

## ***Othello: A Study of "Maimed Rites" as Portents of Tragedy***

**Mohammad Awwad\*, Joseph John\*\***

\*Associate Professor and \*\* Assistant Professor,  
Department of English Language & Literature, Faculty of Arts,  
Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan

**Abstract.** One of the most crucial concerns in *Othello* criticism has been to analyze and assess the causes leading to the tragic end of the protagonists. A major focus in this regard has been on the tragic weaknesses in Othello's character and on Desdemona's unwitting contribution to Iago's success. An equal emphasis on Iago's consummate skill as an evildoer is also evident in the critical corpus. Not enough attention, however, has been paid to the significance of the events in Act I as a necessary prelude to the tragic end of both hero and heroine. This paper attempts to show that the "maimed rites" signified by the flawed circumstances of their love and marriage provide a fertile ground in which the villain sows the seeds of destruction. Both character and incident (and their implications) in act I are analyzed so as to show that the first act, far from being a "detached" sequence depicting the nobility and integrity of Othello and Desdemona, constitutes in effect a pre-Cyprus preamble to the play's tragic climax in the remote Cyprian outpost. The murder of Desdemona is seen as a ritual consummation that harks back ironically to the "maimed rites" and missed "connubium" of their unpropitious match.

It has been customary to ascribe the tragic outcome of *Othello* to Iago's diabolic machinations, aided by Othello's tragic flaw and by Desdemona's innocence. The signal importance of these factors in bringing about the tragic end of both hero and heroine cannot indeed be gainsaid; in fact, without the decisive force of these factors, it is inconceivable that the tragedy should ever take place. However, the inauspicious circumstances of the protagonists' love and marriage constitute a portentous background adumbrative of, and in a way tributary to, the effectiveness of these major factors in causing the tragedy.

Criticism of the play has generally tended to account for the tragedy more or less in terms of what might be called the post-Venetian part of the play, particularly, in terms of the "collapse" of the "noble" Othello of the first act. Neither the Bradleyan approach,<sup>(1)</sup> which interprets the tragedy as exclusively Iago's work, nor the Leavis

---

(1) Cf. A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: MacMillan, 1957). Bradley's discussion of *Othello* in this book is one of the landmarks of *Othello* criticism as is Leavis's, cited below.

sian view,<sup>(2)</sup> which construes it as the inevitable consequence of Othello's unmitigated egotism, has duly recognized the foreboding, if not threatening, aspects of the scenes of act 1, teeming with unnamed menaces to the happiness of the newly-married couple. Studies by Robert B. Heilman<sup>(3)</sup> and Jane Adamson<sup>(4)</sup> have indeed dealt insightfully with the interconnections of events happening in Venice and Cyprus respectively, but even they have not taken sufficient notice of the eloquent latency of tragedy in act 1 as evidenced by the minatory elements in the opening scenes. It is the thesis of this paper that the first act of the play, far from being a somewhat "detached" sequence depicting the nobility of both hero and heroine, is a necessary prelude to the tragedy insofar as it dramatizes what we might call the flawed circumstances of their love and marriage, which are patently predictive of disaster.

These flawed circumstances, subsumed under what we shall designate as the "maimed rites"<sup>(5)</sup> of their wedlock, must be taken fully into account in any attempt to understand the play in its overall context as the story of a failed marriage. These circumstances may not in themselves have constituted an effective cause of the tragedy, but without them it appears certain that Iago, far all his "superhuman" capacity for evil, may not have succeeded in bringing about the tragedy. If too much credit has been given to Iago's intelligence by some critics, it is because they have paid too little attention to these flawed circumstances which are significantly co-active with the more decisive character flaws in both Othello and Desdemona. Potential chaos surrounds their marriage — secretly contracted by night, vulgarly advertised by Iago, lamely vindicated (with maimed logic) by both lovers, and opportunely endorsed by the powers that be in view of the crisis created by the Turkish designs on Cyprus. The inevitable move from Venice to Cyprus is a move toward a deeper and more isolated insecurity. From the Venetian senate chamber to the bed chamber in Cyprus, where Othello imprints on his wife's lips the kiss of death, there is a line of connection that points to the tragic climax as a catastrophe already latent in the first act.

Generally speaking, love in Shakespeare comes to a tragic end whenever it seeks fulfillment without observing the rites and customs enjoined by tradition and without conforming to the norms and expectations of society. Thus, for instance, in a romantic tragedy such as *Romeo and Juliet*, the love between the young couple, however, pure or exalted in itself, is at variance with both familial and social expectations and is, as such, a foredoomed affair. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, to take another instance,

(2) Cf. F.R. Leavis, "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero: A Note on *Othello*," *Scrutiny*, 6 (1937), 259-83.

