

***OTHELLO*, PLAY, OPERA, FILM**

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1. Introduction

Over the next three weeks we will be looking at a Shakespeare play and at two ways of rendering it in a different idiom – as opera and as film. This lecture will serve as an introduction to our topic. It has often been said of Shakespeare that there is something operatic about his plays. In part this operatic quality springs from the nature of the Elizabethan stage – a bare acting space in the open air, in which full voice and grand gesture are both necessary attributes. Elizabethan plays move forward in boldly structured speeches, formal emotional displays that, even if they are addressed to other characters, have about them the quality of performance. The Elizabethan drama is *public* and *declamatory* in nature: it turns on the speaking voice, a group of actors on a bare stage. The language in Shakespeare's plays is tight, uninterrupted and fluent.

Opera, conditioned by the flow of music rather than that of words, moves more slowly, and so the complexity of Shakespeare's text must be cut down, compressed, and simplified, according to some overall musical and dramatic strategy rooted in a coherent interpretation of the play itself. And opera, coming later than Shakespeare and intended for a very different stage, can make use of spectacle and setting in ways unavailable to the Elizabethans.

To make an opera of a play is to remake and reshape the text, ready for the further interpretation of director and singers for each production and each performance, and also each audience. To make a film of a play is to render such a performance, but to do so for an audience removed from interaction with the director. If Shakespeare is operatic, there are also those who describe his plays as cinematic. The plays tend to revolve around confrontations or emotionally fraught interactions, frequently between two people only. The plays change location frequently and easily. They are full of the language of description of a kind that can be rendered visually by the camera. But films, for the most part, have settings: the visual serves as a container and interpreter of the language. They can also make use of the close-up, conveying emotive power through the subtle changes in facial expression that cannot be captured in the theatre. So, as with opera, the text must be segmented and rearranged, recast to suit the restless medium of cameras and lights.

These changes are only extreme versions of what every director of Shakespeare must do, even on the conventional stage. The plays were written four hundred years ago for particular conditions. Their texts have come down to us in imperfect and sometimes conflicting forms. So the stage director must adapt and change as well. Critics delight in

ambiguity and complexity, but directors and actors require clarity and coherence. Moving from text to performance, regardless of the form of that performance, requires interpretation and closes off roads not taken.

In our examination of play, opera and film, *Othello* is a perfect candidate for comparison because it has inspired a brilliant opera and a number of highly accomplished films in sharply contrasting styles. My role is to examine the play itself, as a preliminary to these excursions into its later adaptations.

2. Five ways of looking at *Othello*

Shakespeare's *Othello* is perhaps the tightest and most carefully crafted of his tragedies, a model of dramatic tension and economy. Much has been written about the play over the years, and some strikingly different ways of playing it have emerged. Some see the villain Iago as essentially motiveless in his villainy (Coleridge writes of his "motiveless malignity"¹); others see his actions as clearly motivated and his behavior that of a disgruntled employee elevated to tragic significance. For some he is a devil, Satan himself; for others he is an operator, a conniver, a bustling subversive; and others see the spring of the action not in Othello's jealousy but Iago's, for Iago is unwilling to cede his control over the general to the general's new-found wife. To some, Othello is a victim, brought down by others' malice; to others he is a perpetrator, his true nature hidden beneath the surface and so easily revealed by the cunning of his subordinate. Desdemona is to some an innocent led to the slaughter; to others she is a determined woman who miscalculates.

We come to this tragedy not as novices but as Shakespeareans: it is hard, not to say perverse, to resist comparisons with other plays. The situation at the opening of the play is, in its most basic form, not dissimilar from what we have encountered in the comedies: a young woman elopes with a man judged inappropriate by her father, thus threatening the settled order of society. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the result is the chaos of Nightwood, compounded by Oberon's magic and Puck's incompetence, but ending happily when a new paradigm, accepting of the love that is rejected by Egeus at the opening of the play, is incorporated into this settled order. In effect, society and nature have parted company at the beginning of the play: the nine-men's morris is the worse for it. At the end society moves tranquilly forward under the aegis of the king and queen of Faerie.

It is not always thus: in *Romeo and Juliet*, the distorted mirror image of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the elopement, under circumstances not dissimilar from those of Athens, brings tragedy. This tragedy comes upon us with a deep and suffocating inevitability, announced from the start and horribly inescapable. Indeed, the image of romantic love

¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge on Shakespeare*, ed. T. Hawkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), 198.

that lies shattered at the end of the play is all the more attractive, all the more poetic and transcendent, in that it is doomed to vanish like a flaring thing. Shakespeare neither accepts nor rejects the traditional values: he explores the tension between the ordinary and the transcendent, while accepting that the second is in some sense only possible because of the first.

In this regard it is *Romeo and Juliet* that lies behind *Othello*: *Othello* too deals with a vision of romantic love, an elopement and a tragedy. But there is a difference: Romeo is surely as eligible in our eyes as Paris, indeed perhaps more so. That his adventure with Juliet is doomed to failure has nothing to do with their ability to feel for one another and everything to do with the social and political situation in which they find themselves. Othello's elopement with Desdemona, however, is in a very real sense a clash of cultures: a middle-aged man makes off with a Venetian daughter (Venice was a society notorious for its inwardly-turned oligarchy); a Moor makes off with a European (an idea first broached in the very different context of *Titus Andronicus*); a mercenary general "steals" or "bewitches" the daughter of a merchant. Much of the beginning of the play is concerned with teasing out the implications of these differences: to make the elopement acceptable to us, we must climb over a veritable mountain of prejudices and assumptions – quite unlike the situation with Romeo, who is attractive from the start, not least because of his non-involvement with an apparently senseless feud. These prejudices and assumptions include views of Moors (Othello, we are told, has, like some Barbary pirate, "boarded a land-carrack"; he is supposedly black and unattractive; he has abused Brabantio's hospitality by making off with his daughter – and so on). Climbing the mountain is made easier by the sheer bad behavior of Iago and Roderigo, whose palpable villainy (in one case) and gullibility (in the other) make us ready to cleave to their opposites. And of course it is only by the audience's readiness to deny the evidence of its prejudices that the play can be made to work at all. Yet we cannot not be aware of the unstable foundation on which this love is constructed.

