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Othello

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Between the ages of 40 and 44, Shakespeare wrote his great tragedies. There are various peaks in his career. In the first period, he solves the problem of the historical chronicle play in *Henry IV,* and of a certain kind of comedy in *As You Like It.* Then, after a slight uncertainty, he solves the problem of tragedy and produces the five tragic masterpieces: *Othello, Macbeth, King Lear, Antony and Cleopatra,* and *Coriolanus.*

The particular kind of tragedy Shakespeare writes differs from Greek tragedy. Both assume that the tragic figure is a great or good man suffering from a flaw that brings him to destruction. If one asks, what is the matter with the Greek character, the answer is *hybris,* which is not translatable by our word *pride.* Hybris is the belief that one is omnipotent, a god. This doesn't cause a radical difference in the way you behave, but the tragedy is the gods' punishment for a man's feeling like this. The envy of the gods is aroused when someone powerful—a power derived from them—should claim to be their equal. The gods show the heroes that they aren't. The tragic heroes in Greek drama must therefore be great men, in a worldly sense. Members of the chorus in Greek tragedy can't be heroes. The whole point in a Greek tragedy is that the hero and his tragic fate are exceptional.

Shakespeare's tragic characters, on the other hand, suffer from the Christian sin of pride: knowing you aren't God, but trying to become Him—a sin of which any of us is capable. Hybris is the manifestation of overweening self-confidence, of over-security. Pride is the manifestation of a lack of security, of the anxiety that is due to lack of faith, and of a defiance of one's finite limitations as a human being. It is a form of despair. There are two types of despair: one is the despair of willing not to be oneself, the other is the despair of willing to be oneself. The official heroes of Shakespeare's tragedies are men of passion who will not to be themselves—their passions, not unlike the humours of Jonson's characters, are the attempt to hide from themselves what they are. The other type of tragic figure is Iago, a tragic hero without passion, who refuses to yield to what he knows, who wills to be himself, who knows what he is and refuses to change, who refuses to relate himself in love to others and insists on standing outside the community. Iago relates to others only negatively.

All great Shakespearean tragedies are about first, anxiety and security, and second, freedom and necessity. In Greek tragedy the pity lies in the inevitability of the hero's fate, in Shakespearean tragedy what is pitiable is that the hero chose as he did, because he could have chosen otherwise. *Romeo and Juliet* is a play that is untypically pathetic because Romeo and Juliet are too young to be entirely responsible for their choices—they are before the age of consent. For theatrical reasons it is convenient to pick people who play prominent roles in society, but pride can exist in anyone. In Greek tragedy, a member of the audience is part of the chorus, a spectator, but in Shakespearean tragedy, whatever his position, a member of the audience must say, "This is me." He is a participant as well as a spectator.

The only thing that's pure fate in Othello is the storm. Even the dropping of the handkerchief does not occur by absolutely pure chance. The storm (1) allows Desdemona and Cassio to meet before Othello gets to Cyprus, and (2) disposes of the Turkish fleet and gives the Venetians leisure. All the rest of the tragedy is character, either personal or sociopolitical. Because Othello himself, as a general, is indispensible to Venice in the political struggle with the Turks, the Venetians permit his miscegenation. But fate is also a function of other people's characters. As we see in *Othello,* there are two wrong attitudes that people can take toward events: they can pretend what happens isn't so, or they can succumb to what happens. Brabantio could have taken Desdemona in, Cassio needn't have gotten drunk, Emilia needn't have given the handkerchief to Iago, Desdemona needn't have lied about its being lost, Roderigo needn't have attacked Cassio, etc.

The play suffers from a certain contradiction of interest. Shakespeare began writing a tragedy about a man suffering from jealousy. Iago was just a necessary agent in that case. In the original story Iago was a plain villain who was in love with Desdemona, thinking she was in love with Cassio. As Shakespeare went on, however, he became interested in why people like evil, not for their own advantage but for its own sake. The effect of this shift in interest is that Othello becomes a secondary character and Iago dominates the whole play, which finally raises difficult problems for Shakespeare.

