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William Shakespeare's OTHELLO



Bloom's NOTES

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM

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User's Guide

This volume is designed to present biographical, critical, and bibliographical information on William Shakespeare and *Othello*. Following Harold Bloom's introduction, there appears a detailed biography of the author, discussing the major events in his life and his important literary works. Then follows a thematic and structural analysis of the work, in which significant themes, patterns, and motifs are traced. An annotated list of characters supplies brief information on the chief characters in the work.

A selection of critical extracts, derived from previously published material by leading critics, then follows. The extracts consist of such things as statements by the author on his work, early notices of the work, and later evaluations down to the present day. The items are arranged chronologically by date of first publication. A bibliography of Shakespeare's writings (including a complete listing of all books he wrote, cowrote, edited, and translated, and selected posthumous publications), a list of additional books and articles on him and on *Othello*, and an index of themes and ideas conclude the volume.

Harold Bloom is Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale University and Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Professor of English at the New York University Graduate School. He is the author of twenty books and the editor of more than thirty anthologies of literature and literary criticism.

Professor Bloom's works include *Shelley's Mythmaking* (1959), *The Visionary Company* (1961), *Blake's Apocalypse* (1963), *Yeats* (1970), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), and *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (1982). *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) sets forth Professor Bloom's provocative theory of the literary relationships between the great writers and their predecessors. His most recent books are *The American Religion* (1992) and *The Western Canon* (1994).

Professor Bloom earned his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1955 and has served on the Yale faculty since then. He is a 1985 MacArthur Foundation Award recipient and served as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University in 1987-88. He is currently the editor of the Chelsea House series Major Literary Characters and Modern Critical Views, and other Chelsea House series in literary criticism.

Introduction

HAROLD BLOOM

It is Othello's tragedy, but Iago's play. I do not mean that Iago runs off with it, or that Othello's is not a great role. Iago is a dramatist who takes over his fellow characters and plots them into the play that he desires to stage. He is a theatrical improviser, making his plot up as he goes along: He imagines passions for others, and even proposes emotions for himself, which to some degree he subsequently feels. His genius is not as comprehensive as Falstaff's or as Hamlet's, and he lacks the icy joy of Edmund, the brilliant villain of *King Lear*. But his intellect is extraordinary: amazingly quick, endlessly resourceful. Iago is the master psychologist in all of Shakespeare, expert at manipulating everyone else in the play. His pride and analytical interest in his own technique make him also the forerunner of theatrical criticism: as he says, "For I am nothing if not critical."

Montaigne may have taught Shakespeare skepticism, but Shakespeare invented modern nihilism: Hamlet, Iago, Edmund, and Macbeth are its pioneers, direct ancestors of Dostoevsky's Svidrigailov and Stavrogin, and before that, of Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*, who is particularly indebted to the diabolical Iago. One useful path into the enigma of Iago's consciousness is provided by the Miltonic "Sense of Injured Merit" that the hero-villain of *Paradise Lost* suffers when he is passed over for Christ, as it were. Coleridge wrote of Iago's "motiveless malignity," but Iago's sense of injured merit is more than motive enough. *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* scarcely can be understood without foregrounding Iago's initial outrage, the permanent wound to his self-regard that was constituted by Othello's rejection of his merit. As the Moor's "ancient" or ensign, Iago bears his captain-general's standard in battle and is professionally pledged to die rather than to allow Othello's colors to be captured. The critic Harold C. Goddard wisely noted that Iago is the spirit of war incarnate, a "moral pyromaniac," who sets the blaze of battle to everyone and to everything. Iago is always at war, which must be why Othello passed over this loyal and courageous fighter and chose Cassio instead

as his second-in-command, though Cassio is dismissed by the furious Iago as "a great arithmetician . . . that never set a squadron in the field." Cassio knows the difference between peace and war, a difference that Iago is incapable of knowing. It is the difference that Othello enforces in one magnificent, monosyllabic line that ends a street battle and that confirms Othello in the greatness from which he is soon to fall: "Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them."

The drama begins with Iago affirming truly that he hates the Moor, but the foregrounded implication is that for years he has loved and indeed worshipped Othello, who to Iago would have seemed the god of war incarnate. Iago's nihilistic outcry, "I am not what I am," ensues from a tremendous ontological loss that precedes the start of the play. Iago's predicament is as theological as that of his involuntary disciple, Milton's Satan. You recognize a supreme being, whether your general or your God, as your source of reality, your assured sense of your own value. When you are passed over for another, you become another in the line of Cain, though Iago surpasses the biblical Cain, and Milton's Satan as well. Satan is driven to subvert God's creation, Adam and Eve, but Iago accomplishes the degradation of his war god by reducing Othello to an incoherent murderer. In the metaphysical terms of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Iago becomes an Ahab who hunts his White Whale in Othello. If Othello was everything and rejected his true servant, Iago, then Iago must seek revenge lest he become nothing at all: "I am not what I am." St. Paul had written, "By the grace of God I am what I am," but what if the grace had been withdrawn?

