SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO.¹

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UNDER the spell of Shakespeare's Hamlet, of its people and of its poetry, the audience is impressed with the inevitability of Hamlet's end. As an imaginative apprehension, it incorporates itself with the whole stock of our cumulative awarenesses of life. It becomes a spiritual part of the hoarded body of our experience which impels the mind to seek some sign of shape and meaning in the mystery of mortality. The impressive and inescapable weight which imagination gives to the personal pain and to the world's loss in Hamlet's destruction increases the obstinacy of man's questionings of his fate. But perhaps the intellectual acquiescence which is part of our imaginative response to the play does not necessarily justify subsequent intellectual conviction. Or may be, if only to find consolation for our own lot, we must look for hints to mitigate the tragic sense of mortal existence. As the individual he is, and in his own particular phenomenal world, Hamlet is inevitably doomed. But is his doom demanded by the inevitable nature of things? May it not be the outcome of qualities and circumstances which are accidental and adventitious rather than of the essence of life itself? If it be not, is it yet essential to the human hope that man must push his moral imperatives till they reach to the uttermost zenith of human ideals? From another point of view, is the pressure of external circumstance exerted on Hamlet by his external world a factitious or a controllable force, or has it the authority of necessity? We are thrown back on the primary problem. What, indeed, are the essential elements of human

¹ The substance of a lecture delivered in the Rylands Library on the 10th October, 1945 and later, as one of the Clark Lectures at Cambridge. As it is included with other material in a volume, Shakespearian Tragedy, now being made at the Cambridge University Press, permission to print it here is due to the kindness of the Syndics of that press.
Is man so fixed in spiritual form that he has always been and always must be exposed to the hazard of the tragic power within and without his own nature? Has such tragic liability an absolute universality? Or in the course of man's history, through the force of race, of tradition, of religion and of surrounding circumstance, has mankind assumed from time and place their needless accessory attributes? If he has, are they peculiar to time and place, or indispensable to his inherent nature? Does history warrant a hope that in some such way as this the absolute grip of tragedy may slacken its ruthless strangulation of human happiness? Is the tragic universe, indeed, an artificial structure of man's disordered dreams, an embodied and articulated fear, and not in fact a dispensation eternally invested with the compulsion of necessity? These are the thoughts which hurtle in the brain when Hamlet has become a living part of its content.

The next story which laid hold of Shakespeare's imagination, Othello's, brought questionings of this kind into the focus of his imaginative exploration. No doubt the story seized his attention at the outset by the vivid depth and breadth of its immediate human interest. But as his imagination warmed to the re-creation of the figures who enacted its incidents, he found himself confronting an imaginative universe in which forces dormant or inactive in Hamlet are the operative agents of its tragedy.

Othello is the only one of the four great tragedies which is built on a contemporary novel, contemporary, that is, in the fullest sense, not only put into circulation contemporaneously in the way in which Belleforest gave the Hamlet story its currency, but a tale told by a contemporary of Shakespeare's and made up of incidents from their contemporary world. It was a tale which had been told in his Hecatommithi by the sixteenth-century Italian, Cinthio, novelist, critic, and dramatist himself,

1 No Elizabethan translation of Cinthio's story is known. The original Italian was published in 1565 as the seventh story of the third deca of La Prima Parte de gli Hecatommithi di M. Giovanbattista Giraldi Cinthio (appresso Lionard Torrentino), pp. 571-586. A French translation, by Gabriel Chappuys, appeared in Premier Volume des Cent Excellentes Nouvelles de M. Jean Baptiste Giraldy Cynthiaen, Paris, 1584, pp. 323-333. This French version is very scarce. It follows the original with a literal fidelity rare in such translations. Its closeness

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whose doctrine and practice inaugurated a determinative movement in the making of Renaissance tragedy. Cinthio urged his contemporaries to seek their dramatic material, not in ancient traditional myth, but in stories steeped in contemporary sentiment and orientated by contemporary outlook, such, for instance, as their modern love-stories were. Although Cinthio himself dramatised some of his own novels, he did not turn his *Othello* into a play. Yet as a story, it satisfied all the conditions he required in dramatic material. It was a love-story such as might have happened in his own day, and it told of such responsive passions and other motives for behaviour in its people as would strike its readers with the immediate effect of naturalness. It handled a particular problem of immediate contemporary interest, the situation created by the marriage of a man and a woman who are widely different in race, in tradition and in customary way of life. Though Shakespeare probably picked the story up because of the rich promise in it of passionate dramatic interest, his imaginative insight, once excited, pierced beneath the plot and its superficial circumstance to explore whatever essential dramatic substance might lie beneath. His genius sought to discover how far the composite stuff of the story shaped itself into a coherent human world. In the process, his imagination converts Cinthio’s melodrama into tragedy.

The first impulse to the process is an instigation from Cinthio himself: for Cinthio made his Desdemona formulate a kind of moral to the whole tale. Lamenting the sudden change in Othello’s attitude towards her, she unburdens herself to Emilia, telling her that she fears that her example will be cited to posterity for a warning not to marry a man whose nature, race, upbringing, beliefs and mode of life are so different from one’s own. Desdemona’s words in Cinthio are not quite so amply explicit as that; but what he makes her say seems to require is such that it proffers not the slightest clue as to whether Shakespeare had the tale from the Italian or the French. The effective words in the passage from Cinthio cited in the text below (p. 31) occur as follows: ‘i’ay grâde peur que ie ne donne exemple aux ieunes filles, de ne marier, contre la volonté de leurs parens, & que les femmes Italiennes n’apprennent de moy, de ne s’accompagner d’homme, que la Nature, le Ciel, & la maniere de vivre rend differens de nous’ (p. 329v).
such amplification in a modern English context: 'io non sò, che mi dica io del Moro, egli soleva essere verso me tutto amore, hora, da non sò che pochi giorni in quà, è divenuto un'altro; e temo molto di non essere io quella, che dia esempio alle giovani di non maritarsi contra il voler de suoi; e che de me le Donne Italiane imparino, di non si accompagnare con huomo, cui la Natura, e il Cielo, e il modo della vita disgiunge da noi'\(^1\)—‘not to marry a man divided from us by Nature, Heaven and mode of life’.