Aaron, Shylock, Richard III, and Don John the Bastard are all patently villainous characters. Nobody trusts them. The moment they come on stage, we say, "This is the bad man." Claudius, Proteus, Oliver, and Angelo are the same. They all have direct and visible motives: Claudius is

possessed by ambition, Proteus by rivalry, Oliver by envy, and Angelo by jealousy of purity. But the point about Iago is that everyone must trust him. He resembles Boyet, Friar Lawrence, Puck and Oberon, Prince Hal-Henry V, Hamlet, Pandarus, and the Duke of Vienna—all Machiavellian characters who manage people, though Iago is more like the characters in the comedies, Boyet and Puck, in that he does what he does for fun. Hal wants to rule, Hamlet to trap, Pandarus to revivify love, the Duke to make people conscious of what they are. Most Iagos on stage are impossible because they act sinister, like regular villains, so that no one will trust them. Iago must be plain and inconspicuous, absolutely ordinary, someone who could be chosen as a Secret Service man today, "honest" because he is what he looks like. Yet he must dominate the play by his will. Iago also says nothing poetically or intellectually interesting. His monologues don't square with this because, though Shakespeare may have begun the characterization of Iago as an ordinary malcontent, a then new idea, he soon realized that without soliloquies the audience would be at sea. But unlike Hamlet's soliloquies, which are most important, Iago's soliloquies reveal nothing—Iago can't explain his self to himself. To perform these soliloquies you must play them like Ariel or Puck, slightly mad and with terrific gaiety.

Iago is an example of the idea of the *acte gratuit*, a concept that is foreign to Greek thought. It first comes up in St. Augustine's *Confessions*, in the episode of the pear tree. Augustine writes that when he was young,

> I lusted to thieve, and did it, compelled by no hunger, nor poverty, but through a cloyedness of welldoing, and a pamperedness of iniquity. For I stole that, of which I had enough, and much better. Nor cared I to enjoy what I stole, but joyed in the theft and sin itself. A pear tree there was near our vineyard, laden with fruit, tempting neither for colour nor taste. To shake and rob this, some lewd young fellows of us went, late one night, (having according to our pestilent custom prolonged our sports in the streets till then,) and took huge loads, not for our eating, but to fling to the very hogs, having only tasted them. And this, but to do, what we liked only, because it was misliked. Behold my heart, O God, behold my heart, which Thou hadst pity upon in the bottom of the bottomless pit. Now, behold let my heart tell Thee, what it sought there, that I should be gratuitously evil, having no temptation to ill, but the ill itself. It was foul, and I loved it; I loved to perish, I loved mine own fault, not that for which I was faulty, but my fault itself.

The idea of such an action, a pure assertion of self-autonomy, seemed to Augustine to be the central problem of ethics. One acts not on a motive of pleasure or pain, or of the rational and the irrational, but just for the hell of it. St. Augustine was the first real psychologist for he was the first to see the basic fact about human nature, namely that the natural man hates nature, and that the only act that can really satisfy him is the *acte gratuit.* His ego resents every desire of his natural self for food, sex, pleasure, logical coherence, because desires are given not chosen, and his ego seeks constantly to assert its autonomy by doing something of which the requiredness is not given, something which is completely arbitrary, a pure act of choice. The *acte gratuit* may be considered as a special case under the heading of pleasure and pain or of rational and irrational, or it may be considered primary, with the other categories secondary—it depends upon your view of psychology. One can't prove it one way or the other. If you think the *acte gratuit* is primary, you believe that a man's deepest desire is to be free of necessity through an act of pure choice.

