp. 47–52). For the play's sources, see Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (1973; rpt. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), Vol. VII, pp. 191–265.

II

Othello's first entrance is made in a low key, with no fanfare or ceremony. He comes out calm and tacit after his humiliating anonymity in the first scene. Yet his self-command and lofty bearing preside over the stage at the moment of his appearance. Obviously, emphasis in his characterization is laid on his military discipline and personal magnanimity. Othello is presented first and foremost as a soldier of supreme prowess and experience, as a general of unrivalled calibre, who can alone be qualified to defend Venice from heathen harassments.[1] His masculine virtues are promptly put to the test when he finds himself surrounded by naked swords and challenged by an irate father in the middle of a night. Frugal of speech and bounteous in courage, Othello remains as composed as ever, with no trace of emotional perturbation on his face: "Keep up your swords, for the dew will rust them" (I. 2. 59). His self-possession, founded upon his physical and mental strength, is awesome and unassailable.

The hero's value is fully exposed to view in the third scene. Before the Senate, he relates with sincerity and confidence how his love for Desdemona started, progressed and culminated in marriage. His noble demeanour, especially his gracious modesty, illustrated by his triple repetition of the word 'little' in seven lines (I. 3. 82–8), impresses the magnificoes so deeply that one of them, the Duke himself, goes as far as to say, "I think this tale would win my daughter, too" (I. 3. 171). Even in the scene of a night brawl (II. 3), where a slight sign of irritation is felt in his voice, Othello's temper is kept under control. There is no difficulty in imagining how this remarkable man has won the Venetian beauty's heart and how he is in his turn enamoured of her, as he confides:

> She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd,
> And I lov'd her that she did pity them. (I. 3. 167–8)

The mutual feeling of love and pity is not the only thing shared between the protagonists. Othello's robust masculinity is well matched with Desdemona's exquisite feminine charms. Though described as

[1] Cf. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on "Hamlet", "Othello", "King Lear", "Macbeth"* (1904; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1941), p. 176.

"A maid, so tender, fair, and happy" (I. 2. 66) or "A maiden never bold of spirit, / So still and quiet" (I. 3. 94–5), the heroine never flinches from making clear her course of action when summoned to the Senate and confronted by her own father. Her wisdom, maturity and determination endow her with the strength to bury an old bond of blood for a new knot of love:

> . . . but here's my husband:
> And so much duty as my mother show'd
> To you, preferring you before her father,
> So much I challenge, that I may confess,
> Due to the Moor my lord. (I. 3. 185–9)

In addition, no second thought deters her reply when she is asked where to stay and what to do during the war. Her love for Othello accomodates no regard of convenience and security of life:

> . . . if I be left behind,
> A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
> The rites for which I love him are bereft me,
> And I a heavy interim shall support,
> By his dear absence; let me go with him. (I. 3. 255–9)

Desdemona's devotion is thus adamant, and so is her decision. Her speech so far bears a salient resemblance to Othello's delivery in dignity and intensity.

Besides these similarities, the hero and heroine are given almost equal pedigree and social standing. Desdemona is the only daughter of Brabantio, who is reputed to hold "in his effect a voice potentially / As double as the duke's" (I. 2. 13–4). In the meantime, Othello claims in his own account, "I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege" (21–2). What others regard as his drawbacks in his relationship with Desdemona comprise his age, culture and race, of which the last is of course rated as the worst.

Othello's physical features as a dark-skinned Moor are delineated unmistakably by such expressions as "an old *black* ram" (I. 1. 88), "a *Barbary horse*" (110), "a lascivious *Moor*" (126) and "the *sooty* bosom"

(I. 2. 70).[1] It little matters from an artistic point of view how dark his skin exactly is: what is crucial about Othello's looks is that his skin seems to vary its hues and shades in accordance with his inner state of being.[2] At first, the whole issue of his skin-color and other physical eccentricities is nearly lost in the various virtues of his character which could outweigh any shortcomings. Moreover, his skin can even be felt to be 'fair' at times.[3] This theatrical illusion may be aroused partly by his perfect compatibility with the "fair Desdemona" (IV. 2. 225) and partly by his successful assimilation into the white society of Venice. But the main cause ought to be attributed to his 'fairness' beneath the skin, as Desdemona maintains: "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (I. 3. 252). The righteousness of her statement is endorsed and enhanced immediately by the Duke:

> If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
> Your son-in-law is far more fair than black. (I. 3. 289–90)

Thus the souls of the hero and heroine are tied in spiritual rapport beyond the superficial barrier of appearance and received prejudice. The dramatic framework of general unawareness urges the audience to trace the internal developments of the unknowing hero by seeing the reflections of his image upon others, in particular upon Desdemona

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[1] In view of the Elizabethan concept that black is the colour of sin and death, G. K. Hunter, "Othello and Colour Prejudice", in *Intepretations of Shakespeare* (op. cit.), says that "The dramatic function of Iago is to reduce the white 'reality' of Othello to the black 'appearance' of his face, indeed, induce in him the belief that all reality is 'black' . . . ." (p. 201). In *Love's Labours Lost*, the colour of black is defined as "the badge of hell, / The hue of dungeons, and the school of night" (IV. 3. 250–1).

[2] Attempting to trace the origin of the hero in the social and cultural climates of contemporary Spain, Barbara Everett, "Spanish Othello: The Making of Shakespeare's Moor", *Shakespeare Survey*, 35 (1982), argues that "he is almost any 'colour' one pleases, so long as it permits his easier isolation and destruction by his enemies and by himself" (p. 107) and also that "Othello's colour, . . . is to some degree not a literal factor, but a matter of social assertion and reaction" (p. 107).

[3] Doris Adler, "The Rhetoric of Black and White in *Othello*", in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 25 (1974), No. 2, asserts: "The black-skinned Othello is exonerated as being metaphorically white" (p. 252). H. H. Furness, in his New Variorum edition of the play (1886; rpt. New York: Dover Publications, 1963), quotes Mary Preston as saying that "In studying the play of *Othello*, I have always imagined its hero a white man" (p. 395). For a further (and more provocative) discussion of the topic, see Martin Orkin, "Othello and the 'plain face' of Racism", in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38 (1987), No. 2, pp. 166–88.

and Iago, since he remains unable to see himself objectively.[1]

III

In *Othello*, inner conflicts gradually unfold themselves in the aftermath of outer strifes. Due to the Turkish aggression, the location is shifted to Cyprus, and the action hereafter takes place exclusively in this outpost of civilization adjacent to the uncanny pagan world of the Sultan. The play's focus narrows down swiftly in the process of isolation and individuation. The process is further accelerated by a storm which disperses the enemy fleet and brings the burgeoning war to an abrupt end. Ironically, the windfall, itself an unexpected blessing for the protagonists, in fact marks the onset of their downfall. As the action shrugs off its international glamour, the characters shed their formality and lay bare their humanity. The war, won without fighting, changes its battlefield from outside to inside, and the tempest, well weathered in nature, is about to howl soon again, this time, in the soul of the hero.

Upon landing in Cyprus and being reunited with Desdemona after a dangerous voyage, Othello cannot suppress an impulsive rise of passion and exultation:

> O my soul's joy,
> If after every tempest come such calmness,
> May the winds blow, till they have waken'd death,
> And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas,
> Olympus-high, and duck again as low
> As hell's from heaven. If it were now to die,
> 'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear
> My soul hath her content so absolute,
> That no another comfort, like to this
> Succeeds in unknown fate. (II. 1. 185–94)

The tragedy begins to assume its macabre shape and play its morbid tone as the hero's wishes and premonitions come true by degrees. As if to recant his own words of ominous note, Othello holds his wife in

[1] James P. Driscoll, *Identity in Shakespearean Drama* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983), says, " The change in Othello's conscious identity commences as he begins to see himself, his race, origin, and age through his tempter's eyes " (p. 73).

his arms and kisses her. It is worth observing that this is the first time that they embrace on the stage: a comparison of the scene with the occasion of their second embrace will later illuminate the tragical passage of their love.

