transcending "mine-own-ness," would draw upon it for purposes of poetic persuasion. We have such appeal in mind when speaking of the "topical" element. You can get the point by asking yourself: "So far as catharsis and wonder are concerned, what is gained by the fact that the play imitates *this particular tension* rather than some other?"

In sum, Desdemona, Othello, and Iago are all partners of a single conspiracy. There were the enclosure acts, whereby the common lands were made private; here is the analogue, in the realm of human affinity, an act of spiritual enclosure. And might the final choking be also the ritually displaced effort to close a thoroughfare, as our hero fears lest this virgin soil that he had opened up become a settlement? Love, universal love, having been made private, must henceforth be shared vicariously, as all weep for Othello's loss, which is, roundabout, their own. And Iago is a function of the following embarrassment: Once such privacy has been made the norm, its denial can be but promiscuity. Hence his ruttish imagery, in which he signalizes one aspect of a total fascination.

So there is a whispering. There is something vaguely feared and hated. In itself it is hard to locate, being woven into the very nature of "consciousness"; but by the artifice of Iago it is made local. The tinge of malice vaguely diffused through the texture of events and relationships can here be condensed into a single principle, a devil, giving the audience as it were flesh to sink their claw-thoughts in. Where there is a gloom hanging over, a destiny, each man would conceive of the obstacle in terms of the instruments he already has for removing obstacles, so that a soldier would shoot the danger, a butcher thinks it could be chopped, and a merchant hopes to get rid of it by trading. But in Iago the menace is generalized. (As were you to see man-made law as destiny, and see destiny as a hag, cackling over a brew, causing you by a spell to wither.)

In sum, we have noted two major cathartic functions in Iago: (1) as regards the tension centering particularly in sexual love as property and ennoblement (monogamistic love), since in reviling Iago the audience can forget that his transgressions are theirs; (2) as regards the need of finding a viable localization for uneasiness (*Angst*) in general, whether shaped by superhuman forces or by human forces interpreted as super-human (the scapegoat here being but a highly generalized form of the overinvestment that men may make in specialization). Ideally, in childhood, hating and tearing-at are one; in a directness and simplicity of hatred there may be a ritual cure for the bewilderments of complexity; and Iago may thus serve to give a feeling of integrity.

These functions merge into another, purely technical. For had Iago been one bit less rotten and unsleeping in his proddings, how

could this play have been kept going, and at such a pitch? Until very near the end, when things can seem to move "of themselves" as the author need but actualize the potentialities already massed, Iago has goaded (tortured) the plot forward step by step, for the audience's villainous entertainment and filthy purgation. * * *

* * *

G. K. HUNTER

Othello and Colour Prejudice†

It is generally admitted today that Shakespeare was a practical man of the theatre: however careless he may have been about maintaining consistency for the exact *reader* of his plays, he was not likely to introduce a theatrical novelty which would only puzzle his audience; it does not seem wise, therefore, to dismiss his theatrical innovations as if they were unintentional. The blackness of Othello is a case in point. Shakespeare largely modified the story he took over from Cinthio: he made a tragic hero out of Cinthio's passionate and bloody lover; he gave him a royal origin, a Christian baptism, a romantic *bravura* of manner and, most important of all, an orotund magnificence of diction. Yet, changing all this, he did not change his colour, and so produced a daring theatrical novelty—a black hero for a white community—a novelty which remains too daring for many recent theatrical audiences. Shakespeare cannot merely have carried over the colour of Othello by being too lazy or too uninterested to meddle with it; for no actor, spending the time in 'blacking-up', and hence no producer, could be indifferent to such an innovation, especially in that age, devoted to 'imitation' and hostile to 'originality'. In fact, the repeated references to Othello's colour in the play and the wider net of images of dark and light spread across the diction, show that Shakespeare was not only not unaware of the implication of his hero's colour, but was indeed intensely aware of it as one of the primary factors in his play.[1] I am therefore assuming in this lecture that the blackness of Othello has

† From *Proceedings of the British Academy* 53 (1967): 139–63. © British Academy 1968. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. The author's quotations from *Othello* have been retained, but bracketed references are to this Norton Critical Edition. For stunning visual and textual illustrations, as well as some footnote references omitted from this excerpt, consult the original or the reprint in Hunter's *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1978), 31–59.