At the same time man wants to feel important, and it is from the immediately given feelings with which he identifies himself that the natural man derives his sense of self-importance. This places him in a dilemma, for the more he emancipates himself from given necessity, the more he loses his sense of importance and becomes prey to anxiety. Necessity—hunger, for example—conditions importance. Games of all kinds, including art, are *actes gratuits* in which the players obey the necessity of rules freely chosen by themselves. Other *actes gratuits* are criminal: a man asserts his freedom by disobeying a law and retains a sense of self-importance because the law he has disobeyed is an important one, one established either by God or his society. Much crime is magic, an attempt to make free with necessities. All *actes gratuits* involve the Fall of Man.

Charles Williams gives the best account of the Fall. "The nature of the Fall," he writes,

> —both while possible and when actual—is clearly defined. The "fruit of the tree" is to bring an increase of knowledge. That increase, however, is, and is desired as being, of a particular kind. It is not merely to know more, but to know in another method. It is primarily the advance (if it can be so called) from knowing good to knowing good and evil; it is (secondarily) the knowing "as gods." A certain knowledge was, by its nature, confined to divine beings. Its communication to man would be, by its nature, disastrous to man. . . .

God, Williams continues, may know evil through intelligence, but

> It was not so possible for man, and the myth is the tale of that impossibility. However solemn and intellectual the exposition of the act sounds, the act itself is simple enough. It is easy for us now, after the terrible and prolonged habit of mankind; it was not, perhaps, very difficult then—as easy as picking a fruit from a tree. It was merely to wish to know an antagonism in the good, to find out what the good would be like if a contradiction were introduced into it. Man desired to know schism in the universe. It was a knowledge reserved to God; man had been warned that he could not bear it—"in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." A serpentine subtlety overwhelmed that statement with a grander promise—"Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." Unfortunately to be as gods meant, for the Adam, to die, for to know evil, for them, was to know it not by pure intelligence but by experience. It was, precisely, to experience the opposite of good, that is, the deprivation of the good, the slow destruction of the good, and of themselves with the good.

Adam and Eve, Williams concludes, "knew good," but

> they wished to know good and evil. Since there was not—since there never has been and never will be—anything else than the good to know, they knew good as antagonism. All difference consists in the mode of knowledge. They had what they wanted. That they did not like it when they got it does not alter the fact that they certainly got it.

Iago tells Roderigo that he doesn't like the way Cassio, not he, got the Lieutenancy, and Roderigo asks why Iago then doesn't leave Othello. Iago professes an intention to take revenge—"I follow him to serve my turn upon him" (I.i.42)—and plays the worldly-wise cynic for Roderigo's benefit. But no one else seems to think that Iago has lost out for the job. Neither Othello, nor Cassio, nor Emilia thinks Iago should be jealous of Cassio's promotion. Iago also puts up the idea that Othello has cuckolded him, without taking it seriously, and again speaks faintly of taking revenge by seducing Desdemona:

> Now I do love her too;
> Not out of absolute lust (though peradventure
> I stand accountant for as great a sin)

> But partly led to diet my revenge,
> For that I do suspect the lusty Moor
> Hath leap'd into my seat. . . .
>
> (II.i.299–305)

If Iago had wanted revenge, he would have tried to have Desdemona seduced by someone. But he doesn't care about that—he just wants to make Othello jealous:

> And nothing can or shall content my soul
> Till I am even'd with him, wife for wife;
> Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor
> At least into a jealousy so strong
> That judgment cannot cure.
>
> (II.i.307–11)

Othello asks at the end, very reasonably, why Iago has done what he has done. Iago refuses to answer. He can't, any more than Leopold and Loeb could for their killing of the young boy. The whole point of revenge is to confront people: "Now I'll pay you for what you did." But Iago wants to destroy everyone. Out of Desdemona's goodness, he says, he will "make the net / That shall enmesh them all" (II.iii.367–68). Iago must confine himself to temptation. He must make people destroy themselves by making them instruments of his will. Once he has to take a hand, once he has to commit murder himself, he's lost. And I think Iago never lies about a point of fact. He may hold out false hopes to people who would never believe these hopes were they not blinded by their own desires, and he may select aspects of truth, but he doesn't lie about facts.

