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## THE USE OF SCRIPTURE IN *OTHELLO*

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*Othello* has been generally regarded as the least universal and symbolic of Shakespeare's major tragedies. Most critics would agree with A. C. Bradley's view that the play is more a story of private life than the other tragedies, a domestic tragedy of jealousy, which limits its greatness.<sup>1</sup> G. Wilson Knight describes *Othello* as a play that is "vividly particular" rather than universal, one in which the characters appear human and concrete.<sup>2</sup> The tragedy is sometimes seen as a tragedy with an improbable plot, and based on some lucky (or unlucky) timing. All of which reduces the stature and scope of the play and keeps it from having wider moral implications.

This situation, however, has not hindered some scholars from finding a variety of elaborate theological meanings in the play. One critic likens Othello's initial bliss to that of Adam in Eden. "But there was a serpent in his Eden," which caused Othello, like Adam, to lose his paradise and become the prey of his passions.<sup>3</sup> Another prefers to liken Othello to Judas who betrayed Christ with a kiss and then killed himself. So also Othello says, "I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee. No way but this,/ Killing myself, to die upon a kiss" (V.ii.358-59). But in the handkerchief incident, this critic thinks that Othello becomes parallel to Christ who in the Veronica legend accepted Veronica's napkin while being led away to be crucified.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the opinion that *Othello* is less symbolic than Shakespeare's other tragedies, a third scholar thinks that "nowhere in Shakespeare does the presence of some kind of Biblical analogy suggest itself more readily to the receptive reader than it does in *Othello*." He holds that Othello reflects the office of God, that Cassio is Shakespeare's figure for Adam, and that Roderigo parallels the serpent suborned by Satan, Iago.<sup>5</sup> Another view is that the relationship between Othello and Desdemona is an allegory of Henry VIII and Queen Katherine, while Iago is comparable to Wolsey.<sup>6</sup>

Outstanding among those who disagree with these authorities is Roland Frye. According to Frye, the major flaw of those who insist that Shakespeare's plays are primarily theological and Christian is a lack of evidence. We are repeatedly faced with "theological assertion without theological evidence" about the characters, actions, and speeches in Shakespeare's plays, Frye says. Rarely do we find evidence from the sixteenth century to indicate that Shakespeare's contemporaries

understood the plays in that manner. Frye believes that these interpretations are largely subjective and theologically naive.<sup>7</sup>

The principal basis for any religious interpretation of Shakespeare's plays must be the many biblical references and analogies in the plays themselves. Should it occur that Shakespeare's borrowings from Scripture support a consistent religious interpretation of the plays, then we are justified in concluding that Shakespeare had a religious meaning in mind when he penned the plays. Those who support a religious interpretation of the plays firmly contend that their interpretations are based on Scripture. They stress that they are careful to "investigate the pertinence of Christian lore" in the plays, the "way in which biblical paradigms echo in a play's structure."<sup>8</sup> We are told that "a Scriptural reference in Shakespeare often seems to take control of that part of the play in which it appears, and sometimes even takes control of the entire play." Even in plays where the biblical references are neither numerous nor striking, "there is nothing casual or accidental about them. Working as reinforcement for the network of metaphors in the play, they help to establish and define the values that are presented there."<sup>9</sup> If there is one thing on which these critics agree, it is that the biblical references and analogies in Shakespeare's plays are central to their interpretations of his plays.<sup>10</sup>

We would do well to re-examine the biblical references in *Othello* to see what conclusions we can validly draw from them, and whether Shakespeare's use of Scripture warrants a religious interpretation of the play. As it happens, *Othello* contains a surprising number of biblical references. In his study of Shakespeare's use of the Bible, Richmond Noble lists twenty-three references for the play in his main text (plus four others which he cites as possible references), with the observation that "a large proportion of the Biblical allusions proceed from the mouth of Iago."<sup>11</sup> There are, however, upwards of fifty biblical references as well as borrowed biblical analogies and expressions in the play, most of which seem to be conscious adaptations of Scripture on the part of Shakespeare. The number of religious terms and images is also large.

