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OTHELLO’S DESCENT FROM REASON

by Louis E. Dollarhide

It is a matter of general critical agreement in recent times that among Shakespeare’s tragedies Othello is the best-made play, a play tightly unified around a central action, each movement of the action driving relentlessly toward an all but overwhelming tragic moment. Technically and structurally, the play is superior to the more diffuse (if more universal in statement) Hamlet, Lear, and Antony and Cleopatra. It focuses closely, not on a prince or a ruler and a state and nature, but simply on a man, a great man certainly, but a man and his wife. In making this falling off worthy of tragic statement, Shakespeare used his powers of organization in editing and re-shaping his source, removing lurid details of Italian intrigue from the story as told by Cinthio, and magnifying hero, heroine, and villain as dramatic personages. Two key scenes illustrate clearly his method in presenting the character of the hero and this hero’s downfall: these are, respectively, Act I, Scene iii, which might be called the “Presentation Scene” because Othello is presented in his full powers; and Act III, Scene iii, the “Proof Scene” because of the talk, mostly ironic, of proof. In the many commentaries on Othello, one aspect of this great falling off from greatness, clearly illustrated in these scenes, remains to be commented upon. In this paper I propose to discuss Othello’s descent, or fall, from reason, an important aspect of his tragedy, as it is illustrated technically in the play.

For material antecedent to a study of this kind, I am indebted particularly to the investigations of T. W. Baldwin, Sister
Miriam Joseph, and Hardin Craig. Baldwin has ascertained the scope of Shakespeare’s training; Sister Joseph, the technicalities of his knowledge of the arts of language; and Craig and others, the milieu out of which the play emerged. Of more recent studies, Terence Hawkes in a very good article, entitled “Iago’s Use of Reason,” assumes a point of view which complements, yet diverges from, my own. According to Hawkes, Iago “imposes the necessity” of the ratio inferior on “events which do not warrant it,” requiring Othello to acquiesce to Iago’s conclusions.

As early as the realization of the character of Gloucester in III Henry VI and fully developed in Richard III, whenever Shakespeare felt that it was important to characterization to show that a character possessed the powers of persuasion or knew the techniques of oratoria, he displayed that character taking part in one of the Elizabethan’s favorite sports, delivering a well-made oration and/or prevailing in a scene of disputation. One has only to look at the devious rhetoric of Gloucester, later Richard III, with its florid oratorical and disputative qualities, the fustian and bombast of Richard II, and the soaring eloquence of Henry V, to observe how carefully he follows this pattern. By the time of Richard III, furthermore, Shakespeare used the modified oratorical outline for set speeches of any length. And he used the oration itself as a formal speech, as soliloquy; and, to lessen the formality of delivery, he broke the oration with dialogue, even at times giving different parts of the speech to different characters as he does the sonnet form in Romeo and Juliet.

Significantly, the two key scenes in the presentation and downfall of Othello are scenes of disputation. In the first (Act I, Scene iii) Othello answers majestically before the Venetian

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Senate Brabantio’s accusation that he has won Desdemona by foul means; in the second (Act III, Scene iii), he struggles but is unable to answer Iago’s charges against Desdemona. A significant part of the tragic statement of the play lies in the fact that the man who could counter with such ease and eloquence the charges made by Brabantio is finally so lacking in control that he is unable to handle the palpable fallacies of Iago. These distinctions would be evident to an audience trained, as Shakespeare was, in the arts of language.

When Othello enters the play in Act I, Scene ii, he is already under indictment. Iago has manipulated events so that Brabantio knows about the marriage of Othello and Desdemona, and the enraged father is searching for the Moor. When the old man fronts Othello, he accuses him of witchcraft: “O thou foul thief...thou hast enchanted her” (62-63). Calmly, yet firmly, Othello quiets his own men and those of Brabantio and agrees to go with the angry father to answer the charges made against him. In Scene iii, framed though it is with matters of state, the central development is Brabantio’s charge against the Moor before the Senate and Othello’s eloquent answer. According to her father, Desdemona has been “abus’d, stol’n from me, and corrupted/By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks” (60-61). Othello’s defense takes the form of a carefully made judicial cause, consisting of exordium, narratio, propositio, confirmatio, and conclusio. The oration is broken after the narratio by dialogue, and then after the propositio by the Duke’s, “Say it, Othello.” The remainder of the speech, the confirmatio through the brief conclusio, is uninterrupted, as it should be. While the interruptions make the scene more dramatic by breaking up what would otherwise be a set speech of some sixty-five lines, they do not conceal the formal structure of Othello’s oration. The exordium (76-81) begins, “Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors,/My very noble and approv’d good masters,” and goes through Othello’s admission of part of Brabantio’s charge: he has married the daughter. Making use of the topic of invention, subject and adjunct, the narratio (81-94) begins with the plain, blunt soldier’s demurrer: he is “rude of speech,” a man of action, not of words. “And therefore little shall I grace
my cause/In speaking for myself” (88-89). Yet he will a “round unvarnish’d tale deliver” on his course of love.