This hint of Cinthio’s is seized by Shakespeare and becomes a main motive in the thematic structure of *Othello*. Brabantio is completely mystified by his daughter’s choice: ‘for nature so preposterously to err’

\[\ldots\ text{in spite of nature,}\]
\[\ldots\ text{Of years, of country, credit, everything—}\]
\[\ldots\ text{To fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!}\]
\[\ldots\ text{It is a judgement maim'd and most imperfect}\]
\[\ldots\ text{That will confess perfection so could err}\]
\[\ldots\ text{Against all rules of nature’}.\(^2\)

Iago has the sensualist’s explanation of it, and the sensualist’s sardonic expectation of the outcome of a union between two such complete opposites as are an erring barbarian and a supersubtle Venetian. Only one result is possible; it conforms so obviously to general truth that the putting of it as a truism will suffice to convince Othello that his wife must be false to him:

\[\ldots\ as, —to be bold with you—\]
\[\ldots\ text{Not to affect many proposed matches}\]
\[\ldots\ text{Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,}\]
\[\ldots\ text{Whereeto we see in all things nature tends—}\]
\[\ldots\ text{Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,}\]
\[\ldots\text{Foul disproportion, thought unnatural’}.\(^3\)

Shakespeare continues throughout to give far greater prominence to the motive than did Cinthio. In Cinthio, indeed, it is little more than a moral attached to his novel, and not really an operative agent in it; it is a circumstance taken for granted rather than a sequence exhibited as cause and effect. He seldom recurs to it or to its incidental implications. On one occasion only he mentions that Othello is black: he lets his Iago explain to

\(^1\) *Hecatommithi*, p. 480. \(^2\) *Othello* I, iii, 96. \(^3\) *Ibid.*, III, iii, 228.
Othello that perhaps Desdemona is pleading for Cassio's restoration because, finding now that her husband's blackness is loathsome to her, she seeks consolation in Cassio. Only one further detail relevant to this racial nature is made explicit in the Italian version: Desdemona tells her husband that, like all Moors, he is of such hot nature that mere trifles stir him to anger and to thoughts of vengeance: 'ma voi Mori sete di natura tanto caldi, ch'ogni poco di cosa vi move ad ira, & a vendetta'.

Such simple suggestions grew vastly in Shakespeare's imaginative re-creation of the story. Othello is the heir of a race and of a culture alien altogether from the society and the civilisation of Venice. To the refined social habits and the civil institutions of the Italian world he is a complete alien, an extravagant and wheeling stranger of here and everywhere. Its curled darlings, its manners of obsequious and ceremonial bondage, the elaborate graces of its social discourse, those soft parts of conversation which chamberers have, all these are foreign and unfamiliar to Othello. Its simpler amenities and its customary household comforts are luxuries which he has only come to know in the last nine moons since his military occupation brought him to Venice. Before that, and he is now somewhat declined into the vale of years, the young effects in him defunct, his boyhood and his adult life had been lived in the unhoused free condition of the soldier, in the tented field, a flinty and steel couch for his softest bed, inured to all circumstance else that pertains to feats of broil and battle. In his own distant homeland, he had fetched his life and being from men of royal siege, but his royal inheritance was the simple valour of those who have won leadership of men in an altogether more primitive cultural society, men of a

1 'per lo piacere, ch'ella si piglia con lui, qual'hora egli in casa vostra viene, come colei, a cui già e venuta à noia questa vostra nerezza' (p. 577). In the French version, 'pour le plaisir qu'elle a avec luy, quand il va en vostre maison, comme celle, qui est déjà ennuyée de vostre taint noir' (p. 327). Whenever in the text above the people of Cinthio's story are referred to, they are given the names which Shakespeare gave to them. Cinthio gives only Desdemona a personal name. Othello is simply 'il Moro', and the others have merely occupational labels, e.g. Iago is 'l'alfiero', Cassio 'il capo di squadra', etc.

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race whose country has always been much nearer to the sun and
on whose characters the heat of the sun whereunder they were
born has exercised its influence, distilling and sublimating their
fluid humours, and marking them off from other men distinct­
ively by the outward signs of their countenance. For Othello is
incontestably black, black with the blackness of a negro, not
merely tinted with the sun-tan of the Hollywood sheik. ‘ Black
as mine own face’, he says himself; ‘ for that I am black’, he
repeats; and Brabantio refers in disgust to his ‘ sooty bosom ’.
Neither Coleridge nor Lamb could bring themselves to accept
a negroid Othello. Coleridge would grant him a sort of in­
determinate blackness, but nothing more negroid. Lamb would
not even retain the colour, dissolving its momentary pictorial
appearance into the poetic hues of Othello’s moral brightness.
But Othello is in fact negroid—‘ thick-lips ’ he is called.
Another of Shakespeare’s Moors, Aaron, in Titus Andronicus,
is called by the Roman Titus ‘ a coal-black Moor ’;¹ and
Aaron himself described a fellow-Moor as a ‘ thick-lipp’d
slave ’.²

Distinctive as his countenance is the soul of the man Othello.
Feeling life as a thing to be lived rather than as a succession of
experiences to be measured philosophically, his sense of values
is built on the worth of moral qualities which inspire fitting and
effective action, and hardly at all on the abstract compatibility
of articles comprised in a metaphysical or a religious creed.
He has adopted the Christian faith and holds it with unaffected
sincerity. To describe the strength of Desdemona’s power over
him, Iago says that she, and she alone, might even move him
to give up his most precious hopes—

‘ were it to renounce his baptism,
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin ’.³

Implicitly he has accepted its essential dogmas. They are
links to bind him in longed-for domestic happiness with the
entirely Christian Desdemona. He adopts all Christianity’s
major articles of belief; for instance, belief in the immortality
of the soul. It is the worth of man’s eternal soul which makes

¹ Titus Andronicus, III, iii, 78.
² Ibid., IV, ii, 175.
³ Othello, II, iii, 348.
him different from a dog. In the dread solemnity of his putting Desdemona to death, he will destroy her body, but not her soul:

'I would not kill thy unprepared spirit;
No, Heaven forfend! I would not kill thy soul'.