I will first list the references in the order in which they occur in the play, with an occasional comment on some of them, as well as a few observations on which Bible Shakespeare appears to have in mind. Quotations from Scripture preceded by "Compare . . ." indicate those items which I think are probably conscious references to Scripture, but about which we should not be dogmatic. The reader can choose to accept or reject as many of these references as he wishes. But even after the more uncertain items are removed to each one's satisfaction a sufficient number of biblical references and expressions remains to

indicate whether Shakespeare conveys a religious message in the play, whether *Othello* should be seen as a Christian tragedy. Quotations are from *The Riverside Shakespeare* and the Geneva Bible of 1560, unless indicated otherwise.<sup>12</sup> The Geneva Bible is used since that is the Bible that Shakespeare echoes most often.

I.i.65: "I am not what I am."

Compare Ex. 3.14: "I am that I am."

I.i.70-71: "And though he in a fertile climate dwell,  
Plague him with flies."

The fourth plague on Egypt was the plague of flies.

Ex. 8.21-31. See also Gen. 47.6.

I.i.108-9: "You are one of those that will not serve God, if the devil bid you."

A reversal of the Devil's proposal that Jesus worship him instead of God, and of Jesus' answer: "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him onely shalt thou serue." Matt. 4.10.

I.i.154: "Though I do hate him as I do hell-pains."

Ps. 18.4: "The paynes of hel came about me: the snares of death ouertooke me."

Ps. 116.3: "The snares of death compassed me rounde about: and the paines of hel gate holde vpon me."

I.ii.9-10: "That with the little godliness I have  
I did full hard forbear him."

Compare Col. 3.13: "Forbearing one another, and forgiuing one another."

Compare Eph. 4.2, Tyndale, Matthew's, Coverdale, Great, Bishops': "Forbearyng one another."

I.ii.59: "Keep up your bright swords."

Compare Matt. 26.52: "Put vp thy sworde into his place."

Compare John 18.11: "Put vp thy sworde into its sheath."

The setting closely parallels the Gospel accounts. A band with torches and armed with swords comes by night to arrest Othello. The circumstances of Jesus' arrest are much the same. Matt. 26.47.

In Cinthio's tale, there is no elopement and no attempt is made to arrest Othello. Desdemona marries Othello with her parents' knowledge but against their wishes because she and Othello ("the Moor") deeply loved each other. Shakespeare

adds the arrest scene, which increases the likelihood that in doing so, he patterned Othello's arrest on Christ's.

I.iii.81: "Rude am I in my speech."

2 Cor. 11.6: "Thogh I be rude in speaking."

I.iii.94-95: "A maiden, never bold;

Of spirit so still and quiet."

1 Peter 3.4-5, of women, who should have "a meke and quiet spirit."

I.iii.147-50: "But still the house affairs would draw her thence,

Which ever as she could with haste dispatch,

She'ld come again, and with a greedy ear

Devour up my discourse."

Luke 10:39-40: "Marie, which also sate at Iesus fete, and heard his preaching. But Martha was combred about muche seruing."

Here, again, as at I.ii.59, the parallelism is to be found in the setting rather than in the actual words. The fact that in this instance also, Shakespeare adds this scene to what he found in Cinthio, increases the likelihood that he modelled this addition on the well-known account of Jesus at the home of Mary and Martha.

I.iii.177: "Destruction on my head if . . . ."

A common biblical expression.

Compare 1 Kings 2.33: "Their blood shal therefore returne vpon the head of Ioab, and on the head of his sede."

Compare Ezek. 9.10: "Wil recompence their wayes vpon their heads."

See also Joshua 2.19; Judges 9.57; 2 Sam. 1.16; 1 Kings 2.37; Ps. 7.17 (7.16, Geneva); etc.

I.iii.347-49: "The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts, shall be to him shortly as acerb as the coloquintida."

Matt. 3.4: "His meat was also locustes and wilde honie."

Rev. 10.9-10: "It was in my mouth as swete as honie: but when I had eaten it, my bellie was bitter."

