

(or inductive), a master in the Machiavellian art of manipulating appearances, a Baconian or Hobbesian 'Realist'?

In the conflict of Othello and Iago we have, as in that setting Edmund, Goneril and Regan against Lear and Gloucester, a collision of these two Renaissance views. Bradley points to a similarity between Lear and Othello, that they are both 'survivors of a heroic age living in a later and smaller world'. Both represent a golden age naively which was disappearing then (as now, and always). Lear's survival is across a temporal gap; his long life has carried him out of one age and stranded him in another. But Othello's travel is geographical rather than temporal, from the heroic simplicities of

I fetch my life and being

From men of royal siege [1.2.21]

into the supersubtle world of Venice, the most sophisticated and 'modern' city on earth, as it seemed to the Elizabethans.

Here, if anywhere, was the scene-setting for no merely domestic intrigue, but for an exercise in the quality of civilization, a contest between the capacities and ideals claimed by Christendom, and those that Christians were actually employing in that context where (as Marlowe says)

... Indian Moors obey their Spanish lords.³

Othello's black skin makes the coexistence of his vulnerable romanticism and epic grandeur with the bleak or even pathological realism of Iago a believable fact. The lines that collide here started thousands of miles apart. But Shakespeare's choice of a black man for his Red Cross Knight, his Rinaldo,⁴ has a further advantage. Our involvement in prejudice gives us a double focus on his reality. We admire him—I fear that one has to be trained as a literary critic to find him unadmirable—but we are aware of the difficulty of sustaining that vision of the golden world of poetry; and this is so because we feel the disproportion and the difficulty of his social life and of his marriage (as a social act). We are aware of the easy responses that Iago can command, not only of people on the stage but also in the audience. The perilous and temporary achievements of heroism are achieved most sharply in this play, because they have to be achieved in *our* minds, through *our* self-awareness.

2. Hunter brings the philosophers Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) into the same orbit of unillusioned free inquiry as Machiavelli and Montaigne earlier. [Editor's note]
3. Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, 1. 1. 122.
4. Protagonist of an early poem by Torquato Tasso (1544–1595), subsequently appearing in Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, translated into English in 1660. [Editor's note]

STANLEY CAVELL

Epistemology and Tragedy: A Reading of *Othello*[†]

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We have known (say since G. Wilson Knight's "The Othello Music" [1930]) that Othello's language, call it his imagination, is at once his and the play's glory, and his shame; the source of his power and of his impotence; or we should have known (since Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*) that Othello is the most romantic of Shakespeare's heroes (see 265 above), which may be a way of summarizing the same facts. And we ought to attend to the perception that Othello is the most Christian of the tragic heroes (expressed in Norman Rabkin's *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* [1967]). Nor is there any longer any argument against our knowledge that Othello is black; and there can be no argument with the fact that he has just married, nor with the description, compared with the case of Shakespeare's other tragedies, that this one is not political but domestic.

We know more specifically, I take it, that Othello's blackness means something. But what specifically does it mean? Mean, I mean, to him—for otherwise it is not Othello's color that we are interested in but some generalized blackness, meaning perhaps "sooty" or "filthy," as elsewhere in the play. This difference may show in the way one takes Desdemona's early statement: "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" [1.3.250]. I think it is commonly felt that she means she overlooked his blackness in favor of his inner brilliance; and perhaps further felt that this is a piece of deception, at least of herself. But what the line more naturally says is that she saw his visage as he sees it, that she understands his blackness as he understands it, as the expression (or in his word, his manifestation) of his mind—which is not overlooking it. Then how does he understand it?

† From *Daedalus* 108.3 (Summer 1979): 35–41. © 1979 by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Reprinted by permission of MIT Press. The author's quotations from *Othello*—from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1952)—have been retained, but bracketed references are to this Norton Critical Edition. Cavell's discussion of the play is situated in a tradition of philosophical reflection about skepticism, extending from Wittgenstein to Descartes, Montaigne, and beyond. For more information, see Cavell's revised version of the essay, "Othello and the Stake of the Other," in his *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 125–42, as well as the introduction to the book, 1–37.

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As the color of a romantic hero. For he, as he was and is, manifested by his parts, his title, and his "perfect soul" [1.2.31], is the hero of the tales of romance he tells, some ones of which he wooed and won Desdemona with, others of which he will die upon. It is accordingly the color of one with enchanted powers and magical protection, but above all it is the color of one of purity, of a perfect soul. Desdemona, in entering his life, hence in entering his story of his life, enters as a fit companion for such a hero; his perfection is now opened toward hers. His absolute stake in his purity, and its confirmation in hers, is shown in what he feels he has lost in losing Desdemona's confirmation:

... My name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face . . .