Implied also in Othello's breach of the rigid hierarchy of the Venetians and in Desdemona's willingness to defy it is a sense of freedom. Perhaps it is the same freedom that Juliet feels as she rhapsodizes on Romeo, but we know that in Juliet's case her celebration of fiery-footed steeds (or Romeo's of the wingèd messenger of heaven) is doomed. Othello, on the other hand, is beholden to no one, except in the sense that he is employed by the Venetians:

But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
I would not my unhousèd free condition
Put into circumscription and confine
For the seas' worth. (1.2.23-27)

The point is important: the soldier Othello, in choosing the institution of marriage, domesticates himself, circumscribes himself, in a way that is altogether more constricting than it would be for those already domesticated – ourselves, for example, or the Venetians. And Othello's love of freedom, his love of the role of "wheeling stranger," as Roderigo puts it, inevitably forces upon him a certain ambivalence. His response to this

step in the direction of a way of life largely unknown to him is a kind of hypercorrection: if the world is to be governed by rules of custom, he wants complete control. It is this desire for control, coupled with uncertainty about the ways of the Venetians (and, in general, the married), and linked with the inevitable straining against his newly-assumed bonds, that provides Iago with his opportunity.

Of course, there is no Iago in *Romeo and Juliet*, only bumbling do-gooders like the Nurse and Friar Lawrence. The lovers are destroyed by external circumstances. Othello, on the other hand, a free agent, brings his tragedy on himself.

Desdemona, Othello insists to the senators, and later to Iago, was free to accept him or reject him: "She had eyes and chose me." The freedom that Othello so values is undermined and delimited not by the fatal utterances of a Chorus before the play begins, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, but by Othello's own distorted vision and by the diabolical clear-sightedness of Iago. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* turns on magic, but in *Twelfth Night* the only magic is the powerful magic of human nature; in *Romeo and Juliet* fate is at work from the beginning, but in *Othello* the only fate at work in the play is the fatal error that the free agent Othello freely commits.

In this respect, Othello is in a wholly different situation from Hamlet, whose political and dynastic entanglements leave him no means of escape, and who is pulled down and under by the whirlpool of the past. However, like Hamlet, Othello is a seeker after certainty, who must know the answer: he shows that "irritable reaching after fact" that so upset John Keats in a different context. It is Othello's need to believe and to have certainty, his unwillingness to live with skepticism and uncertainty, that undoes him. Iago offers him the possibility of belief of a kind that his puzzling bride does not offer, and Othello opts for it in spite of himself: only someone willing to *believe* could be persuaded by Iago's arguments. Othello believes that the world makes sense, and this literalness is his undoing.

Othello is also different from Macbeth, whose suggestibility causes him to become fixated with a particular view of the future and a determination to shape the forward march of history accordingly. Yet Macbeth, like Othello, is also a man of action ensnared by the complexities of contingency – and a poet or orator whose grand poetic utterances are devices to create certainty in a sea of ambiguities. Yet he is free to make his own errors, free to make his own judgments. Perhaps Iago and Lady Macbeth have their superficial similarities, but Iago, to the end, lacks conscience. Even Richard III, surely a clearer precursor, fights the demons of conscience (as Macbeth, in his turn, will do).

And there are other enigmas and extravagancies in this most fascinating of plays. Shakespeare's complex image patterns and his studied and strategic use of epithets provide a thematic underpinning, or sometimes a counterpoint, to the action. William Empson has pointed out how often and how cleverly Iago's supposed "honesty" is presented to us. Indeed, the play rings the changes on the meanings of that word: it extends (to borrow another suggestive quibble from the play) from lying to lying with,

from untruth to unfaithfulness. Roy Walker, and numerous others, have explained to us how Shakespeare stresses the contrast of blackness and whiteness, and of light and dark. As the play opens, we are not given Othello's name (not until we reach scene 3), only details of his physical appearance, stressing his difference from those around him and the contempt in which he is held. Iago and Roderigo are insiders, in the sense that they are both Venetians (neither Cassio the Florentine nor Othello the stranger qualify in this regard): Othello is emphatically an outsider. At the same time it is Roderigo and Iago who are outsiders in that they both of them "lack preferment," one in love and the other in his profession, while the general is an insider in the sense that he has not only "done the state some service" but is indispensable in the war against the Turks, and is recognized as "the valiant Othello." This contrast of insiders and outsiders plays out as central to the tragedy, and it is accorded special emphasis in the play's opening – an opening that also launches a string of animal imagery that begins in the speeches of Iago and Roderigo but, at the moment of crisis in Othello's moral disintegration, transfers to Othello, with his reference, for example, to "goats and monkeys."

There is "the *Othello* music" that so intrigues G. Wilson Knight – the richness of language that we associate primarily with Othello himself, but a poetic extravagance that is undermined in the center of the play as Othello drops into an incoherent and all-consuming jealousy.² In truth, the play as a whole is rich in poetry: the opening of Act 2, in Cyprus, offers us images of stormy seas and providential voyages that come from the lips not just of Othello but of Cassio and others beside. Indeed the image of the sea, emblem of chaotic formlessness and of a kind of blind moral indifference, occupies a central place in the symbolism of films of the play, especially Orson Welles's (1952) and Sergei Yutkevitch's (1955). In the richness of the language, *Othello* takes its place beside *Macbeth*, but here the poetry is broader and more expansive, less inward-looking and obscure. Yet Othello's own frame of reference is exotic and, as Wilson Knight puts it, "aloof," and his speech, like that of Tamburlaine before him, is full of references to distant places. John Gillies (p.30)³ calls it "lapidary" – "the jewel-like glitter of his 'entire and perfect chrysolite,' the smoothness of his 'monumental alabaster,' the chill perfection of his 'marble heaven.'"

