

It is his irony that is what makes possible the final coupling of self-knowledge and learning in delight, combining his gift as orator in a perfect structure of rhetoric, organizing a work of art in which all human capacities are acknowledge and embroidered in a piece of a logician who re-creates a world that mirrors the ordered but flexible Elizabethan chain of being.

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NARRATIVE AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN *OTHELLO*

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The Clown appears only twice in *Othello*; both appearances are brief but pulsing with proleptic energy. The first is at the start of the third act. Cassio has instructed the musicians to play something to wake Othello, who has spent his first night with Desdemona in Cyprus. The Clown asks if their instruments are wind instruments, and when they say they are, he quips: "O, thereby hangs a tale"¹. Not "hearing" the pun, the first musician asks: "Whereby hangs a tale, sir?". He expects a story and all he gets is an allusion to flatulence². Cassio then offers the Clown some gold to arrange a meeting with Desdemona. The Clown pretends to misunderstand him,

Cassio: Dost thou hear, mine honest friend?

Clown: No, I hear not your honest friend: I hear you.

(III.1.21-22)

Iago is invoked without being named. As the Clown leaves, it is the newly reinstated Lieutenant who enters.

The Clown's second appearance (three scenes later) is just as fleeting and no less gratuitous. This time it is Desdemona who asks for Cassio. Once again the Clown's response is punning: "I know not where he lodges, and for me to devise a lodging, and say he lies here, or he lies there, were to lie in my own throat." (III.4.11-13) The pun is a bad one but cruelly anticipatory of Othello's grim play on the word in Act IV:

Iago: Lie—

Othello: With Her?

1 This and future references to the text are to the Kenneth Muir edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987). In both Q1 and F1, no orthographic distinction is made between the two terms, though the pun is obviously intended.

2 Touchstone, in *As You Like It*, uses the same expression, but this time referring to the passing of time: "And so, from hour to hour we ripe and ripe, / And the from hour to hour we rot and rot, / And thereby hangs a tale". Jaques, who quotes these words, thinks he has found a kindred spirit, though the Fool's words might equally be interpreted as an allusion to impotence.

Iago With her, on her, what you will.
 Othello: Lie with her? Lie on her? We say lie on her when
 they belie her. Lie with her! Zounds, that's fulsome!

(IV.1.35-40)

The Clown gets away with it because he is not yet aware –no one is– of the true relevance of the word "lie". He makes a joke because he is paid to be witty. At the same time, however, his *affected* literal-mindedness, a grotesque parody of Othello's *real* gullibility, comically highlights what appears as an obsessive concern of the tragedy: storytelling, its purposes and effects; the demand for narrative and the "credit" given to it, as well as the function of the tale in a dramatic context.

Stories abound in the play and their function is clearly rhetorical. As Alan Sinfield has recently observed, "all the characters in *Othello* are telling stories, and to convince others even more than themselves". (1992, 29) But this is not to forget that both the nature and the effect of the narratives told are radically different. Othello's stories are, as we shall see, predominantly about the past and about his own exploits. But what they reveal is less, as Leavis and scores of subsequent critics have claimed, the character's love of himself than an urgent desire to outvoice his detractors and so convince his auditors. Thus to Iago's warning in Act I that Brabantio is out to denounce him, Othello calmly responds: "Let him do his spite: / My services, which I have done the signory, / Shall out-tongue his complaints". (I.2.17-19) This is no doubt vanity, but as the play never ceases to remind us, deeds are more eloquent than rumour, though as the last quotation reveals, those deeds must first be put into words, given a "voice", if they are to convince. Commenting on Othello's "traveller's history", Stephen Greenblatt writes that we are

on the brink of a Borges-like narrative that is forever constituting itself out of the materials of the present instant, a narrative in which the storyteller is constantly swallowed up by the story. That is, Othello is pressing up against the *condition* of all discursive representations of identity. He comes dangerously close to recognizing his own status as a text, and it is precisely this recognition that the play as a whole will reveal to be insupportable.

(1980: 238)

But this is to ignore the supremely *oral* nature of narrative in the play. Besides, Greenblatt overlooks both the fact that the words are intended for an audience (here the Duke and the Senators as well as the "real" audience viewing the play) and what Robert Weimann has called the "wounding, healing, affectional" (1985: 275) power of the *performed* word. In this respect, Othello is in complete

command of his discourse: it is not his self-recognition as a text so much as the revelation of his failure as an auditor which the play makes insupportable. Determining this failure, as I shall argue, is what the play presents as a maladjustment to present conditions, highlighted by the fact that Othello's narratives are in the past, not the present, tense. I shall return to this later.

