

19. *The Critical Voices*

– *Are you planning to lead us through all your essays in such a way that, instead of getting scholarship, we get nothing more than ruminations?*

It seems to me I'm long past the point I need to justify letting my thoughts range outside this thing called scholarship. This strict but not so strict as it thinks itself practise.

– *Good Lord, what does he mean?*

– *What does he mean?*

Still with the tragically heroic, I will bring up the matter of *Othello* and try to give some idea of not only my resistance to scholarly consensus but to something that might be called the combined weight of it and an exalted presence.

In the classroom circumstances that were mine some twenty-seven years ago, the latter was no less than Shakespeare. It was in a course that I took the same year as Dr. Gold's "Ancient Epic and Drama." *Hamlet, King Lear, Coriolanus, Romeo and Juliet, Measure for Measure, Twelfth Night, Henry IV, Part I, Henry V, The Merchant of Venice* – not one of these did I think was shorn of this exalted presence. But Shakespeare, the greatest dramatist of all time, had also written *Othello*, a play normally grouped with *King Lear, Hamlet, and Macbeth* as the greatest of his tragedies. Having never read *Othello* before this course, I had no reason not to think I would be swept up by it as much as by the other plays.

"The Reductional Factor on the Status of Othello as Tragic Hero"

"This factor is quite simply the lessening of the reader's ability as he moves through the play to sustain the belief that the hero's downfall proceeds naturally from forces therein. The high degree of contrivance shown by the frequent and prolonged misunderstandings between the characters, the acts and omissions not thoroughly characteristic of them, and especially the wholly one-sided workings of chance – all these have a cumulative effect and impinge upon one's mind to the extent that the playwright's manipulation of character, plot, and circumstance becomes in and of itself a felt presence. It is in this sense that Othello becomes the victim of the playwright. The weakening of the dramatic illusion surrounding Othello's victimization by Iago as well as his transformation into a jealous monster, his consequent suffering, and his final redemption – this weakening impairs the reader's emotional involvement with him. A loss of belief in Othello's suffering and

tragedy resulting from a loss of belief in the reasons for them must entail a corresponding loss of sympathy for the hero."

From my present standpoint, what is most important to me are not my views on *Othello* but a kind of unspoken law that always abided in me and prevented me from bypassing anything in my studies that caused me discomfort. In the case of this play, it was the feeling that the tragedy of the hero was being foisted on me, that his high-mindedness was being brought down to an unusual low-mindedness and then brought back to the former state only by artful ruses that surpassed even what an Iago was capable of. Of course I knew *Othello* was a highly successful stage play and, although I hadn't seen a performance of it, I even ventured to think it might have been successful with me. But I was also willing to think that, had this occurred, it would have been due to some dramatic sleight of hand, some suspension of disbelief brought on by an over-fascination with the arch-villain, Iago, and his boundless verve and craftiness in playing the spider to Othello's fly.

Perhaps my protest in its most elementary form was that the scholarly agents and mouthpieces of Shakespeare were making *Othello* out to be a better tragedy than *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Richard III*, and *Coriolanus*. Perhaps I was encouraged in this view by the fact that I found few scholars who protested its improbable elements and the large role that chance played in shaping it into a tragedy rather than, had Iago finally been tripped up and hoisted with his own petard (had he not been blessed with phenomenal luck, in other words), the melodrama it would have been. In any event, I put myself in the role of the boy who cries the emperor has no clothes and systematically attacked it.

"Besides being an ingenious schemer and dissembler, Iago has, paradoxically enough, a widespread reputation for honesty. Since everyone accepts his observations and suggestions without questioning their truth or validity, he can freely go about manipulating all whom he catches up in his web. In addition, the human material he has to work with is excellently designed for this purpose. Everyone responds exactly as he determines they should and, when he is not around to be on top of the situation, exactly as he would *desire* they should. Roderigo is the easiest led or misled of Iago's dupes and this quality, along with the interest which he shares with Iago in the downfall of Cassio and Othello, makes him Iago's ideal stooge. Even so, it is very fortunate for Iago that Roderigo's ability to reason and think independently are so limited that he gives way to his mentor even when he has good reason not to. (This happens on at least three occasions.) Othello's free and open nature, his passionate temperament, his blackness, and his uneasiness

with Venetian customs are precisely the traits Iago counts on to help him foster in his victim the belief that his wife is unfaithful. Cassio's quickness of temper, low tolerance for alcohol, and violent reaction to any affront are tailor-made to involve him in a brawl that is crucial for what follows later. Furthermore, his charming way with women is the very thing to make Othello suspect him on the basis of minimal evidence. Emilia's fearful obedience to her husband Iago is a prerequisite for her show of silence over the missing handkerchief that is, along with so much else in the play, crucial to the success of Iago's plot. Desdemona becomes the sacrificial pawn in Iago's game to destroy her husband by virtue of being the loving, obedient, faithful, and unassuming wife.