We are able to see what other characters are like by the way Iago acts towards them, and they emerge through their interactions with his greater consciousness. You'd expect Emilia to know Iago best—yet she gives him the handkerchief. She is stupid. She thinks men are all crazy anyway, that you must put up with them or they'll make a fuss. Anything for a quiet life. She calls Iago "wayward" when she steals the handkerchief to please him:

> My wayward husband hath a hundred times
> Woo'd me to steal it; but she so loves the token
> (For he conjur'd her she should ever keep it)
> That she reserves it evermore about her
> To kiss and talk to. I'll have the work ta'en out
> And give't Iago.

What he will do with it heaven knows, not I;
I nothing but to please his fantasy.

(III.iii.292–99)

Emilia doesn't think too clearly about what life is about. She has a drive not to think about what she is like or what anyone else is like. She condones adultery, and then rails on Bianca. Stupid Emilia, by stealing the handkerchief, kills Desdemona.

Roderigo is the stupidest of the men whom Iago deals with, but he is the one who destroys Iago. Roderigo is neither handsome nor bright, and he is envious of those who are, but he does have one asset—money. He is the type who buys what he wants with money, including sleeping with a lot of girls. He won't love anyone, however, because he is unattractive and afraid he won't be loved back. He may, though, care for Desdemona a little. He wants to be like Cassio and Iago. Iago manages him by treating him as worldly-wise. Iago tries to get Roderigo to get Desdemona's marriage to Othello annulled, and Brabantio says that he wishes Roderigo had her. But when the marriage is confirmed, Roderigo is ready to give up because of the element of affection for Desdemona. Iago then talks of the great power of his money—"Put money in thy purse. . . . Fill thy purse with money. . . . Make all the money thou canst" (I.iii.346, 354, 362)—which is what Roderigo would like to believe. In the next Act, Iago suggests to Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio because of Cassio's beauty as well as Othello's physical unattractiveness, again reasons that appeal to Roderigo and that Iago uses to convince him that he must get rid of Cassio:

Iago. First, I must tell thee this: Desdemona is directly in love with him.

Rod. With him? Why, 'tis not possible.

Iago. Lay thy finger thus, and let thy soul be instructed. Mark me with what violence she first lov'd the Moor, but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies; and will she love him still for prating? Let not thy discreet heart think it. Her eye must be fed; and what delight shall she have to look on the devil? When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there should be, again to inflame it and give satiety a fresh appetite, loveliness in favour, sympathy in years, manners, and beauties; all which the Moor is defective in. Now for want of these requir'd conveniences, her delicate tenderness will find itself abus'd, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor. Very nature will instruct her in it and compel her to some second

> choice. Now, sir, this granted (as it is a most pregnant and unforc'd position), who stands so eminent in the degree of this fortune as Cassio does?
> (II.i.220–42)

In Act IV, in their last set-to, Roderigo becomes suspicious, and Iago puts forth the idea that Roderigo kill Cassio. Roderigo is not suited to this employment—he's cowardly and he's shocked, and Iago has to incite him very strongly. But because of his fear and guilt, he fails to bring the murder off, and this causes Iago's downfall. Iago thought Roderigo was easier to handle than he proves.

Brabantio is an old widower, with an only child, who puts his trust in birth and breeding. His real satisfaction in life is a daughter who adores him, and he resents her having any suitor. Brabantio wants his daughter to remain a child. Iago knows just how to treat him, repeatedly stressing the image of his beautiful, nobly-born daughter in bed with a black man:

> Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe. . . . you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse. . . . I am one, sir, that come to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.
> (I.i.88–89, 111–12, 116–18)

The business about magic (I.i.172–74) is truer than Brabantio or others realize. Mysteriously, we're told at the end of the play that he died of grief over the marriage.