(3) Robert B. Heilman, *Magic in the Web: Action and Language in "Othello"* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), pp. 17-23.

(4) Jane Adamson, "*Othello*" As Tragedy: Some Problems of Judgment and Feeling (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 28-63.

(5) William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.1. 219, in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974).

the illicit affair between the hero and heroine, militating as it does against the anti-theoretical values of Rome and Egypt, proves a disastrous one. In the comedies, on the other hand, love, after surviving many complications, eventually comes to a happy ending, with marriage duly celebrated not only as a sacramental union of the lovers but also as a festive enactment of social amity and harmony. According to Sigurd Burckhardt, Shakespeare's "great metaphor for his vision of order is not something grand and cosmic like the harmony of the spheres or the chain of being; it is something modest, earthly, human — marriage."<sup>(6)</sup> In his sonnets and in his comedies, Shakespeare reveals a deep and abiding interest in marriage as the "perfect ceremony of love's rite."<sup>(7)</sup>

The sacramental and social dimensions of traditional matrimony are more or less non-existent in the marriage of Othello and Desdemona, and their absence is accentuated by the "detailed social ethos"<sup>(8)</sup> of the city of Venice as presented in act 1. At any rate, the marriage appears to be opprobrious enough to need vindication by the "errant" lovers before a solemn assemblage of Venetian senators. News of their clandestine marriage comes to us from foul-mouthed Iago hollering out the "juicy" tidings to Brabantio in rude and salacious language. More information is withheld than revealed — purposely, it seems, to enhance the air of guilty secrecy. We are in the dark as to the venue of their secret marriage. Was it a friar's cell, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, and was there a Friar Laurence to pronounce them man and wife? Or did they simply have a "common law" marriage unsolemnized by priest or friar? Well might one say, with Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*: "This looks not like a nuptial."<sup>(9)</sup> That they are married is all we know; and we first hear the news from the two persons in the play who have already pledged themselves to destroy it. Secrecy matches secrecy: Iago secretly plans to wreck the marriage which itself has its beginning in secrecy.

Secret marriages are generally regarded with scant condonation in Shakespeare's plays. In *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, the young lovers are shown as paying with their lives for their secret marriage.<sup>(10)</sup> In *Measure for Measure*, Claudio, sentenced to death for his secret union with Juliet, has this to say on his situation:

---

(6) Sigurd Burckhardt, *Shakespeare's Meanings* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 20.

(7) Shakespeare, Sonnet 23, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

(8) Michael Long, *The Unnatural Scene: A Study in Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 4.

(9) Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, 4.1. 68, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

(10) It is not intended here to "blame" the lovers; indeed, as exemplars of the primacy of love over all mundane matters, Romeo and Juliet defy censure. Blame for the tragedy must ultimately fall on the inveterate feud between their two families. However, the "maimed rites" of their secret marriage form an integral part of the pattern of circumstances that make for tragedy.

Thus stands it with me: upon a true contract  
 I got possession of Julietta's bed.  
 You know the lady; she is fast my wife,  
 Save that we do the denunciation lack  
 Of outward order.<sup>(11)</sup>

Speaking of the traditional policy of the church in regard to marriage, Ernest Schanzer says:

On the one hand it wished to make the contraction of a legal marriage as easy as possible in order to encourage people to live in a state of matrimony rather than 'in sin.' It therefore decreed that any *de praesenti* contract (i.e., one in which a man and a woman declared that henceforth they were husband and wife) constituted a legal marriage. Such a contract did not need the presence of a priest, nor, indeed, of any third person to witness it, nor any deposition in writing. All that was required was the mutual consent of the parties ... But to counteract the obvious evils to which such laws were bound to give rise, the church also insisted that, though valid and binding, such secret marriages were sinful and forbidden, and that, if they took place, the offenders were to be punished and forced to solemnize their marriage *in facie ecclesiae*.<sup>(12)</sup>

Whether or not the marriage of Othello and Desdemona was duly solemnized *in facie ecclesiae*, the fact remains that it lacked the "outward order" which Claudio admits his marriage to Juliet lacked. His remark on the vitiating effect of secrecy is revealing: "The stealth of our most mutual entertainment / With character too gross is writ on Juliet."<sup>(13)</sup> In a comedy like *Measure for Measure*, the potentiality for danger and death betokened by the stigma of stealth is eventually transformed into a happy ending, whereas in the love tragedies it aligns itself with the dark forces of both human and circumstantial evil that conspire against the lovers' happiness.