1. See R. B. Heilman, 'More Fair than Black; Light and Dark in *Othello*', *Essays in Criticism*, i (1951), 313–35.

a theatrical purpose, and I intend to try to suggest what it was possible for that purpose to have been.

Shakespeare intended his hero to be a black man—that much I take for granted;[2] what is unknown is what the idea of a black man suggested to Shakespeare, and what reaction the appearance of a black man on the stage was calculated to produce. It is fairly certain, however, that some modern reactions are not likely to have been shared by the Elizabethans. The modern theatre-going European intellectual, with a background of cultivated superiority to 'colour problems' in other continents, would often choose to regard Othello as a fellow man and to watch the story—which could so easily be reduced to its headline level: 'sheltered white girl errs: said, "Colour does not matter"'—with a sense of freedom from such prejudices. But this lofty fair-mindedness may be too lofty for Shakespeare's play, and not take the European any nearer the Othello of Shakespeare than the lady from Maryland quoted in the Furness New Variorum edition: 'In studying the play of *Othello*, I have always *imagined* its hero a white man.' Both views, that the colour of Othello does not matter, and that it matters too much to be tolerable, err, I suggest, by over-simplifying. Shakespeare was clearly deliberate in keeping Othello's colour; and it is obvious that he counted on some positive audience reaction to this colour; but it is equally obvious that he did not wish the audience to dismiss Othello as a stereotype nigger.

Modern rationalizations about 'colour' tend to be different from those of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. We are powerfully aware of the relativism of viewpoints; we distinguish easily between different racial cultures; and explicit arguments about the mingling of the races usually begin at the economic and social level and only move to questions of God's providence at the lunatic fringe.

The Elizabethans also had a powerful sense of the economic threat posed by the foreign groups they had daily contact with—Flemings or Frenchmen—but they had little or no continuous contact with 'Moors', and no sense of economic threat from them.[3] This did not mean, however, that they had no racial or colour prejudice. They had, to start with, the basic common man's attitude that all foreigners are curious and inferior—the more curious the more inferior, in the sense of the proverb quoted by Purchas: 'Three Moors to a Portuguese; three Portuguese to an Englishman.'[4] They

2. I ignore the many treatises devoted to proving that he was of tawny or sunburnt colour. These are, however, very worthy of study, as documents of prejudice.
3. See G. K. Hunter, 'Elizabethans and Foreigners', *Shakespeare Survey*, xvii ('Shakespeare in His Own Age') (1964), 37–52. [Rpt. in Hunter's *Dramatic Identities* (see the daggered source note to this essay), 3–30.]
4. See M. P. Tilley, *A Dictionary of Proverbs* (1950), M. 1132.

had also the basic and ancient sense that black is the colour of sin and death, 'the badge of hell, The hue of dungeons, and the Schoole of night' (as Shakespeare himself says).[5] This supposition is found all over the world (even in darkest Africa)[6] from the earliest to the latest times; and in the West there is a continuous and documented tradition of it. It may be worth while giving some account of this. In Greece and Rome black was the colour of ill luck, death, condemnation, malevolence. * * *

The coming of Christianity made no break in the tradition. Indeed, Christian eschatology seems to have taken over the black man from the underworld with great speed and enthusiasm. * * *

The linguistic change from Greek or Latin to English did not free the word *black* from the[se] associations. * * * This is a tradition that Shakespeare picks up in his description of Thomas Mowbray as a Crusader,

> Streaming the ensign of the Christian cross
> Against black pagans, Turks and Saracens.[7]

There was then, it appears, a powerful, widespread, and ancient tradition associating black-faced men with wickedness, and this tradition came right up to Shakespeare's own day. The habit of representing evil men as black-faced or negroid had also established itself in a pictorial tradition that persists from the Middle Ages through and beyond the sixteenth century. This appears especially in works showing the tormentors of Christ, in scenes of the Flagellation and the Mocking, though the tormentors of other saints are liable to have the same external characteristics used to show their evil natures. * * *