II.i.64-65: "And in th' essential vesture of creation

Does tire the ingener."

Ps. 102.25-27: "The heauens are the woorke of thy handes. They shal perishe, but thou shalt endure: they al shal waxe

olde as dooth a garment. And as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shalbe changed."

II.iii.71-72: "A soldier's a man;  
O, man's life's but a span."

Ps. 39.6 (39.5, Geneva): "Beholde, thou hast made my dayes as it were a spanne long."

II.iii.102-104: "Well, God's above all; and there be souls must be sav'd, and there be souls must not be sav'd."

Rom. 9.18: "Therefore he hathe mercie on whome he wil, and whome he wil, he hardeneth."

Rom. 9.22-23: "What and if God . . . suffre with long pacience the vessels of wrath, prepared to destruction . . . that he might declare the riches of his glorie vpon the vessels of mercie, which he hathe prepared vnto glorie?"

II.iii.106-107: "For mine own part . . . I hope to be sav'd."

Rom. 8.24: "For we are saued by hope."

II.iii.111-12: "God forgive us our sins!"

Luke 11.4: "And forgiue vs our sinnes."

Matt. 6.12: "And forgiue vs our dettes."

Prayer Book: "And forgiue vs our trespasses."

The form of the Lord's Prayer that Shakespeare heard most often was that set forth in the Prayer Book, recited daily in the English Church. But the Act of Uniformity of 1559 prohibited disrespectful use of the Prayer Book in any interlude, play, song, or rhyme. Thus when drunken Cassio quotes the Lord's Prayer, Shakespeare is careful not to use the Prayer Book version lest he run afoul of the law.

II.iii.296-97: "It hath pleas'd the devil drunkenness to give place to the devil wrath."

Eph. 4.27: "Nether giue place to the deuil."

The Geneva Bible was the first version to read "giue place to the deuil." Earlier version had "giue place vnto the backebyter."

II.iii.309-10: "Good wine is a good familiar creature, if it be well us'd."

Ecclus. 31.27-28: "Wine soberly dronken, is profitable for the life of man. . . . Wine mesurably dronken, and in time, bringeth gladnes."

- II.iii.342-44: "And then for her  
 To win the Moor, were't to renounce his baptism,  
 All seals and symbols of redeemed sin . . . ."  
 Eph. 4.30: "The holie Spirit of God by whome ye are sealed  
 vnto the day of redemption."  
 Eph. 1.13-14: "Ye were sealed with the holie Spirit of  
 promes, . . . vntil the redemption."
- II.iii.351-53: "When devils will the blackest sins put on,  
 They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,  
 As I do now."  
 With clear overtones to Satan as an angel of light, which  
 Shakespeare refers to several times in his plays.  
 2 Cor. 11.14: "For Satan him self is transformed into an  
 Angel of light."
- II.iii.360: "So will I turn her virtue into pitch."  
 Compare Eccclus. 13.1: "He that toucheth pitch, shalbe defiled  
 with it."
- III.iii.117: "My lord, you know I love you."  
 Compare John 21.15-17: "Yea Lord, thou knowest that I loue  
 thee."
- III.iii.155-59: "Good name in man and woman, . . .  
 Is the immediate jewel of their souls.  
 Who steals my purse steals trash; . . .  
 But he that filches from me my good name . . . ."  
 Prov. 22.1: "A good name is to be chosen aboue great  
 riches."  
 Eccclus. 41.12: "Haue regarde to thy name: for that shal  
 continue with thee aboue a thousand treasures of golde."  
 Eccl. 7.3 (7.1, AV): "A good name is better then a good  
 oyntment."
- III.iii.203-204: "Their best conscience  
 Is not to leave't undone, but to keep't unknown."  
 Matt. 23.23, Bishops': "These ought ye to haue donne, and  
 not to leaue the other vndonne." (Also Tyndale, Matthew's,  
 Great).  
 Prayer Book, Morning Prayer: "We haue left vndone those  
 things which wee ought to haue done, and wee haue done those  
 things which wee ought not to haue done."

