

The Polarization of Erotic Love in "Othello"

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## THE POLARIZATION OF EROTIC LOVE IN 'OTHELLO'

*Othello* is composed of an extraordinary mixture of antithetical states of feeling and being. The extremes are literally as well as emblematically represented in Desdemona and Iago, but they are most deeply incarnated in Othello himself, who moves from one to the other, from the transcendence and love celebrated in the first half of the play to the nearly utter disintegration and hatred which is dramatized in the second half. The contrast is so drastic that most critics find it insupportable. *Othello* is not the only Shakespearian tragedy to dramatize such oppositions (*Lear* especially does) but *Othello* poses a peculiar difficulty for critics because its preoccupations are so unremittingly sexual. At the core of *Othello's* conception and execution is an uncomfortably intense focus upon the sexual relationship between a man and a woman in marriage, a relationship which was as inherently paradoxical and mysterious to Elizabethans as it is to us. It is a mystery celebrated in many of the Petrarchan conceits which Othello literally enacts,<sup>1</sup> but its essential paradox is most explicitly and profoundly described in the words of St Paul that are cited in the marriage liturgy:

So men are bound to love their own wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his own wife, loveth himself. For never did any man hate his own flesh, but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord doth the congregation: for we are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This mystery is great, but I speak of Christ and of the congregation.<sup>2</sup>

Referring to this very passage, Freud describes the same mystery in approximately analogous terms: 'A man shall leave father and mother — according to the Biblical precept — and shall cleave to his wife; then are tenderness and sensuality united.' He explains that 'to ensure a fully normal attitude in love', the union of both 'currents' of feeling is necessary, and that this union is ultimately derived from a child's early symbiotic relationship with his mother in which his love for her and for himself are identical.<sup>3</sup>

I think we should attend to both St Paul and Freud in interpreting *Othello*. Existing theological and psychoanalytic criticism of the play admittedly does not offer an especially encouraging precedent: apart from being grossly reductive, most of it is driven by the impulse to convict Othello of moral or psychic failure. Since Othello's energies and conflicts are not diseases to be cured or redeemed, such an impulse inevitably deforms the play. But the quest for pathology is not an inescapable function either of Christian or psychoanalytic thinking, and both systems of thought can be put to the service of the play, rather than vice versa. Used with discretion they can serve as means of apprehending and interpreting the human experience that is dramatized within the play rather than as extrinsic standards of

<sup>1</sup> See Rosalie Colie, *Shakespeare's Living Art* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1974), pp. 135–67.

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer 1559*, edited by John Booty (Charlottesville, 1976), p. 297. The biblical text (Ephesians 5. 28–32) varies slightly in the Geneva translation.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life', translated by Joan Riviere, in *Freud: Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, edited by Philip Rieff (New York, 1963), pp. 59–61. All other references to Freud are to *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey, 24 vols (London, 1953–74).

moral or psychological judgement, and in particular, I think, they can help us understand some of the deeper sources of *Othello's* tragic design and power.

In *Troilus and Cressida* Hector warns Troilus that it is 'mad idolatry | To make the service greater than the god' (II. 2. 56), and that play in fact depicts a world in which madness and idolatry do characterize all sexual and social relationships. It is essential to recognize at the outset that the world of *Othello* is different, that Desdemona is not Helen or Cressida, that she is true, and that there is no service greater than she deserves. One would suppose these to be self-evident propositions, but there are notable critics who dispute them. A. P. Rossiter, for example, actually equates Desdemona with Helen, indicts Othello for ascribing 'false excellences' to her, and dismisses her as a 'pathetic, girlish, nearly-blank sheet'.<sup>1</sup> W. H. Auden responds to her more fully, but thinks even worse of her. 'Everybody must pity Desdemona', he writes,