But these pronouncements of accepted Christian doctrine spring vitally to his mind only in the stress of agitated feeling, and most often in immediate connection with some crucial action. He holds the threat of everlasting damnation over Iago to compel him to undistorted honesty:

'If thou dost slander her and torture me,
Never pray more . . .
For nothing canst thou to damnation add
Greater than that'.

What he chiefly finds in Christian practice is an ethical satisfaction, a pattern and an impulse to moral goodness:

'Are we turn'd Turks, and to ourselves do that
Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?
For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl'.

But, in Othello's simple sincerity, his Christianity is mainly a gracious demeanour and a habit of noble conduct. When his innermost being is stirred to its depths, he breaks out into utterances of a remotter and more mystically articulated religion. First fully resolved on Desdemona's guilt, he pledges himself by sacred vow to the terrible act of condign vengeance: but he does so with gestures and phrases which are dues of a reverence belonging better to dim pagan cults than to any form of Christian worship:

'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'.

and Iago falls easily into the paganism of the ritual:

'Do not rise yet.
Witness, you ever-burning lights above,
You elements that clip us round about . . .'
committing himself, as they kneel together, to obey Othello,

'What bloody business ever.'

Even the culminating scene of the tragedy, the deed of Desdemona's death, is wrapped about with a holy atmosphere of solemn sacrifice: but its solemnity is that of some universal rite, in reverence to the chaste stars, and belonging to a religion whose sacraments are not those of a Christian origin. So, too, at the end of the play, in the last moments of Othello's life, in full realisation of the deception which has been so destructively practised on him, and in full consciousness of the enormity of his wrong in slaying his innocent wife, he is agonised by piercing anticipations of his fate in an afterworld wherein the Christian elements are confusedly mixed with cruder old-world dreads; and even so, the deepest torment which is filling his mind is the feeling that from now and for ever he is irrevocably cut off from Desdemona's spiritual presence:

'*... Where should Othello go?*

*Now, how dost thou look now? O ill-starred wench!*  
*Pail as thy smock! When we shall meet at compt,*  
*This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,*  
*And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold, my girl!*  
*Even like thy chastity. O cursed slave!*  
*Whip me, ye devils.*  
*From the possession of this heavenly sight!*  
*Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!*  
*Wash me in steep-down guls of liquid fire!*  
*O Desdemona! O Desdemona! dead!*  
*Oh! Oh! Oh!*

Othello's religion is of a parcel with his whole nature. The elements of moral manhood are simple and unadulterated in him, and they exhibit themselves in their primitive purity and strength. He is 'of a constant, loving, noble nature'. His response to life is simpler far than that of more civilised man: living has been for him a continuity of passionate experience and not a series of intellectual states. A spontaneous surge of feeling is the vitalising form of his being. As his instinct rouses feeling, he is compelled to express it in deed. But his nature has prompted him equally powerfully to seek self-mastery in the

1 Othello, V, ii, 271.  
control of his passionate impulse. He has built for himself a simple moral ideal, and has schooled himself to realise its constraints in habitual practice. He has trained himself in settled habits of control which will act as his safer guides by impeding the onset of his blood as it rushes in to rule. For encounters with most of the incidents of life, this hard-won discipline serves him faithfully. At the very outset, a day of unique excitement unexpectedly culminates in distractions of another kind: on his wedding day, summoned at night to an urgent session of the Council, Othello meets in the street the clamour of Brabantio and his armed followers, angrily seeking to lay hold of the black scoundrel who has ruined Brabantio’s dutiful daughter. Othello meets him with superbly calm poise and quiet dignity:

'Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.
Good signior, you shall more command with years
Than with your weapons.'

an assured calm which he maintains because he knows that he has acquired mastery of his impulses:

'Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it
Without a prompter.'

He has fashioned his moral standard by those conditions of discipline which his military life has taught him to be obligatory.

'Good Michael, look you to the guard tonight:
Let’s teach ourselves that honourable stop,
Not to outsport discretion.'

He has framed himself so that now the fullest happiness is no longer an intense pulsating sensation of vivid feeling, but an all-satisfying supreme emotional contentment:

'O my soul’s joy!
If after every tempest come such calms,
May the winds blow till they have waken’d death!
And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas
Olympus-high and duck again as low
As hell’s from heaven! If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear,
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.'

1 Othello, I, ii, 59. 2 Ibid., II, iii, 1. 3 Ibid., II, i, 186.
The spiritual resource of which this moral demeanour is the outward expression is the impulse of his native nobility. He has through life relied hardly at all on the tutelage of intellect. Indeed, whereas his instinct and his nature strengthen themselves in the conflicts of a moral situation, an intellectual dilemma confounds his mind. He has neither faculty nor skill to resolve it. His reason is inadequate for dialectic, and his power of thought is not sufficiently acute to sift the likelihoods of problematic circumstance. He is inexpert in simple intellectual judgment; and the intellectual confusion which such effort induces in him gives further opportunity for his passion to break through its disciplined courses and submerge his whole apprehension. His mind is unequal to his soul. Hence his inevitable predicament:

\[
\text{... no! to be once in doubt} \\
\text{Is once to be resolved.}^{1}
\]

But resolutions taken in such manner are neither guided by reason nor directed by moral nobility; they are determined and propelled by the sheer might of passion. Iago knows this and builds his evil schemes on it: he knows Othello's nature, and with consummately audacious artistry, dares to rely on a plot so simple that Othello alone of all mankind is the one man certain to be caught by it.