Defiance of parental wishes which almost invariably characterizes secret marriages is frowned upon in Shakespeare's plays. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia's refusal to marry the man of her father's choice provokes Duke Theseus into threatening her with life-long sequestration in a nunnery or even death. The Duke is firm in his support for her father's right to obedience from her. To her plea, "I would my father look'd but with my eyes" he replies, "Rather your eyes must with his judgement look."<sup>(14)</sup> In *The Merchant of Venice*, on the other hand, Portia's inflexible loyalty to the will of her deceased father ("If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana, unless I be obtain'd by the manner of my father's will"<sup>(15)</sup>) is

---

(11) Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 1.2. 145-49, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

(12) Ernest Schanzer, *The Problem Plays of Shakespeare* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), pp. 75-76.

(13) Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 1.2. 154-55, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

(14) Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.1. 56-57, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

(15) Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 1.2. 106-108, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

rewarded with the choicest of husbands in the casket scene. In comparison with Portio's steadfast adherence to her *dead* father's will, Desdemona's cold disregard for her *living* father's feelings is, to say the least, grossly unfilial. No wonder Brabantio bemoans his daughter's choice as a "judgement maimed" (1.1.99) — a judgement that goes "against all rules of nature" (1.1.101). Brabantio considers his daughter's marriage not only "unnatural" but also unhallowed by traditional rites and ceremonies.

Rites and ceremonies are of great importance in Shakespeare's plays. Their absence or perversion in the tragedies presages disaster and their infraction in the comedies tends to muddle the issues, thus darkening the denouement before the happy ending. Their due observance at all social events, be they weddings or be they funerals, is deemed essential to the collective wholesomeness of the community. Even small omissions that detract from communal "pietas" will not escape the shrewd observer. Thus, for instance, the first thing that Hamlet notes at Ophelia's funeral is the "maimed rites" that characterize the event. He says:

Who is this they follow?  
And with such maimed rites? This doth betoken  
The corse they follow did with desp'rate hand  
Foredo it own life.<sup>(16)</sup>

It is significant that the "maimed rites" suggest to Hamlet the socially and morally tabooed manner of Ophelia's death. Natural death would merit full funeral rites, but suicide deserves only "maimed rites."

What is true of death and burial in Shakespeare is also true of love and marriage. The rites and ceremonies associated with marriage are frequently enacted with due propriety, particularly in the comedies where marriage often becomes a paradigm for the ideal state of man no less than for the natural. The natural and the ideal, which in other contexts could be antonymous, here coincide at the point of confluence between the personal and the communal. Rites and customs, observed with due reverence, are seen as cementing the bond of union between the couple and as conferring on it society's unqualified approval. On the other hand, failure to observe them is fraught with grave consequences for the couple involved. This, as we have seen, is generally true of the love tragedies, including the story of Othello and Desdemona whose tragic end soon after their marriage is fairly adumbrated by the untoward circumstances of their love and marriage.

These circumstances indicate the shape of things to come in the married life of Othello and Desdemona, and as such there is considerable irony in the passage in

---

(16) Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.1. 218-21, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

which Desdemona pleads with the Duke to be allowed to accompany Othello to Cyprus:

if I be left behind,  
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,  
The rites for why I loved him are bereft me,  
And I a heavy interim shall support  
By his dear absence.

(1.3.255-59)

The word “rites” here, of course, signifies marital rights, but these rights have not been hallowed by “rites” duly observed. On the second night after her arrival in Cyprus, Desdemona is murdered by her husband. “Rights” evaporate in the absence of “rites.” In saying this, due cognizance must, of course, be taken of Iago’s towering role as malefactor par excellence, but it needs nonetheless to be noted that his work is made much easier by the complex of deficiencies subsumed under the “maimed rites” of the two lovers’ bleak union.

What Iago gains from his shrewd acquaintance with the ominous contingencies of the Othello-Desdemona affair in Venice is an absolute conviction about the easy vulnerability of their union. Thus, for instance, despite Desdemona’s unequivocal assertion of her “blindness” to Othello’s color, Iago works on the assumption that it will, sooner or later, be a cause of disaffection in her. As Coleridge puts it, “No doubt Desdemona saw Othello’s visage in his mind; yet, as we are constituted, and most surely as an English audience was disposed in the beginning of the seventeenth century, it would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro.”<sup>(17)</sup> Here Coleridge seems merely to echo in decent words Iago’s foul-worded innuendoes about Othello’s color, which, together with his age and racio-cultural alienness, constitutes what Johnson has dubbed an “unequal match.”<sup>(18)</sup>

Iago’s obsessive interest in Othello’s blackness has much to do with his gratuitous imputation of excessive lasciviousness to the “blackamoor.” Indeed he cannot think of the match between the fair Desdemona and the black Moor except in terms of animal lust; neither can he speak of it except in terms of the most outrageous sexual imagery. To a shocked and perplexed Brabantio he announces: “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tuppung your white ewe” (1.1.90-91). And he goes on to say, “Because we come to do you service, and you think we are ruffians, you’ll have your daughter cover’d with a Barbary horse” (1.1.109-12). Revelling in the

---

(17) S.T. Coleridge, *Coleridge’s Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare and Some Other Old Poets and Dramatists* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1911), p. 170.

