

"Shakespeare: The Invention of
The Human"

HAROLD BLOOM

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Iago. O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger,
But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
Who dotes yet doubts, suspects yet strongly loves!

Othello. O misery!

[III.iii.147-73]

This would be outrageous if its interplay between Iago and Othello were not so persuasive. Iago manipulates Othello by exploiting what the Moor shares with the jealous God of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims, a barely repressed vulnerability to betrayal. Yahweh and Othello alike are vulnerable because they have risked extending themselves, Yahweh to the Jews and Othello to Desdemona. Iago, whose motto is "I am not what I am," will triumph by tracking this negativity to Othello, until Othello quite forgets he is a man and becomes jealousy incarnate, a parody of the God of vengeance. We underestimate Iago when we consider him only as a dramatist of the self and a psychologist of genius; his greatest power is as a negative ontotheologian, a diabolical prophet who has a vocation for destruction. He is not the Christian devil or a parody thereof, but rather a free artist of himself, uniquely equipped, by experience and genius, to entrap spirits greater than his own in a bondage founded upon their inner flaws. In a play that held a genius opposed to his own—a Hamlet or a Falstaff—he would be only a frustrated malcontent. Given a world only of gulls and victims—Othello, Desdemona, Cassio, Roderigo, even Emilia until outrage turns her—Iago scarcely needs to exercise the full range of powers that he keeps discovering. A fire is always raging within him, and the hypocrisy that represses his satirical intensity in his dealings with others evidently costs him considerable suffering.

That must be why he experiences such relief, even ecstasy, in his extraordinary soliloquies and asides, where he applauds his own performance. Though he rhetorically invokes a "divinity of hell," neither he nor we have any reason to believe that any demon is listening to him. Though married, and an esteemed flag officer, with a reputation for "honesty," Iago is as soli-

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tary a figure as Edmund, or as Macbeth after Lady Macbeth goes mad. Pleasure, for Iago, is purely sadomasochistic; pleasure, for Othello, consists in the rightful consciousness of command. Othello loves Desdemona, yet primarily as a response to her love for his triumphal consciousness. Passed over, and so nullified, Iago determines to convert his own sadomasochism into a countertriumphalism, one that will commandeer his commander, and then transform the god of his earlier worship into a degradation of godhood. The chaos that Othello rightly feared if he ceased to love Desdemona has been Iago's natural element since Cassio's promotion. From that chaos, Iago rises as a new Demiurge, a master of uncreation.

In proposing an ontotheological Iago, I build upon A. C. Bradley's emphasis on the passed-over ancient's "resentment," and add to Bradley the idea that resentment can become the only mode of freedom for such great negations as Iago's Dostoevskian disciples, Svidrigailov and Stavrogin. They may seem insane compared with Iago, but they inherited his weird lucidity, and his economics of the will. René Girard, a theoretician of envy and scapegoating, feels compelled to take Iago at his word, and so sees Iago as being sexually jealous of Othello. This is to be yet again entrapped by Iago, and adds an unnecessary irony to Girard's reduction of all Shakespeare to "a theater of envy." Tolstoy, who fiercely resented Shakespeare, complained of Iago, "There are many motives, but they are all vague." To feel betrayed by a god, be he Mars or Yahweh, and to desire restitution for one's wounded self-regard, to me seems the most precise of any villain's motives: return the god to the abyss into which one has been thrown. Tolstoy's odd, rationalist Christianity could not reimagine Iago's negative Christianity.

Iago is one of Shakespeare's most dazzling performers, equal to Edmund and Macbeth and coming only a little short of Rosalind and Cleopatra, Hamlet and Falstaff, superb charismatics. Negative charisma is an odd endowment; Iago represents it uniquely in Shakespeare, and most literary incarnations of it since owe much to Iago. Edmund, in spite of his own nature, has the element of Don Juan in him, the detachment and freedom from hypocrisy that is fatal for those grand hypocrites, Goneril and Regan. Macbeth, whose prophetic imagination has a universal force, excites our sympathies, however bloody his actions. Iago's appeal to us is the power

of the negative, which is all of him and only a part of Hamlet. We all have our gods, whom we worship, and by whom we cannot accept rejection. The Sonnets turn upon a painful rejection, of the poet by the young nobleman, a rejection that is more than erotic, and that seems to figure in Falstaff's public disgrace at Hal's coronation. Foregrounding *Othello* requires that we imagine Iago's humiliation at the election of Cassio, so that we hear the full reverberation of

Though I do hate him as I do hell-pains,
Yet for necessity of present life
I must show out a flag and sign of love,
Which is indeed but sign.