but I cannot bring myself to like her. Her determination to marry Othello — it was she who virtually did the proposing — seems the romantic crush of a silly schoolgirl rather than a mature affection; it is Othello's adventures, so unlike the civilian life she knows, which captivate her rather than Othello as a person . . . her deception of her own father makes an unpleasant impression . . . she seems more aware than is agreeable of the honor she has done Othello by becoming his wife. . . . Before Cassio speaks to her, she has already discussed him with her husband and learned that he is to be reinstated as soon as is opportune. A sensible wife would have told Cassio this and left matters alone. In continuing to badger Othello, she betrays a desire to prove to herself and to Cassio that she can make her husband do as she pleases. . . . Her lie about the handkerchief is, in itself, a trivial fib but, had she really regarded her husband as her equal, she might have admitted the loss. . . . Though her relation with Cassio is perfectly innocent, one cannot but share Iago's doubts as to the durability of the marriage. It is worth noting that, in the willow-song scene with Emilia, she speaks with admiration of Ludovico and then turns to the topic of adultery. . . . Given a few more years of Othello and Emilia's influence and she might well, one feels, have taken a lover.<sup>2</sup>

Auden's response is deeply perverse, but I have cited it at such length because in sophisticated or disguised form his assumptions and prejudices subsume more criticism of the play than might at first be apparent. Though I suppose few readers of *Othello* (and still fewer of its spectators) would even conceive of faulting Desdemona for not being 'sensible', there are many who do feel that she is too good to be true, too innocent to be a wife or too wifely to be innocent, and this attitude is quite as damaging to the play as Auden's outright hostility. Either way the play eventually starts turning inside out. It is therefore important to any interpretation to pay detailed attention to the terms in which Shakespeare presents Desdemona and not to take her for granted.

The first substantial impression we receive of her is in Othello's description of their courtship. He tells how he often visited her father's house, how he recounted the story of his life at Brabantio's request, and how he drew from Desdemona a 'prayer of earnest heart' to tell that story to her:

I did consent,  
And often did beguile her of her tears,  
When I did speak of some distressful stroke  
That my youth suffer'd. My story being done,

<sup>1</sup> *Angel With Horns* (New York, 1961), p. 206.

<sup>2</sup> *The Dyer's Hand* (New York, 1968), pp. 268–69.

She gave me for my pains a world of sighs;  
 She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange;  
 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.  
 She wish'd she had not heard it; yet she wish'd  
 That heaven had made her such a man. 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. 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.

(1. 3. 155)<sup>1</sup>

The tenor of Othello's whole speech, as well as the Duke's reaction to it ('I think this tale would win my daughter too' (1. 3. 171)), should alone suggest that Desdemona is hardly an over-aggressive schoolgirl, that their wooing was delicately mutual, and that in responding to the story of Othello's life she was responding to the man it revealed; but an even more important index of her characterization is the description of the precise nature of her response. After centuries of sentimentalist thinking, we may be disposed to regard tears and the capacity for pity as cheap commodities, but Shakespeare did not. Pity is always exalted in the plays (the Italian word 'pietà' may perhaps better suggest its Shakespearian connotations) and it is regularly the most compelling virtue of his heroines. It is incarnated in Cordelia when she returns to Britain, as she says, 'to go about' her father's 'business', weeping and praying:

All blest secrets,  
 All you unpublish'd virtues of the earth,  
 Spring with my tears; be aidant and remediate  
 In the good man's distress.

(IV. 4. 15)

It is inscribed in Miranda's characterization at the start of *The Tempest* when she laments to her father, 'I have suffered | With those that I saw suffer', and he tells her to calm her 'piteous heart' (1. 2, 5–6, 13). Desdemona's feeling for Othello is of this kind. It is a sign not that she is silly or guileful, but that she has a capacity to sympathize deeply with human suffering, that she has a piteous heart.

Desdemona enters immediately after Othello's speech and her father asks her, 'Do you perceive in all this noble company | Where most you owe obedience?'. The moment is charged both for those on stage and for us, and the impact and importance of her answer, the first words she speaks in the play, cannot be exaggerated:

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. 179)

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Shakespeare are from Peter Alexander's edition (London, 1951).