For the moment, I would like to reexamine Brabantio's claims that the Moor had bewitched his daughter, entangling her in "chains of magic". For both Brabantio, Desdemona and the Senate are in turn entranced by the tale which is recounted: the Duke's response, "I think this tale would win my daughter too" (I.3.171) is a tribute not to Othello, though his valour and "value" is not in doubt, but to the incantatory effect of his story. Iago's later remark to Roderigo, "Mark me with what violence she first loved the Moor, but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies" (II.1.216-17), is from a man who also knows the rhetorical force of fiction.

The "magical" effect of narrative is reaffirmed in the "story" of the handkerchief. Responding to Rymer's critique, Kenneth Burke understood the importance of this object, standing as it does as a combination of the public and the intimate, and thus a "perfect materialisation of the tension which the play is to exploit". (1951, 198-99) But the handkerchief is representative on another level. Desdemona's concern here is with reinstating Cassio and her response to Othello's "magic in the web" tale is, for Othello, a flat "Is't possible?" and "Indeed! Is't true?" (III.4.68,76). Emilia, who has picked up the handkerchief, keeps it, "I'll have the work ta'en out, / And give't Iago" (III.3.293-4), while Cassio, fatally, gives it to Bianca to "have it copied" (III.4.187). The spell has begun to wear off and as the object is passed from hand to hand, or rather from (Othello's) head to (Cassio's) bed, new and less romanticised signifieds accrue to it: for Bianca the handkerchief is simply a sign of Cassio's deceitfulness; Iago uses it as a sign of Desdemona's "infidelity" and as the ocular proof needed for his revenge. Like stories which circulate from mouth to mouth, the token drifts inexorably from its original meaning. When Iago informs Othello of Cassio's manly boasts and makes him "tell the tale anew", the magic is already gone –the work has been taken out of it.

Othello's final recourse to narrative is of course his suicide speech, and it is here that the warlike Othello of the opening scenes returns. The self-identification with the "malignant and turbaned Turk" has been presented as a sign of the Moor's forced acceptance of his true place in Venetian society –that is, no place–, though it may also seen as a last-ditched attempt to replace language with heroic deed and so re-woo his listeners in extremis. As if to

underline the fact, Othello stabs himself in the throat, the source of speech and (as the Clown reminds us) of lies. If the speech is rhetorical, it is not in the "inflationary," self-deluding sense of the term which would seem to govern the Leavisite attitude to the character; rather, it is an instance of what Eliot called the "rhetoric of substance", a rhetoric peculiar to situations "where a character *sees himself* in a dramatic light". (1951, 39) Othello, that is, is more conscious than ever of his role as actor in a tragedy which has been scripted by another, as well as the uses and limitations of speech as an affective mechanism. Lodovico's punning response ("O bloody period!"), alluding both to the events that have just taken place and to the spilling of blood which the end of Othello's speech occasions, is qualified by Gratiano's: "All that's spoke is marred!". The statement carries a kind of retrospective consciousness of tragic waste as well as an aphoristic quality: speech deceives, only actions convince.

The paradox is that, even as he cuts his throat, Othello clings to his favoured past tense. For though Othello has been presented as a kind of parvenu, artificially ennobled by his love for a wealthy grandee's daughter, it is equally true that, in his own imagination, he has all the hallmarks of the epic hero, a figure which finds its degraded counterpart in Iago. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the "world" of such heroes is

a world projected into the past, on to the distanced plane of memory, but not into a real, relative past tied to the present by uninterrupted temporal transitions; it [is] projected rather into a valorized past of beginnings and peak times. This past is distanced, finished and closed like a circle. [...] Within this time, completed and locked into a circle, all points are equidistant from the real, dynamic time of the present; insofar as this time is whole, it is not localized in an actual historical sequence; it is not relative to the present or to the future; it contains within itself, as it were, the entire fullness of time.

(1990: 19)

It would not, I think, be stretching the point to say that the world of Othello's stories is equally closed, equally distanced from the "present" of the play, and that when, under Iago's malevolent guidance, the Moor crosses the divide between past and present, he is incapable of adapting, the present threatens to engulf him and he must murder it (Desdemona) and then himself.

By contrast, Iago is perfectly adapted to the world of "modern" seeming; it is his natural habitat. His being cashiered from epic nobility next to Othello is his cue to commence a new life amongst those who throw "but shows of service on their lords" and thrive by them. If, in Bakhtin's terms, the epic and tragic

hero is "nothing" outside his destiny, Iago resembles the characters of a popular mask, "heroes of free improvisation and not heroes of tradition, heroes of a life process that is imperishable and forever renewing itself, forever contemporary". (36) As critics never cease to observe, he is an extemporiser, a spontaneous inventor of fictions, and audiences can even extract enjoyment from watching his plot mature and his skill in capitalising on coincidence. In short, he is the product of a consciousness whose ultimate expression will be what Bakhtin defines as the novel, and as such he takes his place next to the Clown.