SCRIPTURE IN *OTHELLO*

Morning Prayer, recited daily, would be Shakespeare's most immediate source.

III.iii.381-83: "*Oth* . . . Thou shouldst be honest.

*Iago*. I should be wise—for honesty's a fool  
And loses that it works for."

Compare Luke 16.8: "And the Lord commended the vniust stewarde, because he had done wisely. Wherefore the children of this worlde are . . . wiser then the children of light."  
The Unjust Steward was shrewd though dishonest.

III.iv.146-48: "For let our finger ache, and it endues

Our other healthful members even to a sense  
Of pain."

1 Cor. 12.25-26: "In the bodie . . . if one member suffer, all suffer with it."

III.iv.197: "I pray you bring me on the way a little."

Compare Gen. 18.16: "Abraham went with them to bring them on the waie."

IV.i.8: "The devil their virtue tempts, and they tempt heaven."

Compare the Devil's second temptation of Jesus and Jesus' answer at Matt. 4.7: "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."

See also Luke 4.12; Deut. 6.16; and I.i.108-109, above.

IV.i.270: "He's that he is."

Compare Ex. 3.14: "I am that I am."

See also I.i.65, above.

IV.ii.15-16: "If any wretch have put this in your head,

Let heaven requite it with the serpent's curse!"

A reference to God's curse on the serpent in Eden at Gen. 3.14: "The Lord God said to the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou are cursed aboue all cattel."

IV.ii.25-26: "Let me see your eyes;

Look in my face."

Based on the idea that the guilt of an adulterous woman can be detected by the look on her face, and especially by looking into her eyes.

Compare Ecclus. 26.9: "The whordome of a woman may be knowen in the pride of her eyes, and eyeliddes."



IV.ii.42: "Alas the heavy day!"

Compare Joel 1.15: "Alas: for the day."

Compare Jer. 30.7: "Alas, for this day."

IV.ii.47-53: "Had it pleas'd heaven

To try me with affliction, had they rain'd  
All kind of sores and shames on my bare head,  
Steep'd me in poverty to the very lips,  
Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes,  
I should have found in some place of my soul  
A drop of patience."

A reference to Job, who was reduced to poverty and shame,  
afflicted with disease, and yet maintained patience.

Job 2.7-10: "Smote Iob with sore boyles, from the sole of his  
fote vnto his crowne."

James 5.11: "Ye haue heard of the pacience of Iob."

IV.ii.57-62: "But there, . . .

Where either I must live or bear no life;  
The fountain from the which my current runs  
Or else dries up: to be discarded thence!  
Or keep it as a cestern for foul toads  
To knot and gender in!"

Prov. 5.15-18: "Drinke the water of thy cisterne, and of the  
riuers out of the middes of thine owne well. Let thy  
fountaines flowe forthe, and the riuers of waters in the stretes.  
But let them be thine, euen thine onely, and not the strangers  
with thee. Let thy fontaine be blessed, and reioyce with the  
wife of thy youth."

Shakespeare seems to have the Geneva Bible in mind in this  
reference. The Bishops' has neither "cisterne" nor "fontaine"  
("fountaines").

IV.ii.69: "Would thou hadst never been born!"

Matt. 26.24: "It had bene good for that man, if he had neuer  
bene borne."

See also Mark 14.21.

IV.ii.82-85: "No, as I am a Christian.

If to preserve this vessel for my lord  
From any other foul unlawful touch  
Be not to be a strumpet, I am none."

1 Thess. 4.3-4: "That ye shulde absteine from fornication,  
That euerie one of you shulde know, how to possesse his  
vessel in holines and honour."

1 Sam. 21.5: "Certainly women haue bene separate from vs  
. . . and the vessels of the yong men were holy, . . . how  
muche more then shal euery one be sanctified this day in the  
vessel?"

IV.ii.90-92: "You, mistress,  
That haue the office opposite to Saint Peter,  
And keeps the gate of hell!"