(18) Samuel Johnson, *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. W.R. Wimsatt (New York: MacGibbon & Kee, 1960), p. 114.

sheer bestiality of his language, he adds, "I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" (1.1.115-17).

The heavily bestial tone and substance of Iago's reportage introduces a note of the sinister and the unnatural into the "noble" phenomenon of a "marriage of minds" that both Desdemona and Othello consider their marriage to be. The loud hue and cry raised by Iago (and Roderigo), the stealth and guilt of the lovers' elopement and marriage, the veritable "trial" of the newlyweds in the senate chamber, the news of the Cyprus was that bespeaks Othello's imminent departure for Cyprus — all these conjoin to surround the couple with a tenebrous atmosphere of indefinable fatefulness even before Iago initiates his ingenious plan for their destruction.

A close look at the opening scenes of the play will show that all is not well with the way the ill-fated couple wooed and won each other. Othello's famous speech before the senate, while it clears himself of Brabantio's charge of witchcraft, still does seem to "incriminate" him on other counts. The very first words of his speech refer to the friendship that existed between himself and Brabantio, a friendship which, presumably, thrived on the proximity in age between the two and which gave Othello access to Brabantio's daughter. Othello says:

Her father lov'd, oft invited me;  
Still question'd me the story of my life  
From year to year - the battles, sieges, fortunes,  
That I have pass'd.  
I ran it through, even from my boyish days  
To th' very moment that he bade me tell it ...

(1.3. 128-33)

Closer in age to the father than to the daughter, Othello, in all decency, could hardly have been expected by the trusting father to take advantage of their friendship. It is true, of course, that Othello at first had no intention of taking advantage of the situation. As he says, his primary auditor originally was Brabantio, Desdemona being but an occasional listener who came now and then to listen in on his tale, eager to "devour" whatever she could hear of it, after hastily finishing her household chores. It is only when he found that she was so keenly interested that he found himself tempted to "tempt" her, so to speak, into asking him to tell her the whole tale. So in a "pliant hour," he managed:

to draw from her a prayer of earnest heart  
That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,  
Whereof by parcels she had something heard  
But not intently. I did consent,  
And often did beguile her of her tears  
When I did speak of some distressful stroke  
That my youth suffered

(1.3. 151-58)

Thus did Othello betray his friendship with Brabantio. The words “pliant” and “beguile” denote an attitudinal flaw in his courtship — they more than hint at a calculating approach that clearly involves a conscious betrayal of the trust placed in him by his unsuspecting friend. There is considerable equivocation in Othello’s account of his courtship. On the one hand, he confesses that he did use a “pliant” hour to induce Desdemona to request him to tell his whole tale and, on the other, he seeks to give the impression that he merely obliged her by complying with her “voluntary” request. The truth is that, although Brabantio’s charge that Othello has “enchanted” Desdemona with “foul charms” is false, yet Othello seems to have “enchanted” her with his fantastic stories of “disastrous chances,” of “accidents by flood and field,” of “hair-breadth escapes,” and other exciting wonders. The result, as he himself puts it, is that “She lov’d me for the dangers I had pass’d / And I lov’d her that she did pity them” (1.3. 167-68).

Offered here is a rather poor rationale for love. It takes an extremely naive and immature maiden to fall in love with a man simply for the dangers he has gone through, and it takes an equally naive man to love her simply for the “pity” these dangers have evoked in her. Heilman is right in saying that Othello “singularly reminds us of the actor falling in love with his audience.”<sup>(19)</sup> We feel that Othello’s words reveal “less of devotion than of flattered acceptance of adoration, and we wonder what likelihood there is that, after the glamorous and one-sided beginning, the relationship will achieve depth and durability.”<sup>(20)</sup>

More revealing about the “springs” of Desdemona’s love are the following lines from Othello’s speech:

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

(1.3. 163-66)

To Othello, this was Desdemona’s indirect way of telling him that, should he propose marriage, she would gladly accept. Othello, of course, did propose and was accepted. Yet the fact remains that he, in his elation at being accepted, paid little attention to the fact that what mattered to her was the tale, not the teller, since (as she told him) any other man telling such a tale could win her. Considered in this light, Desdemona’s assertion that she saw Othello’s visage in his mind could, among other things, mean this too: that she had become enamoured of a mind that could conjure up such strange fantasies and regale her with exotic yarns. It is one of the intriguing

---

(19) Heilman, p. 140.