In contrast to the Clown, however, he is not content with his servitude, has ideas above his station, and for this reason is cunningly represented as the "demi-devil". From the very start, we are made aware of the economic efforts of the demoted and so déclassé soldier to regain the position "usurped" from him by the parvenu Cassio, and of a system in which "Preferment goes by letter and affection, / And not by old gradation, where each second / Stood heir to th'first". (I.1.36-38) Iago here excuses himself by representing his fall as one from the ideal epic world of heroic deed to mercenary, mercantile Renaissance Venice:

But he, sir, had th'election:
And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof
At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds
Christian and heathen, must be leed and calmed
By debtor and creditor.

(I.1.27-31)

His first action in his new role is to take hold of Roderigo's purse strings. Moreover, the language Iago speaks from now on will be the language of the market, not just as a means of gulling his rich friend out of a fortune, but of establishing the "value" of the stories he hears and constructs. Thus, that Desdemona loves Cassio is considered "apt and of great credit" (II.1.278), while her repeated overtures to Othello concerning Cassio only succeed in undoing her "credit" with the Moor (II.3.349). To the "example" of Othello's cuckoldom his response is: "To be direct and honest is not safe. / I thank you for this profit...". (III.3.376-77). The humiliating ring to the term "honest" is surely, as Empson observes, a powerful incentive to revenge, but it is equally the profits to be gained through dishonesty which make Iago such a fervent tale-teller.

In *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner argued that Shakespeare's tragic characters are largely unaffected by the money motive, that only "base" creatures, such as Roderigo, are shown putting gold in their purse; furthermore, the only "poetry of money is prose", and more specifically the modern novel. (1961, 263-4) Prose indeed plays a comparatively small part in this particular

work, but this is not to overlook the fact that every one in the play is in the business of either constructing, contesting, crediting or discrediting narratives. If Iago, whose baseness has been insisted on again and again, comes closest to embodying the novelistic hero, this is not to say that other, nobler characters are tainted with the mercantile spirit. Thus even before Othello entrances the Senate with his story of how he bewitched both Brabantio and his daughter, the Duke and Senators are shown disputing the "credit" of the news of the Turkish invasion. Perhaps on his guard, the Duke meets Brabantio's story with a distinctly lukewarm:

To vouch this is no proof,
Without more wider and more overt test
Than these thin habits and poor likelihoods
Of modern seeming do prefer against him.

(I.3.107-10)

Amidst the clamour of report and counterreport of the Turkish invasion, Brabantio's tale (fed to him in part by Iago) fails to incriminate the crypto-Turk Othello, who has already proved his "value". The taunt of "modern" has a sanctimonious ring, specially as "seeming" has been the whole substance of the discussion preceding Brabantio's entrance.

But *Othello* is not just about the nature of truth and its delicate balance with falsehood. What the play puts on trial is not just the veracity or credulity of its protagonists, but their whole credibility as social actors. On stage are two quite distinct social orders, two "world pictures." The clash of narratives represented is nothing less than a clash between the old and the new. Iago, the demoted lieutenant, seeking retribution by means of "modern seeming", is found out and sent off for ignominious torture; Othello, the outsider, regains his place in the heart of the society which has adopted him by becoming their scapegoat and dying by his own hand. In the final scene, new "stories" are in the offing – Iago's confession to his torturers, and Lodovico's relation of the "heavy act" of Othello's suicide to the state, though the play ends, as it must, in silence. Iago's "victory" – in Jonathan Goldberg's words, his refusal to answer the accusations represents his self-mastery as a character, a condition he "takes control over by relinquishing –by withholding– his voice" (1985, 132) – is a pyrrhic one. Othello's muteness, coinciding with his "self-discovery" as the Venetian's "other," the turbaned Turk, is more powerful and ennobling: the drawing of the curtain on the object which "poisons sight", at the same time as it preserves the image of the death embrace as the dumb show of love's immortal triumph over jealousy, re-encloses the Moor in his epic circle.

Is this a sign of Shakespeare's basic conservatism? Do we sense here the dramatist's resistance to the more discursive mode of fiction? As the play approximates the actional extreme of wordless pantomime, so the "truth" emerges in its painful intensity. Othello's final gesture is far more eloquent than words, and more ennobling, while Iago, who is denied the dignity of a "clean" death, confirms his baseness by refusing to talk. Yet the demand for narrative is a powerful one, as Lodovico's last words, and indeed the whole play, have shown. As Paul Hernadi has argued, "every passage of imaginative literature contains at least a modicum of both action and vision." (1971, 25) Such a merger is implicit in Lodovico's invocation of the object which poisons sight: *Othello* is a striking instance of the aptness of the paradox which makes sight the recipient of a substance administered only through ear and mouth. To Brabantio's earlier objection: "But words are words; I never yet did hear / That the bruised heart was piercèd through the ear" (I.3.216-7), it is as if Shakespeare the storyteller had wanted to supply his own ironic rejoinder: "Thereby hangs a tale".

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