While Othello basks in the felicity of a happy marriage, Act II reveals an erosion of his selfhood in the company of Desdemona. In the first place, their identities begin to be merged into an interesting, or rather, queer oneness: or it may be more appropriate to say that the hero's seemingly steadfast identity as a soldier is, at the height of his life and career, psychologically invaded and conquered by Desdemona. His soldiers now call her their " great captain's captain " (II. 1. 74) and say, " Our general's wife is now the general " (II. 3. 305). Othello himself addresses her in public as " O my fair warrior " (II. 1. 182). It must be born in mind, as Rosalie Colie observes,[1] that love, a selfless act of devotion and commitment, can at the same time be a battle between the sexes for unconscious domination and possession. The exchange of roles between the protagonists could be traced back as early as the inception of their love, as is hinted in Othello's

> She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd,
> And I lov'd her that she did pity them. (I. 3. 167–8)

Othello, till he met Desdemona, had fastidiously and almost intuitively fortified his soul against intrusion of any alien elements. His preference for an unbounded life style is evinced unequivocally in

> But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
> I would not my unhoused free condition
> Put into circumscription and confine
> For the sea's worth. (I. 2. 25–8)

But now he savours a taste of sensuous defeat and surrender with gusto. Othello the public figure is transformed into Othello the private man, and it is exactly in the domestic aspect of life that he is most defenseless and least immune against attacks. This specific transition, or process of privatization, can be construed as a further sign of unity and harmony between the couple, but it also implies that his innermost part is undergoing a kind of dissolution and that he is being stripped

[1] Rosalie L. Colie, ibid., p. 151.

of his prominant soldiership.[1] His error, if it is error at all, is not his psychological submission to love and domestic pleasures but his failure to notice it. Here is another case of theft and loss, a very grievous one, which promises to lead to further deprivation and disintegration.

The early symptom of Othello's inner collapse develops into a settled condition in Act III as he falls a prey to Iago's snare of jealousy. While Desdemona puts the mirror of true reflection up to him, Iago sets up before him the mirror of a deformed image twisted and warped to the breaking point. Othello, who possesses a colossal ego yet lacks profound self-knowledge, is in no position to objectify himself and to repel false images of himself offered by the flatterer. In addition, Iago's shrewdness sniffs his vulnerability at the moment of his inner transition. The concoction of these factors produces a magical effect, under whose influence the hero can do nothing but follow his tempter meekly. Once tricked into Iago's machinations, Othello becomes his carbon copy, mimicking him both in word and in deed. Darkness thickens around him literally and figuratively as Iago embarks on an all-out frontal attack on him. To begin with, the celebration of his nuptials fizzles out into the night of disorder and into his own portentous "Are we turn'd *Turk*?" (II. 3. 161). Iago's manifesto of knavery, "Divinity of *hell*!" (341), takes the lead in playing an eerie duet of darkness with Othello's "*Death* and *damnation*" (III. 3. 402), "I am *black*" (267), "My name . . . is *begrim'd*, and *black* / As mine own face" (392–4) and "Arise, *black* vengeance" (454). Only in the wake of the Temptation scene does Othello begin to gain a deeper tinge, both within and without. His appearance and identity converge in a dire blackness for the first time in the play: "I here look *grim* as hell" (IV. 2. 65). Othello, dragged into Iago's private world of grotesque murkiness and callousness, now looms himself like a black depraved monster hungry for a victim and furious at his own being.

Under the creeping siege of darkness, Othello's soldiership, already enfeebled in the subconscious battle of love, crumbles down without much resistance. Muddled helplessly by Iago's malevolent innuendos and implications, the hero slips into despair and jumps at the hasty

[1] Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeare's Soliloquies* (London: Methuen, 1987), notices the acute and radical change of Othello's personality (p. 166).

conclusion that Desdemona, the most significant part of his life now, is lost, that the means by which he feels himself secure and content is gone. The following words are a painful outburst of his lost self and maimed ego, which shakes his identity, his existence itself, at its foundation:

> O now for ever
> Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content:
> Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars,
> That makes ambition virtue: O farewell,
> Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,
> The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife;
> The royal banner, and all quality,
> Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
> And, O ye mortal engines, whose wide throats
> The immortal Jove's great clamour counterfeit;
> Farewell, Othello's occupation's gone! (III. 3. 353–63)

His days of adventure and glory are over; and what is thought to be the secure foothold of his private life turns into a torture rack. Prior to the emergence of any tangible enemy, Othello is already vanquished inwardly and disqualified as a warrior. Coincidental with his declaration of defeat is Desdemona's psychological disrobing of her borrowed soldiership: " . . . I was unhandsome *warrior* as I am / Arraigning his unkindness with my soul " (III. 4. 149–50).