[I.i.152–55]

The ensign, or ancient, who would have died faithfully to preserve Othello's colors on the battlefield, expresses his repudiation of his former religion, in lines absolutely central to the play. Love of the war god is now but a sign, even though revenge is as yet more an aspiration than a project. The god of war, grand as Othello may be, is a somewhat less formidable figure than the God of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but by a superb ontological instinct, Iago associates the jealousy of one god with that of the other:

I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin
And let him find it. Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ. This may do something.
The Moor already changes with my poison:
Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons
Which at the first are scarce found to distaste
But with a little art upon the blood
Burn like the mines of sulphur. I did say so.

Enter OTHELLO.

[III.iii.324–32]

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The simile works equally well the other way round: proofs of Holy Writ are, to the jealous God, strong confirmations, but the airiest trifles can provoke the Yahweh who in Numbers leads the Israelites through the wilderness. Othello goes mad, and so does Yahweh in Numbers. Iago's marvelous pride in his "I did say so" leads on to a critical music new even to Shakespeare, one which will engender the aestheticism of John Keats and Walter Pater. The now obsessed Othello stumbles upon the stage, to be greeted by Iago's most gorgeous outburst of triumphalism:

Look where he comes. Not poppy nor mandragora
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
Which thou owedst yesterday.

[III.iii.333-36]

If this were only sadistic exultation, we would not receive so immortal a wound from it; masochistic nostalgia mingles with the satisfaction of uncreation, as Iago salutes both his own achievement and the consciousness that Othello never will enjoy again. Shakespeare's Iago-like subtle art is at its highest, as we come to understand that Othello *does not know* precisely because he has not known his wife. Whatever his earlier reluctance to consummate marriage may have been, he now realizes he is incapable of it, and so cannot attain to the truth about Desdemona and Cassio:

I had been happy if the general camp,
Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,
So I had nothing known. O now for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars
That makes ambition virtue! O farewell,
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!

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And, O you mortal engines whose rude throats
 Th'immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
 Farewell: Othello's occupation's gone.

[III.iii.348-60]

This Hemingwayesque farewell to the big wars has precisely Hemingway's blend of masculine posturing and barely concealed fear of impotence. There has been no time since the wedding, whether in Venice or on Cyprus, for Desdemona and Cassio to have made love, but Cassio had been the go-between between Othello and Desdemona in the play's foregrounding. Othello's farewell here essentially is to any possibility of consummation; the lost music of military glory has an undersong in which the martial engines signify more than cannons alone. If Othello's occupation is gone, then so is his manhood, and with it departs also the pride, pomp, and circumstance that compelled Desdemona's passion for him, the "circumstance" being more than pageantry. Chaos comes again, even as Othello's ontological identity vanishes, in Iago's sweetest revenge, marked by the villain's sublime rhetorical question: "Is't possible? my lord?" What follows is the decisive moment of the play, in which Iago realizes, for the first time, that Desdemona must be murdered by Othello:

Othello. Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore,
 Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof,
 Or by the worth of man's eternal soul [*catching hold of him*]
 Thou hadst been better have been born a dog
 Than answer my waked wrath!

Iago. Is't come to this?

Othello. Make me to see't, or at the least so prove it
 That the probation bear no hinge nor loop
 To hang a doubt on, or woe upon thy life!

Iago. My noble lord—

Othello. If thou dost slander her and torture me
 Never pray more, abandon all remorse,
 On horror's head horrors accumulate,

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Do deeds to make heaven weep, all earth amazed,
For nothing canst thou to damnation add
Greater than that!

[III.iii.362–76]

Iago's improvisations, until now, had as their purpose the destruction of Othello's identity, fit recompense for Iago's vastation. Suddenly, Iago confronts a grave threat that is also an opportunity: either he or Desdemona must die, with the consequences of her death to crown the undoing of Othello. How can Othello's desire for "the ocular proof" be satisfied?

Iago. And may—but how? how satisfied, my lord?
Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on?
Behold her topped?

Othello. Death and damnation! O!

Iago. It were a tedious difficulty, I think,
To bring them to that prospect. Damn them then
If ever mortal eyes do see them bolster
More than their own. What then? how then?
What shall I say? where's satisfaction?
It is impossible you should see this
Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,
As salt as wolves in pride, as fools as gross
As ignorance made drunk. But yet, I say,
If imputation and strong circumstances
Which lead directly to the door of truth
Will give you satisfaction, you might have't.

