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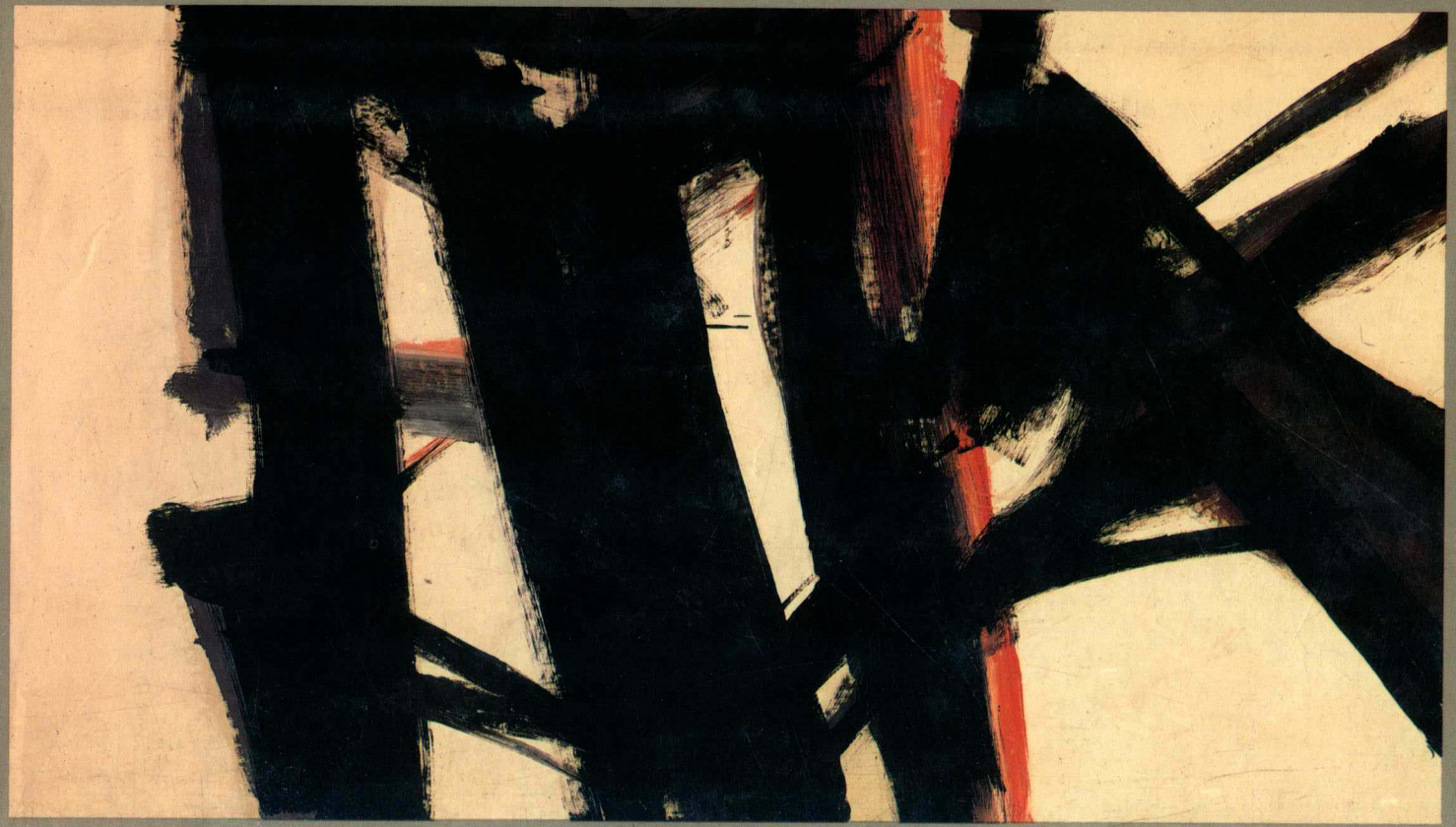
INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM



William Shakespeare's
Othello

Modern Critical Interpretations

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Othello

Edited and with an introduction by

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Editor's Note

This book brings together what I judge to be a representative selection of the best modern criticism on Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological sequence of their original publication. I am grateful to Cornelia Pearsall for her aid in editing this volume.