* * *

It is suggested by several of the authorities cited here that the pictorial tradition was associated with theatrical usage. Certainly the drama of the Middle Ages seems to have used black figures to represent the evil of this world and the next. Creizenach[8] describes the European diffusion of the black faces. The surviving accounts of the Coventry cycle[9] (which some think Shakespeare may have seen—and which he *could* have seen) retain the distinction between 'white

5. *Love's Labour's Lost*, iv. iii. 254 f.
6. See V. W. Turner, 'Colour Classification in Ndembu Ritual', *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. M. Banton (1966); Arthur Leib, 'The Mystical Significance of Colours in . . . Madagascar', *Folk-lore*, lvii (1946), 128–33; Joan Westcott, 'The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegba, the Yoruba Trickster', *Africa*, xxxii (1962).
7. *Richard II*, iv. i. 94 f.
8. *Geschichte des neueren Dramas*, i (1911), 201. * * *
9. Medieval townspeople performed plays representing events in biblical history, ranging from the fall into original sin to the resurrection of Christ. The cycle performed in Coventry (near where Shakespeare grew up) is one of the better known. [Editor's note]

(or saved) souls' and 'black (or damned) souls' * * * Even in a proverbial title like 'Like will to like quoth the Devil to the Collier' the widespread and universally accepted point is exposed as part of the air that Englishmen of Shakespeare's age breathed. Indeed, as late as Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* (1676) stray reference to the Devil's blackness was supposed to be intelligible to a theatrical audience ('like a devil in a play . . . this darkness . . . conceals her angel's face').[1]

How mindlessly and how totally accepted in this period was the image of the black man as the devil may be seen from the use of 'Moors' or 'Morians' in civic pageants. 'Moors' were an accepted part of the world of pageantry.[2] There were Moors in London Lord Mayor's Pageants in 1519, 1521, 1524, 1536, 1541, 1551, 1589, 1609, 1611, 1624,[3] who seem to have acted as bogey-man figures to clear the way before the main procession. They were sometimes supplied with fireworks for this purpose, and in this function seem to have been fairly indifferent alternatives to green-men, wodewoses,[4] devils. As Withington has remarked,[5] 'it seems obvious that all these figures are connected'; they are connected as frightening marginal comments on the human state—as inhabitants of those peripheral regions in the *mappae mundi* [world maps] where Moors, together with

> Anthropophagi and men whose heads
> Do grow beneath their shoulders, [1.3.144–45]

rubbed shoulders (such as these were) with Satyrs, Hermaphrodites, salvage [i.e., savage] men, and others of the species *semihoma*.* * *

Renaissance scepticism and the voyages of discovery might seem, at first sight, to have destroyed the ignorance on which such thoughtless equations of black men and devils depended. But this does not prove to have been so. The voyagers brought back some accurate reports of black and heathen; but they often saw, or said they saw, what they expected to see—the marvels of the East. In any case the vocabulary at their disposal frustrated any attempt at scientific discrimination. The world was still seen largely, in terms of vocabulary, as a network of religious names. The word 'Moor' had no clear racial status. The first meaning in the *O.E.D.* (with examples up to 1629) is 'Mahomedan'. And very often this means no more than 'infidel', 'non-Christian'. Like *Barbarian* and *Gentile* (or *Wog*) it was a word

1. *The Plain Dealer*, IV. ii.
2. Moors (like dwarfs and fools) were found also in the human menageries that the courts of the Renaissance liked to possess. The Moors at the court of James IV of Scotland appear often in the Treasurer's Accounts. * * *
3. See Malone Society Collections, iii (1945).
4. A wodewose, or woodwose, is "a wild man of the woods; a savage; a satyr, faun" (*O.E.D.*). [Editor's note]
5. R. Withington, *English Pageantry*, i (1918), 74.

for 'people not like us', so signalled by colour. The word *Gentile* itself had still the religious sense of *Pagan*, and the combined phrase 'Moors and Gentiles' is used regularly to represent the religious gamut of non-Christian possibilities (see *O.E.D.* for examples). Similarly, *Barbary* was not simply a place in Africa, but also the unclearly located home of Barbarism, as in Chaucer['s *Canterbury Tales*] (Franklin's Tale, 1451, Man of Law's Tale, 183).