Matt. 16.18-19: "Thou are Peter, and vpon this rocke I wil  
buylde my Church: and the gates of hel shal not ouercome it.  
And I wil giue vnto thee the keyes of the kingdome of  
heauen."

IV.ii.152-53: "If e'er my will did trespass 'gainst his love,  
Either in discourse of thought or actual deed."

A paraphrase of the General Confession in the Communion  
Service: "Wee knowledge and bewaile our manifold sinnes and  
wickednes, which we from time to time most grieuously haue  
committed, by thought, word, and deed, against thy diuine  
Maiestie."

IV.iii.64, 68-70: "*Des.* Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?  
*Emil.* The world's a huge thing; it is a great price  
For a small vice."

With overtones to Satan offering Jesus "all the kingdomes of  
the worlde, and the glorie of them," if Jesus would but fall  
down and worship him. Matt. 4.8-9.

Compare also Matt. 16.26: "What shal it profite a man thogh  
he shulde winne the whole worlde, if he lose his own soule?"

V.ii.21-22: "This sorrow's heavenly,  
It strikes where it doth love."

Compare Heb. 12.6: "For whome the Lord loueth, he  
chasteneth."

V.ii.26-27: "If you bethink yourself of any crime  
Unreconcil'd as yet to heaven and grace."

Compare 2 Cor. 5.20: "Be reconciled to God."

- V.ii.32: "I would not kill thy soul."  
Compare Matt. 10.28: "Feare ye not them which kil the bodie, but are not able to kil the soule."
- V.ii.46: "Peace, and be still!"  
Mark 4.39: "Peace, and be stil."
- V.ii.59-61: "Never lov'd Cassio  
But with such general warrantie of heaven  
As I might love."  
A passing reference to the common Christian admonition to "loue one another." See 1 John 3.11; 1 Thess. 4.9; Rom. 13.8; etc.
- V.ii.99-101: "Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse  
Of sun and moon, and that th' affrighted globe  
Did yawn at alteration."  
Typical of the signs that signify the deaths of great persons.  
At Christ's death, the Gospels record an eclipse, an earthquake, the opening of graves, and the dead coming out of their graves.  
Matt. 27.45, 51-53; Mark 15.33; Luke 23.44-45.
- V.ii.132: "She turn'd to folly, and she was a whore."  
Deut. 22.21: "For she hath wrought follie in Israel, by playing the whore."
- V.ii.134: "She was false as water."  
Compare Gen. 49.4, said to Reuben for defiling his father's bed: "Thou wast light as water."  
Tyndale, Matthew's, Great, Bishops': "Vnstable as water."
- V.ii.196: "'Tis proper I obey him; but now now."  
Matrimony Service: "Wilt thou haue this man to thy wedded husband, . . . Wilt thou obey him, and serue him?"  
Eph. 5.22: "Wiues, submit your selues vnto your husbands."  
1 Peter 3.5-6: "Holie women . . . were subiect to their husbands. As Sarra obeied Abraham."
- V.ii.347. Folio: "Like the base Iudean."  
A reference to Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ. Matt. 26.14-16. Judas was the only apostle who was from the tribe of Judah. The other eleven were all Galileans.<sup>13</sup>

V.ii.347-48: "Threw a pearl away  
Richer than all his tribe."

A reference to the "perle of great price" of Matt. 13.46. Since both Judas and Jesus belonged to the same genealogical tribe, Judas threw away the most precious jewel of his tribe by betraying Jesus.

V.ii.355-56: "I took by th' throat the circumcised dog,  
And smote him—thus."

Compare 1 Sam. 17.35: "I went out after him and smote him, . . . I caught him by the bearde, and smote him, and slewe him."

V.ii.358-59: "I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee. No way but this,  
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss."

Again, parallel to Judas, who betrayed Jesus with a kiss and afterwards killed himself. Matt. 26.48-49; 27.4-5.