My introduction meditates upon Iago as an incarnate spirit of war, following a suggestion of Harold Goddard. The chronological sequence of criticism begins with the philosopher Stanley Cavell, who develops his insight that "Iago is everything Othello must deny, and which, denied, is not killed but works on, like poison, like furies."

Susan Snyder emphasizes a tension in *Othello* between general and particular senses of "nature," so as to indicate Shakespeare's apprehension of "the vulnerability of love." In an analysis of power in the play, Stephen Greenblatt broods on what he calls "an *excessive* aesthetic delight," the love of Desdemona for Othello, which intimates a power more profoundly subversive than any power manifested either by Othello or Iago.

Mark Rose reads the play as Othello's "martial pastoral," a belated romance of chivalry subjected to the tortures of Iago's experimentalism. Studying love, sexuality, and marriage in *Othello*, Carol Thomas Neely finds no resolutions in "the pain and derision of the ending," in which "the conflict between the men and the women has not been eliminated or resolved."

Patricia Parker, in an advanced rhetorical reading, reminds us that Shakespeare's language needs to be heard on every level of discourse in which Renaissance rhetoric is embedded: politics, theology, logic, the ideology of sexual difference. In a general overview of *Othello*, the distinguished poet Anthony Hecht, whose own poetry is deeply tinged by

Shakespeare's Venetian tragedy, finds "a painful but undoubted nobility" in Othello's suicide, which has caused considerable controversy in modern criticism.

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Introduction

I

Dr. Samuel Johnson found in the representation of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona "such proofs of Shakespeare's skill in human nature, as, I suppose, it is vain to seek in any modern writer." The High Romantic Victor Hugo gave us the contrary formula: "Next to God, Shakespeare created most," which does not seem to me a remystification of Shakespeare's characters, but rather a shrewd hint in what might be called the pragmatics of aesthetics. Shakespeare was a mortal god (as Hugo aspired to be) because his art was not a mimesis at all. A mode of representation that is always out ahead of any historically unfolding reality necessarily contains us more than we can contain it. A. D. Nuttall wonderfully remarks of Iago that he "chooses which emotions he will experience. He is not just motivated, like other people. Instead he *decides* to be motivated." Though Nuttall says that makes of Iago a Camus-like existentialist, I would think Iago is closer to a god, or a devil, and so perhaps resembles his creator, who evidently chose emotions to be experienced, and decided whether or not to be motivated. We do not feel Othello to be a critique of Shakespeare, but in some sense Iago is just that, being a playwright, like Edmund in *King Lear*, like Hamlet, and like William Shakespeare. Hamlet's "the rest is silence" has a curious parallel in Iago's "from this time forth I never will speak word," even though Hamlet dies immediately and Iago survives to die mutely under torture.

It is not that Iago is in Hamlet's class as an intellectual consciousness. No, Iago is comparable to Edmund, who in *King Lear* out-plots everyone else in the royal world of the play. Othello is a glorious soldier and a sadly simple man, who could have been ruined by a villain far less gifted than Iago. A. C. Bradley's charming notion is still true: exchange Othello and

Hamlet in one another's plays, and there would be no plays. Othello would chop Claudius down as soon as the ghost had convinced him, and Hamlet would have needed only a few moments to see through Iago, and to begin destroying him by overt parody. But there are no Hamlets, Falstaffs, or inspired clowns in *Othello, The Moor of Venice*, and poor Desdemona is no Portia.

The Moor of Venice is sometimes the neglected part of the tragedy's title. To be the Moor of Venice, its hired general, is an uneasy honor, Venice being, then and now, the uneasiest of cities. Othello's pigmentation is notoriously essential to the plot. He is hardly a natural man in relation to the subtle Venetians, but the sexual obsessiveness he catches from Iago develops into a dualism that renders him insane. A marvelous monism has yielded to the discontents of Venetian civilization, and we remain haunted by intimations of a different Othello, as though Desdemona, even before Iago's intervention, has been loss as well as gain for the previously integral soldier. Many critics have noted Othello's ruefulness when he speaks in act 1 of having exchanged his "unhoused free condition" for his love of "the gentle Desdemona." When we think of him in his glory we remember his ending a street battle with one line of marvelous authority:

> Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.