Othello's crisis of identity becomes palpable when ' seeming ' ceases to be synonymous with ' being '. As a man of action and not of introspection, he entertains the simple, one-dimensional notion that appearance should faithfully reflect substance, as is exemplified in his " Certain, men should be what they seem " (III. 3. 132) and " He's that he is " (IV. 1. 266).[1] To Iago, he is no more than a simpleton who " thinks men honest that but seems to be so " (I. 3. 398). Naturally, his monolithic view of man and the world fails to see better than Iago's more complicated vision. The latter immerses himself in a dualistic system of value in which he handles opposite views with a diabolical dexterity. He asserts on one occasion, " I am not what I

[1] Reuben Brower, *Hero and Saint: Shakespeare and Graeco-Roman Heroic Tradition* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1971), regards Othello as " a man of either-or propositions, of simple absolutes simply contrasted " (p. 9).

am" (I. 1. 65), and coolly mentions on another, "Men should be that they seem, / Or those that be not, would they might seem none!" (III. 3. 130–1). Again, he maintains the first of the following two quotations to Cassio and the second to Othello:

> Reputation is an idle and most
> false imposition, oft got without merit, and lost without deserving
> (II. 3. 260–2);
>
> Good name in man and woman's dear, my lord;
> Is the immediate jewel of our souls (III. 3. 159–60).

The perverted logic underlying Iago's schizophrenic, egocentric behaviour finds expression in his own "In following him, I follow but myself" (I. 1. 58), while Othello is upset easily by the slightest deviation from what he is: "O, hardness to dissemble!" (III. 4. 30).[1]

Iago's expertise in dualistic manipulation leads Othello to mistake vagueness for depth, tirade for eloquence and inconsistency for insightfulness and eventually engulfs him in the vicious circle of trust and doubt, of assurance and anxiety:

> But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
> Who dotes, yet yields, suspects, yet strongly loves!
> (III. 3. 171–4)
>
> I think my wife be honest, and think she is not,
> I think that thou art just, and think thou art not.
> (III. 3. 389–91)

Othello remains enslaved to Iago's evil power as long as the pendulum of his ambivalence keeps on swinging between the polarities of his love and hate for Desdemona. His dilemma reaches its apex with the illogicality of his act of justice, with the ultimate absurdity of his love oriented for destruction, as Desdemona points out in the clutches of violence: "That death's unnatural, that kills for loving" (V. 2. 42). Meanwhile, Iago, the skilled practitioner of the distribution of self-loss,

[1] On Desdemona's "I do beguile / The thing I am, by seeming otherwise" (II. 1. 122–3), Philip McGuire (op. cit.) observes that "Her remark points toward the fundamental circumstance within which Iago schemes to destroy Othello—the deliberate disjunction of action and feeling" (p. 201).

never realizes that he himself is also a victim of an identity crisis.[1] His morbid jealousy urges him to become someone else, to usurp someone's identity: " Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago " (I. 1. 57). His discontent with his own self and the way the world goes against his will sets him off in pursuit of what he covets most at the moment, namely the recognized status of Cassio and Othello.[2] Though well learned and well versed in human observation, Iago never attains the ability to see himself in the light of reality and strives to delude himself with an impossible undertaking that is likely to backfire at the cul de sac of identity.