I have suggested elsewhere that the discoveries of the voyagers had little opportunity of scientific or non-theological development.[6] And this was particularly true of the problems raised by the black-skinned races. No scientific explanation of black skins had ever been achieved, though doctors had long disputed it. * * * The theological explanation was left in possession of the field. Adam and Eve, it must be assumed, were white; it follows that the creation of the black races can only be ascribed to some subsequent *fiat*. The two favourite possibilities were the cursing of Cain and the cursing of Ham or Cham and his posterity[7]—and sometimes these two were assumed to be different expressions of the same event; at least one might allege, with Sir Walter Ralegh, that 'the sonnes of Cham did possesse the vices of the sonnes of Cain'.[8] The Cham explanation had the great advantage that 'the threefold world' of tradition could be described in terms of the three sons of Noah—Japhet having produced the Europeans, Shem the Asiatics, while the posterity of Ham occupied Africa, or, in a more sophisticated version, 'the Meridionall or southern partes of the world both in Asia and Africa'—sophisticated, we should notice, without altering the basic theological assumption that Cham's posterity were banished to the most uncomfortable part of the globe, and a foretaste of the Hell to come. * * * When this is linked to the other point made in relation to the Cham story—that his posterity were cursed to be slaves—one can see how conveniently and plausibly such a view fitted the facts and desires found in the early navigators. Azurara, the chronicler of Prince Henry the Navigator's voyages,[9] tells us that it was natural to find blackamoors as the slaves of lighter skinned men:

> these blacks were Moors (i.e. Mahomedans) like the others, though their slaves, in accordance with ancient custom which I believe to have been because of the curse which, after the

6. G. K. Hunter, loc. cit.
7. See Genesis 4 and 9. [Editor's note]
8. *The History of the World*, 1.vi.2 [1614; Raleigh (1552–1618) was a courtier, explorer, poet, and moralist].
9. Prince Henry the Navigator (1394–1460) helped sponsor many voyages of discovery from Europe to Africa, chiefly in search of a route to India. [Editor's note]

> Deluge, Noah laid upon his son Cain [*sic*], cursing him in this way: that his race should be subject to all the other races in the world. And from his race these blacks are descended.[1]

The qualities of the 'Moors' who appear on the Elizabethan stage are hardly at all affected by Elizabethan knowledge of real Moors from real geographical locations, and, given the literary modes available, this is hardly surprising. It is true that the first important Moor-role—that of Muly Hamet in Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (*c.* 1589)—tells the story of a real man (with whom Queen Elizabeth had a treaty) in a real historical situation. But the dramatic focus that Peele manages to give to his Moorish character is largely dependent on the devil and underworld associations he can suggest for him—making him call up 'Fiends, Fairies, hags that fight in beds of steel' and causing him to show more acquaintance with the geography of hell than with that of Africa. Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* is liberated from even such slender ties as associate Muly Hamet with geography. Aaron is in the play as the representative of a world of generalized barbarism, which is Gothic in Tamora and Moorish in Aaron, and unfocused in both. The purpose of the play is served by a general opposition between Roman order and Barbarian disorder. Shakespeare has the doubtful distinction of making explicit here (perhaps for the first time in English literature) the projection of black wickedness in terms of negro sexuality. The relationship between Tamora and Aaron is meant, clearly enough, to shock our normal sensibilities and their black baby is present as an emblem of disorder. In this respect, as in most others, Eleazer in *Lust's Dominion* (*c.* 1600)—the third pre-Othello stage-Moor—is copied from Aaron. The location of this play (Spain) gives a historically plausible excuse to present the devil in his favourite human form—'that of a Negro or Moor', as Reginald Scott[2] tells us—but does not really use the locale to establish any racial points.