[3.3.387-89]

Diana's is a name for the visage Desdemona saw to be in Othello's mind. He loses its application to his own name, his charmed self, when he no longer sees his visage in Desdemona's mind but in Iago's, say in the world's capacity for rumor. To say he loses Desdemona's power to confirm his image of himself is to say that he loses his old power of imagination. And this is to say that he loses his grasp of his own nature; he no longer has the same voice in his history. So then the question becomes: How has he come to displace Desdemona's imagination with Iago's? However terrible the exchange, it must be less terrible than some other. Then we need to ask not so much how Iago gained his power as how Desdemona lost hers.

We know, one gathers, that Desdemona has lost her virginity, the protection of Diana, by the time she appears to us. And surely Othello knows this! But this change in her condition, while a big enough fact to hatch millennia of plots, is not what Othello accuses her of. (Though would that accusation have been much more unfair than the unfaithfulness he does accuse her of?) I emphasize that I am assuming that in Othello's mind the theme and condition of virginity carry their full weight within a romantic universe. Here is Northrop Frye, writing on the subject recently: "Deep within the stock convention of virgin-baiting is a vision of human integrity imprisoned in a world it is in but not of, often forced by weakness into all kinds of ruses and stratagems, yet always managing to avoid the one fate which really is worse than death, the annihilation of one's identity. . . . What is symbolized as a virgin is actually a human conviction, however expressed, that there is something at the core of one's infinitely fragile being which is not only immortal but has discovered

the secret of invulnerability that eludes the tragic hero" (*The Secular Scripture* [1976], p. 86).

Now let us consolidate what we know in this sketch so far. We have to think in this play not merely about marriage but about the marriage of a romantic hero and of a Christian man, one whose imagination has to incorporate the idea of two becoming one in marriage and the idea that it is better to marry than to burn. It is a play, though it is thought of as domestic, in which not a marriage but an idea of marriage, or let us say an imagination of marriage, is worked out. "Why did I marry?" is the first question Othello asks himself, to express his first raid of suspicion (3.3.244). The question has never been from his mind. Iago's first set speech ends with something married? [1.2.11] and Othello's first set speech ends with something less than an answer: "But that I love the gentle Desdemona, / I would not my unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine / For the sea's worth" [1.2.25-28]. Love is at most a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for marrying. And for some minds, a certain idea of love may compromise as much as validate the idea of marriage. It may be better, but it is not perfect to marry, as Saint Paul implies (see 155 above).

We have, further, to think in this play not merely generally of marriage but specifically of the wedding night. It is with this that the play opens. The central fact we know is that the whole beginning scene takes place while Othello and Desdemona are in their bridal bed. The simultaneity is marked: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe . . ." [1.1.85-86]. And the scene is one of treachery, alarms, of shouts, of armed men running through a sleeping city. The conjunction of the bridal chamber with a scene of emergency is again insisted on by Othello's reappearance from his bedroom to stop a brawl with his single presence; a reappearance repeated the first night in Cyprus. As though an appearance from his place of sex and dreams is what gives him the power to stop an armed fight with a word and a gesture. Or is this more than we know? Perhaps the conjunction is to imply that their "hour of love" [1.3.296-97], or their two hours, have each time been interrupted. There is reason to believe that the marriage has not been consummated, anyway reason to believe that Othello does not know whether it has. What is Iago's "Are you fast married?" asking? Whether a public, legal ceremony has taken place or whether a private act, or whether the public and the private have ratified one another? Othello answers by speaking of his nobility and his love. But apart from anything else this seems to assume that Iago's "you" was singular, not plural. And what does Othello mean in Cyprus by these apparently public words:

... Come, my dear love,
The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue—
The profit's yet to come 'tween me and you.
[2.3.8-10]

What is the purchase and what the fruits or profit? Othello has just had proclaimed a general celebration at once of the perdition of the Turkish fleet and of his nuptials [2.2]. If the fruits and profit is the resumption of their privacy, then the purchase was the successful discharge of his public office and his entry into Cyprus. But this success was not his doing; it was provided by a tempest. Is the purchase their (public) marriage? Then the fruits and profit is their conjugal love. Then he is saying that this is yet to come. It seems to me possible that the purchase, or price, was her virginity, and the fruits or profit their pleasure. There could hardly be greater emphasis on their having had just one shortened night together, isolated from this second night by a tempest (always in these matters symbolic, perhaps here of a memory, perhaps of an anticipation). Or is it, quite simply, that this is something he wishes to say publicly, whatever the truth between them? (How we imagine Desdemona's reaction to this would then become all important.)