Finally, there is the matter of time. The "double time" of *Othello* was first recognized in the mid-nineteenth-century. Fifty years later, Harley Granville-Barker wrote about it in his *Prefaces to Shakespeare*,⁴ pointing out that, on the one hand, the action from Act 2 on appears to take place over a period of a day and a half, but, on the other hand, it is clear that the comings and goings between Venice and Cyprus, to say nothing of occasional references to lapses of time in the text, necessitate a far longer period. This is no lapse in Shakespeare's attention: on the contrary it is clearly worked out quite carefully, and the audience is led to ignore the need for a longer view of time in its preoccupation with Iago's swift and deadly attack on Othello's selfhood. Lodovico's remark, in Act 4, that Othello's treatment of Desdemona "would not be believ'd in Venice, / Though I should

² G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930).

³ John Gillies, *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1994).

⁴ Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. P., 1947), 24-30.

swear I saw't," gains double force from the fact that a mere day or two seems to have elapsed since Lodovico saw Othello last.

Faced with the bare bones of the text, albeit with considerable circumstantial evidence surrounding its initial production, we can do little more than speculate on some of the particularities of the human relationships that it presents. In her *Othello, A Contextual History*, Virginia Mason Vaughan⁵ offers us four different ways of looking at the play: as a presentation of the confrontation of the Christian west and the Muslim east; as a depiction of a noble "medieval" knight, at the head of a mercenary army, brought down by malice; as a play about "the other," the outsider; and, finally, as a domestic drama about a marriage gone wrong. In a way, it is about all of these, and more; but such breadth of intellectual interest and such resonance will do little to assist the director intent on making sense of the action.

The director, inevitably, must start with character, and with four characters in particular: Othello, Desdemona, Iago, Cassio. Othello must be strong enough to be a general, but weak enough to be taken in by a wily Iago. Desdemona must be strong enough to defy her father, to address the Senate, and, in her exchanges with Othello in Act 2, to seek to influence her husband on a matter (Cassio's cashiering) strictly professional; yet she must be weak enough, or naive enough, to miss catastrophically the tenor of her husband's moods, and, repeatedly, to flinch beneath his anger. Iago must be sympathetic enough for us to be interested in his machinations, but diabolical enough to make his conduct worthy of our undivided condemnation. And then there is the matter of the relationship among these three, and who stands at the apex of this triangle. Othello is caught between his respect for Iago and his love for Desdemona: Iago insists that he choose between the two of them. Iago, deeply misogynistic, as we discover in his banter with Desdemona at the opening of Act 2, and in his later exchanges with Emilia, seems uninterested in besting Othello, who has perhaps slept with Emilia, by seducing Desdemona; and more interested in keeping Othello for himself. This is no battle for Desdemona, but a battle for Othello's soul. So we should add a fifth way of looking at the play to Vaughan's four – as a kind of morality story, a battle between the forces of good and evil.

But then there is Cassio, an arithmetician perhaps (so Iago calls him; but as the seventeenth century opened, experts on heavy artillery and on military strategy were a lot more useful than the Iago-like mentality of the foot-soldier), but someone chosen by Othello as his lieutenant. He fails his very first test, led easily into a drunken brawl. Seeking to extricate himself, he pushes too hard with Desdemona (giving a sharp edge to her interaction with Othello and opening up a certain distance between them, variously interpreted by a succession of Othellos), and skulks about with too obsequious an evitiation, thereby offering an opening to Iago's "I like not that!". Is this really an example of Othello's soundness of judgment, this appointment of Cassio? We are surely left to wonder, though perhaps distracted by the obvious wisdom of not choosing Iago (who may, however, be the only person who ever entertained this idea). Cassio is the young and handsome Florentine whom Desdemona might more plausibly have defied her father for, who shares with Desdemona a membership in the hereditary elite from which

⁵ Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Othello: A Contextual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1994).

Othello certainly is excluded and Iago possibly so – a good catalyst for jealousy. Many directors make a point of the apparent difference of class between Iago and Cassio (Jonathan Miller, for example, in the BBC television production of the early 1980s, where Iago is played by Bob Hoskins; and the Olivier/Burge/Dexter film of the mid-1960s, with Frank Finlay).

As for Roderigo, his importance as a piece of plotting is obscured by his contemptibility as a specimen of humanity. Iago's moral authority (deeply compromising for the audience though it is) is established at the opening of the play because we witness a clever scoundrel besting a foolish one – in circumstances sketchy and incomplete, so that we are not distracted by the particularities of the story of Othello or the perils of the Venetian state: the filling-in of the narrative will come later. Roderigo wants only one thing – Desdemona's love. Although our attention is not focused on the gradual moral degradation of a figure who is primarily a plot device, we should never the less note that Roderigo moves from hapless suitor to would-be seducer to willing murderer by play's end. Roderigo is responsible, in his way, for much of the action in the play. It is he who goads Cassio, he who tries to kill him at the end of the play: Roderigo generates dramatic action. It is interesting that W.H.Auden draws attention to the essential passivity of all of the characters except Iago ("all the *deeds* are Iago's),⁶ while Granville-Barker stresses that Iago does very little by way of action, and botches much of that. In a way they are both right: Iago is the supreme manipulator, but Roderigo does his dirty work – from the rousing of Brabantio to the cashiering of Cassio to the attempt on Cassio's life. And what Iago eventually perpetrates on Othello he first practices on Roderigo, whose mixture of jealousy and vain desire drives him forward as surely as Othello, Iago's principal quarry, is driven to destruction.