The negative genius of Iago is fearsome but altogether unquestionable. His sense of injured merit draws from his amazing talents, which he could not have known he possessed and which dazzle him almost as much as they startle us. So awesome a cognitive negativity is as rare in literature as in life. William Hazlitt's superbly equivocal tribute to Iago is not likely to be bettered:

Our 'Ancient' is a philosopher, who fancies that a lie that kills has more point in it than an alliteration or an antithesis; who thinks a fatal experiment on the peace of a family a better thing

than watching the palpitations in the heart of a flea in an air-pump; who plots the ruin of his friends as an exercise for his understanding, and stabs men in the dark to prevent *ennui*.

Iago's zest, his energy in evil, has its dangerous aesthetic appeal, and enthralls us as audience even as we are appalled. Shakespeare, who invented the human as we now understand it, did not spare us Iago, the sublime of human negativity. ❖

is defending him to Othello. The scene that follows is extremely brief; Othello sends Iago off with orders to his ships and commands the ensign to report back to him (III.2).

A quick conversation between Desdemona and Cassio, with Emilia in attendance, opens **Act III, scene 3**. Just as Desdemona agrees to intercede on Cassio's behalf, Othello and Iago are seen approaching. Cassio slips away, and Iago, of course, points out the lieutenant's uneasy departure to Othello. Desdemona tries to discuss Cassio's case with her husband, but since his mind is on other matters, Othello asks her to leave him for the moment, promising to talk to Cassio later.

Alone with Othello, Iago continues to discuss Cassio and manipulates the conversation to cause the general to question Cassio's honesty, beginning by asking if Cassio knew of Othello's courtship of Desdemona. As the conversation continues, Iago spikes his replies to Othello's questions with so many innuendos and deliberate hesitations that Othello, frustrated and convinced that Iago is concealing information, insists that he speak candidly. Othello praises Iago as "full of love and honesty" as the ensign casts doubts on Cassio's character and stresses, ironically, the importance of appearances ("Men should be what they seem. . .") and reputation ("Good name in man and woman. . . / Is the immediate jewel of their souls."). Cunningly, Iago warns Othello against jealousy, the "green-eyed monster." Othello is still in possession of his judgment and does not blindly accept Iago's aspersions: ". . . No, Iago, I'll see before I doubt. . ."

Iago, however, does not let up and suggests that Othello observe Desdemona in Cassio's presence. He shrewdly appeals to Othello's alleged lack of experience with Venetian women, implying that not only is Othello unskilled in personal matters but also that these women hide a great deal from their husbands. As Othello's doubts begin to take hold, Iago pushes even further by reminding Othello that Desdemona deceived her father to marry him. Though Othello claims, "I do not but think Desdemona honest," he asks Iago to keep him informed and to have Emilia watch her. As Iago is leaving, Othello ponders, "Why did I marry? This honest creature doubtless / Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds." Othello is thus

beginning to doubt Desdemona, while still believing in Iago's reputed honesty. Othello's poignant soliloquy, in which he reveals his doubts about himself—the color of his skin, his unrefined speech, his age—begins by referring to Iago's "exceeding honesty" and ends by questioning Desdemona's virtue.

Desdemona and Emilia enter the scene, breaking the tension that pervades the atmosphere, and call Othello to dinner. As they leave, Desdemona accidentally drops her handkerchief, the first gift she received from Othello. It seems a small detail until Emilia, who has picked up the handkerchief, gives it to her husband. Iago, who has repeatedly asked Emilia to steal the token, cannot believe his good luck, for the handkerchief will allow him to confirm the poisonous doubts he has planted in Othello's mind.