I do not think that we must, or that we can, choose among these possibilities in Othello's mind. Rather, I think Othello cannot choose among them. My guiding hypothesis about the structure of the play is that the thing *denied our sight* throughout the opening scene—the thing, the scene, that Iago takes Othello back to again and again, retouching it for Othello's enchanted imagination—is what we are shown in the final scene, the scene of murder. This becomes our ocular proof of Othello's understanding of his two nights of married love. (It has been felt from Thomas Rymer [see 227 above] to the modern British playwright and critic G. B. Shaw that the play obeys the rhythm of farce, not of tragedy. One might say that in beginning with a sexual scene denied our sight, this play opens exactly as a normal comedy closes, as if it turned comedy inside out.) I will follow out this hypothesis here only to the extent of commenting on that final scene.

However one seeks to interpret the meaning of the great entering speech of the scene ("It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul. . . . Put out the light, and then put out the light" [5.2.1, 7]), I cannot take its mysteries, its privacies, its magniloquence, as separate from some massive denial to which these must be in service. Othello must mean that he is acting impersonally, but the words are those of a man in a trance, in a dream-state, fighting not to awaken; willing for anything but light. By "denial" here I do not initially mean

something requiring psychoanalytical, or any other, theory. I mean merely to ask that we not, conventionally but insufficiently, assume that we know this woman better than this man knows her—making Othello some kind of exotic, gorgeous, superstitious lunkhead, which is about what Iago thinks. However much Othello deserves each of these titles, however far he believes Iago's tidings, he cannot just believe them; somewhere he also *knows* them to be false. This is registered in the rapidity with which he is brought to the truth, with no further real evidence, with only a counter-story (about the handkerchief) that bursts over him, or from him, as the truth. Shall we say he recognizes the truth too late? The fact is, he recognizes it when he is ready to, as one alone can, in this case, when its burden is dead. I am not claiming that he is trying not to believe Iago, or wants not to believe what Iago has told him. (This might describe someone who, say, had a good opinion of Desdemona, not someone whose life is staked upon hers.) I am claiming, on the contrary, that we must understand Othello to be wanting to believe Iago, to be trying, against his knowledge, to believe him. Othello's eager insistence on Iago's honesty, his eager slaking of his thirst for knowledge with but of his devouring need of it. I do not quite say that he could not have accepted slander about Desdemona so quickly, to the quick, unless he already believed it; but rather that it is a thing he would rather believe than something yet more terrible to his mind; that the idea of Desdemona as an adulterous whore is more convenient to him than the idea of her as chaste. But what could be more terrible than Desdemona's faithlessness? Evidently her faithfulness. But how?

Note that in taking Othello's entering speech as part of a ritual of denial, in the context of taking the murder scene as a whole to be a dream-enactment of the invisible opening of the play, we have an answer implied to our original question about this play, concerning Othello's turning of Desdemona to stone. His image denies that he scarred her and shed her blood. It is a denial at once that he has taken her virginity and that she has died of him. The whole scene of murder is built on the concept of sexual intercourse or orgasm as a dying. There is a dangerously explicit quibble to this effect in the exchange,

Oth. Thou art on thy death bed.
Des. Aye, but not yet to die. [5.2.52-53]

The possible quibble only heightens the already heart-breaking poignance of the wish to die in her marriage bed after a long life.

Though Desdemona no more understands Othello's accusation of her than, in his darkness to himself, he does, she obediently shares his sense that this is their final night and that it is to be some dream-like recapitulation of their former two nights. This shows in her premonitions of death (the Willow Song, and the request that one of the wedding sheets be her shroud) and in her mysterious request to Emilia, . . . tonight / Lay on my bed my wedding sheets" [4.2.106-07]; as if knowing, and faithful to, Othello's private dream of her, herself preparing the scene of her death as Othello, utilizing Iago's stage directions, imagines it must happen ("Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated," "Good, good. The justice of it pleases. Very good" [4.1.201-03]; as if knowing that only with these sheets on their bed can his dream of her be contested. The dream is of contamination. The fact the dream works upon is the act of deflowering. Othello is reasonably literal about this, as reasonable as a man in a trance can be:

... When I have plucked the rose,
I cannot give it vital growth again;
It must needs wither. I'll smell it on the tree.
Ah, balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword! One more, one more.
Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
And love thee after. . . .