[III.iii.397–411]

The only ocular proof possible is what Othello will not essay, as Iago well understands, since the Moor will not try his wife's virginity. Shakespeare shows us jealousy in men as centering upon both visual and temporal obsessions, because of the male fear that there will not be enough time and space for him. Iago plays powerfully upon Othello's now monu-

mental aversion from the only door of truth that could give satisfaction, the entrance into Desdemona. Psychological mastery cannot surpass Iago's control of Othello, when the ensign chooses precisely this moment to introduce "a handkerchief, / I am sure it was your wife's, did I today / See Cassio wipe his beard with." Dramatic mastery cannot exceed Iago's exploitation of Othello's stage gesture of kneeling to swear revenge:

Othello. 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. Now by yond marble heaven
In the due reverence of a sacred vow
I here engage my words.

Iago. Do not rise yet. *Iago kneels.*
Witness, you ever-burning lights above,
You elements that clip us round about,
Witness that here Iago doth give up
The execution of his wit, hands, heart,
To wronged Othello's service. Let him command
And to obey shall be in me remorse
What bloody business ever.

Othello. I greet thy love
Not with vain thanks but with acceptance bounteous,
And will upon the instant put thee to't.
Within these three days let me hear thee say
That Cassio's not alive.

Iago. My friend is dead.
'Tis done—at your request. But let her live.

Othello. Damn her, lewd minx: O damn her, damn her!
Come, go with me apart; I will withdraw
To furnish me with some swift means of death
For the fair devil. Now art thou my lieutenant.

Iago. I am your own for ever.

[III.iii.460–82]

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It is spectacular theater, with Iago as director: "Do not rise yet." And it is also a countertheology, transcending any Faustian bargain with the Devil, since the stars and the elements serve as witnesses to a murderous pact, which culminates in the reversal of the passing over of Iago in the play's foreground. "Now art thou my lieutenant" means something very different from what Othello can understand, while "I am your own for ever" seals Othello's stary and elemental fate. What remains is only the way down and out, for everyone involved.

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Shakespeare creates a terrible pathos for us by not showing Desdemona in her full nature and splendor until we know that she is doomed. Dr. Johnson found the death of Cordelia intolerable; the death of Desdemona, in my experience as a reader and theatergoer, is even more unendurable. Shakespeare stages the scene as a sacrifice, as grimly countertheological as are Iago's passed-over nihilism and Othello's "godlike" jealousy. Though Desdemona in her anguish declares she is a Christian, she does not die a martyr to that faith but becomes only another victim of what could be called the religion of Moloch, since she is a sacrifice to the war god whom Iago once worshiped, the Othello he has reduced to incoherence. "Othello's occupation's gone"; the shattered relic of Othello murders in the name of that occupation, for he knows no other, and is the walking ghost of what he was.

Millicent Bell recently has argued that Othello's is an epistemological tragedy, but only Iago has intellect enough to sustain such a notion, and Iago is not much interested in how he knows what he thinks he knows. *Othello*, as much as *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, is a vision of radical evil; *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's tragedy of an intellectual. Though Shakespeare never would commit himself to specifically Christian terms, he approached a kind of gnostic or heretic tragedy in *Macbeth*, as I will attempt to show. Othello has no transcendental aspect, perhaps because the religion of war does not allow for any. Iago, who makes a new covenant with Othello when they kneel together, had lived and fought in what he took to be an

old covenant with his general, until Cassio was preferred to him. A devout adherent to the fire of battle, his sense of merit injured by his god, has degraded that god into "an honourable murderer," Othello's oxymoronic, final vision of his role. Can such degradation allow the dignity required for a tragic protagonist?

A. C. Bradley rated *Othello* below *Hamlet*, *Lear*, and *Macbeth* primarily because it gives us no sense of universal powers impinging upon the limits of the human. I think those powers hover in *Othello*, but they manifest themselves only in the gap that divides the earlier, foregrounded relationship between Iago and Othello from the process of ruination that we observe between them. Iago is so formidable a figure because he has uncanny abilities, endowments only available to a true believer whose trust has transmuted into nihilism. Cain, rejected by Yahweh in favor of Abel, is as much the father of Iago as Iago is the precursor of Milton's Satan. Iago murders Roderigo and maims Cassio; it is as inconceivable to Iago as to us that Iago seeks to knife Othello. If you have been rejected by your god, then you attack him spiritually or metaphysically, not merely physically. Iago's greatest triumph is that the lapsed Othello sacrifices Desdemona in the name of the war god Othello, the solitary warrior with whom unwisely she has fallen in love. That may be why Desdemona offers no resistance, and makes so relatively unspirited a defense, first of her virtue and then of her life. Her victimization is all the more complete, and our own horror at it thereby is augmented.