"Sheathe or die" would be the reductive reading, but Othello in his zenith defies reduction, and a fuller interpretation would emphasize the easiness and largeness of this superbly military temperament. How does so spacious and majestic an authority degenerate so rapidly into an equivalent of Spenser's Malbecco? Like Malbecco, Othello forgets he is a man and his name in effect becomes Jealousy. Jealousy in Hawthorne becomes Satan, after having been Chillingworth, while in Proust, first Swann and then Marcel become art historians of jealousy, as it were, obsessive scholars desperately searching for every visual detail of betrayal. Freud's *delusional* jealousy involves repressed homosexuality, and seems inapplicable to Othello, though not wholly so to Iago. Jealousy in Shakespeare—parent to its presence in Hawthorne, Proust, and Freud—is a mask for the fear of death, since what the jealous lover fears is that there will not be time or space enough for himself. It is one of the peculiar splendors of *Othello* that we cannot understand Othello's belated jealousy without first understanding Iago's primal envy of Othello, which is at the hidden center of the drama. drama.

II

Frank Kermode curiously says that "Iago's naturalist ethic . . . is a wicked man's version of Montaigne," a judgment that Ben Jonson might have welcomed, but that I find alien to Shakespeare. Iago is not a naturalist but the fiercest version in all literature of an ideologue of the reductive fallacy, which can be defined as the belief that what is most real about any one of us is the worst thing that possibly could be true of us. "Tell me what she or he is *really* like," the reductionist keeps saying, and means: "Tell me the worst thing you can." Presumably the reductionist cannot bear to be deceived, and so becomes a professional at deception.

Iago is Othello's standard-bearer, a senior officer skilled and courageous in the field, as we have every reason to believe. "I am not what I am" is his chilling motto, and is endless to meditation. "I am that I am" is God's name in answer to the query of Moses, and reverberates darkly and antithetically in "I am not what I am." God will be where and when He will be, present or absent as is His choice. Iago is the spirit that will not be, the spirit of absence, a pure negativity. We know therefore from the start why Iago hates Othello, who is the largest presence, the fullest being in Iago's world, and particularly in battle. The hatred pretends to be empirical, but is ontological, and unquenchable in consequence. If Platonic eros is the desire for what one hasn't got, then Iago's hatred is the drive to destroy what one hasn't got. We shudder when the maddened Othello vows death to Desdemona as a "fair devil" and promotes Iago to be his lieutenant, for Iago superbly responds, "I am your own for ever," and means the reverse: "You too are now an absence."

Step by step, Iago falls into his own gap of being, changing as he hears himself plot, improvising a drama that must destroy the dramatist as well as his protagonists:

> IAGO: And what's he then that says I play the villain,
> When this advice is free I give, and honest,
> Probal to thinking, and indeed the course
> To win the Moor again? For 'tis most easy
> Th' inclining Desdemona to subdue
> In any honest suit; she's fram'd as fruitful
> As the free elements. And then for her
> To win the Moor, were['t] to renounce his baptism.
> All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,
> His soul is so enfetter'd to her love,

That she may make, unmake, do what she list,
Even as her appetite shall play the god
With his weak function. How am I then a villain,
To counsel Cassio to this parallel course,
Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!
When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now; for whiles this honest fool
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I'll pour this pestilence into his ear—
That she repeals him for her body's lust,
And by how much she strives to do him good,
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all.

Harold C. Goddard called Iago a "moral pyromaniac," and we can hear Iago setting fire to himself throughout the play, but particularly in this speech. I think that Goddard, a profoundly imaginative critic, captured the essence of Iago when he saw that Iago was always at war, making every encounter, every moment, into an act of destruction. War is the ultimate reductive fallacy, since to kill your enemy you must believe the worst that can be believed about him. What changes in Iago as he listens to himself is that he loses perspective, because his rhetoric isolates by burning away context. Isolation, Freud tells us, is the compulsive's guarantee that the coherence of his thinking will be interrupted. Iago interposes intervals of monologue so as to defend himself against his own awareness of change in himself, and thus ironically intensifies his own change into the totally diabolic. As with Shakespeare's Richard III, Iago's monologues are swerves away from the Divine "I am that I am," past "I am not what I am," on to "I am not," negation mounting to an apotheosis.