[5.2.13-19]

(Necrophilia is an apt fate for a mind whose reason is suffocating in its sumptuous capacity for figuration, and which takes the dying into love literally to entail killing. "That death's unnatural that kills for loving" [5.2.42]; or that turns its object to live stone. It is apt as well that Desdemona sense death, or the figure of death, as the impending cause of death. And at the very end, facing himself, he will not recover from this. "I kissed thee ere I killed thee" [5.2.363]. And after too. And not just now when you died from me, but on our previous nights as well.)

The exhibition of wedding sheets in this romantic, superstitious, conventional environment can only refer to the practice of proving purity by staining. I mention in passing that this provides a satisfactory weight for the importance Othello attaches to his charmed (or farcical) handkerchief, the fact that it is spotted, spotted with strawberries.

Well, were the sheets stained or not? Was she a virgin or not? The answers seem as ambiguous as to our earlier question whether they are fast married. Is the final, fatal reenactment of their wedding night a clear denial of what really happened, so that we can just read off, by negation, what really happened? Or is it a straight

reenactment, without negation, and the flower was still on the tree, as far as he knew? In that case, who was reluctant to see it plucked, he or she? On such issues, farce and tragedy are separated by the thickness of a membrane.

We of course have no answer to such questions. But what matters is that Othello has no answer; or rather he can give none, for any answer to the question, granted that I am right in taking the question to be his, is intolerable. The torture of logic in his mind we might represent as follows: Either I shed her blood and scarred her or I did not. If I did not then she was not a virgin and this is a stain upon me. If I did then she is no longer a virgin and this is a stain upon me. Either way I am contaminated. (I do not say that the sides of this dilemma are of equal significance for Othello.)

But this much logic anyone but a lunthead might have mastered apart from actually marrying. (He himself may say as much when he asks himself, too late, why he married.) Then what quickens this logic for him? Call whatever it is Iago. What is Iago?

He is everything, we know, Othello is not. Critical and witty, for example, where Othello is commanding and eloquent; retentive where the other is lavish; concealed where the other is open; cynical where the other is romantic; conventional where the other is original; imagines flesh where the other imagines spirit; the imaginer and manager of the human guise; the bottom end of the world. And so on. A Christian has to call him devil. The single fact between Othello and Iago I focus on here is that Othello falls twice at the end to kill Iago, knowing he cannot kill him. This all but all-powerful chieftain is stopped at this nobody. It is the point of his impotence, and the meaning of it. Iago is everything Othello must deny, and which, denied, is not killed but works on, like poison, like furies.

In speaking of the point and meaning of Othello's impotence, I do not think of Othello as having been in an everyday sense impotent with Desdemona. I think of him, rather, as having been surprised by her, at what he has elicited from her; at, so to speak, a success rather than a failure. It is the dimension of her that shows itself in that difficult and dirty banter between her and Iago as they await Othello on Cyprus. Rather than imagine himself to have elicited that, or solicited it, Othello would imagine it elicited by anyone and everyone else. Surprised, let me say, to find that she is flesh and blood. It was the one thing he could not imagine for himself. For if she is flesh and blood then, since, they are one, so is he. But then although his potency of imagination can command the imagination of this child who is everything he is not, so that she sees his visage in his mind, she also sees that he is not identical with his mind, he is more than his imagination, black with desire, which she desires. Iago knows it, and Othello cannot bear what Iago knows, so he cannot

outface the way in which he knows it, or knows anything. He cannot forgive her for existing, for being separate from him, outside, beyond command, commanding, her captain's captain.

It is an unstable frame of mind which compounds figurative with literal dying in love; and Othello unstably projects upon her, as he blames her:

O perjured woman! Thou dost stone thy heart,
And makest me call what I intend to do
A murder, which I thought a sacrifice.