IV

Othello's suffering does not end in a ravaged self and a virtually broken marriage. Deprivation down to stark bareness still awaits him. At stake after his renunciation of soldiership and love is his 'humanity'. Cassio has already set a precedent for treading the downward path to bestiality: " . . . to be now a sensible man, by and by a fool, and presently a beast! " (II. 3. 296–7). The aberrance of the hero's mentality makes its way quickly into his diction and behaviour. Othello's parlance is originally noted for its brisk military rhythm although Iago depicts it disdainfully as " Horribly stuff'd with epithets of war " (I. 1. 14).[3] But it is now replaced by an appalling abuse of

[1] Alex Aronson, *Psyche and Symbol in Shakespeare* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1972), sees Iago as the shadow of Othello's unconscious and " the ultimate embodiment of Shakespeare's tragic vision of a singularly repulsive form of trans-personal evil " (p. 113).

[2] Kenneth Muir, " Introduction " to his Penguin edition of *Othello* (1968; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), claims that Iago " is, perhaps unconsciously, identifying himself with the supposedly amorous Cassio " (p. 18).

[3] Under the name of 'Othello music', G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel Of Fire* (1930; rpt. London: Methuen, 1972), defines the hero's speech as " high-coloured, rich in sound and phrase, stately " (p. 104). For analysis of the play's linguistic aspects, see Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and what it tells us* (1935; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1971), pp. 335–8, Wolfgang Clemen, *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery* (1951; rpt. London: Methuen, 1966), pp. 119–32, Mikhail M. Morozof, " The Individuation of Shakespeare's Characters through Imagery ", in *Shakespeare Survey*, 2 (1949), pp. 83–106, S. L. Bethell, " The Diabolical Images in *Othello* ", in *Shakespeare Survey*, 5 (1952), pp. 62–80, and Kenneth Palmer, " Iago's Questionable Shapes ", in *Fanned and Winnowed Opinions* edited by J. W. Mahon and T. A. Pendleton (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 184–201. Morozof and Bethell are reprinted in Kenneth Muir and Philip Edwards eds. *Aspects of " Othello "* (1977; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1981)), pp. 21–28 and pp. 29–47 respectively.

swearing terms copious with the names of animals: "Exchange me for a *goat*" (III. 3. 184), "a *toad*" (274), "a *dog*" (368), "the *raven*" (IV. 1. 20), "that *dog*" (140), "a *crocodile*" (241), "*Goats* and *monkeys*!" (259), etc. Accompanied by these dubious and filthy animals, Othello descends into the state of dehumanization and beastliness prepared by Iago, who has pledged at the outset to lead him by the nose like 'an ass' (I. 3. 400). Possibly, Othello's farewell to humanity is wound up when he falls in a coma at Iago's persistent agitation. For, as he regains his senses, he can scarcely be called human, let alone lover and soldier, having been robbed of everything that guarantees man to be man. Iago secretly tastes a moment of triumph by taunting the hero with his radical transformation:

> Iago: Would you would bear your fortune like a man!
> Oth: A horned man's a monster, and a beast (IV. 1. 61–2);
>
> Iago: Or I shall say you are all in all in spleen,
> And nothing of a man (IV. 1. 88–9).

That "noble nature" (IV. 1. 261) in Venice is now reduced to a mere beast roaring and wandering aimlessly in the wasteland of his own folly and gullibility.

The night falls, encasing Othello and Desdemona in the chamber of doom and gloom. Othello's sudden change confuses Desdemona and even leaves her unable to recognize him. The two souls, clasped so tight till recently, now drift apart and lose sight of each other:

> My lord is not my lord, nor should I know him,
> Were he in favour as in humour alter'd. (III. 4. 121–2)

Desdemona's perplexity is echoed by Lodovico's dismay in "Is this the noble Moor?" (IV. 1. 260). Now the hero and heroine peer into each other's heart in the hope of finding the heat and flame of their initial passion; but, alas, all they can see in each other is a stranger staring back from beyond the range of recognition:

> Des: What is your pleasure?
> Oth: Let me see your eyes, . . .
> Look in my face.
> Des: What horrible fancy's this? (IV. 2. 25–6)
>
> Des: Upon my knees, what does your speech import?