Cassio is a quite familiar type—he gets on with women much better than with men. He's a ladies' man, not a seducer, but he's better at holding wool in the drawing room than being in a barroom where he's ill at ease—women shouldn't be there, anyway. He wants to be authoritative and one of the boys, but when in trouble, he runs to the ladies. How right that he should be the one to be quarrelsome when he gets tight, a characteristic of a person who has hidden resentments. He wants to get friendly with Iago, the "simple soldier," and he fights Montano, the governor of Cyprus, whom he would like to be. Innocent bystanders at drunken parties often become the target of hidden resentments. Iago gets Cassio to drink by playing on his wish to be one of the boys, and afterwards he finds it easy to get him to go to Desdemona.

The nasty side of Cassio shows up in his relation to Bianca. She loves him and he doesn't love her, and she is of a lower class, both of which give him an unaccustomed feeling of power, but he abuses his power

over her out of a sense of his own inferiority. He's cruel in giving the handkerchief to Bianca to copy, knowing she will think it's from another woman and become jealous—that is sadism. Cassio doesn't treat Bianca badly in private, but he talks unpleasantly about her in public, which eventually helps undo him and precipitate the climax of the play, since Othello overhears him and thinks he is talking of Desdemona. He refuses to stay with Othello during his fit. He might have given or been given an explanation, but Cassio is frightened by Iago's description of Othello's bad temper.

Desdemona is a young schoolgirl who wants above all to be a grown-up. Othello wins her by the tale of what he has done, by the romantic idea of adventure—ironically, this really is a kind of magic, though not Brabantio's notion of magic. He does not win her by sexual attraction. She is afraid of sex. Othello is an older man and a father image to her. At the same time she behaves as if she knows she's conferring a favor on him, because her color puts her in a superior position. She's a romantic girl going slumming. And she wants to get away from home. She pushes Cassio's case tactlessly, because she's excited by the idea of a woman's power over a soldier. She's never done anything, she wants to do something, and she overdoes it. She drops the handkerchief when she is shocked by Othello's being short with her for the first time. When she has to confess the loss of the handkerchief, Othello's rage makes her see him as a person for the first time, and she doesn't understand him at all and is frightened. When she hears him call her a strumpet and a whore, "that cunning whore of Venice / That married with Othello" (IV.ii.89–90), she doesn't ask for an explanation, she cries. In her last conversation with Emilia, Desdemona begins to talk like a woman for the first time, and begins to realize the meaning of adultery as a circumstance of life, not just of books. She may see her love for Othello as romantic, but in calling Ludovico a "proper man," she may also be thinking that he is the sort of man she should have married. In time she might well have been unfaithful.

Othello is the black outsider who wants to become a member of the community that only tolerates him because it cannot do without his military competence. He sees Desdemona as a way of uniting himself to the community and being loved and accepted as a person. The marriage is a way of making the grade, but it also masks his own inner insecurity. He initially thinks people love him very much for fear that they don't love him at all. His paranoiac suspicion is an expression of fear that people are ignoring him. He therefore makes himself the center of the

universe in a negative way, preferring a negative interest in him to no interest at all.

There are two kinds of sexual jealousy. Ordinary sexual jealousy involves the infidelity of a person who has given himself to you when you discover that you can't retain that gift. The bigger type is the jealousy of a person seen as a goddess or god-idol. In this type, (a) the idol must act in accord with your will, and (b) must act so of his own free will. Here, the moment you doubt, you're sunk, because once the idol is seen as human, like oneself, all assurances, all acts, can have a double interpretation. Either you must give up the idol or you must realize that you're dependent on another human being. Iago has only to suggest suspicion to Othello. All he has to do is cite a fact, like Desdemona's deception of Brabantio, and Othello's whole world quickly collapses:

> I had been happy if the general camp,
> Pioners 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 troop, and the big wars
> That make 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!
> And O ye mortal engines whose rude throats
> Th' immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
> Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone.
>
> (III.iii.345–57)

But Othello knows nothing. What does he know? Doubt and jealousy. Iago's report of Cassio's dream (III.iii.413–26) may be read as simply a lie. But it can also be thought of as perfectly true—I'm more in accord with this interpretation. It leaves Othello to answer his own questions. In the last scene Desdemona finally asks for evidence, but too late.