These characters provide the dominant images that must have been present in the minds of Shakespeare's original audience when they entered the Globe to see a play called *The Moor of Venice*—an expectation of pagan deviltry set against white Christian civilization—excessive civilization perhaps in Venice, but civilization at least 'like us'. * * * It is in such terms that the play opens. We hear from men like us of a man not like us, of 'his Moorship', 'the Moor', 'the thick-lips', 'and old black ram', 'a Barbary horse', 'the devil', of 'the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor'. The sexual fear and disgust that lies behind so much racial prejudice are exposed for our derisive

1. *Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* (Hakluyt Society, xcv [1896], 54).
2. Author (ca. 1538–1599) of *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), which reflected skeptically on much current belief about demonic forces. [Editor's note]

expectations to fasten upon them. And we are at this point bound to agree with these valuations, for no alternative view is revealed. There is, of course, a certain comic *brio* which helps to distance the whole situation, and neither Brabantio, nor Iago nor Roderigo can wholly command our identification. None the less we are drawn on to await the entry of a traditional Moor figure, the kind of person we came to the theatre expecting to find.

When the second scene begins, however, it is clear that Shakespeare is bent to ends other than the fulfilment of these expectations. The Iago/Roderigo relationship of I. i is repeated in the Iago/Othello relationship of the opening of I. ii; but Othello's response to the real-seeming circumstance with which Iago lards his discourse is very different from the hungrily self-absorbed questionings of Roderigo. Othello draws on an inward certainty about himself, a radiant clarity about his own well-founded moral position. This is no 'lascivious Moor', but a great Christian gentleman, against whom Iago's insinuations break like water against granite. Not only is Othello a Christian, moreover, he is the leader of Christendom in the last and highest sense in which Christendom existed as a viable entity, crusading against the 'black pagans'. He is to defend Cyprus against the Turk, the 'general enemy Ottoman' [1.3.49]. It was the fall of Cyprus which produced the alliance of Lepanto, and we should associate Othello with the emotion that Europe continued to feel—till well after the date of *Othello*—about that victory and about Don John of Austria.[3]

Shakespeare has presented to us a traditional view of what Moors are like, i.e. gross, disgusting, inferior, carrying the symbol of their damnation on their skin; and has caught our over-easy assent to such assumptions in the grip of a guilt which associates us and our assent with the white man representative of such views in the play—Iago. Othello acquires the glamour of an innocent man that *we* have wronged, and an admiration stronger than he could have achieved by virtue plainly represented. * * * Iago is a 'civilized' man; but where, for the 'inferior' Othello, appearance and reality, statement and truth are linked indissolubly, civilization for Iago consists largely of a capacity to manipulate appearances and probabilities:

> For when my outward action doth demonstrate
> The native act and figure of my heart
> In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
> But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
> For daws to peck at: I am not what I am. [1.1.58–62]

3. See G. K. Hunter, loc. cit. [Don John of Austria (1545–1578) led the Venetian and Spanish forces that triumphed at Lepanto. See 153 above.]

Othello may be 'the devil' in appearance: but it is the 'fair' Iago who gives birth to the dark realities of sin and death in the play:

> It is engender'd. Hell and night
> Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light
> [1.3.394–95]

The relationship between these two is developed in terms of appearance and reality. Othello controls the reality of action; Iago the 'appearance' of talk about action; Iago the Italian is isolated (even from his wife), envious, enigmatic (even to himself), self-centered; Othello the 'extravagant and wheeling stranger' is surrounded and protected by a network of duties, obligations, esteems, pious to his father-in-law, deferential to his superiors, kind to his subordinates, loving to his wife. To sum up, assuming that *soul* is reality and *body* is appearance, we may say that Iago is the white man with the black soul while Othello is the black man with the white soul. Long before Blake's little black boy had said

> I am black, but oh my soul is white.
> White as an angel is the English child,
> But I am black as if bereaved of light.

and before Kipling's Gunga Din:

> An' for all 'is dirty 'ide
> 'E was white, clear white inside . . .
> You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din![4]

Othello had represented the guilty awareness of Europe that the 'foreigner type' is only the type we do not know, whose foreignness vanishes when we have better acquaintance. * * *

Othello is then a play which manipulates our sympathies, supposing that we will have brought to the theatre a set of careless assumptions about 'Moors'. It assumes also that we will find it easy to abandon these as the play brings them into focus and identifies them with Iago, draws its elaborate distinction between the external appearance of devilishness and the inner reality.