(20) Heilman, p. 171.



contradictions of the drama that Desdemona's love, based on such seemingly flimsy grounds, should turn out to be the wonderful love it actually is in the play — a love unto death, pure, selfless, unquenchable.

And what is the nature of what Othello rather pompously calls his "pilgrimage" — which so fascinates Desdemona? Among the marvels of this mapless tale of adventure are "men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" (1.3. 144-45). The incredibility of this item is apt to call into question the credibility of the rest of the tale, thus making the other details seem dubious hair-raisers trumped up to whet Desdemona's obvious appetite for the exotic and the exciting. Considered in this light, Iago's cynical disdain for the way Othello won Desdemona (by "bragging and telling her fantastical lies") would seem not without substance. In fact, when Othello ends his speech with the smug clincher, "This only is the witchcraft I have used," the audience is not quite sure that he stands fully acquitted, if only because there is "witchery" enough in his tale to have "maimed" the judgement of a susceptible young maiden like Desdemona. The Duke's glib rejoinder, "I think this tale would win my daughter too" (1.3. 171) should strike the audience either as the dumbest thing that ever dropped from a duke's mouth or as a "politic" utterance meant to placate the man he has chosen to lead the Venetian fleet against the Turks. The Duke's tactical words of approval do not mitigate the fact that Othello, in winning the love of Desdemona the way he did, betrayed his friendship with Brabantio.

Even as Othello is guilty of betraying Brabantio as a friend, so Desdemona is guilty of betraying him as her father. The shock she gives her father must be enormous. Brabantio's incredulity finds expression in these words:

A maiden, never bold;  
of spirit so still and quiet that her motion  
Blush'd at herself; and she, in spite of nature,  
of years, of country, credit, everything,  
To fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!  
It is a judgement maim'd, and most imperfect,  
That will confess perfection so could err  
Against all rules of nature ....

(1.3. 94-101).

Desdemona is guilty not only of a "judgement maim'd" leading to a marriage of "maimed rites," she is appallingly insensitive to the heartbreak of the man whose "widowed" love and care has sustained her through the years. This insensitivity, apart from its being inexplicable in one so benign in all other respects, involves a degree of impiety incompatible with virtuous filial conduct. The way she flaunts her new-found love and loyalty in the face of her crestfallen old father constitutes a blot on her otherwise admirable virtuousness. The only child and the only daughter of Brabantio, she casts in her lot with an alien Moor and quits her father's house with a cold-hearted willfulness that smacks, however vaguely, of hubris. Mark her words:

My noble father,  
 I do perceive here a divided duty:  
 To you I am bound for life and education;  
 My life and education both do learn me  
 How to respect you; you are the lord of duty;  
 I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband,  
 And so much duty as my mother show'd  
 To you, preferring you before her father,  
 So much I challenge that I may profess  
 Due to the Moor, my lord.

(1.3. 180-88).

The switch in loyalties is swift, peremptory, and irrevocable. No words of regret or remorse, no sign of sympathy for her bewildered father. The “pity” that she gave so abundantly to Othello for his *past* dangers is withheld from the *present* sorrow of her own father whose heart she has broken, whose world she has shattered. No wonder he says with bitterness: “I am glad at soul that I have no other child / For thy escape would teach me tyranny” (1.3. 195-96). Like any fond father he may well have cherished for his daughter the hope: “And may her bridegroom bring her to a house / Where all's accustomed, ceremonious.”<sup>(21)</sup> But this is not to be for Desdemona, for she has chosen to elope and get married under cover of darkness — sans rite, sans ceremony, sans paternal consent.<sup>(22)</sup>

Desdemona reveals herself as being quite aware of the radical rebelliousness of her action. What she describes as her “downright violence and storm of fortune” is something that Iago later counts on as a point in his favor. Her marriage, he points out to Roderigo, “was a violent commencement in her, and thou shalt see an answerable sequestration” (1.3. 344-45). Again, “Mark me,” he says, “with what violence she first lov'd the Moor, but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies” (2.1. 222-24). The “violence” referred to by both Desdemona and Iago is reminiscent of Friar Laurence's admonitory comments on the reckless passion of Romeo and Juliet: “These violent delights have violent ends, / And in their triumph die.”<sup>(23)</sup> More importantly, the violence with which Desdemona rushed into her secret marriage has a significant bearing on Brabantio's parting “advice” to Othello: “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see; she has deceiv'd her father, and may thee” (1.3. 202-203). Ostensibly a warning to Othello, this is in fact a curse.