The collapse of Othello is augmented in dignity and poignance when we gain our full awareness of Iago's achieved negativity, war everlasting. No critic need judge Othello to be stupid, for Othello does not incarnate war, being as he is a sane and honorable warrior. He is peculiarly vulnerable to Iago precisely because Iago is his standard-bearer, the protector of his colors and reputation in battle, pledged to die rather than allow the colors to be taken. His equivalent to Iago's monologues is a stirring elegy for

the self, a farewell to war as a valid—because confined—occupation:

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

"Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!" has yielded to Iago's incessant war against being. Othello, within his occupation's limits, has the greatness of the tragic hero. Iago breaks down those limits from within, from war's own camp, and so Othello has no chance. Had the attack come from the world outside war's dominion, Othello could have maintained some coherence, and gone down in the name of the purity of arms. Shakespeare, courting a poetics of pain, could not allow his hero that consolation.

Epistemology and Tragedy: A Reading of *Othello*

Stanley Cavell

The last part of the book of which my reading of *Othello* takes the last pages is in effect a meditation on the relation between the title concepts of the two concluding essays of my book *Must We Mean What We Say?*—"Knowing and Acknowledging" and "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*"—that is, a meditation on the reciprocity between acknowledgment and avoidance, hence between skepticism and tragedy. In particular, the reading of *Othello* is the most detailed of several moments I choose in Shakespeare from which to study the imagination of the body's fate in the progress of skepticism.

To orient ourselves, let us begin by considering briefly how it is that we are to understand, at the height of *The Winter's Tale*, Hermione's reappearance as a statue. Specifically I ask how it is that we are to understand Leontes's acceptance of the "magic" that returns her to flesh and blood, and hence to him. This is a most specific form of resurrection. Accepting it means accepting the idea that she had been turned to stone; that that was the right means for her disappearance from life. So I am asking for the source of Leontes's conviction in the rightness of that fate. Giving the question that form, the form of my answer is by now predictable: for her to return to him is for him to acknowledge her; and for him to acknowledge her is for him to acknowledge his relation to her; in particular to acknowledge what his denial of her has done to her, hence to him. So Leontes recognizes the fate of stone to be the consequence of his particular

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skepticism. One can see this as the projection of his own sense of numbness, of living death. But then why was this *his* fate? It is a most specific form of remorse or of (self-) punishment.

Its environment is provided by a tale of harrowing by jealousy, and a consequent accusation of adultery—an accusation known by everyone else to be insanely false. Hence Leontes is inevitably paired with Othello. I call attention to two further ways in which *The Winter's Tale* is a commentary on *Othello*, and therefore contrariwise. First, both plays involve a harrowing of the power of knowing the existence of another (as chaste, intact, as what the knower knows his other to be). Leontes refuses to believe a true oracle; Othello insists on believing a false one. Second, in both plays the consequence for the man's refusal of knowledge of his other is an imagination of stone. It is not merely an appetite for beauty that produces Othello's most famous image of his victim as a piece of cold and carved marble ("whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth, as monumental alabaster"). Where does his image come from?

Before I can give my answer I still need one further piece of orientation in thinking of tragedy as a kind of epistemological problem, or as the outcome of the problem of knowledge—of the dominance of modern philosophical thought by the problem of knowledge. Earlier, in meditating on the existence of other minds, I was led to ask how we are to understand the other as having displaced or absorbed the weight of God, the task of showing me that I am not alone in the universe. I was claiming there to be giving a certain derivation for the problem of the other. But I was also echoing one formulation Descartes gives his motive in wanting to find what is beyond doubt, namely, to know beyond doubt that he is not alone in the world (Third Meditation). Now I ask, in passing but explicitly, why is it Descartes does not try to defeat that possibility of isolation in what would seem the directest and surest way, by locating the existence of one other finite being.

He says simply that he can easily imagine that ideas "which represent men similar to myself" could be "formed by the combination of my other ideas, of myself, of corporeal objects, and of God, even though outside of me there were no other men in the world." He is, of course, setting up a powerful move toward God. And we can gather from this—something that seems borne out in the sequel of this piece of writing—that the problem of others (other finite beings) is not discovered, or derived, by Descartes to be a special problem of knowledge; this is surely one reason it would not have been discovered to be such in subsequent epistemology. However, the more one meditates on the unique place Descartes makes for