"The plot to cashier Cassio, although Iago has no way of knowing where exactly it will lead to at the time he conceives it, is vital to his larger plot to poison Othello with jealousy. The discrediting of Cassio as a trustworthy officer paves the way for Othello's suspecting him of having an affair with his wife. It also leads Cassio, the dismissed lieutenant, to become a solicitor for his reinstatement by seeking an audience with Desdemona. By arranging it so that Othello can witness the scene of them conferring together, Iago supplies Othello with the 'hard evidence' that has the effect of supporting all his later inferences and innuendoes.

"Iago takes on a considerable number of risks when he executes his plot. So many in fact that if he failed in any one of them, he would surely be considered a fool for having cooked up this scheme. There are uncontrollable factors – unknown variables at play in all human affairs – that he does not seem to acknowledge before he sets out to destroy Othello. If the plot against the latter is to succeed, all events must tightly follow one another and simulate the systematic tumbling of a set of dominoes. Cassio must react to Roderigo's taunts and insults in a very precise way, that is, by immediately attacking him. Similarly Montano must intervene in this quarrel and antagonize Cassio even further. Cassio in turn must react to Montano's intervention by drawing his sword and turning the brawl into a very serious affair. When Othello appears on the scene, Cassio must become silent as the tomb and avoid giving Othello the explanation he demands. Othello must then act with a fair degree of rashness by cashiering Cassio on the spot. Finally, Roderigo must succeed in fleeing the scene rather than be called upon to testify and give an account that quite likely would have undone Iago.

"As in the case of the plot against Cassio, Iago succeeds in making everybody do exactly as he would like them to do. After he has convinced

Cassio that he should have Desdemona plead to Othello for his reinstatement, the cashiered lieutenant learns from Iago's wife, Emilia, that Othello has already told Desdemona that he will be reinstated. This news does not content Cassio, however, and so he proceeds to an audience with Desdemona in the hope that she will do all she can for him. Iago's plot thus escapes a mortal blow to it that would have resulted had no meeting between these two characters taken place. The success of it now depends on what comes out of this meeting. If Iago is to make it look like a lovers' rendez-vous, he must of course be provided with the means to fuel Othello's jealousy. And just as luck would have it, Cassio beats a hasty retreat when Othello appears on the scene. Iago is then able to capitalize on this and begin a series of innuendoes meant to arouse Othello's suspicions. The next thing that happens is that Desdemona begins to plea on Cassio's behalf. Of course the timing is perfect as well as the degree of ardour with which she goes about it. Finally, by referring to Cassio's intimate role as go-between in their courtship days, Desdemona unwittingly provides Iago with further ammunition to raise doubts and suspicions in Othello's mind.

"Then there is the whole handkerchief episode. Othello believes that there is magic in the web of it and, indeed, a reader might very well concur in this (albeit not for superstitious reasons). Desdemona first drops the handkerchief and, instead of retrieving it, follows Othello's instruction, even though it is a prized love token from him, to let it lie where it is. Thereupon Emilia finds it and, instead of returning it to Desdemona, gives it to her husband. Iago then deposits it in Cassio's bedchamber and Cassio, instead of looking for its owner, gives it to his whore, Bianca. The latter ends up flinging it in his face at the very moment Othello is hiding and watching a scene where he believes Cassio is talking about his love for Desdemona. Then Othello confronts his wife over the missing and much-travelled handkerchief and, as it happens, receives a careless lie from her that confirms her guilt in his eyes. And neither one of them at any time remembers the circumstances under which the handkerchief first went astray.

"The question as to whether Othello is the sort of man who would end up killing his wife out of jealousy is central to his status as a tragic hero. After all, he is spoken of as the noble Moor whom passion could not shake and 'whose solid virtue the shot of accident nor dart of chance could pierce.' Predisposition to jealousy not being in Othello's nature, his conversion into that state on the basis of circumstantial evidence, an incessant flood of innuendoes, and as a passion that goes all the way to being murderous can only come across as being somewhat forced.

“Other of Othello’s actions do not mark him as the man whom reputation calls brave and noble, or whose self-control, restrained defiance, and cool and clear-headed reasoning dwell deep within him. To be sure, there is a fine example of these reputed qualities in the beginning when he is able to pacify an outraged mob led by Desdemona’s father and bearing down on him with weapons drawn. But in contrast to this we have later scenes where he seems neither self-restrained nor noble. One of these is when he cashier his trusted lieutenant, Cassio, without giving him the benefit of a fair hearing. The other is when he enlists Iago’s help to avenge himself on Cassio.