---

(21) W.B. Yeats, “Prayer for My Daughter,” in *W.B. Yeats: Selected Poetry*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: MacMillan, 1983), p. 103.

(22) Despite the unconventional manner in which Desdemona chooses to get married, the seriousness of her choice of Othello as her man of destiny is a factor that emerges prominently in act 1 and contributes significantly to the tragic potential of the play.

(23) Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.5. 9-10, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

Othello and Desdemona thus begin their married life under the shadow of Brabantio's curse. In light of the scheme of values obtaining in the plays, their marriage is but a parody of the real thing; it is a "maimed" matrimony lacking the social bonhomie and the sacramentality that knit together the destinies of bride and groom within the ample space of society's benevolent approbation. Bereft of this amplitude, it has to sustain itself narrowly and exclusively on the love between the couple. Transported to the remote outpost of Cyprus, and caught in the web of Iago's preternatural malice, it is bound to "collapse" and bring the unfortunate couple to a tragic end.

Carefully analyzed, the love between Othello and Desdemona will be seen as less than ideal in ways other than we have already noted. To be sure, it is no hot-blooded passion but a spiritual affinity that seems to have little to do with the body. Desdemona consecrates her "soul and fortunes" to Othello's "honours and his valiant parts." She dedicates herself to the semi-mythic hero that he makes himself out to be in his image-boosting yarns about his "heroic" antecedents. Othello as an image, as an icon of the mind, as an avatar of "enchancing" otherness this is what she seems to be in love with. Perhaps it is this "iconolatrous" aspect of her love that makes it endure against all odds to the very end, causing her, with her dying breath, to bid Emilia, "Commend me to my kind lord" (5.2. 125), thus paying her final tribute of submission and adulation to her killer husband.

And yet the question might be posed: Is there, in her attitude, a hint of a subliminal libido that engenders a "supersubtle" preference for the brave black hulking adventurer over the "curl'd darlings" of Venice? Frank Kermode's comment on the matter is worth quoting: "Her penetrating to the truth of Othello under an appearance conventionally thought repulsive can seem less a result of her purity of response than of some pagan witchcraft of his."<sup>(24)</sup> All the same, there is still ground for attributing an ideational genesis to her love. She is in love with a principle rather than a person. As noted above, any other person having the same "mystique" about him as Othello does could subdue her heart. Hers is an idealistic love, transfixed on an idea; not even Othello's transformation, through jealousy, into a veritable monster can affect this love. Her undying loyalty to Othello — or rather the "idea" of Othello — has a touch of the martyr's tenacity. She is indeed made of the stuff that martyrs are made of. It may not be far-fetched to suggest that she, in the end, reveals something of what F.R. Leavis attributes to Isabel in *Measure for Measure*: "a kind of sensuality of martyrdom."<sup>(25)</sup> She cleaves unto Othello as though he were her very salvation. She dons her bridal robes before laying herself down in her death-bed to be "overshadowed," as it were, by her Moorish lord. Her kind of love can be enduring, even "obstinate," but it is eminently ethereal.

---

(24) Frank Kermode, Introduction to *Othello* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, p. 1200.

(25) F.R. Leavis, "The Greatness of *Measure for Measure*," *Scrutiny* (1942), p. 234.

What is true of Desdemona's love is, in other ways, true of Othello's love too. We find in his words a clear discounting of the physical aspects of love. In urging the senate to grant Desdemona's wish to join him in Cyprus, he refers to his "defunct" physical passion. He says:

Let her have your voice.  
 Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not  
 To please the palate of my appetite,  
 Nor to comply with heat (the young affects  
 In me defunct) and proper satisfaction;  
 But to be free and bounteous to her mind.  
 And heaven defend your good souls, that you think  
 I will your serious and great business scant  
 For she is with me

(1.3. 260-68).

The stress on the "mental" aspects of his love echoes Desdemona's pronouncement on the ideational nature of her love for him. The discounting of the physical, if it is not to be construed as a mere ploy to persuade the senate, is clearly suggestive of a certain hesitation, a withholding of self, perhaps even an "incompleteness of love"<sup>(26)</sup> on the part of Othello, the public man, as yet unsure of his capacity to reconcile the rival claims of public responsibility and private connubiality. As Heilman puts it:

In Othello, Shakespeare succeeds in showing something about the love of the hero for the girl who first caught his eye by adoring his exploits, a love in which an over-explicit temperateness reveals some incompleteness of response and in which the man of Affairs ... has withheld the self from a transforming devotion.<sup>(27)</sup>

Othello's role as a public man subordinates his role as a lover. His "love-language is devitalized"; it is the language of an "etiolated social code."<sup>(28)</sup> He can exalt his wife in high poetry and rhetoric, but he cannot "talk to her as an individual woman."<sup>(29)</sup>

All in all, then, the mutual love of Othello and Desdemona, for all its spiritual exaltation, is characterized by considerable unreality. It seems to be somewhat wanting in concreteness of reciprocity. What ties them together is "a frail substitute for more intrinsic bonds".<sup>(30)</sup> Each of them, says H.B. Charlton, "is held by the impassioned idea of what the other is intuitively seen to be. It is the conviction of a bodiless

---

(26) Heilman, p. 141.