At this point, almost as though speaking his thoughts aloud, Brabantio repeats his charge. The Duke, one of the senators, and Othello engage in an exchange. And then Othello returns to his oration with the *propositio* (122-126), a succinct statement of the matter at hand: he will present how he “did thrive in this fair lady’s love” and she in his. Then after the Duke bids him speak on, Othello proceeds into the body of his defense, the proof or *confirmatio* (128-166) of the oration. Chiefly from the topic, cause and effect, he tells how Brabantio “oft invited” him, and questioned him about the story of his life. Desdemona listened, asked him to repeat the stories in private, and finally gave him evidence that she loved him. Only then did he speak. The brief *conclusio* merely summarizes the argument:

_Upon this hint I spake:_

She lov’d me for the dangers I had pass’d,
And I lov’d her that she did pity them.
This only is the witchcraft I have us’d. (167-169)

Sister Joseph observes that by the time Shakespeare had reached his major tragedies, and Othello in particular, he had effected in his art a perfect integration of character, rhetoric, and logic.\(^3\) No other speech illustrates this synthesis better than Othello’s judicial cause delivered before the Venetian Senate. The figures of speech and the topics of invention are the same as those used with such flourish in *Richard III*. Only here, the art conceals the artfulness. In his *narratio*, Othello presents himself as the plain, blunt soldier, a character type for whom Shakespeare had already developed a rapid, bare manner of address. He will, he states, deliver a “round unvarnish’d tale,” that is, a straightforward, undecorated account. And, faithful to his word, he does just this—at least on the surface. At his command, and made to serve his purpose, however, are the resources of the arts of language. Of figures of speech, those

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\(^3\) Sister Joseph, pp. 240-241.
most useful to him are figures of repetition, of omission, modification, and balance.

Of figures of repetition he uses anadiplosis, the repetition of a word which ends one construction, in the opening lines of the next: "That I have taken away this old man’s daughter,/It is most true; true, I have married her" (79-79). This is an artful kind of figure, both emphatic and graceful, suitable, if used wisely, to an exordium. One of the most common figures of repetition appears in the narratio, the figure anaphora, the repetition of a word at the beginning of parallel sentence elements: "what drugs, what charms,/What conjurations, what mighty magic" (91-92). The figure asyndeton, the omission of conjunctions from elements in a series, gives a rapidity of movement to these lines. Asyndeton is also used effectively as Othello moves into his confirmatio:

Her father lov’d me; oft invited me;
Still question’d me the story of my life
From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes,
That I had passed. (128-131)

Asyndeton is again combined with anaphora and parison, a figure of balance, in the lines that follow these.

Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances,
Of moving accidents by flood and field,
Of hair-breadth escapes i’ th’ imminent deadly breach,
Of being taken by the insolent foe. (134-137)

Notable, too, are the uses of what the Elizabethan was taught to respect, the congruent epitheton, the qualifying adjective. Used sparingly, they appear in the first two-thirds of the speech—"Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors,/My very noble and approv’d good masters," "the soft phrase of peace," "dearest action," "tented field," "a round, unvarnish’d tale," "moving accidents," "greedy ear," "pliant hour." Most of these appear in the exordium, the narratio and the first half of the confirmatio. When Othello arrives at the part Desdemona plays
in his “tale,” the flourishes disappear almost altogether. From there on, with an unobtrusive epithet or two, and the repetition of the word pitiful by means of the figure diacope, the only rhetoric is structural.

The whole speech with its explicitly direct statement, presented in a well-wrought oratorical structure and shaped and colored by a most judicious use of logic and rhetoric, stands as a model of eloquence. Few characters in Shakespeare plead a cause as persuasively as Othello does in this scene. Listening to him, we are sympathetically inclined to accept the judgment of the Duke when the speech is ended, the reaction Shakespeare plainly intends: “I think this tale would win my daughter too” (171).