The downfall of Othello as the tragic hero is the core of Shakespeare's tragedy. But he is a tragic figure in a tragic world, a world which is the disastrous meeting point of two cultural and spiritual traditions. The story of the plot is the story of a marriage; it becomes the tale of a frustrate human effort to link the two worlds together. In the setting divined by Shakespeare's genius as the one most suitable for the dramatic fulfilment of such scenes, the dramatist has at hand a means by which his hero may grow to full tragic stature. To those of his readers and audience who are trying to understand his artistic vision, and are therefore seeking to trace the artistic methods which it devises, the particular problem would seem technically to be this. His tragic hero is Othello, a man formed by nature so simply, and in some things (and those the things of the mind)

\[1 \text{Othello, III, iii, 179.}\]
so much behind the men of Shakespeare's day, so obviously gullible in his guilelessness, that he is a perfect woodcock for any sort of simple springe. Such a person promises easy satisfaction of the author's and the audience's demand that his death shall be inevitable. But such a dissolution might easily evoke no greater response than 'Oh! the pity of it!' Like Richard II's fate, it might well seem lacking in momentousness. It might achieve no more than the logical universality inherent in the pathos of all weakness; and it might fail to engender the imaginative universality of that tragedy of human nobility which is inherent in the best life that man can contemplate as morally ideal. Moreover, in a human as distinct from a technical sense, Othello's tragedy might create no greater perturbation than a mildly pathetic regret at the rigorous law of nature which condemns to extinction the last relics of an outworn world, the inevitable fate of one who is an alien not only to our customs, our habits, and our shores, but to the very spirit of our time, another lamentable but familiar example of the evolutionary might which destroys the unadapted survivors of the past. The risk of this becomes greater as Shakespeare is seen plainly emphasising those traits in Othello which alienate him from our culture and from our epoch. But the marriage theme gave to Shakespeare's Othello his opportunity to grow to full tragic significance.

Though in the finished play Othello's undoing is still mechanically compelled by the flat logic of measured cause and effect, and though it is still apparent to cold reason that so much blind gullibility as was his must destroy its victim, the quality of Othello's love for Desdemona, and of her's for him, is Shakespeare's occasion for exalting the mechanics of mundane causality into the wider and the more mysterious dispensation of human fate at large. The figure of Othello is exalted as the theme is raised to higher imaginative planes. His gullibility recedes as a positive lack which must perforce make him less significant as a man; it takes on the appearance of an obverse reflection of those qualities which are the native nobility of his soul. So the story which was originally an example of lurid domestic melodrama is made anew to become part of sheer
poetic tragedy. The sublimation is largely done by Shakespeare's handling of the emotional and spiritual relationship which draws the lovers to each other.

Although to a cursory reader, there is little difference in the early part of Cinthio's story and Shakespeare's version of it, the modifications made by the dramatist, even in this preliminary part, are vital. One of them is especially important. There is no account of a wooing scene in Cinthio. In a few lines he tells how a Moor of great merit and courage, happened to meet a marvellously beautiful Venetian girl. They fell in love with each other, she drawn to it not by sensual impulse but by the Moor's virtue, and he by the lady's beauty and by the nobility of her mind. They married forthwith, in spite of her parent's opposition. That is all Cinthio tells us about the preliminaries to the marriage. But, both realistically and poetically, Shakespeare felt the need of more substantial information: for the quality of the bond between them was vital to his imaginative apprehension of the facts. Shakespeare's own account of their wooing is given in the play as a statement offered in formal evidence, and as such it is confirmed by both parties to the compact which came out of it. First of all, Othello, in Desdemona's absence, tells his tale to the court of enquiry. It fills out the hint of Cinthio that their mutual magnetism was spiritual and not corporeal in its origin. But before it is recited, Shakespeare has presented forcibly the explanation which the wide experience of men well-versed in worldly wisdom would inevitably offer of such a union, whether they spoke as men of approved moral habit or as those who cynically were prone to see the beast emerge in most of the actions of men. One must be fair to Brabantio, and must see his fury as fully righteous wrath.

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1 'Fù gia in Venetia un Moro, molto valoroso, il quale, per essere prò della persona, & per havere dato segno, nelle cose della guerra di gran prudenza, & di vivace ingegno, era molto caro à que signori, i quali nel dar premio à gli atti vertuosi avanzano quante Republiche fur mai. Avenne, che una virtuosa Donna, di maravigliosa bellezza, Disdemona chiamata, tratta non da appetito donnesco, ma della virtù del Moro, s’innamorò di lui & egli, vinto dalla bellezza, & dal nobile pensiero della Donna similmente di lei si accese, & hebbero tanto favorevole amore, che si congiunsero insieme per matrimonio, anchora che i parenti della Donna facessero ciò che poterono, perchè ella altro marito si prendesse, che lui' (p. 572).
If the modern earl of Westshire's daughter announced her intention to marry the negro general whom she had met at a Red Cross party, his perturbation would be easily understood: as would his frenzied wrath, if she had cut out the intimation and straightway eloped with the man. It is the situation of Desdemona. A daughter has made a gross revolt: she has abandoned duty, beauty, wit and fortune to fly to the gross clasp of a seemingly lascivious Moor: and even now, now, this very now, as the news of her flight is brought to him, an old black ram is performing the act of his kind with Brabantio's white ewe. Brabantio's astonishment, his incredulity and his wrath are natural responses. It is incredible that his own daughter, 'a maid so tender, fair and happy, so opposite to marriage' that she shyly shunned the company of eligible young men, should have done what will inevitably expose her to general mock by flying to the sooty bosom of a middle-aged and loathsome-seeming negro. To fall in love so is to act in spite of nature, against all rules of nature. Even when, in the light of all the evidence accepted by the Duke, Othello's tale of his courtship is approved as legitimate love-making, the Duke condones the lovers without commending their action. The affair is, in fact, to him a misfortune:

> When remedies are past, the griefs are ended
> By seeing the worst, which late on hopes depended.
> To mourn a mischief that is past and gone
> Is the next way to draw a mischief on'.