(27) Heilman, p. 174.

(28) Long, p. 52.

(29) Ibid.

(30) Ibid., p. 51.

affinity of two souls."<sup>(31)</sup> Their love is "more like the love of Adam and Eve before than after the Fall."<sup>(32)</sup> Despite their Edenic innocence, however, their marriage fails to engender the emotional intimacy, the passional intensity capable of forging the kind of bond that no Iago, however consummate in his skill as an evildoer, can put asunder. From the beginning, it appears to be a marriage "on the rocks"; there is "hardly a moment when we are allowed to think that permanence or happiness is part of its nature."<sup>(33)</sup>

It should be clear from the above discussion that the marriage of Othello and Desdemona is not presented as representing either a natural or an ideal state; rather it is shown as an event that flies in the face of tradition and social propriety, as an event that significantly fails to constitute what a marriage should be — a celebration of personal jubilation and social felicity. For this reason, their ultimate end is not unlike that of Romeo and Juliet or Antony and Cleopatra. Although no villain plots against the latter couples (even Octavius cannot be considered a "villain" in *Antony and Cleopatra*), they nevertheless meet with their tragic ends, their doom being inherent in the singularity, the social (and political) eccentricity of the way they love and get united. No doubt Shakespeare sees to it that great and glowing poetry attends their daring and uncalculating love, ennobled by a Reason that reason itself knows not. The odds, however, are against such love; the stakes are high, and what the lovers risk is nothing less than life itself.

Such is the case with Othello and Desdemona — though the economy of the play does not permit Shakespeare to invest such largesse of poetry in their love as he does in the loves of their counterparts in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. It is perhaps for this reason that Othello and Desdemona seem bereft of the title of "immortal lovers" that assuredly belongs to Romeo and Juliet and to Antony and Cleopatra. While the two latter pairs of lovers appear united in death forever, we can hardly imagine Othello and Desdemona as being thus eternally joined: divided in life by Iago, divided in death they remain. It seems as though Brabantio's curse, incarnate in Iago haunts them in their separate deaths as it has haunted them in their brief wedlock. The glory of death-defying love such as we see in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra* is not to be found in *Othello*. We do not see in it, as we do in the other two plays, "a resounding affirmation of the power of love to resolve differ-

---

(31) H.B. Charlton, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1948), p. 134.

(32) Kermode, p. 1200.

(33) Kermode, *Introduction to Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, p. 1957. These words of Kermode about the doomed love of Romeo and Juliet are true also of the marriage of Othello and Desdemona. The authors, however, are aware that the view they have taken here of the Othello-Desdemona relationship is apt to be deplored as being too "arid" by critics who tend to consider the love between the two all the more precious precisely because it is so "fragile" and yet so daring, and because it is the kind of love that, risking all, lays claim to tragic grandeur.

ences and elevate the human spirit, leaving the audience feeling that what they have just experienced is not altogether tragedy.”<sup>(34)</sup>

Unlike the villainless tragedy of the lover in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, the tragedy of the protagonists in *Othello* is a villain-engineered one. The uncalculating love of Othello and Desdemona is set against the ruthless calculations of a diabolic villain. The virtues of the doomed pair are placed defenceless against the scourge of Iago’s conquering vice. Othello’s large-hearted ingenuousness is pitted helplessly against Iago’s malevolent ingenuity. Desdemona’s purity and innocence stand maligned by Iago’s “motiveless malignity.”<sup>(35)</sup> The crystalline honesty and integrity of them both fare ill against the honest-seeming iniquity of their arch-enemy. All the same, Iago’s villainy thrives substantially on the inauspicious and fateful circumstances of their love and marriage, which provide a fertile ground in which the villain sows the seeds of destruction.