[5.2.64-66]

As he is the one who gives out lies about her, so he is the one who will give her a stone heart for her stone body, as if in his words of stone which confound the figurative and the literal there is the confounding of the incantations of poetry and of magic. He makes of her the thing he feels ("... my heart is turned to stone" [4.1.177-78]), but covers the ugliness of his thought with the beauty of his imagery—a debasement of himself and of his art of words. But what produces the idea of sacrifice? How did he manage the thought of her death as a sacrifice? To what was he to sacrifice her? To his image of himself and of her, to keep his image intact, uncontaminated, as if *this* were his protection from slander's image of him, say from a conventional view of his blackness. So he becomes conventional, sacrificing love to convention. But this was unstable; it could not be said. Yet better thought than the truth, which was that the central sacrifice of romance has already been made by them: her virginity, her intactness, her perfection, had been gladly forgone by her for him, for the sake of their union, for the seaming of it. It is the sacrifice he could not accept, for then he was not himself perfect. It must be displaced. The scar is the mark of finitude, of separateness; it must be borne whatever one's anatomical condition, or color. It is the sin or the sign of refusing imperfection that produces, or justifies, the visions and torments of devils that inhabit the region of this play.

If such a man as Othello is rendered impotent and murderous by aroused, or by having aroused, female sexuality; or let us say: if this man is horrified by human sexuality, in himself and in others; then no human being is free of this possibility. What I have wished to bring out is the nature of this possibility, or the possibility of this nature, the way human sexuality is the field in which the fantasy of finitude, of its acceptance and its repetitious overcoming, is worked out; the way human separateness is turned equally toward splendor and toward horror, mixing beauty and ugliness; turned toward before and after; toward flesh and blood. * * *

JAMES R. SIMON

"Nay, That's Not Next": *Othello*, VII in Performance, 1760-1900[†]

Shakespeare's directing hand offers guidance to readers and performers, but individuals as well as eras have not merely ignored that direction but have, on occasion, firmly rejected it. When taken as a group, the evasions, embellishments, and outright contradictions of Shakespeare's text that win acceptance in the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century performances of the final scene of *Othello* suggest a coherence of interpretation based on particular notions of both tragedy and femininity. Understanding the strains that the era put upon the scene makes us more aware of those notions, and, at the same time, directs our attention to notable features of the Shakespearean text itself.¹

[†] From *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37.1 (1986): 38-51. © 1986 Folger Shakespeare Library. Reprinted with the permission of Johns Hopkins University Press. The author's quotations from *Othello* have been retained, but bracketed references are to this Norton Critical Edition.

¹ This essay is so heavily indebted to the influence of the late Bernard Beckerman that I wish to record here my immense gratitude to him. The essay is primarily based upon performance records in the Folger Shakespeare Library and the Harvard Theatre Collection, especially the annotated promptbooks, which number 58 items (in a field defined by approximately 110 entries dating to 1900 in Charles H. Shattuck's *The Shakespeare Promptbooks* [Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1965]), and which document performances by leading actors in England and America. I am indebted to the Folger Shakespeare Library and the Harvard Theatre Collection for assistance and for permission to cite manuscript sources, to the Graduate School of Boston University for research funding and to Professor Lynda E. Boose, whose work on *Othello* has furnished ideas and insights too numerous to mention. Professor Shattuck offered trenchant criticism at an important phase of writing.

I refer throughout to the final scene of *Othello* as *Othello*, [5.2], though it was variously labeled in the promptbooks and acting editions of the period under investigation. Quotations from the play itself, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the Arden edition of *Othello*, ed. M. R. Ridley (1978; rpt. New York: Random House, 1967).

Among invaluable critical sources for this study are: H. H. Furness's *Variorum Othello* (1886; rpt. New York: American Scholar Publications, 1965) with its notes on performance; Marvin Rosenberg's classic study, *The Masks of Othello* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1961), and his "The Rehearsal of Othello in the Eighteenth Century British Theatre," *Studies in Philology* 51 (1954), 75-94; Cino J. Milocco's *Shakespeare's "Othello": The Study and the Stage* (Salthaug: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1974) treats the relation between criticism and performance. On this relation, see also C. J. Carlisle, "The Nineteenth-Century Actors Versus the Closet Critics," *Studies in Philology* 51 (1954), 599-615. I have made abundant use of data and insights from Matteo Cobly Sprague's *Shakespeare and the Actors* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1948). Also very helpful is Carlisle's *Shakespeare from the Greenroom* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1969), which has a section on *Othello*, [5.2] in performance. Students of *Othello* in performance should see also William P. Halstead, *Shakespeare as Spoken: A Collation of 5000 Acting Editions and Promptbooks of Shakespeare*, 11 (Ann Arbor: Univ. Microfilms International, 1977-80).