“At times the behaviour of some of the other characters shifts radically or else does not conform to how they are presented in the main. Cassio is given to be basically noble in nature but he is also one who cannot hold his liquor, who flies out of control whenever someone insults him, who uses a proxy (i.e., Desdemona) in order to return to the world’s favour, and who speaks disparagingly about the woman who loves him (i.e., Bianca). Emilia is one who, in one instance, remains silent when she has important information that could be divulged to good purpose and who, in another, refuses to hold her tongue even when a sword is drawn against her.

“There are a number of interactions in the play which contribute to Desdemona’s untimely death and which all involve one person misunderstanding or misinterpreting another. The most blatant of these is that staged by Iago wherein he and Cassio discuss Bianca’s love for the lieutenant. It is here that Cassio cooperates most obligingly in Iago’s ruse by speaking disparagingly of Bianca while Othello overhears all this and assumes that Cassio is speaking about Desdemona. A second example is the conversation between Othello and Desdemona leading up to her death. In this instance Othello interprets all that Desdemona says as evidence of her guilt. On the other hand, Desdemona interprets everything Othello says as evidence that his changed attitude towards her is simply a result of his being overwrought with cares of state. During this episode, the attempt by Desdemona to have Cassio immediately reinstated as lieutenant becomes for Othello a clear sign that she is in love with him. When she rejoices at the news that they are to return to Venice and Cassio is to take Othello’s place in Cyprus, he interprets this as being her happiness over Cassio’s promotion rather than the prospect of living happily with him in her home country. And then finally, at the end of the play, when Desdemona utters the heartfelt words ‘Alas, he is betray’d, and I undone,’ Othello takes Desdemona to be referring to Cassio and so finds a final reason to condemn her.

“While Othello misunderstands or misinterprets Desdemona virtually every

time she opens her mouth, Desdemona remains ignorant of his growing jealousy straight up to the time of her death. In spite of his behaviour bearing all the earmarks of an enormous change of attitude with respect to their relationship, she decides that it must be weighty affairs of state which have 'puddled his clear spirit.' Even after he has told her that she is as 'false as hell,' she does not suspect that anything more serious is at stake than his displeasure over being called back to Venice or, more exactly, his wild hunch that her father is behind this official summons. And then even after he has repeatedly called her such vile names as whore and strumpet, she does not take it so amiss that she cannot be consoled by Iago when the latter confirms her view that only great cares of state would cause her husband to act as he does. In their final conversation, Othello tells her to 'bethink [her]self of any crime / Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace.' Desdemona responds, 'Alas, my lord, what do you mean by that?' Surely there is someone here – although the same could be said of Othello – who has never learned to read the language of the heart in the eyes of another."

– *What do you think?*

– *I have no opinion. Leave him to his own devices. Or, rather, let's refrain from being one of his devices.*

– *Quite. But did you notice the lack of references? The lack of any attempt to engage other scholars?*

– *Yes. It's a deficiency that he of course plumes himself with.*

– *It's a form of solipsism, don't you think? Cut yourself off from others. From dialogue. From debate. From disagreement.*

– *And from agreement. The consensus that keeps us all on course.*

– *Of course.*

– *The very centre of discourse and knowledge is consensus. It's the target that we should all aim at. Otherwise there would be chaos. People running off in all directions. Everyone with their own opinion and nothing to keep a debate or controversy on course.*

Honest Iago! It is almost as if one were to go around saying good old Uncle Adolph. Well, even if many did at the time, did all? On what basis does this general consensus arise? Why isn't there one person who holds a contrary

view? Surely he didn't become an arch-villain overnight? And those two reasons he gives – that Othello wronged him by preferring Cassio for the lieutenancy and *possibly* wronged him (for he is not sure about this) by having an affair with Emilia – are we to think that these two reasons are sufficient to turn an essentially good man (for how else could he end up being called honest by everyone?) into a monster?

– *May I put my two cents in?*

– *Who's she?*

– *Someone no doubt meant to help him with his disjointed discourse on literature since we're not impressed by it.*

– *I'm a humble person who may be looked upon in two ways. First as the graduate student who corrected the essay entitled "The Reductional Factor on the Status of Othello as Tragic Hero." Secondly as the representation of the writer's inability to —*

– *What writer?*

– *The present writer. He is conscious of his inability to reproduce here a literary scholar of the first rank.*

– *Yes, that fits exactly.*

– *Of course I'm sensitive to his overall concern for truth or truth-telling but I don't think literature should be judged according to the same criteria that a real-life situation calls for. After all, Shakespeare wrote Othello first and foremost as a play. As a piece of entertainment. As an illusion. This illusion is successful because people at a theatre neither have the time nor inclination to look into every corner. Certainly such elements as character, plot, and antecedent action must have a fair degree of probability if they are supposed to represent our world. On the other hand, the literary or theatrical world, whatever its similarity to ours – and of course I mean real-life – is still never the same as it.*

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