To the above list can be added the following passages in *Othello*, that were probably also suggested to Shakespeare by the biblical texts cited for them:

II.i.187-89:	Ps. 107.23-26
II.i.299:	Ex. 21.23-25
III.iii.172-73:	1 Tim. 6.6-8
IV.i.234:	Luke 17.29; Rev. 14.10; 20.10; 21.8
IV.ii.63:	Gen. 3.24; Ex. 25.18-22
IV.ii.103-104:	Num. 5.11-31
V.ii.129:	Rev. 21.8
V.ii.220:	Ezek. 1.4; Job 37.9

Since Shakespeare's use of Scripture in *Othello* is so extensive and varied, it should not be too difficult to ascertain whether his aims were theological. Surely Shakespeare was capable of conveying a coherent and consistent religious message if he chose to do so. On the other hand, if the foregoing array of references do not set forth a reasonably clear or consistent theological scheme, then we must conclude that Shakespeare's references are subservient to his dramatic ends and are used by him as the need arises in developing the action of the play.

An analysis of the references make it clear that Shakespeare had no theological message to convey. All efforts to find a consistent religious pattern or to convert the play into a Christian allegory on the basis of the references are both futile and unconvincing. For the patterns that appear to emerge from some of the references are

completely contradicted by other references which present a totally different pattern.

Four of Shakespeare's references seem to liken Othello to Christ:

I.ii.59, the arrest scene, where both the circumstances of the arrest and Othello's words on being apprehended are parallel to Christ's;

I.iii.147-50, Othello at Desdemona's home, parallel to Jesus at the home of Mary and Martha. In Shakespeare's context, Desdemona plays the role of both Mary and Martha, being distracted by household duties and at the same time eagerly devouring Othello's words as opportunity affords;

IV.ii.69, Othello's use of Jesus' words, "It had bene good for that man, if he had neuer bene borne." Jesus spoke these words about his betrayer, Judas. Othello, however, says them to Desdemona;

V.ii.46, where Christ's words in calming the stormy Sea of Galilee, "Peace, and be still," are put in Othello's mouth.

Elsewhere, however, Shakespeare seems to consciously compare Othello to both Job and the Apostle Paul:

At IV.ii.47-53, Othello is likened to Job. Othello says he would prefer to have heaven afflict him in the manner that Job was afflicted, rather than be made a cuckold;

Othello's words to the Duke and the council, "Rude am I in my speech" (I.iii.81), are those of the Apostle Paul to the church at Corinth.

But before we conclude that these references which liken Othello to three outstanding men of faith have any theological significance, we must also come to terms with the fact that in another reference Othello accuses Desdemona (who as we shall see, is also compared to Christ and given ideal Christian qualities) of being a whore, then murders her, and finally commits suicide. Moreover, while it can be argued that Othello is four times likened to Christ, he is twice compared to Judas:

SCRIPTURE IN *OTHELLO*

V.ii.347-48, where Othello speaks of himself as the base Judean, who betrayed Christ, the richest member of his tribe;

V.ii.358-59, already commented on, where Othello plays out the part of Judas, who likewise betrayed Christ with a kiss and then killed himself.

In these instances, Desdemona would be the Christ figure, betrayed and killed by a Judas. But when Othello says to her, "Would thou hadst never been born," Desdemona is being compared to Judas, to whom the Gospels apply these words. At V.ii.99-101, however, Desdemona's death is compared to Christ's, at whose death an eclipse and an earthquake also occurred. Desdemona is given ideal Christian qualities at I.iii.94-95; IV.ii.82-85; IV.ii.152-53; IV.iii.64; and V.ii.59-61, all quoted in the list of references.

Discrepancies of this nature cannot be easily ignored or explained away without manipulating and distorting the evidence. If Shakespeare wrote to convey a religious message, then he must be judged as a very inept and inconsistent theologian. And not to be overlooked is the fact that the majority of Shakespeare's fifty-plus references play no part in any theological scheme.