Shakespeare's playcraft, however, would hardly have been able to superimpose these new valuations on his audience (unique as they were in this form) if it had not been for complicating factors which had begun to affect thought in his day.

The first counter-current I should mention is theological in origin and is found dispersed in several parts of the Bible. It was a fairly important doctrine of the Evangelists that faith could wash away

4. William Blake (1757–1827), poet and artist, included "The Little Black Boy" in his *Songs of Innocence* (1789). Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), poet and novelist, wrote extensively about Anglo-India. [Editor's note]

the stains of sin, and the inheritance of misbelief, that the breach between chosen and non-chosen peoples could be closed by faith. The apostle Philip baptised the Ethiopian eunuch and thereupon, says Bede, the Ethiop changed his skin.[5] * * *

Augustine[6] asks who are meant by the Ethiopians; and answers that all nations are Ethiopians, black in their natural sinfulness; but they may become white in the knowledge of the Lord. *Fuistis enim aliquando tenebrae; nunc autem lux in Domino* (Ephesians 5. 8 ["For ye were sometimes darkness, but now *are ye* light in the Lord," King James Version]). As late as Bishop Joseph Hall, writing one of his *Occasional Meditations* (1630) 'on the sight of a blackamoor', we find the same use of *nigra sum sed speciosa* [I am black only in appearance]:

> This is our colour spiritually; yet the eye of our gracious God and Saviour, can see that beauty in us wherewith he is delighted. The true Moses marries a Blackamoor; Christ, his church. It is not for us to regard the skin, but the soul. If that be innocent, pure, holy, the blots of an outside cannot set us off from the love of him who hath said, *Behold, thou art fair, my Sister, my Spouse*: if that be foul and black, it is not in the power of an angelical brightness of our hide, to make us other than a loathsome eye-sore to the Almighty.

The relevance of this passage to Othello need not be stressed.

* * *

The sense that inferior and black-faced foreigners might in fact be figures from a more innocent world close to Christianity grew apace in the Renaissance as the voyagers gave their accounts, not of highly organized Mahomedan kingdoms, but of simple pagans, timid, naked as their mothers brought them forth, without laws and without arms (as Columbus first saw them and first described them) and perhaps having minds naturally prone to accept Christianity. The old ideals and dreams of travellers, the terrestial paradise, the fountain of youth, the kingdom of Prester John,[7] assumed a new immediacy. And so the old impulse to bring the Evangel to all nations acquired a new primitivist dynamic. * * * Alongside the view that such black pagans could only acquire Christian hope by enslavement grew an alternative vision of their innocence as bringing them near to God, by way

5. See 149 n. 2 above. Bede (672?–725) was a historian, theologian, and author of biblical commentaries. [Editor's note]
6. Saint Augustine (354–430), one of the most prominent of the early Church Fathers, is hugely influential for his autobiographical writing and ecclesiastical history, as well as for his biblical and theological commentaries. [Editor's note]
7. A mysterious king who, in a popular medieval legend, founded a perfect realm thought perhaps to exist somewhere in Africa or Asia. [Editor's note]

of nature. Nowhere was the opposition between these two views more dramatically presented than in the famous debate at Valladolid between Sepulveda and Las Casas.[8] Sepulveda asserted that the American Indians were 'slaves by nature', since their natural inferiority made it impossible for them to achieve the light of the gospel without enslavement.[9] Las Casas, on the other hand, dwelt on the innocence of the Indians, living *secundum naturam*, on their natural capacity for devotion, and on the appalling contrast between the mild and timid Indians and the inhumanity of their 'civilized' or 'Christian' exploiters. Of these two it was of course Las Casas who made the greatest impact in Europe. We should not forget that the Valladolid debate was decided in his favour; but it was not in Spain, but in France and England that primitivism grew most rapidly. * * *

The crown of all such Renaissance primitivism is Montaigne's *Essays*,[1] and especially that on the Cannibals, where the criticism of Spanish Christianity has become a *libertin* critique of modern European civility. Shakespeare, in *The Tempest*, seems to show a knowledge of this essay, and certainly *The Tempest* reveals a searching interest in the status of Western civilization parallel to Montaigne's, and a concern to understand the point of reconciliation between innocence and sophistication, ignorance and knowledge.