These luminous lines, which are strongly reminiscent of those which Cordelia uses when she defies Lear,<sup>1</sup> evoke the very cadence of the Scriptural injunction to marry: 'For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall be joined unto a wife, and they two shall be one flesh'; and Desdemona's description of the transfer of her feelings from her father to her husband, with its invocation of her own mother as her example, touches in almost archetypal terms upon the psychological process by which a girl becomes a woman and a wife. These associations are unmistakable and Desdemona's strikingly unusual choice of a husband only heightens their power. Othello's age, the same as her father's, literalizes the psychological reverberations, and his blackness, as we shall see, intensifies the theological ones. It is nonsense to imagine that Shakespeare created such a speech for a character who was to be an unpleasant homiletic example, a 'caution', as Thomas Rymer put it, 'to all Maidens of Quality how, without their Parents consent, they run away with Blackamoors'.<sup>2</sup>

It is even greater nonsense to imagine that such a speech would introduce a girl incapable of 'mature affection'. As Desdemona immediately shows, she loves Othello as a wife should, body and soul. She insists on going with him to Cyprus in a speech which is even more remarkable for its spiritual and emotional poise than her first:

That I did love the Moor to live with him,  
My downright violence and storm of fortunes  
May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdu'd  
Even to the very quality of my lord:  
I saw Othello's visage in his mind;  
And to his honours and his valiant parts  
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.  
So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,  
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,  
The rites for why I love him are bereft me,  
And I a heavy interim shall support  
By his dear absence. Let me go with him.

(1. 3. 248)

There are few instances in Shakespearian drama of so explicit, so natural, and so harmonious an integration of flesh and spirit. Sensuality and affection are inseparable in Desdemona's consciousness. She loves Othello to live with him, she acknowledges but is unashamed of the violence of her behaviour, she wants to consummate the marriage, she is subdued to Othello's very quality ('utmost pleasure' in the quarto). At the same time, she consecrates her soul to his honour and valiancy,

<sup>1</sup> Cordelia says to Lear:

Good my lord,  
You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me: I  
Return those duties back as are right fit,  
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.  
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say  
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,  
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry  
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.  
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,  
To love my father all.

(1. 1. 94.)

<sup>2</sup> *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, edited by J. E. Spingarn, 3 vols (London, 1908), II, 221.

and says that she 'saw Othello's visage in his mind'. That charged and crucial statement cannot be fully appreciated apart from Othello's characterization and I shall return to it, but for the moment we can at least observe that it testifies to a kind of spiritual eyesight which Shakespeare consistently celebrated in his other plays. The presence of this vision in Desdemona authenticates her desire for Othello and is an expression of the fullness as well as the transcendence of her love. It is also a measure of her own surpassing worth as an object of love.

Desdemona's subsequent appearances in the play only confirm and heighten these initial impressions of her love and of its value. In the scene of her arrival in Cyprus, Cassio refers to her as 'the divine Desdemona' (II. 2. 73) and calls upon the men of Cyprus to kneel in adoration of her. At the same time he speaks of her in explicitly sexual terms:

Great Jove, Othello guard,  
And swell his sail with thine own powerful breath,  
That he may bless this bay with his tall ship,  
Make love's quick pants in Desdemona's arms,  
Give renew'd fire to our extincted spirits,  
And bring all Cyprus comfort!

(II. 1. 77)

That Cassio, as we later see, is incapable of unifying such idealized and sensual feelings in his own erotic life does not diminish the force of his perception of their union in Desdemona, and her sexual integrity is particularly radiant in this scene. In response to Othello's fear during their reunion that 'not another comfort like to this | Succeeds in unknown fate', she says:

The heavens forbid  
But that our loves and comforts should increase  
Even as our days do grow!

(II. 1. 192)

The pellucid beauty of these lines, as of so many others of Desdemona, is a function of the harmony of instinctual and spiritual life which Shakespeare represents in her, and it is characteristic that she should see the passage of time not as a threat to marriage but as a promise of its growth and fulfilment.

The promise, of course, is never fulfilled, and in the remainder of the play, as Iago pours his pestilence into Othello's ear, Desdemona becomes increasingly incapable not only of comforting her husband but even of understanding him. Many critics besides Auden interpret this failure as evidence of her own inadequacy. Whatever merit such a judgement might have in our lives outside the theatre, in the world of the play it is the opposite of the truth, as Iago himself explicitly informs us:

So will I turn her virtue into pitch;  
And out of her own goodness make the net  
That shall enmesh them all.