Iago exploits every aspect of these circumstances that is favorable to the furtherance of his designs. He takes full advantage of the difference in age, race, and color between his victims. He directs the full force of his inventive duplicity against Othello’s gullibility. He makes capital out of the fact that Desdemona, in marrying Othello, has betrayed her father. He sets great store by his conviction that Othello has won Desdemona’s love simply by telling her “fantastical lies” and that love thus won cannot endure. In fact, he makes cunning use of things said, things done, and things not done by Othello and Desdemona in perfecting what might be called his masterpiece in the art of metaphysical manslaughter. And yet it must be remembered that the tragic potential of the play involves not only the cruel dovetailing of the strengths and weaknesses of Iago and his victims, but also the dangers latent in the very circumstances of his victims’ love and marriage. Iago, in implementing his plan, constantly invokes these predictive circumstances. If the plot, once set in motion, “seems of its own momentum to bring about the destruction for which it is designed,”<sup>(36)</sup> it is because Iago has much to count on in what has happened in the Venetian phase of the play.

It is significant that the murder of Desdemona which terminates her marriage to Othello takes on the semblance of a ritual consummation that parodies the “rites” and “ceremonies” that went by default in their secret marriage. The love-death climax in which Othello simulates the role of a priestly sacrificer unctuously performing “purgative murder”<sup>(37)</sup> combines Eros and Thanatos in a macabre gesture of

(34) Martha T. Rozett, “The Comic Structure of Tragic Endings: The Suicide Scenes in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 2 (Summer 1985) 152-64.

(35) S.T. Coleridge, *Coleridge’s Shakespeare Criticism*, ed. T.M. Raysor (Cambridge, Mass: University of Harvard Press, 1930), 1, 52.

(36) Burckhardt, p. 17.

(37) Heilman, p. 189.

nock-ceremonial ambience. The ambiguousness of Othello's dying words is unmistakable: "I kiss'd thee ere I killed thee. No way but this, / Killing myself to die upon . . . kiss" (5.3. 358-59). As Heilman puts it, "Othello's *die* cannot help having in addition to the literal sense, the metaphorical sense of completing the sex act. Othello finally seals the union only by killing his wife and himself."<sup>(38)</sup> He kills his wife with ceremonial solemnity, acting "as a sort of private priest sacrificing to justice what he most loves."<sup>(39)</sup> He is at once priest ("Have you pray'd to-night, Desdemona?") and confessor ("Therefore confess thee freely of thy sin"), and he seeks to ritualize his heinous act by invoking the terminology of sacrificial rites. The mimic "rites" of this macabre climax hark ironically back to the "maimed rites" and missed "connubium" of their unpropitious match in a manner that highlights the significance of the Venetian sequence as a pre-Cyprus preamble to the play's tragic climax in the remote Cyprian outpost.

---

38) Heilman, p. 192.

39) Miriam Joseph, Sister, *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language*, quoted in Heilman, p. 274.

## عطيل: دراسة في الطقوس والشعائر المتبورة بصفتها نذيرا للمأساة

محمد عواد\* و جوزيف جون\*

\*أستاذ مشارك \*\* وأستاذ مساعد، دائرة اللغة الإنجليزية وأدائها، كلية الآداب

والعلوم الإنسانية والاجتماعية، جامعة اليرموك، إربد، الأردن

ملخص البحث. إن من أكثر الأمور أهمية فيما يتعلق بما كتب من نقد وتحليل لرواية Othello هو تحليل وتقويم الأسباب المؤدية إلى النهاية المأساوية لبطل الرواية، حيث كان التركيز في هذا المجال على الضعف المأساوي في شخصية عطيل وإسهام دزدومونا دونما قصد في نجاح إياجو. ومن الواضح أيضا أن هناك تركيزا بالقدر نفسه على مهارة إياجو الفاتقة كفاعل للشر. ولكن أهمية أحداث الفصل الأول كمقدمة ضرورية للنهاية المأساوية لكل من البطل والبطلة لم تحظ بالاهتمام اللازم. ويحاول هذا البحث أن يبين أن «الطقوس والشعائر المتبورة المشوهة» كما تعبر عنها الملابس والظروف الخاطئة لحب البطلين وزواجهما تقدم الأرض الخصبة التي يزرع فيها هذا الرجل الشرير (إياجو) بذور الدمار. وهكذا فإن هذا البحث يحلل ويفسر كلا من الدور والحدث (وما يرمزان إليه) في الفصل الأول على أساس أنها في الواقع مقدمة ما قبل قبرص لنهاية المأساوية للمسرحية في القاعدة الأمامية البعيدة في قبرص نفسها، بعيدا كل البعد عن كونها تتابعا منفصلا للأحداث يصور نبل دزدومونا وعطيل ونزاهتها واستقامتها. ويعتبر هذا البحث مقتل دزدومونا إتماما وتحقيقا شعائريا للزواج يعود بنا وبكل سخرية إلى «الطقوس والشعائر المتبورة» والاحتفال المفقود لزواجهما غير المتكافئ.