But this indeed is cold comfort for Brabantio, who is still incapable of squaring the incident with any kind of fitness in the nature of things. For him, there is but one reasonable explanation of Desdemona's infatuation. Othello must have practised on her with foul charms by which the property of youth and maidhood is abused. He has enchanted her delicate youth with drugs and minerals, corrupted her by spells and medicines bought of mountebanks, and bound her thus in chains of magic. He has wrought upon her with mixtures potent to induce such vile corruption in the blood. It is plain practice of arts inhibited and out of warrant, rank witchcraft, and sans witchcraft, it

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1 *Othello*, I, ii, 66.  
could never have occurred. Brabantio is, of course, speaking in perplexity and bitter sorrow. But, let the world calmly review the facts of the case, and his suggested explanation is very probable and palpable to common-sense thinking. And in fact the spell which struck Othello and Desdemona together was an enchantment. But it was not an operation of black magic with drugs and minerals. These two people, utterly different in race, in age, in appearance, in upbringing, in tradition and in experience, were mysteriously moved to mutual attraction. It is magic: but it is natural magic, the magic of the heart of human beings, the mysterious impulse which is mankind’s behaviour in the love of man for woman:

Othello’s story of his wooing recreates the scene in which were forged the first links of this spiritual affinity. It reveals the texture of them, and shows how tensile and how penetrating are the hooks they cast, and how unbreakably tight is their bodiless grip. Their substance is the stuff which has been growing gradually in the hitherto unrealised ideals of two human beings who for the first time are discovering a unique world common to both of them, a world realised in their imagination, and in it they recognise their spiritual likeness each to the other. It is a revelation of community in things entirely of the spirit. As Desdemona weaves her entranced sympathy into this imaginative world which the vivid recital of Othello’s history has made their mutual meeting-place, a spiritual partnership is struck. They fall in love with each other. The whole thing can be seen in the making in the manner of Othello’s retelling of his wooing.

He is cited to give the story as evidence in a formal judicial enquiry. His evidence is an account of what happened in the domestic calm of Brabantio’s drawing-room. What had happened there was that Othello, admitted to a normal Venetian milieu of social converse, had been led by outer and inner impulse to recall the course of his adventures; having no skill in the usual commonplaces of social talk, his own experiences were all on which he could fall back. As he tells the tale to the court, the feelings of the moment, and the recollection of what he remembered feeling as he had told his story to Desdemona and to Brabantio, and the resurgence of the excitement which the
episodes of which he then told once more moved within him, all crowd on each other in natural casualness and recover the creative vitality of the wooing-scene. His narrative reproduces a situation and an atmosphere in which, byimaginative sympathy, unguessed and unlikely spiritual affinities are discovered.

He starts in completely assured calm. ‘Her father loved me; oft invited me’. The father himself had first felt the spell:

‘Still questioned me the story of my life
From year to year’.

But as Othello runs over the memory of battles, sieges, fortunes, which have filled his life since its boyhood days, the power of recollected feeling distributes its emphasis over the order and the choice of the things which memory recalls, this or that disastrous chance or moving accident, that hair-breadth escape from just that deadly breach. And the succession of crowded detail remembered suffers an additional diversification from the accompanying associations which had sprung from the intermittent presence of Desdemona at its first recital, as she had flitted eagerly from her domestic duties to resume her place in the magic circle—‘Such was the process’: in that way, their love revealed itself:

‘My story being done,
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs:
She swore, in faith, ’twas strange, ’twas passing strange,
’Twas pitiful, ’twas wondrous pitiful’,

the timid innocent Desdemona trying to find the words which in part conceal and in part give way to her agitation as she clutches at phrases permissible both by social propriety and by moral sincerity. Then the half-recoiling and half-welcoming consciousness of her insistent sentiment:

‘She wished she had not heard it’,
followed at once by her acceptance of its real import:

‘And yet she wished,
That heaven had made her such a man’,

and then the innocent gaucherie with which in accents between the affected shyness of a husband-hunter and the naïve sincerity
of a love-stricken girl, she stammers her sincerity in ambiguous terms:

`She thank'd me,
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story,
And that would woo her.'

Even Othello's diffident simplicity caught the meaning:

`Upon this hint I spake;
She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
And I loved her that she did pity them.'

Desdemona adds her own testimony. To obey the irresistible inner call she adopted every resource, and willingly defied all the conventions which impeded her way to happiness: she loved the Moor, and she loved him to live with him.¹

That is how Shakespeare's representation of their wooing runs. He makes a dynamic scene out of a situation which Cinthio had recorded inertly in a line or two. The scene was indispensable to Shakespeare's sense of the tragedy inherent in the ensuing situation, The love of his Othello and of his Desdemona was to become a spiritual union of two noble souls. It was the sort of love which might well become an ever-fixed mark to look on tempests and be never shaken. But its worth at the outset is unknown; its potential height is unlimited, but like all other human states, it is subject to the circumstance of time. Thus, time becomes a crucial element in Shakespeare's story of Othello; for it is a story which enacts itself in a world like ours, a world within which temporal circumstance may stifle the fulfilment of spiritual impulse. Our world, the factual world, is subject to time's folly and to its incalculable whimsey; it may refuse the material circumstance within which an ideal love such as that of Desdemona and Othello could find fulfilment.