(II. 3. 349)

Iago is a liar, but not in his soliloquies, and Shakespeare gives us no reason to doubt him here. Quite the contrary, for our constant apprehension of how Desdemona's virtues are perverted is central to our response not only to her but to the entire action. She is human, she has a literal identity, and it is possible to discover considerable stubbornness in her disastrous advocacy of Cassio, but to stage or read those scenes in which she pleads for Cassio as the exercises of a wilful

woman or a domineering wife is to misconstrue her motives and to become as subject to Iago's inversions as Othello does. Her fundamental concern is not for Cassio, for whom she does nevertheless feel love, but for her husband, for Othello. She intuitively, what we after all know, that Othello's alienation from Cassio is unnatural and injurious to them both. She sees Cassio as Othello's devoted friend, 'That came a-wooing with you, and so many a time, | When I have spoke of you disparagingly, | Hath ta'en your part' (III. 3. 72), and she begs Othello to forgive him in the terms and for the reasons that truly prompt her:

'Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves,  
Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm,  
Or sue to you to do a peculiar profit  
To your own person.

(III. 3. 78)

She is thinking, as ultimately she always does, of Othello, not of herself, and the conclusion of her plea is: 'Be as your fancies teach you; | Whate'er you be, I am obedient' (III. 3. 88). And she is. She obeys Othello literally until death parts her from him.

She also continues, in the words of the liturgy, to love and honour him, and much of the horror and pity we experience at the end of the play comes from our perception of the ways in which her absolute fidelity to marriage helps destroy it. She misplaces the handkerchief in the first place because she cannot comprehend Othello's allusion to the pain in his forehead, and she uses it to bind his brow and to comfort him. It is he, in his distemper, who brushes it aside and 'loses' it. The same innocence is the source of her persistence in pleading for Cassio while Othello asks her about the handkerchief, thus more deeply associating the two in his mind, and of her general incapacity to recognize and therefore cope with his jealousy. That innocence, as her wondering discussion of adultery with Emilia makes clear, is born of her own absolute marital chastity.<sup>1</sup> She may unconsciously apprehend more of what Emilia believes than she realizes, as her corruption of the willow song seems to suggest,<sup>2</sup> and she is human enough, in mentioning Lodovico as a 'proper man', to have intimations of a marriage that might have been better than her own, for she senses what is to come. She is also, certainly, momentarily terrified of dying (for which some critics, for some unfathomable reason, fault her) but her last words are for Othello, and her earlier bewilderment and fear only heighten our sense of the depth of her love, the monstrousness of its destruction, and the overwhelming pity of its loss. The worldly Emilia testifies, at the cost of her life, to the truth we ourselves most deeply feel: 'Moor, she was chaste; she lov'd thee, cruel Moor' (v. 2. 252).

<sup>1</sup> 'What is symbolized as a virgin' in romance, Northrop Frye points out, 'is actually a human conviction, however expressed, that there is something at the core of one's infinitely fragile being which is not only immortal but has discovered the secret of invulnerability that eludes the tragic hero'. *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1976), p. 86. Though Desdemona herself is not invulnerable, her love is. Elizabethan theological writers commonly equated virginity and marital chastity. Henry Bullinger, for example, quoted St Chrysostom: 'The first degree of chastity is unspotted virginity; the second is faithful wedlock.' *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, Parker Society edition, 4 vols (London, 1849-52), I, 402.

<sup>2</sup> See Ernest Brennecke, "'Nay, That's Not Next!': The Significance of Desdemona's 'Willow Song'", *SQ*, 4 (1953), 35-38.

The peculiar integrity and power of Desdemona's characterization, as I have been suggesting throughout this discussion, is in part a function of the literalness of her exemplification of the religious and psychological commitments of marriage. As a result she is the most domestic of Shakespeare's heroines at the same time that she is one of the most elemental and numinous, and in the latter half of the play her symbolic overtones become particularly insistent. Othello compares her to a chrysolite, which was one of the twelve precious stones in the walls of the heavenly city (Revelation 21. 20) and was traditionally associated with faith, constancy, and innocence, 'all things in Christ';<sup>1</sup> and in his final speech, when he realizes how much he has lost, he speaks of her as a pearl, and his own image suggests the pearl of great price (Matthew 13. 45-46).<sup>2</sup> Towards the end a profusion of references associates her with heaven and salvation, and the more Othello sees and treats her as a devil, the more saintly she seems and becomes. In the worst of her suffering, as she kneels to Iago for help, she says:

Unkindness may do much;  
And his unkindness may defeat my life,  
But never taint my love.