Emilia, who might know Iago best, is in fact quite unclear about the conduct and motives of her husband. Over the handkerchief, which she finds where Desdemona has dropped it, she plays into Iago's hands; and her comments to Desdemona about women's loyalty to their menfolk, while they may strike the deconstructed relativists in her audience as fair comment, are given in a context in Cyprus in which the effects of moral compromise are already far advanced. Hers is the voice of experience even as Desdemona's is the voice of innocence. Emilia's spunky courage at the end of the play, in which she shows herself as unafraid of Othello as Iago is, not only functions as a vital plot device but also constitutes a feminist response to Iago's earlier misogyny, her first appearance on the stage thus counterbalanced by her last.

3. The confrontation of the Christian west and the Muslim east.

Jonathan Bate, in a recent article, points out that the great war of Shakespeare's time was the one "played out between two rival superpowers ... the Christian empire of Spain and

⁶ W.H.Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber, 1963), 246.

the Islamic one of the Ottomans.”⁷ Throughout this period, the Turkish Empire loomed as a palpable threat to Christian Western Europe – a threat that entered the cultural consciousness of the West quite early on, at the time of the Crusades, and remained an important element in the symbolology and iconology of western culture.⁸ St. George did battle with the Turkish knight in many a mummers’ play, and paynim knights were not only the enemy in such reinventions of the Crusades as Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*, almost contemporaneous with Shakespeare, but also in *The Faerie Queene* and many other literary works in England and beyond. Included among such literary works are numerous plays involving Turks, such as Peele’s *Battle of Alcazar* (1588), the anonymous *Selimus, Emperor of the Turks* (1594), Robert Daborne’s *A Christian Turned Turk* (1612), Thomas Goffe’s *The Raging Turk* and *The Courageous Turk* (both 1618), and Philip Massinger’s *The Renegado* (1624).⁹ Marlowe’s epic creation *Tamburlaine* describes the rise and fall of empires in the great tracts of land beyond Christendom, and while Tamburlaine defeats the Turk, it is his burning of the Koran and his defiance of Mahomet that precede, indeed may seem to produce, his sudden sickness and death.

It was in the fourteenth century that Turkey pushed into southwestern Europe, subjugating much of Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia, and winning the first Battle of Kosovo in 1389. Salonika, garrisoned by Venetians, fell in 1430. The Turks won at Kosovo again in 1448. They took Constantinople in 1453. Albania was overrun, and Venice reached a humiliating agreement with the Turks in 1478. The Turks advanced as far as Moldavia. Suleiman the Magnificent captured Rhodes in 1522 and overran Budapest in 1526. He attacked Vienna but was driven back twice. Cyprus was overrun in 1571. In that same year, Venice, Spain and the Pope won a great victory over the Turkish fleet at Lepanto, but not until a century later, in 1683, did John Sobieski lead an army that drove the Turks back from the gates of Vienna for the last time.

James I, while still in Scotland, wrote a great poem about Lepanto. Late in 1603, the year of his accession, it was republished in London. In this same year, Richard Knolles published his magnum opus *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* and dedicated it to James.

Venice, the great merchant power of the eastern Mediterranean, carried on its trade with the Ottoman Empire in an uneasy atmosphere of perceived mutual benefit punctuated by outbreaks of hostility. To some in England it was itself a border community, a great port riddled with corruption and immorality, famous for its brothels and renowned for its double-dealing. Its narrow streets and dark canals were rife with all manner of corruption. Not for nothing did Nashe describe the Earl of Surrey’s encounter, in *The Unfortunate Traveller*, with the Venetian courtesan Tabitha the Temptress. Popular opinion had it that the Venetians, consumers of the great wealth generated by their

⁷ Jonathan Bate, “Othello and the Other,” *Times Literary Supplement*, October 19, 2001, 14-15.

⁸ See Samuel C. Chew, *The Crescent and the Rose: Islam and England During the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1937); Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York: Columbia U. P., 1999).

⁹ See Daniel J. Vitkus, ed., *Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2000), which contains *Selimus*, *A Christian Turned Turk*, and *The Renegado*.

dealings in distant parts, tolerated the Turk when it suited them, lived off Jewish capital (Shakespeare had already had his say on that topic in *The Merchant of Venice*), practiced the political arts of Machiavelli, and fought their battles with proxy armies consisting of mercenaries hired for the purpose. Next to them, the English were paragons of impoverished virtue.

But this was only one view of Italy and Venice. Indeed, it contrasts sharply with a quite different, and quite widespread view. In 1599, Lewis Lewkenor published his translation of Contarini's *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, a work that held Venice up as a model of republican government and of political stability – and a great example of Christian virtue and Christian enterprise. Contarini depicts a Venice run by its merchant families, an oligarchy governed through strong internal loyalty and firmness of purpose. We have a glimpse of this view of Venice in the council scene in Act 1 scene 3. Desdemona and her father Brabantio are members, at the highest level, of this tight inner circle: her decision, as an only daughter, to defy her father and break out of this constriction, is close to treasonable. Alternatively, her allowing Othello to make a futile bid for acceptance into this exclusive club by marrying her is subversive in a different way.