I understand a fury in your words,
But not the words.
Oth: Why, what art thou? (IV. 2. 31–4)

The dialogue between the couple can no longer be termed 'communication': it is an 'interrogation' consisting of questions, cross-examinations and reproaches. Othello's enquiry of identity, made in its simplest and most straightforward form in his line quoted above, receives answers on two incompatible planes which underscore the psychological distance between them:

Des: Your wife, my lord, your true and royal wife. (IV. 2. 35)
Oth: I took you for that cunning whore of Venice,
That married with Othello. (IV. 2. 91–2)

The unbearable and unutterable name Othello has given to Desdemona —"Such as she says my lord did say I was" (IV. 2. 121)—shatters her pride and hope. The shock devastates her sense of reality and puts her in a state of trauma, from which she never recovers completely:

Emi: Good madam, what's the matter with my lord?
Des: With who?
Emi: Why, with my lord, madam.
Des: Who is thy lord?
Emi: He that is yours, sweet lady.
Des: I ha' none, do not talk to me, Emilia. (IV. 2. 100–4)

Desdemona, who has enjoyed perfect compatibility with Othello, is compelled to share his languishes in her own way.

A new horizen opens over Othello's identity in the denouement—a vital phase of characterization which aims at uplifting him from a "murderous coxcomb" (V. 2. 234) to "An honourable murderer" (295). In the mayhem of the killing scene, Desdemona's pathetic cry for mercy, "O Lord, Lord, Lord!" (85), fades into Emilia's frantic shout, "My lord, my lord! what ho, my lord, my lord!" (86). The discordant chorus of the two desperate women produces a curious aural effect which proves to overlap Othello's grisly figure with the sacred image of God. This theatrical image-making is further reinforced without delay by the word 'merciful' in Othello's "I that am cruel, am yet merciful" (V. 2. 88). The impression that the hero is engaged

in the act of gross self-dramatization by 'cheering himself up[1]' may be evoked by moralizing too much on his actual words and deeds without taking into account what he really is in dramatic terms. It is true that the hero looks ridiculous and even awkward here, but that is because his still deranged reasoning falsely persuades him that he is executing justice in the place of God, and also because he is wading through another (and a more drastic) stage of transformation from a fallen hero to a reclaimed one. In the theatre, contrary to the interpretations of T. S. Eliot and his followers, the massive gap between Othello's self-image and the plot's shaping of him will contribute to eliciting intense sympathy from the audience. While placed farthest from mercy in his act, Othello, whose sorrow is even "heavenly" (V. 2. 21), is in fact bringing himself to the threshold of dramatic redemption in the realm of imagination. But he is still forced to sink to the nadir of his destiny before a beam of mercy actually streaks into his despair:

> My wife, my wife, my wife; I ha' no wife;
> O, insupportable! O heavy hour!
> Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
> Of sun and moon, and that the afflicted globe
> Should yawn at alteration. (V. 2. 98–102)

Indeed "Chaos is come again" (III. 3. 93) in Othello's private world, which is now bereft of its "flaming minister" (V. 2. 8) and encompassed in total darkness and isolation.

The disclosure of Iago's plot wakes up the hero from his nagging nightmares. His instant wrath at the perpetrator of his quandaries soon directs its fury back to him and burns itself out. The war that has been waged inside him is done; and the tempest raging in his soul has subsided. To Lodovico's call, "Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?" (V. 2. 284), Othello answers by identifying himself with his former self: "That's he that was Othello; here I am" (285). The past and present meet again in him, with the future soon to take shape beyond them. Out of the smoldering embers of defeat and disgrace

[1] Cf. T. S. Eliot, "Stoicism of Seneca", in *Selected Essays* (1932; rpt. London: Faber & Faber, 1972), p. 130. See also F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), p. 141, and Derek Traversi, *An Approach To Shakespeare II: "Troilus And Cressida" To "Tempest"* (1938; rpt. London: Hollis & Carter, 1978), p. 101.

re-emerges the epitome of honour. Othello's rearming betokens restoration of his lost status as a soldier.[1] The old familiar tone and bearing are regained over the body of Desdemona:

> . . . then must you speak
> Of one that love'd not wisely, but too well:
> Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
> Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,
> Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
> Richer than all his tribe: of one whose subdued eyes,
> Albeit unused to the melting mood,
> Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
> Their medicinal gum; set you down this,
> And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and turban'd Turk
> Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,
> I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
> And smote him thus. (V. 2. 344–57)