Of course, we must not assume that Shakespeare, because he had these concerns in *The Tempest*, must have had them also in *Othello*; but *The Tempest* at one end of his career, like *Titus Andronicus* at the other end, indicates that the polarities of thought on which *Othello* moves (if I am correct) were available to his mind.

I have spoken of 'polarities' in the plural because it is important to notice that Shakespeare does not present his *Othello* story in any simple primitivist terms. *Othello* is not adequately described as the exploitation of a noble savage by a corrupt European.[2] This is an element in the play, * * * but by giving too much importance to this it would be easy to underplay the extent to which Othello becomes what Iago and the society to which *we* belong assumes him to be.

8. Described most fully in English in L. Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians* (1959).
9. See Eric Williams, *Documents of West Indian History* (1963), item 155, discussing the view that a 'negro cannot become a Christian without being a slave'. Cf. the summary of Sepulveda's position in Hanke, op. cit., pp. 44 f. The same views persist today, though with interesting modifications in the vocabulary: 'He (the Negro) requires the constant control of white people to keep him in check. Without the presence of the white police force negroes would turn upon themselves and destroy each other. The white man is the only authority he knows.' (Quoted in E. T. Thompson, *Race Relations* [1939], p. 174.)
1. The *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), much admired for their skeptical detachment and (as we would now say) cultural relativism, are frequently echoed in Shakespeare. [Editor's note]
2. But Iago's Spanish name (and his nautical imagery) may represent Shakespeare's awareness of this potentiality in his play at some level of his consciousness. The relevance of the figure of Saint' Iago Mafamoros (Moor-slayer) has been suggested by G. N. Murphy, 'A Note on Iago's name', *Literature and Society*, ed. B. Slote (1964).

There is considerable strength in the anti-primitivist side of the great Renaissance debate (as that is represented in *Othello*) and this lies in the extent to which the whole social organism pictured is one we recognize as our own, and recognize as necessarily geared to reject 'extravagant and wheeling strangers'. I speak of the social organism here, not in terms of its official existence—its commands, duties, performances; for in these terms Othello's life is well meshed into the state machine:

> My services which I have done the Signiory
> Shall out-tongue his complaints. [1.2.18–19]

I speak rather of the unspoken assumptions and careless prejudices by which we all conduct most of our lives. And it is in these respects that Iago is the master of us all, the snapper-up of every psychological trifle, every unnoticed dropped handkerchief. It is by virtue of such a multitude of our tiny and unnoticed assents that Iago is able to force Othello into the actions he expects of him. Only the hermit can stand outside such social assumptions; but, by marrying, Othello has become part of society in this sense, the natural victim of the man-in-the-know, the man universally thought well of. And Iago's knowingness finds little or no resistance. We all believe the Iagos in our midst; they are, as our vocabulary interestingly insists, the 'realists'.

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', that Desdemona in particular, 'where I have garnered up my heart'

> . . . that was fresh
> As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
> As mine own face. [3.3.387–89] * * *

* * *

The dark reality originating in Iago's soul spreads across the play, blackening whatever it overcomes and making the deeds of Othello at last fit in with the prejudice that his face at first excited. Sometimes it is supposed that this proves the prejudice to have been justified. There is a powerful line of criticism on *Othello*, going back at least as far as A. W. Schlegel,[3] that paints the Moor as a savage at heart, one whose veneer of Christianity and civilization cracks as the play proceeds, to reveal and liberate his basic savagery: Othello turns out to be in fact what barbarians *have* to be.

3. August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Art* (1815), ii. 189.

This view, however comforting to our sense of society and our prejudices, does not find much support in the play itself. The fact that the darkness of 'Hell and night' spreads from Iago and then takes over Othello—this fact at least should prevent us from supposing that the blackness is inherent in Othello's barbarian nature. Othello himself, it is true, loses faith not only in Desdemona but in that fair quality of himself which Desdemona saw and worshipped: ('for she had eyes and chose me' [3.3.191]).