These two views of Venice are dynamically commingled in Shakespeare's play. Iago plays off Venice's negative connotations as he reminds Othello that Venetian wives "do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands" (3.3.206-7), yet the Venetian battle against the Turks assumes the dimensions of a battle for Christianity against paganism. One can of course locate the frontier in different places. It was once disparagingly said of the English ruling class that they believed the frontier lay at Calais. If London is Here, Venice is There. But if London and Venice are both Here, the frontier lies beyond them both, in places like Rhodes (lost before Shakespeare was born) and Cyprus, lost in 1571. Cyprus, like some last rocky outcrop before the Ottoman hordes, isolated from the civilization of Venice, is reached through stormy seas. For once, these seas have broken the Turkish fleet apart, as they once broke apart the Armada, defeated as much by the storms of Scotland and Ireland as by the wiliness of Sir Francis Drake. Out here on the edge, in Cyprus, subversion and corruption are easier, and Venetian ladies less protected. Indeed, as in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, another play set on an island at the edge of Christendom, it is hard to tell whether those who are assigned to guard Christianity remain staunch defenders of the faith against the infidel or are somehow subtly corrupted by the very atmosphere around them. "His was an impenetrable darkness," says Conrad's narrator of the enigmatic Mr. Kurtz, a later inhabitant of the mysterious and forbidding land at the edge of the world. Cyprus is ideal territory for the devilry of Iago, whose Spanish name hints at another frontier between Christendom and the Moors. As for Othello, he may be loyal to the Christian Venetians and a Christian himself, but, as we have seen, he is none the less of an "unhoused free condition," a wanderer whose tie to Venice is a salary.

Hardly surprising, then, that it is Othello who first hints at this ambiguity of the frontier. Faced with the drunken brawl that mars his first night in Cyprus, his immediate response

Nor to comply with heat – the young affects
In me defunct – and proper satisfaction;
But to be free and bounteous to her mind;
And heaven defend your good souls that you think
I will your serious and great business scant
When she is with me. (1.3.256-263)

Yet scanting business may now be precisely what Othello fears: Desdemona, whom he loves passionately, is yet a distraction (the more so because he loves her), and the military life and that of a lover do not easily commingle. The more he gives way to sexuality, the more, potentially, he loses control. Certainly the arrival of Desdemona in Cyprus is like the golden apple thrown among the guests at the marriage of Peleus and Thetis: Cassio, Iago, Roderigo, Othello, all are, in their various ways, destabilized by her presence.

4. Othello as noble knight

“Othello must not be conceived as a negro, but a high and chivalrous Moorish chief.” So declares Coleridge (195), *ex cathedra*. He is suggesting, of course, that there are two quite distinct ways of thinking about the Other at the edge of Christendom, and that different figures wear their alterity in different ways. Nabil Matar makes a distinction between the Turks (of the Ottoman Empire) and Moors (of the Kingdom of Morocco) on the one hand and the inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa on the other. The former represented cultures highly developed, peoples with whom the English did business, untrustworthy perhaps, and frequently hostile, but worthy of respectful consideration. Indeed, the King of Morocco sent ambassadors to Elizabeth’s court in 1600. Hamet Xarife even had his portrait painted, and it hangs today in the Barber Gallery in Birmingham. In 1603, the Moroccan king suggested an alliance between England and Morocco against the Spanish. Such visits merged with numerous other pieces of history or folklore to reinforce the image of the noble Moor, the noble Turk. “I take my being/ From men of royal siege,” declares Othello, aligning himself with this image.

Iago and Roderigo, of course, are intent on reinforcing the opposite image – of the slave, the sub-Saharan African who was increasingly seen not as human but as merchandise. Hence their constant emphasis on Othello’s blackness, on his physical appearance, and on animals. The two images are further confused in English minds because the Barbary pirates were famous for their attacks on shipping, even as far north as the English Channel, and their kidnapping of hapless Englishmen who faced the choice of redemption or perpetual slavery: there were Moorish slaves as well as Moorish princes.

But Othello, suggests Coleridge, is of the first type, not the second – a prince not a slave (though Othello, of course, talks of having endured slavery). Thus he is in some sense the Venetians' equal. It is an attractive and enduring image that held the stage for many years. We find little attention being given to Othello's race in much of the criticism in the twentieth century. Orson Welles's rendering of Othello in his 1952 film presents a grand and noble figure who seems to stand head and shoulders above the seignory he serves. It was not until the influx of Caribbean immigrants into London in the late 1950s and the Notting Hill Riots of August and September 1958 that Othello's blackness was rediscovered, most notably in the John Dexter National Theatre production of the play in 1961, later made into the Stuart Burge film of 1965, starring a highly caribbeanized Laurence Olivier.

Othello's grandiloquence is clearly that of a person of substance, or so we conclude as Act 1 unfurls. But this noble figure is none the less an outsider, and his grand talk of anters vast and deserts idle may seem to suggest the overreaching of a general who is very much aware of the fact that he is in Venice on sufferance – as the mercenary head of a largely mercenary army, for such were the armies the Venetians employed. From Jane Austen's Mr. Collins on, the illusion of equality is maintained between professional leaders and their employers, but there are invisible lines that are not to be crossed, barriers that are not to be breached. Othello, noble as he is, crosses one of those lines when he marries Desdemona. Brabantio's demand for justice goes unrequited by the seignory, not because they do not realize the breach of decorum that has been allowed to occur but because they are powerless to stop it: there is a war on, and they need the army to prosecute it. "My services which I have done the Signiory," Othello declares in 1.2., "shall out-tongue his complaints;" and it is so.

Othello, coming from some distant realm, displays the nobility of a fine soldier of the old school: he embodies, in his bearing and his eloquence, the old virtues of the military life. Iago, by contrast, is a time-server, out for what he can get: "I follow him to serve my turn upon him," declares Iago of Othello. While he complains to Roderigo that "Preferment goes by letter and affection, / And not by old gradation," he does so not because he is an old soldier outflanked by the new, but because his efforts to win the lieutenantcy through the mediation of "three great ones of the city" come to nought. In other words, Iago has engaged in the very practice that he denigrates. We note, in passing, that the "three great ones" were people "of the city": Iago is offended that Othello passes over a Venetian in favor of a Florentine. The Florentine is "one Michael Cassio, an arithmetician," trained, as it were, at West Point, and a consummate lady's man. Indeed, it may be Cassio's pedigree that gets him preferment: Othello is nothing if not eager to ingratiate himself with the Venetian powers-that-be.