Though criticism frequently has blinded itself to this, Shakespeare had no affection for war, or for violence organized or unorganized. His great killing machines come to sorrowful ends: Othello, Macbeth, Antony, Coriolanus. His favorite warrior is Sir John Falstaff, whose motto is: "Give me life!" Othello's motto could be "Give me honor," which sanctions slaughtering a wife he hasn't known, supposedly not "in hate, but all in honour." Dreadfully flawed, even vacuous at the center as Othello is, he still is meant to be the best instance available of a professional mercenary. What Iago once worshiped was real enough, but more vulnerable even than Iago suspected. Shakespeare subtly intimates that Othello's prior nobility and his later incoherent brutality are two faces of the war god, but it remains

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the same god. Othello's occupation's gone partly because he married at all. Pent-up resentment, and not repressed lust, animates Othello as he avenges his lost autonomy in the name of his honor. Iago's truest triumph comes when Othello loses his sense of war's limits, and joins Iago's incessant campaign against *being*. "I am not what I am," Iago's credo, becomes Othello's implicit cry. The rapidity and totality of Othello's descent seems at once the play's one weakness and its most persuasive strength, as persuasive as Iago.

Desdemona dies so piteously that Shakespeare risks alienating us forever from Othello:

Des. O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!

Oth. Down, strumpet!

Des. Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight!

Oth. Nay, if you strive—

Des. But half an hour!

Oth. Being done, there is no pause—

Des. But while I say one prayer!

Oth. It is too late.

[V.ii.77–82]

Rather operatically, Shakespeare gives Desdemona a dying breath that attempts to exonerate Othello, which would indeed strain credulity if she were not, as Alvin Kernan wonderfully put it, "Shakespeare's word for love." We are made to believe that this was at once the most natural of young women, and also so loyal to her murderer that her exemplary last words sound almost ironic, given Othello's degradation: "Commend me to my kind lord—O, farewell!" It seems too much more for us to bear that Othello should refuse her final act of love: "She's like a liar gone to burning hell: / 'Twas I that killed her." The influential modern assaults upon Othello by T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis take their plausibility (such as it is) from Shakespeare's heaping up of Othello's brutality, stupidity, and unmitigated guilt. But Shakespeare allows Othello a great if partial recovery, in an astonishing final speech:

Soft you, a word or two before you go.
 I have done the state some service, and they know't:
 No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
 Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely, but too well,
 Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
 Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
 Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,
 Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
 Their medicinable gum. Set you down this,
 And say besides that in Aleppo once,
 Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
 I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
 And smote him—thus! *He stabs himself.*

[V.ii.336–54]

This famous and problematic outburst rarely provokes any critic to agree with any other, yet the Eliot–Leavis interpretation, which holds that Othello essentially is “cheering himself up,” cannot be right. The Moor remains as divided a character as Shakespeare ever created; we need give no credence to the absurd blindness of “loved not wisely, but too well,” or the outrageous self-deception of “one not easily jealous.” Yet we are moved by the truth of “perplexed in the extreme,” and by the invocation of Herod, “the base Judean” who murdered his Maccabean wife, Mariamme, whom he loved. The association of Othello with Herod the Great is the more shocking for being Othello’s own judgment upon himself, and is followed by the Moor’s tears, and by his fine image of weeping trees. Nor should a fair critic fail to be impressed by Othello’s verdict upon himself: that he has become an enemy of Venice, and as such must be slain. His suicide has

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nothing Roman in it: Othello passes sentence upon himself, and performs the execution. We need to ask what Venice would have done with Othello, had he allowed himself to survive. I venture that he seeks to forestall what might have been their politic decision: to preserve him until he might be of high use again. Cassio is no Othello; the state has no replacement for the Moor, and might well have used him again, doubtless under some control. All of the rifts in Othello that Iago sensed and exploited are present in this final speech, but so is a final vision of judgment, one in which Othello abandons his nostalgias for glorious war, and pitifully seeks to expiate what cannot be expiated—not, at least, by a farewell to arms.

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