The big figures in Shakespeare's tragedies do not learn anything—that is the ultimate tragedy of Shakespearean tragedy. Othello says in his last 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 lov'd not wisely, but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand
(Like the base Indian) threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdu'd eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their med'cinable gum. Set you down this;
And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog
And smote him—thus. *He stabs himself.*

(V.ii.338–56)

Othello learns nothing, remains in defiance, and is damned. He cannot think why he did what he did, or realize what was wrong. His thoughts are not on Desdemona at all. He just recalls he did some service to the state, and he ends by identifying himself with another outsider, the Moslem Turk. He has no realization of why he was jealous. It's easy for us to see that Othello and Desdemona should not have married, but he never does.

Given Iago's knowledge, he should be a saint. There must be some significance in the fact that Iago is the only person in the play who exhibits a knowledge of Holy Writ: "I am not what I am" (I.i.65), he says, and he can lecture and catechize on virtue like a theologian. His lines, in fact, have frequent theological overtones and allusions. In Iago we have, I think, a very remarkable portrait by Shakespeare of the villain as an inverted saint, a saint manqué. On the surface, nothing might seem less probable. Yet Shakespeare was surely right in suggesting this, because the saint and the villain have very similar psychologies. In both, ethics and aesthetics become almost the same thing. There is a similar detachment and similar freedom in both with respect to human relations, an absence of the usual scruples and motivations that govern or trouble most living.

Iago has the knowledge of living described by the hero in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*:

> I believe that the best definition of man is the ungrateful biped. But that is not all, that is not his worst defect; his worst defect is his perpetual moral obliquity, perpetual—from the days of the Flood to the Schleswig-Holstein period. . . . The only thing one can't say [about the history of the world] is that it's rational. The very word sticks in one's throat. And, indeed, this is the odd thing that is continually happening: there are continually turning up in life moral and rational persons, sages and lovers of humanity, who make it their object to live all their lives as morally and rationally as possible, to be, so to speak, a light to their neighbours simply in order to show them that it is possible to live morally and rationally in this world. And yet we all know that those very people sooner or later have been false to themselves, playing some queer trick, often a most unseemly one. Now I ask you: what can be expected of man since he is a being endowed with such strange qualities? Shower upon him every earthly blessing, drown him in a sea of happiness, so that nothing but bubbles of bliss can be seen on the surface; give him economic prosperity, such that he should have nothing else to do but sleep, eat cakes and busy himself with the continuation of his species, and even then out of sheer ingratitude, sheer spite, man would play you some nasty trick. He would even risk his cakes and would deliberately desire the most fatal rubbish, the most uneconomical absurdity, simply to introduce into all this positive good sense his fatal fantastic element. It is just his fantastic dreams, his vulgar folly, that he will desire to retain, simply in order to prove to himself—as though that were so necessary—that men still are men and not the keys of a piano, which the laws of nature threaten to control so completely that soon one will be able to desire nothing but by the calendar. And that is not all: even if man really were nothing but a piano-key, even if this were proved to him by natural science and mathematics, even then he would not become reasonable, but would purposely do something perverse out of simple ingratitude, simply to gain his point. . . . the whole work of man really seems to consist in nothing but proving to himself every minute that he is a man and not a piano-key! . . .
>
> You will scream at me (that is, if you condescend to do so) that no one is touching my free will, that all they are concerned with is that

my will should of itself, of its own free will, coincide with my own normal interests, with the laws of nature and arithmetic.

Good heavens, gentlemen, what sort of free will is left when we come to tabulation and arithmetic, when it will all be a case of twice two makes four? Twice two makes four without my will. As if free will meant that!