Vaughan points out that the early years of the seventeenth century were a time of intense debate about the virtues and drawbacks of a standing army. England, relying on local militias and on conscription at times of national emergency, had no standing army until Oliver Cromwell created the New Model Army of 1644, which turned the tide against Charles I and the monarchy. In fact, Empson suggests (with little more than his assumptions to go on) that many of Shakespeare's audience "were old soldiers disbanded

without pension; they would dislike Cassio as the new type of officer, the boy who can displace men of experience merely because he knows enough mathematics to work the new guns.”¹⁰ Perhaps, but Cassio continues the aristocratic tradition of soldiering that Othello aspires to, indeed, some would argue, rather specifically represents.

In truth, Iago is cut from the same cloth as an Edmund, or a Bolingbroke – people who care not a fig for the old ways of doing things, and for hierarchy and precedence. “Virtue? A fig! ‘Tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners,” he declares to Roderigo at the end of Act 1. “Wherefore should I / Stand in the plague of custom?” asks Edmund, and finds no reason. Iago’s assault on Othello is the assault of the amoral upon the principled, an unequal battle in which the spry and unencumbered Iago repeatedly outwits an Othello hemmed about with virtue. It is Cassio who has gone between Othello and Desdemona (a fact that Cassio appears to deny in the exchange with Iago in 1.2, when Cassio asks whom Othello has married) – a Florentine outsider, but an aristocratic insider perhaps. Iago, as a native Venetian, knows the local scene better than any of them.

Indeed, it is arguable that Othello neither learns the local scene nor considers it particularly important. We note that the image conveyed in 1.3 by his recounting to the Signory of his courtship of Desdemona is that of a great story-teller and a willing listener: Desdemona only suggests that if someone else came along who could tell stories as well as Othello, she would marry him.... This grand language has little to do with understanding and a great deal to do with impressing Desdemona: “Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself,” writes T.S.Eliot of Othello. Eliot suggests that Othello, here and later in the play, repeatedly adopts “an aesthetic rather than a moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment.”¹¹ In other words, there is, an egotistical element to Othello’s make-up and a tendency to self-dramatization, as though he were acting in his own play within the play that bears his name. It is this, as much as anything, that makes him easy for Iago to outmaneuver. “Othello, in his magnanimous way,” writes F.R.Leavis in a 1938 essay, “is egotistic. He really is, beyond any question, the nobly massive man of action, the captain of men, he sees himself as being, but he does very much see himself ... A habit of self-approving self-dramatization is an essential element in Othello’s make-up, and remains so at the very end.”¹²

5. Othello as the Other: black vs. white, light vs. dark.

Leavis and Wilson Knight, following the fashion of the time, put little emphasis on Othello’s blackness. For them, Othello is a tragic hero, whose ancestry and physical characteristics perhaps reinforce his position as outsider but are as relevant to the play as,

¹⁰ William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951) 229.

¹¹ T.S.Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1951), 129-31

¹² F.R.Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), 142

say, the fact of Hamlet's education at Wittenberg is to the plot of Hamlet – not something to be ignored (Hamlet is in part a play about the collision of the progressive and rational views of the educated intellectual with the dark, atavistic irrationality of blood vengeance and superstition), but not something utterly central either. But Knight and Leavis wrote before the civil rights movement in the United States and large-scale immigration from the Caribbean to London brought the issue of race more directly to people's consciousness. The difference can be seen quite clearly in the shift from the noble Othello of Orson Welles's film of 1952 to the Jamaican knock-off of Olivier's post-Notting-Hill (1958) representation of 1965 (based on John Dexter's National Theatre production of 1964).

That Shakespeare dwells on Othello's blackness (or at least that Iago and Roderigo do) is evident: most of the references to him in the initial scene outside Brabantio's house are contemptuous references to his physical characteristics. He is referred to constantly as "the Moor" and is not given a name at all until 1.3, the scene in the Venetian Senate House. But in this, as in many other matters, Shakespeare confounds us. It can be argued that by putting these stereotypes in the mouths of the clearly contemptible Roderigo and Iago and then presenting us with a grand and noble figure who rises above the contentiousness of Brabantio and his followers, Shakespeare "rescues" Othello from the stereotypes of blackness in such plays as *The Battle of Alcazar*, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, and the anonymous play *Lust's Dominion*. This new figure demonstrates characteristics that we associate not with the bombastic deviousness of stage Moors but with the most noble of men.

At the same time, Othello's gradual moral disintegration as the play proceeds both reasserts the initial stereotypes, pushing us off our earlier judgment, and also in some sense lines us up with the condemnatory and dismissive comments of Iago. In other words, we are left with nowhere to stand. The term "prejudice" means "judgment before the evidence is in." Iago's "prejudice" is answered by Othello's grand speeches before the Venetian Senate and by his apparently loving relationship with Desdemona. Yet it is precisely Othello's own "prejudice" – his insisting on judging, but his passing judgment on Desdemona before the evidence is in, that leads to his undoing. In an odd way, Othello is like the Cheshire Cat: a noble performance in self-fashioning, a grand heroism as he acts the part of the noble figure betrayed, seems to hang in the air while its perpetrator collapses in self-destruction. Othello, as Leavis points out, is a great actor, who woos and wins Desdemona with his amazing stories, who gives stirring speeches to the Venetian Senate, winning them over and salving their consciences – and even persuading them to let him take Desdemona with him to the wars. But less clear is the question of where the acting ends and the actual personality begins.

That the Venetian Senate is in a difficult position should be clear to us. While arguably it is the threat from the Turks, in Rhodes and Cyprus, that introduces anarchy into the universe of the play, the Turkish invasion across the distant Mediterranean mirrors a different kind of invasion here at home. "What's the matter, think you," asks Othello, summoned by Cassio to appear before the Senate. "Something from Cyprus, as I may divine," replies Cassio. And a moment later, in reply to a question from Cassio, Iago

declares that Othello “tonight hath boarded a land carrack,” a treasure-ship, but on land rather than sea. As the Turks invade Venetian colonial possessions, Othello “invades” peacefully the house of Brabantio. But the Senate needs Othello, and so the Senators swallow the fact that one of their own has been abused by an outsider, and the fact that a Venetian daughter has defied her father.¹³ They are forced in this way into a moral compromise from which the play never recovers. And it is this tension, between what is right and what is expedient, between law and incipient lawlessness, that interacts with the play’s other thematic concerns, among them romantic love and jealousy.