* * * The tragedy becomes, as Helen Gardner has described it, a tragedy of the loss of faith.[4] And, such is the nature of Othello's heroic temperament, the loss of faith means the loss of all meaning and all value, all sense of light:

> I have no wife,
> O insupportable! O heavy hour!
> Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
> Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe
> Should yawn at alteration. [5.2.99–103]

Universal darkness has buried all.

But the end of the play is not simply a collapse of civilization into barbarism, nor a destruction of meaning. Desdemona *was* true, faith *was* justified, the appearance was not the key to the truth. To complete the circle we must accept, finally and above all, that Othello was not the credulous and passionate savage that Iago has tried to make him, but that he was justified in his second, as in his first, self-defence:

> For nought I did in hate, but all in honour. [5.2.300]

The imposition of Iago's vulgar prejudices on Othello ('These Moors are changeable in their wills' [1.3.344]; etc.) is so successful that it takes over not only Othello but almost all the critics. But Iago's suppression of Othello into the vulgar prejudice about him can only be sustained as the truth if we ignore the end of the play. The wonderful recovery here of the sense of ethical meaning in the world, even in the ashes of all that embodied meaning—this requires that we see the final speech of Othello as more than that of a repentant blackamoor 'cheering himself up', as Mr. Eliot phrased it.[5] It is in fact a marvellous *stretto* of all the themes that have sounded throughout the play. I shall only dwell on Othello's self-judgement and self-execution, repeating and reversing the judgement and execution on Desdemona and so, in a sense, cancelling them. Othello is the 'base

4. Helen Gardner, 'The Noble Moor', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, xli (1955).
5. T. S. Eliot, 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', reprinted in *Selected Essays* (1932), p. 130. [See above, p. 270.]

Indian' who threw away the white pearl Desdemona, but he is also the state servant and Christian who, when the Infidel or 'black Pagan' within him seemed to triumph,

> Took by the throat the circumcised dog
> And smote him—thus. [5.2.360–61]

With poetic justice, the Christian reality reasserts its superior position over the pagan appearance, not in terms that can be lived through, but at least in terms that can be understood. We may rejoice even as we sorrow, catharsis is achieved, for

> What may quiet us in a death so noble,[6]

as this in the Aleppo of the mind?

* * *

The domestic intensities of *King Lear* have been seen usefully and interestingly (by Theodore Spencer, for example) in relation to the intellectual history of the Renaissance.[7] The position of the king obviously calls on one set of traditional assumptions, while Edmund's doctrine of nature equally obviously draws on the views of the *libertins*, of Montaigne and Machiavelli.[8] The pressure of these larger formulations may be seen to add to the largeness of scope in the play. *Othello*, on the other hand, is thought not to be a play of this kind. 'The play itself is primarily concerned with the effect of one human being on another',[9] says Spencer. It is true that Iago operates in a less conceptualized situation than Edmund; but the contrast between his world view and that of Othello is closely related to the contrast between Edmund and Lear. On the one side we have the chivalrous world of the Crusader, the effortless superiority of the 'great man', the orotund public voice of the leader, the magnetism of the famous lover. The values of the world of late medieval and Renaissance magnificence seem compressed in Othello—crusader, stoic, traveller, believer, orator, commander, lover—Chaucer's parfit knight, Spenser's Red Cross, the Ruggiero of Ariosto.[1] In Iago we have the other face of the Renaissance (or Counter-Renaissance), rationalist, individual, empirical

6. Hunter quotes John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (published 1671), line 1724. [Editor's note]
7. Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (1943).
8. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), political theorist, historian, and sometime playwright, fascinated (and often repelled) English Renaissance audiences for his supposedly amoral pragmatism. [Editor's note]
9. Spencer, op. cit. (1961 ed.), p. 126.
1. Images of heroic chivalry in, respectively, *The Canterbury Tales* (late 14th century), *The Faerie Queene* (1590), and *Orlando Furioso* (1532). [Editor's note]