The pronounced ambience of exoticism recalls the wonderous tales the hero once told to Desdemona and serves to bring the couple together again. The 'Aleppo' episode sets the hero back in his former role as a defender of Venice. When he stabs himself while narrating his slaying of a Turk, he intends primarily to punish himself for his murder of the innocent Desdemona and secondly to eradicate from himself unwholesome elements, which are embodied in the play by the Turk and Iago; in other words, Othello intends to kill the 'Iago' in himself after the manner that he once killed a Turk. The Turk-Iago link is reconfirmed by the canine metaphor of 'circumcised dog' and "Spartan dog" (362).[2] In dramatic terms, justice is subtly but decisively executed on the head of Iago through the vicarious physical punish-

[1] The last scene of the tragedy, particularly the last public speech of the hero, attracts critical attention: John Holloway, *The Story of The Night: Studies in Shakespeare's Major Tragedies* (1961; rpt. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), terms it "a conventional genre" (p. 55) for summing up; Reuben Brower (ibid.) detects in it Othello's "new self-knowledge" (p. 25).

[2] Compare my interpretation with that of John Holloway (ibid.), who mentions that "the Turk, chief enemy of Venice, and the Moor, have become one. The 'circumcised dog' is himself. For what has Othello done in the case of Desdemona, daughter of a Senator, but 'beat a Venetian and traduce the state'?" (p. 56).

ment of Othello. The villain's self-imposed silence in

> Demand me nothing, what you know, you know,
> From this time forth, I nver will speak word (V. 2. 304–5)

signifies that he has become a dramatic non-entity without any voice and any identity: hence his name is replaced mostly by various epithets of subhuman connotation such as " this damned villain " (317), " the pernicious caitiff! " (319), " this slave " (333), " Spartan dog " (362) and " this hellish villain " (369).[1] The roles are totally exchanged between the hero in the first scene and Iago in the last scene. Now independent of this fiendish pilot for his voyage of life, Othello is prepared to head for the unknown country with an awakened understanding of himself and of Desdemona's love.

The dismal night is almost over: the day is dawning with a fresh scent of morning as if freeing itself from the thrall of darkness. Othello kisses the dead Desdemona with his dying breath, saying,

> I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee, no way but this,
> Killing myself, to die upon a kiss. (V. 2. 359–60)

Their embrace of death paradoxically envisions their days of life filled with love and harmony, specifically drawn in Act II. Scene 1, where their first embrace was presented on the stage.[2] The visual aspect of drama, in league with the oral one exemplified in the 'Aleppo' recollections, connects the separate scenes and actions in a cyclical sequence which denotes the passage of the love between Othello and Desdemona. Truly, Desdemona's love is installed back in its initial, or a much securer, position after having fulfilled its roles, which deserve to be called 'humanistic' in view of what the hero has achieved at his journey's end: her love first opened his eye to the diversity and productiveness of life by divesting him of his rigid military uniform; then it defied and survived all the earthly interventions and attacks; consequently it has enlightened Othello on who he really is through its consistency and strength. From Othello's point of view, it might be said that his life is not wisely spent, but well lost, in that his death not only buys back

[1] Iago's silence is called " enigmatic " by Traversi (ibid., p. 121).

[2] W. Clemen (*Shakespeare's Soliloquies*) says, " The audience are reminded of the first kiss that the lovers exchanged " (p. 167).

what he has lost so far—soldiership, humanity, love and total identity —but also procures him a new insight into the meaning of life, a kind of anagnorisis. The play's ending with an announcement of immediate sailing is a reminder of its essential dramatic structure in which the action retains constant geographical mobility. Now the anticipation mounts that there might be yet another voyage, a metaphysical one, for the hero and heroine. After the merciless trial of love in this world, Othello and Desdemona are bound to set out for the placid seashore of everlasting union.[1]

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[1] Helen Gardner, "*Othello:* A Retrospect, 1900–67", in *Shakespeare Survey*, 21 (1968, pp. 1–11), asserts that "in the last speech this sense of separation is lost in the final sense of union, typified by Othello's last words: 'a kiss'" (p. 6).