Elizabethan ambivalence on the matter of race has been well documented. While blacks were no common sight in London, they were certainly not unknown. A few blacks were brought to London, mostly as a result of the capture of Spanish prizes. That Othello is of sub-Saharan African background does seem likely: terms like Moor and Indian are used more or less interchangeably in the period, always to denote outsiders. Blacks were seen by some as the descendants of Ham (*Genesis* ch. 9), one of Noah’s three sons. “A servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren,” we are told – and this is enough to give Biblical sanction to the slave trade. Elizabeth, shortly before her death, issued orders for their removal from England, but without success.

“Blackamoors” were a common feature of folk plays, pageants and masques, and were specifically associated with the forces of darkness, as for example in Ben Jonson’s *Masque of Darkness*. Jonson’s masque turns on the contrast between light and dark; even as Othello’s blackness is emphasized in Shakespeare’s play, so is Desdemona’s fairness. In this play that is so focused on the sense of sight (on “ocular proof”) there are repeated references to the “fair Desdemona.” While the semantic range of the adjective is narrower now than it was then, the implication seems inescapable: as Othello is dark, so Desdemona is light. Our last image of her turns on Othello’s putting out the light before he murders her. And the play, we remember, turns on questions of “ocular proof.”

Yet here, too, Shakespeare compounds his irony. Cassio’s mistress, hardly presented to us as a figure of virtue, goes by the name of “Bianca,” white.

6. *Othello* as a play about marriage.

It is often said of *Othello* that it is the most domestic of Shakespeare’s tragedies. *Hamlet* and *Lear* are focused on their heroes, to the exclusion or at least subordination of all else. In *Macbeth*, by contrast, we watch a marriage corrupted by greed, and perhaps by the supernatural (we are never quite sure whether Lady Macbeth is simply an evil woman or possessed by the power that possesses the witches). But the goal here is a crown, and an entire kingdom revolves around the outcome. In *Othello* the protagonists’ primary ambition is love, and their success or failure, while related to great events, is all our concern. It is a play single in its plot and claustrophobic in its intensity, reminiscent of

¹³ On the compromised position of the Venetian Senate, see John Gillies 1994: 137-40.

the genre of domestic tragedy begun by such works as the anonymous *Arden of Feversham* of around 1592.

As we have noted, its aptest predecessor is *Romeo and Juliet*: Desdemona defies her father as Juliet defies hers, and she does so in the name of a kind of romantic love that perhaps can only exist because of its impossibility: Desdemona is both brave and foolhardy in defying convention as she does, and she is swayed more by her love for the fantastic and exotic than by her understanding of the character of her husband. He, perhaps dazzled by the prize that Desdemona constitutes, the entry into Venetian society that she represents, but more likely by her exquisite beauty and her evident capacity for hero-worship, does not stop to weight the consequences of his love but presses resolutely forward. Desdemona, Othello tells us, loves him for the dangers he has passed, and “I loved her that she did pity them.”

A marriage based on the capacity of one party to listen and the other to talk may be judged unstable from the start. And the instability of the situation is only exacerbated by the difference in age and experience between Desdemona and Othello. The instability is symbolized in the great tempest that scatters the Turks and miraculously delivers the Venetians on the seas between Venice and Cyprus. This growing instability in the external world – elopement, tempests, riotous parties – maps an inner, psychological instability between the lovers. Their first night in Cyprus is not only interrupted and disturbed by the rioting – “Are we turned Turks?” asks Othello (as we have already noted), “and to ourselves do that / Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?” – but introduces the problem of Cassio, which will gradually undermine the relationship. By 3.3, Desdemona is trying to convince Othello to pardon Cassio even as Iago is sowing his seeds of doubt in Othello’s mind. Desdemona, for her part, is wrong on two counts: her coquettish wheedling of Othello only fuels his doubt and adds credence to Iago’s aspersions, and her insistence on Othello’s pardoning Cassio is an intrusion on his professional life as a soldier that is deeply inappropriate. As if to underline the point, Shakespeare includes a brief scene (3.2) right before this, showing Othello going about his business, sending dispatches back to Venice and setting out to inspect the fortifications with a view, presumably, to making repairs. But 3.3 takes Othello from his declaring to Desdemona “I will deny thee nothing” (83) to his joining with Iago to swear vengeance against her. Along the way comes the episode of the handkerchief, in which Desdemona attempts to bind Othello’s head to relieve a headache (Othello evidently is prone to brainstorms), but by this point Iago has already driven a wedge between Othello and Desdemona, by exploiting two weaknesses: Othello’s concern with reputation and “good name,” the sort of thing that matters to a professional soldier in the employ of the Venetian senate, and Othello’s jealousy of Cassio. The first touches Othello’s professional uncertainties, the second his personal ones and his uncertain status in Venetian society.

When we return to the (now lost) handkerchief in 3.4, Desdemona has learned nothing about Othello’s feelings: she cannot read his emotions nor judge the impropriety of her behavior. As for Othello, he is already receding into atavistic and mysterious talk about Egyptian clairvoyants: “That handkerchief / Did an Egyptian to my mother give; / She

was a charmer and could almost read / The thoughts of people” (3.4.57-60). We only wish that Othello had learned something about mind-reading from his mother’s Egyptian.... Desdemona’s terrified to Othello’s anger at the loss of the handkerchief is fatally evasive, the response of a girl out of her depth before the sharp insistence of the punctilious military man. She employs a similar evasion – no clear denial of a relationship with Cassio, but rather a plea for mercy – in the final scene, right before the murder.