(iv. 2. 160)

and she remains sacrificially true to that love as she dies:

EMIL. O, who hath done this deed?  
DES. Nobody. I myself. Farewell.  
Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!

(v. 2. 126)

It is this kind of love, with its manifold religious and psychological reverberations, to which Othello first responds and with which his own love resonates in the first two Acts of the play. In these Acts he and Desdemona are so well tuned that they seem together to be an elemental expression of that single state of being towards which marriage aspires, and his characterization cannot be understood apart from hers. His blackness and his age especially, his two most salient features, have enormous symbolic as well as literal significance in their marriage. In any performance his colour and its contrast with Desdemona's are visually most powerful, and images of darkness and light permeate the language of the play as well. As G. K. Hunter has shown, there were two opposing conceptions of the black man in Elizabethan England.<sup>3</sup> The first was the primitive and ancient sense of black as the colour of inferiority and wickedness, which was incorporated in early Christian eschatology and became deeply ingrained in Christian thinking. In medieval and Renaissance drama and art, devils as well as evil men (the torturers of Christ, for example) were regularly depicted as black. It is this sense of blackness which Shakespeare's audience would most likely have brought to the theatre and which, with a particularly acrid emphasis upon sexual bestiality and unnaturalness, is strongly associated with Othello in the first few scenes of the play. The play opens with a cascade of obscene references to Othello's colour and race ('thicklips', 'a Barbary horse', 'the

<sup>1</sup> See Lawrence J. Ross, 'World and Chrysolite in *Othello*', *MLN*, 76 (1961), 683-92.

<sup>2</sup> See John E. Seaman, 'Othello's Pearl', *SQ*, 19 (1968), 81-85.

<sup>3</sup> 'Othello and Colour Prejudice', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 53 (1967), 139-63. Hunter's discussion of Othello's blackness is masterful, and I am much indebted to it.

gross clasps of a lascivious Moor', 'a gross revolt' (I. 1. 67, 113, 127, 135)) and Iago tells Brabantio explicitly that

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram  
Is tupping your white ewe. Arise, arise;  
Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,  
Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you.  
(I. 1. 89)

The 'spiteful old pantaloone'<sup>1</sup> Brabantio himself picks up the litany. He expresses disbelief that Desdemona could have 'run from her guardage to the sooty bosom | Of such a thing as thou — to fear, not to delight', and repeatedly states that only pagan witchcraft, the 'practices of cunning hell', can explain how 'perfection so could err | Against all rules of nature' (I. 2. 70; I. 3. 102, 100).

The other Elizabethan conception of blackness, more peculiar to Christian theology and less familiar now, was the notion that all men are black in their sinfulness, but become white in the knowledge of the Lord, a belief which was especially adumbrated in evangelically tinted voyage literature, which treated inferior and black-faced foreigners as creatures whose innocence made them close to God and naturally prone to accept Christianity. The root metaphor of this attitude was drawn from the Song of Songs and the belief found expression as late as 1630 in a meditation by Bishop Hall 'on the sight of a blackamoor':

This is our colour spiritually; yet the eye of our gracious God and Saviour, can see that beauty wherewith he is delighted. The true Moses marries a Blackamoor; Christ, his church. It is not for us to regard the skin, but the soul. If that be innocent, pure, holy, the blots of an outside cannot set us off from the love of him who hath said, *Behold, thou art fair, my Sister, my Spouse*: if that be foul and black, it is not in the power of an angelical brightness of our hide, to make us other than a loathsome eye-sore to the Almighty.<sup>2</sup>

It is to this spiritual dynamic that Desdemona is clearly referring when she says, 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind', and to which we ourselves are compelled to refer Othello once he comes on stage. His sense of command, of public decorum and courtesy, his dignity, and above all his remarkable devotion to Desdemona are instantly evident, and the impression they make is all the more powerful, as Hunter and others have suggested, because Shakespeare has deliberately implicated us in the primordial prejudices of that other conception of the black man evoked in the first scene of the play.<sup>3</sup> We ourselves thus experience, we do not merely witness, the process of perception which Desdemona describes. That process is kept constantly in our consciousness by Othello's literal appearance, by the pervasive imagery of blackness and fairness and of true and false vision, and by Iago's increasingly ominous and explicitly diabolic threats to turn the spiritual metaphor into an 'ocular proof'. Under these circumstances, and given the concurrent development of Desdemona as an incarnate ideal of marital love and of the charity which subsumes it, Othello's marked worship of her is an expression not, as so many critics would have it, of the intrinsic weakness of his own love, but of its potential strength. Brabantio's last bitter words in the play are:

<sup>1</sup> Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time* (Toronto, 1967), p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Hunter, 'Othello and Colour Prejudice', p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion of the Elizabethan decorum of Othello's public behaviour, see John Holloway, *The Story of the Night* (London, 1961), pp. 40–42.

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:  
She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee.

Othello answers, with an absolutism that characterizes him throughout, 'My life upon her faith' (1. 3. 292-94). Iago is later to make deadly use of Brabantio's words, and when Othello immediately turns to 'honest Iago' to care for Desdemona, we feel Othello's peril. His absolute commitment to Desdemona increases the peril, but it is not therefore in itself idolatrous. His investment in Desdemona's vision of him, as opposed to her father's, is a precisely Christian choice, the very reverse of idolatry. It is a manifestation of the faith which in Elizabethan eyes was the deepest resource of the love which unites a man and woman in marriage.

The discrepancy between Othello's and Desdemona's age has much the same effect as his blackness in the early Acts and is similarly related to the reverence which marks his love for her. As several critics have observed,<sup>1</sup> the marriage of an old man and a young girl was traditional material for comedy or farce, but Shakespeare again inverts his audience's expectations and thereby intensifies its response. Desdemona, as we have seen, is no May. She loves Othello body and soul, unreservedly, and neither at the beginning nor at the tragic end of the marriage is she ever untrue to the ideal of one flesh to which she has consecrated herself. Othello, similarly, in the beginning, is no January. He is a general replete with power and respect, and unlike his comic prototypes, as Shakespeare takes pains to establish, he is neither lascivious nor impotent. In a much misunderstood speech to the Duke and Venetian lords, he seconds Desdemona's request to accompany him to Cyprus, 'not', as he says,

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. 262)

Because of the crux in lines 263-64 the speech is not entirely clear, but there is no warrant, I think, for seeing a pathological sexual defensiveness in it. Desdemona's request, in wartime, is unusual, and Othello wants her to be with him at the same time that he wishes to assure the senators that they can rely on him to fulfil his office. So he points out, what we already have reason to accept, that he is a mature and moderate man, that he is not driven by appetite and heat, and that he knows how to value Desdemona for her companionship and spirit. At the same time, whatever the syntax, the young affects are those that are defunct, and there is no suggestion in the remainder of the speech that he does not expect or wish to consummate his marriage. His emphasis, in this highly public statement, is on the propriety of his behaviour as a general as well as an older man. Elizabethans would have had far more sympathy than we do with both concerns: they took the decorum of public life more seriously, and they did not idolize youth or its

<sup>1</sup> Thomas McFarland, *Tragic Meanings in Shakespeare* (New York, 1966), pp. 60-91; Barbara Heliodora C. de Mendonça, 'Othello: A Tragedy Built on a Comic Structure', *Shakespeare Survey* 21 (1968), pp. 31-38.

appetites. Later, on the first night in Cyprus, with the threat of war over, Othello explicitly invites his wife to bed in language that blends Scriptural and physical allusiveness:

Come, my dear love,  
The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue;  
The profit's yet to come 'twixt me and you.  
(II. 3. 8)

There is no question, except for those critics who would prefer the play to be hiding a novel within it, that the marriage is consummated. Nor is there any suggestion in the behaviour of the two the morning after that the consummation has not been pleasurable.