So the element of time is the crucial factor in Shakespeare's transformation of Cinthio's melodrama into his Othello's tragedy. With unobtrusive thoroughness, he completely replans Cinthio's calendar, and imposes his own time-scheme on the episodes of the story. In Cinthio's novel, after their marriage Othello and

¹ Othello, I, iii passim.
Desdemona lived for some measurable period in settled matrimonial happiness at Venice: "vissero insieme di sì concorde volere & in tanta tranquillità, mentre furono in Venetia, che mai tra loro non fù non dirò cosa, ma parola men, che amorevole".\(^1\) In due course, and not by reason of sudden military emergency, Othello was drafted to command the Venetian forces in Cyprus. This distressed him because it looked as if the happy domesticity which he was sharing so delightfully with his wife would be interrupted. But his fear was overcome, for Desdemona lovingly declared that she would eagerly risk the hazards of the voyage to accompany him to his new post. They travelled together on the same ship to Cyprus, the whole battalion, commander, lieutenant, ensign and other ranks embarking in one orderly transport. In this sizeable interval since the marriage, Iago had had time to fall lustfully in love with Desdemona, and to hope that in the oncoming months he might find occasion to gratify his lust; by now, he had begun to watch for suitable time and circumstance for such occasion: ‘per la qual cosa si mise ad aspettare, che il tempo, & il luogo gli apprisse la via da entrare à così scelerata impresa’.\(^2\) It was essential to await a propitious opportunity. He knew that, after settling in Cyprus, Desdemona had grown into the habit of visiting his wife Emilia at their own house, and of taking affectionate interest in their three-year-old daughter. It suggested to him the stealing of her handkerchief. Some days after the theft—‘indi ad alquanti giorni’\(^3\)—Desdemona realised that she had lost her handkerchief. In the meantime Iago was elaborating his plot. After waiting for an opportune occasion, he planted the handkerchief in Cassio’s room. In his turn, Cassio, having now fallen into disgrace, was watching for a suitable time at which to see Desdemona in her house and to plead for her assistance. Unfortunately his visit coincided with the unexpected return of Othello, whose suspicions were increased. Othello determined to wait until he saw Iago, and to ask Iago to approach Cassio in order to sound him for information. To make the enquiry look as if it were prompted by a chance encounter, Iago put off asking it until ‘one day’ he ran into Cassio: ‘et al Capo di

\(^1\) Hecatommithi, p. 572. \(^2\) Ibid., p. 575. \(^3\) Ibid., p. 578.
squadra parlò un giorno costui'. In due course, Iago's report to Othello led to the next move. One day, after dinner, 'un giorno dopo desinare'; Othello asked Desdemona for the handkerchief. Her reply seemed to confirm his suspicions, whereafter he ruminated night and day to hit on a fitting revenge, 'pensando giorno & notte sopra ciò'. Nursing such thoughts, Othello had to find all sorts of excuses to explain to Desdemona the new demeanour which he was displaying towards her; for his change had distressed her for some days, 'da non sò che pochi giorni in quà'. She took counsel with Emilia, who advised her to adopt a studied habit of affection and sedulously to avoid all cause of suspicion. Whilst she was practising this carefulness, 'in questo mezzo tempo'; Othello was still looking for more conclusive proofs of her guilt. He sought out Iago and asked him to find such evidences. Iago had noticed that Cassio had handed the handkerchief to a needlewoman with whom he was familiar so that she could copy its pattern before he returned it. She did her stitching in the daylight which she secured by sitting up to her window, where, of course, she was in view of passers-by. Hence, and again in due course, Othello could pass the window of the house and see the apparently incriminating piece of muslin. He was entirely convinced by the ocular demonstration. He proceeded forthwith to plot with Iago a scheme of vengeance; together they thought out a plan which required a certain amount of preliminary preparation, and, of course, a further stretch of time between the planning and the execution.

That is how the time-scheme of Cinthio's novel ambles on. As a time-element, it is in no way a prominent feature of the story. The narrative proceeds with no particular demand on the calendar, and certainly with no deliberate compression of the tale into incidents which flare up all together in the events of a day or two. Cinthio's telling tacitly assumes that the things of which it tells happened in normal circumstance over an appropriate stretch of time. There were, for instance, the first months of unclouded happiness in wedlock, and then such lapse

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1 Hecatommithi, p. 579.  
2 Ibid., p. 580.  
3 Ibid., p. 580.  
4 Ibid., p. 581.
of time—days, weeks, months—as might suggest itself as a natural span for the incidents which made the plot.

Time is handled far differently in Shakespeare's *Othello*. There, the time-span is not tied to any measurement of the Greenwich mean calendar. But sufficiently positive data of clock-time are put into the play to indicate the scope within which imagination is imposing its own dramatic chronology. The fingers on the dial spin furiously, and sequences of action are geared to fantastic rapidity of motion. The pace is set at once. The voyage to Cyprus occurs on the very day of the wedding, and before its consummation. The tragedy follows in what seems to be but the second day after Cyprus is reached; and in the interval required for the sea-voyage from Venice to Cyprus, Othello and Desdemona had been sailing in different ships. The night and day of the Cyprus scene is an astronomical phenomenon existing only in a stellar universe of the dramatic imagination, the ‘double-time’ of the Shakespearian commentators. But the persistent strokes by which Shakespeare’s genius transmutes natural time into the ideal compass of dramatic moments reveal the circumstances which Shakespeare’s insight had grasped as the compelling features of Othello’s tragedy.

The cumulative effect of this imaginative handling of the time-lapse is palmary. It gives the sense of inevitability to a story which otherwise, as in Cinthio, must run on only as a striking succession of barely credible and but remotely possible events. It makes the episodes intelligible, deeds of intelligible human beings. In making the characters intelligible, it discovers in them a nobility of soul which Cinthio never looked for in Desdemona and of which he luridly deprived Othello. In thus exalting the moral qualities of his hero and his heroine, Shakespeare transmuted melodramatic accident into a universal idea of tragedy. He revealed the tragic fact within the finer spiritual substance of his imaginative world. Its roots lay neither in extraneous chance, nor even in the terrible malevolence of evil. The handkerchief became but a convenient mode, not an essential instrument. Even Iago serves as no

1 See especially Granville Barker’s superb handling of this in his *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (O.U.P.), vol. iv, *Othello*. 
more than a means, not as an indispensable cause of the calamity.