We meet Desdemona with Othello next in 4.1. The occasion is the arrival of Lodovico from Venice, and the letter from the Senate recalling Othello and deputing Cassio in his stead. We are apt to see this letter as a routine recall: the Turkish war is over before it began, and so it is natural enough that Othello should be brought back to Venice. But is that so? “This fail you not to do, as you will,” is the only fragment of the letter that Othello reads aloud, but it is hardly a reassuring passage, suggesting as it does that Othello might be tempted not to comply with whatever the “this” is. Later Othello declares, “I obey the mandate / And will return to Venice,” as though there is some question about his obeying. We do not know whether word of the breach between Othello and Cassio has reached Venice (Lodovico is evidently not privy to it), but Othello may suspect that it has. In any event, his reaction to the letter suggests the anger of the established professional whose reputation has been compromised by the distraction of an importunate wife, never mind his suspicion of her adultery.

This suspicion, and Desdemona’s denial, is the substance of their next encounter, in 4.2. Now Othello’s contempt comes pouring out: “I took you for that cunning whore of Venice / That married with Othello” (4.2.91-2). The die is now cast, and we move inevitably to the dénouement – an outcome in which Othello’s role as man of action and savior of civilizations (“Yet she must die,” he says, “else she’ll betray more men”) is fatally reasserted. Othello acts because he is a professional – a soldier first and a lover second. How different from Antony who, when Cleopatra ruins his reputation as a soldier and abandons the fight at Actium, still forgives Cleopatra even as the forces of Octavius close in.

7. *Othello* as morality play

The old morality plays – most famously the great play of Everyman, dating from the early sixteenth century – show the hero pulled this way and that by the angel of good and the angel of evil. The theme persists into Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, most notably in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, where Faustus is the object of just such a struggle. Shakespeare’s play shows Othello likewise caught between the blandishments of Iago and the attractions of Desdemona. Just as Desdemona insists that Othello follow *her* will in the matter of Cassio, so Iago insists that Othello follow his. On occasion the play is presented by modern directors as a battle between the heterosexual attentions of Desdemona and the homosexual impulses of Iago, but the sexual dimension at most only heightens what is clearly a desire to control.

Satanic imagery gathers around the person of Iago from the beginning.¹⁴ He uses it of others at first, but his allegiance is clear, when, in the very first scene, he declares to Roderigo, in a parody of the biblical description of Jehovah “I am that I am,” “I am not what I am.” Then, at the end of the first act, turning over in his mind the strategy that he will use to entrap Othello, he suddenly exclaims:

I have ‘t. It is engender’d. Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light. (1.3.402-3)

In fact, the play is full of imagery relating to religion and to damnation. The word “devil” and related terms occur more frequently in this play than any other by Shakespeare, and the word “heaven” appears with greater frequency as well. Cassio, according to Iago, is a “devilish knave,” and Cassio, speaking of wine, describes it as “devil,” Desdemona, says Othello, is a “fair devil” (3.3.481).

Iago, for his part, dancing across the stage like the exultant Mephistophilus of the old play, shows us how the skilled fiend goes about his business: “Divinity of hell! When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows / As I do now” (2.3.345-8).

When, at the end of 3.3, Othello is convinced by the insinuations of Iago to take vengeance on Desdemona, he does so in a grand and dramatic gesture (Othello is nothing if not dramatic) that is reminiscent of a pact with the devil:

Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell,
Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne
To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught,
For ‘tis of aspics’ tongues. (3.3.450-3)

The lines epitomize the conflict – between hatred and love, and between the fecundity of happy marriage and the bosom-serpent of evil. Othello continues:

Like to the Pontic sea
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne’er keeps retiring ebb but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont:
Even so my bloody thoughts with violent pace
Shall ne’er look back, ne’er ebb to humble love
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up. (3.3.456-63)

The sea that has destroyed the Turks seems ready to rise up and engulf those whom it has earlier spared, and the task of the Ottomites will be carried out by Othello’s revenge.

¹⁴ On devil imagery in *Othello* see Leavis’s essay in *The Common Pursuit* (cited above), “Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero.”

Iago kneels with him to complete the pact, dedicating himself “to wronged Othello’s service.” As for Desdemona, “Damn her, lewd minx,” cries Othello, “O damn her, damn her!” (3.4.478).

And later, as Othello lies at his feet in an epileptic fit, Iago exults over him like Beelzebub over another lost soul:

Work on,
My medicine, work! Thus credulous fools are caught,
And many worthy and chaste dames even thus,
All guiltless, meet reproach. (4.1.44-7)

It is, of course, in the final act that the satanic imagery gathers around Iago’s own person, most notably in Othello’s lines, upon realizing Iago’s deception: “I look down towards his feet; but that’s a fable. / If thou be’st a devil, I cannot kill thee” (5.2.283-4). And of course he cannot: he lunges at Iago, wounds him, but “I bleed, sir, but not killed,” Iago declares.

The careful equivocation – Iago both is and is not a devil, is and is not an agent of a fate bigger than the resistance of any of the characters in this play – is of a piece with Shakespeare’s message, here and in such plays as *Macbeth* and perhaps *Hamlet*: we are free agents, free to make the choices we make, but we are hedged about with all manner of unspoken and unfathomable impulses and motivations. *Othello* both asserts a grand design and proclaims our freedom from it. Yet perhaps the very beauty of human aspiration and desire would not be possible without its negation, the dream of transcendence not possible without those mortal encumbrances that pull it down.

Five ways, then, of looking at *Othello*? How easy it is to sustain such grand ambiguity when we do not have a play to perform, an opera to put on, a film to make. Critics and scholars would rule if there were no choices to be made. It is about these choices that we will learn over the coming weeks.