Between the two scenes under consideration, Act I, Scene iii, and Act III, Scene iii, Othello takes very little part in the action of the play. In all of Act II and in Act III, Scene i, he is on stage briefly three times and is involved in only one significant action, the dismissal of Cassio as his lieutenant. When he does enter the drift of the play again, Iago has set the stage for him. Early in Act II, Iago has declared that he will put the Moor “At least into a jealousy so strong/That judgment cannot cure” (II, i. 310-311). Later in the same Act after he has “cashier’d” Cassio, he uses an even more appropriate image; out of Desdemona’s goodness he “will make a net/That shall enmesh them all” (II, iii, 367-368). When the time is right, in Act III, Scene iii, Iago begins, spider-like, to weave his web. Beginning with mere innuendoes, he leads step by step to “proof” of Desdemona’s infidelity. As he had said, his method will be to put Othello into a jealousy so strong that his judgment, his ability to distinguish the true from the false, can no longer function. His initial step in arousing Othello’s jealousy is his “Ha! I like not that” (35) when he sees Cassio suddenly leave Desdemona. Then after Desdemona pleads for Cassio and extracts a promise that Othello will talk with his disgraced friend, Iago begins his siege in earnest. “Did Michael Cassio, when you woo’d my lady/Know of your love?” he asks (94-95). From that question on, he does not pause until Othello is prey to the “green-ey’d monster.” When Iago warns him to beware of jealousy, Othello replies:
No, Iago;
I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;
And on the proof, there is no more but this,—
Away at once with love or jealousy! (189-192)

At this point, though shaken, Othello can still speak and even think rationally, but his brave words merely open the door to Iago’s machinations: since Othello is not liable to jealousy, he will speak freely to him. But as he does he cautions Othello not to “strain” his speech to “grosser issues.” Listening to him, however, Othello becomes so distracted at last that he commands Iago to leave his presence. Iago takes his leave, but returns at once to advise Othello to observe Desdemona with Cassio. If she pleads for him, the fallacious implication is that she is guilty of infidelity. Left alone, Othello is already too disturbed to detect the fallacy of this argument. “If I do prove her false,” he says. At this point in the scene, Desdemona comes in to call Othello to dinner. When told his head aches, she tries to bind his forehead with the fateful handkerchief, which is dropped by Othello. Taking the handkerchief from Emelia a moment later, Iago plans to drop it in Cassio’s lodging, for, he says,

Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ. . . . (322-324)

Othello re-enters, distracted. He can already imagine Cassio’s kisses on Desdemona’s lips. In a famous speech, he bids farewell to his peace of mind, and concludes, “Othello’s occupation’s gone!” (357).

Although there has already been repetitive talk of “proof,” at this point when he is already convinced of guilt, he at last demands “proof”—“Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore; Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof...” (359-360). Iago must “so prove/That probation bear no hinge nor loop/To hang a doubt on... (364-366).” After Iago protests his injured “honesty,” Othello repeats, “I’ll have some proof” (386). Before offering him any, Iago further inflames Othello’s mind by asking him if he must be the “supervisor” of the love-making to
be “satisfied.” “It is impossible you should see this,” Iago concludes (402). Therefore, “If imputation and strong circumstance” will satisfy him, he will give him evidence. Again Othello demands, “Give me a living reason she’s disloyal” (409). The “living reason” is, of course, Iago’s fictitious account of Cassio’s dream. After listening to these maddening details, Othello is too distraught to question the authenticity of the dream; he can only say that it “denotes a foregone conclusion.” Iago speaks twice more of “proof,” but Othello is beyond caring for proof. Instead, he wants Cassio dead and will furnish himself with “some swift means of death” for Desdemona. In the next scene and in Act IV, Scene i, Iago continues to pile on additional “evidence,” but from the point at which he arrives at the “foregone conclusion,” Othello never hesitates or looks back again. The added evidence merely increases the fury of his mounting rage.

The Moor, at the outset and by nature a balanced man of reason, walks unsuspectingly into the trap set for him by Iago. After he is too distraught to handle evidence, he demands proof. By then Iago can offer him the simplest, most obvious of fallacies, the fallacy of the accident,4 and lead him to accept its validity. If Desdemona pleads for Cassio, she is guilty. There are no other alternatives. His account of Cassio’s dream is “proof” of adultery, Iago even warns Othello that his evidence may be invalid: it is circumstantial, “imputations and strong circumstance.” What he has told Othello, this “living reason,” is merely an account of a dream. But in his disturbed state of mind Othello can no longer tell the horrible dream from the reality, which for him have become one. And finally, in the most terrible moment of the play, the man who could move the Venetian Senate with unexampled clarity and directness condemns his wife and his comrade in arms to death on this flimsy “proof.” The dream “denoted a foregone conclusion”; it was proof of something which had already happened. This is enough.

4Thomas Wilson, The Rule of Reason, Containing the Arte of Logique (London, 1552), 140R.
As we see him in the beginning of the play, then, Othello is a man who can stand before the Duke and the governing body of Venice and answer charges brought against him by one of their own members. His own modest claims to the contrary, he is a Renaissance soldier-scholar, skilled in the arts of language as he is in the art of war. For this reason his desperate attempt to see things rationally in Act III, Scene iii, is a moment of great pathos. His struggle and failure contribute finally to the pall of tragedy which hangs over the play. Not only does a loving husband destroy an innocent wife but a man, a superior man, a hero, is deprived of reason, the one gift which sets him and all mankind above the animal in the Scale of Nature. Deprived of reason, Othello becomes the helpless animal caught in the “net” prepared by Iago.