The most consistent use of Scripture in the play involves Iago. Except for one reference, he is consistently portrayed as either the Devil parading as an angel of light (II.iii.351-53), or else as an evildoer filled with malice toward others (I.i.154; I.ii.9-10; II.iii.342-44; II.iii.360). That portrayal coincides with the part that Iago plays in the drama and in using these biblical references Shakespeare aptly develops Cinthio's narrative in which Iago (the ensign) is also presented as a devil incarnate.<sup>14</sup> If Shakespeare's intentions were theological, we should expect a reasonably similar consistency in the references pertaining to Othello and Desdemona. But those references are theologically irreconcilable and are used by Shakespeare as they best lend themselves to the dialogue and action of the play. The controlling factor is not the reference, for the references are subordinated to the plot borrowed from Cinthio, and to the context in which they appear. Moreover, as S. L. Bethell has shown in his study of the diabolic imagery in the play, only eighteen diabolic images (rather than references) are applied to Iago, but twenty-six to Othello,<sup>15</sup> although the biblical references four times liken Othello to Christ.

The evidence seems conclusive, therefore, that based on the biblical references in the play, attempts to impose a religious interpretation on *Othello* have no sound basis. Those who argue otherwise seem to be dominated by their private religious leanings and their arguments are

marred by over-ingenuity and a great deal of special pleading. There is no evidence that anyone in Shakespeare's day interpreted *Othello* as a Christian tragedy. Shakespeare's company performed the play in Oxford in 1610, six years after it first appeared, and a learned Oxonian who saw the play wrote that the audience was moved to tears by Desdemona's death. "As she lay on her bed, her face itself implored the pity of the audience."<sup>16</sup> The actors movingly conveyed the play's basic theme, the tragedy of a loving wife murdered by her jealous husband. No hint that anyone saw Desdemona as a Christ figure or a divinity, or that the play was interpreted in symbolic or allegorical terms. For no matter how adroitly these interpretations may be argued, they stray far afield by attempting to load the play with meanings it does not have, and go beyond what Shakespeare intended or the audience must have understood.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York, 1968), pp. 147-200.

<sup>2</sup>G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (New York, 1966), p. 97.

<sup>3</sup>Paul N. Siegel, *Shakespearean Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise* (New York, 1957), pp. 126-127.

<sup>4</sup>Roy Battenhouse, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Its Christian Premises* (Bloomington, 1969), pp. 95-100.

<sup>5</sup>J. A. Bryant, Jr., *Hippolyta's View: Some Christian Aspects of Shakespeare's Plays* (Lexington, 1961), pp. 139-146.

<sup>6</sup>Peter Milward, S. J., *Shakespeare's Religious Background* (Bloomington, 1973), pp. 174-175.

<sup>7</sup>Roland Mushat Frye, *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (Princeton, 1963), pp. 3-20.

<sup>8</sup>Roy Battenhouse, pp. ix-x.

<sup>9</sup>J. A. Bryant, Jr., pp. 17, 69.

<sup>10</sup>Paul Siegel, pp. 88-98.

<sup>11</sup>Richmond Noble, *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge* (London, 1935), pp. 216-221.

<sup>12</sup>Quotations from the Psalms, however, are from the Psalter, the version of the Psalms recited daily in the morning and evening services of the Anglican Church, and which Shakespeare was best acquainted with. I have used the Psalter that was published in the Second Folio edition of the Bishops' Bible of 1572. References to the Prayer Book are to an edition of 1590.

<sup>13</sup>The First Folio text of *Othello* is considered the superior text by most editors, but in this line, the Riverside editors preferred the First Quarto, which has "Like the base *Indian*." See my note "Like the Base Judean," *SQ*, 31 (1980), 93-95, for evidence that "Judean" is the correct reading.

<sup>14</sup>The exception occurs at III.iii.117 where Iago utters the well-known words that Peter spoke to Jesus at the Sea of Galilee, a passage that makes it difficult to argue for theological intent even in the case of Iago.

<sup>15</sup>S. L. Bethell, "Shakespeare's Imagery: The Diabolic Images in *Othello*," *ShS*, 5 (1952), 69.

<sup>16</sup>Marvin Rosenburg, *The Masks of Othello* (Berkeley, 1961), pp. 5, 237.