The varied features of this complete sublimation can be more distinctly realised if Cinthio's novel is put in detail side by side with Shakespeare's play, the differences of factual incident noted, and the trend of these differences used as a clue for exploring the unconscious artistic purposes of Shakespeare's genius as it imposed the changes on his material data. Take, for instance, the remaking of the time-scheme. The wooing scene has disclosed the nature and the quality of the links which first bound the lovers together in imaginative and emotional sympathy. They are direct and immediate bonds of the spirit purely ideal in their nature. Each of the lovers is held by the impassioned idea of what the other is intuitively seen to be: it is the conviction of a bodiless affinity of two souls. But souls on earth dwell only within their bodies: and on earth intuitive revelations seek the sustaining corroboration of slower and more mediate cognition. Love of such ideal kind as that of Desdemona and Othello needs time and occasion to habituate itself to temporal and corporeal domesticity. Their love promises full power to irradiate a life-time of human wedlock: but it must have opportunity to learn its way amongst the household furniture and the social institutions in the midst of which all human life has its being. The lovers knew each other's soul in its pure essence; but they were ignorant of the temporal and habitual forms in which the other's soul responded characteristically to the particular circumstances of its material environment. They needed to learn to live together in what they must perforce make their actual world. But time forbade. They never lived together, as Cinthio's had done, in the settled mundanities of a domestic household. They were linked by a spiritual chain immensely strong in essence, but frail in work-a-day substance. The exigencies of the world denied them the home in which the spiritual power of their love could have pervasively informed the whole body of its material appurtenances. Their ideal union was not permitted to domesticate itself into wedlock. And thus, remaining an ideal creation in an ideal realm, being entirely a thing of the mind, it was exposed to the onslaught of intangible
suggestion: even the slightest hint of taint, and far more, the plausible suspicion of infidelity, would blast it entirely. The Desdemona who drew forth the passionate love of Othello was the Desdemona in his mind; it was in his mind that she was to become an angelic-seeming ogre of putrescent flesh. The cause, the cause itself, on which all human goodness depends, demanded her sacrificial murder. Die she must, and at Othello's hands.

Within such an imaginative universe, clearly the inhabitants have become different beings from those of the same name who lived in the physical and mechanical world of Cinthio's novel. His Othello and Shakespeare's belong to entirely different human kinds. The differentiation need not be pursued in continuous detail, since it comes sufficiently to light in all that pertains to the ultimate situation which Shakespeare makes a scene of solemn sacrifice. Contrast the manner in which it is prepared for and enacted in Cinthio. At the very moment when Cinthio's Othello declares his final conviction of Desdemona's infidelity, he resolves to murder her; but, in the very same breath, adds that the way of it must be such that no suspicion of his complicity will arise, 'si che à lui non fosse data colpà della sua morte'.

Othello pondered night and day on the most effective contrivance. He decides to kill both his wife and Cassio. He plots with Iago to achieve this, in the first place assigning to Iago the slaughter of Cassio. Iago needs a substantial bribe, 'buona quantità di danari', for he is afraid of the deed and of Cassio's bravery. In the end, Iago consents, but he bungles the job and only wounds Cassio. Desdemona, however, is the main object of Othello's vengeance. He confers with Iago, whether her murder shall be by dagger or by poison, 'se di veleno, ò di coltello si deueva far morir la Donna'. Iago advises against both schemes; they must find one which will not direct suspicion towards them,

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1 Hecatomnithi, p. 580. In the first edition, there is a possible misprint. It reads: 'si che à lor non fosse', etc. Of course, Othello may automatically have thought of himself and the associated conspirators he would need—'lor', therefore. But his French translator took the 'lor' as a misprint for lui—as later Italian editions (which may have been the ones the translator was using) had the phrase: 'de maniere qu'on ne le taxast de leur mort' (p. 329).

2 Ibid., p. 582.

3 Ibid., p. 583.
"non se ne haurà sospetto alcuno"; he has a plan to suggest. Othello's house is an old structure whose roofbeams are faulty. Let Desdemona be battered to death by a stocking filled with sand, then displace a beam and let it seem to have fallen on her head and so have killed her. The plot pleased the Moor; 'piacque al Moro il crudel consiglio'.

The whole situation is utterly incongruous with the character of Shakespeare's Othello. The plan is bestial enough, but the manner of its execution drags its perpetrator even deeper into human contempt. Othello watched for a ripe moment for the murder. He secreted Iago one night in a dressing closet opening on the bridal chamber. When Othello and Desdemona were in bed, Iago made some pre-arranged noise in his hiding place. Othello turned to his wife and asked her if she had heard anything. She replied that she had, and Othello commanded her at once to get out of bed and see what was afoot! 'Hollo sentito disse ella: levati, soggiunse il Moro, & vedi che cosa è'—a curious code of conjugal chivalry. As she went to the closet-door, Iago rushed out and struck her with the sandbag. Almost unable to speak, she managed to call to her husband for help; he then arose from bed, only to tell Desdemona gloatingly that this was proper treatment for a faithless wife. As she lay stunned and prayed mazedly to God, she was struck a second and a third blow until she was dead. At this, the Moor and Iago lifted her corpse onto the bed, smashed its skull, and, dislodging a beam, lowered it down onto the skull. All this carefully accomplished, Othello rushed into the street and called passers by, informing them of the terrible accident which had just occurred and had deprived him of a dear wife. There is nothing in this whole episode which could have been done or said by the Othello who sacrificed his wife with the solemn invocation—

'It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!', and who performed the sacrifice with all the dignity of a religious ceremony. The nearest hint that Cinthio's Othello gets to an expression of a sentiment more moral than that of naked vengeance is put in phraseology which belongs rather to the streets than to a temple—

1 Hecatommithi, p. 583.

2 Othello, V, ii, 1.
'così si trattano quelle che fingendo di amare i loro Mariti, pongono loro le corna in capo'.

On such different planes do Shakespeare's Othello and Cinthio's Moor live: and so, appropriately, they come to their equally different manner of death. For Shakespeare's Othello, 'tis happiness to die'. He can be nobly spoken of as he nobly was, one that loved not wisely but too well, one who in perplexity

Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; one whose subdued eyes
Albeit unused to the melting mood
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum.