Othello now returns and resumes his earlier discussion with Iago. A change in Othello has taken place as he himself acknowledges: ". . . O now for ever / Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!" Extremely frustrated by the jealousy that has begun to gnaw at him, Othello turns on Iago, calls him a villain, and insists that he provide "ocular proof" of his accusations. Again Iago hesitates, thus increasing Othello's agitation. When Othello insists that he be direct, Iago finally agrees to provide evidence: "[I]f imputation and strong circumstances / Which lead directly to the door of truth / Will give you satisfaction, you may have't." Iago tells Othello that as Cassio slept, the lieutenant uttered, "Sweet Desdemona, / Let us be wary, let us hide our loves!" and that he saw Cassio wipe his beard with Desdemona's handkerchief. Here Iago kneels and begs Othello to command him. Othello has fallen into the well-laid trap and, caught in an irrational frenzy of revenge, orders that Cassio die within three days. By the end of the scene, Iago has accomplished several of his goals: Cassio is ruined, Desdemona is suspected of infidelity, and Iago is appointed Othello's lieutenant. This last success may be Iago's sweetest, for he has not simply retained his image as an honest servant but has risen in rank, influence, and power precisely because of his dishonesty. He tells Othello, "I am your own forever."

List of Characters

Othello is a successful Venetian general of noble birth. However, as a Moor, his ethnicity, dark skin, and non-Christian birth set him apart. When Othello secretly marries Desdemona, daughter of a Venetian senator, he oversteps invisible boundaries. In spite of his distinguished military record, his marriage to a white Venetian woman is considered an unnatural alliance; it is alleged that the blackness of his skin is only a thin cover for the blackness of his unbaptized heathen soul. Over the course of the play, Iago's machinations lead him to behave like the "savage" he is reputed to be. As he becomes embroiled in the plot laid for his downfall, his reason and judgment give way to obsessive rage. Ironically it is Othello's judgment that allows Iago to manipulate him; Othello is a trusting man who believes that people are what they seem, thus believing in Iago because he appears to be honest and loyal. Thinking that his wife, Desdemona, has had an affair with his lieutenant, Cassio, Othello strangles her, only to kill himself after realizing that he was tricked by his trusted servant.

Iago is Othello's "ancient," his ensign or standard-bearer. Iago plots to advance himself and to destroy Othello and Cassio by suggesting to Othello that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair and thereby driving Othello to murder. While Iago is Othello's inferior in military rank and experience, he exceeds his general in his ability to calculate and maintain control of his plan. That others repeatedly refer to Iago as "honest" is both ironic and accurate: While Iago uses his reputation for honesty and loyalty as a sham to manipulate Othello, he is always honest to himself—to his goals of revenge and self-advancement and to his motivations of jealousy throughout the web of lies he spins. While Iago's guilt is revealed by his wife, Emilia, whom he murders in the play's final scene, he ultimately succeeds in his plan to ruin Othello.

Desdemona is the virtuous daughter of Brabantio, a Venetian senator. She marries Othello, who strangles her, believing her guilty of adultery with Cassio. While Desdemona is often thought of as a passive child-bride with little personality, she does exhibit her own will. By marrying Othello, who is outside

the circle of acceptable suitors, without her father's permission, Desdemona flouts parental authority and social convention. Ironically, this independence, which indicates the strength of her love for Othello, becomes her undoing. Iago uses Desdemona's deception of her father to cause Othello to doubt his wife's virtue and honesty and to kill her.

Cassio is Othello's recently promoted lieutenant. Although his character is not well developed, Cassio is a key figure in Iago's plot. Iago's jealousy of Cassio—he desired the post of lieutenant—leads Iago to include Cassio in his revenge against Othello. The play's action revolves around Iago's attempts to destroy Cassio by creating a fictitious and illicit relation between him and Desdemona. While Iago succeeds in wounding and perhaps crippling Cassio, the lieutenant survives to take over Othello's post at the end of the play.

Emilia is Iago's wife and maid-servant to Desdemona. Despite her devotion to Desdemona, she unknowingly helps Iago's plans by securing Desdemona's handkerchief, which becomes Iago's primary piece of evidence "proving" Desdemona and Cassio's "affair." In the final scenes, Emilia defends Desdemona's innocence to Othello and reveals Iago's infamy, only to be stabbed by her husband. In contrast to Desdemona, Emilia is a worldly woman who speaks candidly about adultery and sexual relations.

Roderigo is a gentleman of Venice whom Iago enlists in his revenge. Iago promises the gullible Roderigo that he will arrange an assignation with Desdemona, whom Roderigo loves. But Iago, troubled with financial problems, exploits Roderigo for his wealth and uses him as a foil in the conspiracy against Cassio. Iago eventually kills Roderigo to cover his tracks and to avoid returning gold and jewels he has embezzled.

Bianca is Cassio's courtesan. In his conspiracy against Cassio, Iago stages a conversation with Cassio about Bianca, allowing Othello to overhear it and believe they are discussing Desdemona. At the end of the play, Iago tries to implicate Bianca in Cassio's death.

Brabantio is a Venetian senator and the father of Desdemona. Personifying the discrimination against Othello, Brabantio is