The medicine has purged the soul of its contracted impurity; he dies of his own will no way but this, raining kisses on Desdemona who through his folly can no longer know them his,

'Killing myself, to die upon a kiss'.

He was of great heart: and as he passes, all that's spoke by us is marr'd.

But Cinthio's Moor has rightfully another destiny. Though the crime of murdering his wife is so far undiscovered, he sinks into madness through the lack of her presence. He grows to hate Iago, but is afraid to have him put to death, so strict in its enquiry would be the impartial justice of Venice. But he deprives him of his military commission. Iago thereupon discloses something of the crime to Cassio, and, in the upshot, Othello is cited before Venetian judges on a capital charge. He is put to torture but escapes death by the strength of mind which sustains him against proffering a confession of guilt. He was, however, sentenced to long imprisonment and then to perpetual

1 Hecatommithi, p. 583. There is another phrase in Cinthio which may remotely have suggested some sort of vague principle behind the Moor's thirst for revenge. Even so, however, if a principle at all, it is no more than that of primitive intuition. When Iago has told him that Cassio is life and soul to her—essendo colui l'anima sua', Othello replies—'Anima sua, eh? Io le trarrò ben io l'anima del corpo che mi terrei non essere huomo, senon togliessi dal mondo questa malvagia' (p. 582).
2 Othello, V, ii, 347.
exile. In the course of it, he was slain vendetta-wise by relatives of Desdemona.

Iago is thus in the Italian account the primary and the effective cause of all Othello's trouble. He is first heard of as a member of Othello's regiment when it embarked for Cyprus. Othello had in his company an ensign of charming appearance and manner, but in character the wickedest man who ever lived. He was, however, very dear to the Moor, for the latter had failed to see any trace of his wickedness; in fact, although the ensign had a most craven spirit, he had managed to cover his badness with such proud bearing and confident speech that he seemed noble as a Hector or an Achilles. Though he was himself married, he forgot all ties both to his wife and to Othello and fell violently in love with Desdemona and gave all his energies to devising a plan whereby he might enjoy her: "volto tutto il suo pensiero à vedere, se gli poteva venir fatto di godersi di lei". But he had to be extremely cautious, lest, discovering his purpose, the Moor should kill him. He tried in every indirect way to make Desdemona understand his passion. But her whole thought was on her husband: the ensign could not excite her interest at all, still less inflame her with desire. Hence he concluded that she must be in love with the lieutenant, and his passion changed from love of Desdemona to the most intense hatred of her. He thought of nothing henceforward except to kill the lieutenant, and, if he could not enjoy Desdemona himself, to prevent Othello from happiness with her. Hence the whole plot: to insinuate against her a charge of adultery.

Shakespeare's conception of Iago is more complex: he is not entirely, even not mainly, actuated by the simple motive of sexual desire. There is his resentment at Cassio's preferment, a motive which does not occur in Cinthio. There is also another feature with which Cinthio's novelistic or anecdotal art had no need to be concerned. In a drama, Iago has to enter the community of the human race. To be an embodied self-consciousness, he has to have his own personality; his separate identity must assert its own autonomy. He can no longer be a merely

1 Hecatomnithi, p. 574.
Satanical agent of evil; he must be an artist in his own evil creations. He must enjoy the human emotions which accompany their making. He must have his own aesthetic gratification in their structure and in their form. When Coleridge spoke of Iago’s motiveless malignity, he meant that Iago’s evil-doing lacked intelligible causality in any rational response to the circumstantial occasion. But Iago’s malignity is propelled from within. He acts as he does to satisfy the cravings of his own person and of his own personality. He tries to fashion circumstance to the form in which it will most completely satisfy his own aesthetic and amoral nature. His motive is artistic and not moral. In one crucial episode, however, Shakespeare appears to be deliberately denying to Iago opportunity for a piece of craftsmanship which Cinthio had allowed to him. It is the handling of the handkerchief. In Shakespeare, Iago’s possession of it is in the first instance an outcome of mere chance. Desdemona happens to drop it unwittingly. In the Italian novel, and traces of this original version survive in Shakespeare’s ex-post-facto assertions that Iago had urged his wife to steal it for him, Iago foresees a purpose for using the handkerchief, and schemes a plan whereby he may acquire it. Desdemona regularly visits his house and caresses his three-year-old daughter. As one day she is doing so, the baby being pressed to her bosom, he filches the handkerchief from the sash wherein she carries it. His later use of it follows a similarly deliberate planning, a planning, too, ever ready to improvise on a chance occurrence, as when he finds that Cassio has loaned it for copying to a needleworker who does her stitching in the full view of passers-by and can therefore be seen in possession of it by Othello. But the part the handkerchief plays in Shakespeare is different. It falls into Iago’s hands by mere chance; Desdemona inadvertently drops it. It just happens to be the particular fact which most effectively serves a purpose which many another casual occurrence might have served in its own way. It is not in itself a first cause. Shakespeare is more concerned with the design of the moral universe than with the material instruments of Iago’s technical craftsmanship. His Iago is a consummate master of villainy: but he shows it not so much by subtlety of intrigue as by astuteness in diagnosing the
situation and in daring then to put his whole trust in a device appropriate to that occasion, but to that occasion alone, knowing full well that what will infallibly trap Othello would be ineffective against any other man.

Othello's tragedy is Othello's and not the outcome of a chance which made him contemporary with Iago.