The evocation of January and May, moreover, has a further purpose than simple inversion, for Shakespeare uses Othello's age, as he does his blackness, to dramatize the elemental composition of his marriage. As we have seen, the emphasis in the depiction of Othello's blackness is primarily, though by no means exclusively, religious; the deeper connotations of his age are developed in more psychological terms. January figures were commonly depicted in the second childhood of senility. Shakespeare, in his genius, appropriates the convention to give Othello much of the primal character of a child. A professional soldier, a stranger to Venetian culture and sophistication, and coming to marriage late in life, he seems innocent as well as vulnerable and, without depriving him of his actual manhood, Shakespeare endows him with many of the emotional responses and much of the peculiar vision of a very young boy. What Northrop Frye has described as the 'curious quality in Othello's imagination that can only be called cosmological', and what G. Wilson Knight has discriminated in a different way as 'the *Othello* music' are both functions of that vision.<sup>1</sup> They both spring from the primal world of a child's feelings and fantasies, and Othello's habitation in that world is a potent source of his heroic energy throughout the play. In the early Acts the accent is on a child's primitive capacity for wonder and worship, and it is demonstrated in Othello's 'rude' speech as well as in the life-history which he runs through for Brabantio,

... even from my boyish days  
To th' very moment that he bade me tell it;  
Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,  
Of moving accidents by flood and field;  
Of hairbreadth scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach;  
Of being taken by the insolent foe  
And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence,  
And portance in my travel's history;  
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,  
Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven,  
It was my hint to speak — such was the process;  
And of the Cannibals, that each other eat,  
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads  
Do grow beneath their shoulders.

(I. 3. 132)

Othello's capacity to generate wonder is ultimately an expression of his capacity to feel it, and it is his own child-like wonder and reverence that make his love for

<sup>1</sup> *Fools of Time*, p. 102; *The Wheel of Fire* (London, 1949), p. 97.

Desdemona in the early Acts so remarkable. A child's first erotic relationship is with his mother, towards whom he develops intense feelings of affection and desire. Freud argued that a child initially experiences his mother and her nourishment as a virtual extension of himself: 'We say that a human being has originally two sexual objects — himself and the woman who nurses him — and in doing so we are postulating a primary narcissism in everyone.' In infancy both the mother and child experience a sense of symbiotic union, and that sense continues in a child's early development, as his 'possession' of his mother and her love becomes an objectification of his most idealized vision of himself. Eventually, of course, with his father both an obstacle and a support, a boy surrenders much of his narcissism and learns to transfer his erotic feelings from himself and his mother to other women, but a man's image of his mother is never lost and, in his deepest and most complete sexual relationships, his early sense of union with his mother, 'the primal condition in which object-libido and ego-libido cannot be distinguished', remains the model of sexual ecstasy and the source of his most passionate as well as exalted romantic feelings. Freud himself concluded that no marriage is secure 'until the wife has succeeded in making her husband her child as well and in acting as a mother to him'.<sup>1</sup>

Desdemona from first to last expresses these primal ideals in her love for Othello, a love that like a mother's is literally unconditional, though at the same time it is freely sexual, and at the beginning Othello responds to it with corresponding primal force. He invests his whole being in his love for her, and in the early Acts he always speaks of and to her with that sense of symbiotic exaltation which is the remembrance of childhood, a sense which reaches its apogee in Cyprus, when they are reunited after their journey over 'the enchafed flood':

*Enter OTHELLO and Attendants.*

OTH. O my fair warrior!

DES. My dear Othello!

OTH. It gives me wonder great as my content  
To see you here before me. O my soul's joy!  
If after every tempest come such calms,  
May the winds blow till they have waken'd death,  
And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas  
Olympus-high and duck again as low  
As hell's from heaven. If it were now to die,  
'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear  
My soul hath her content so absolute  
That not another comfort like to this  
Succeeds in unknown fate.

DES. The heavens forbid  
But that our loves and comforts should increase  
Even as our days do grow!

OTH. Amen to that, sweet powers!  
I cannot speak enough of this content;  
It stops me here; it is too much of joy.  
And this, and this, the greatest discord be [*They kiss.*]  
That e'er our hearts shall make!

(II. I. 180)

<sup>1</sup> Freud, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction', *Works*, xiv, 88, 100; 'Femininity', xxii, 133-34.

Freud observed, in discussing the love for which a man leaves father and mother to cleave to his wife, that 'the greatest intensity of sensual passion will bring with it the highest mental estimation of the object (the normal over-estimation of the sexual object characteristic of men)'. In a similar connexion he wrote that 'this sexual overvaluation is the origin of the peculiar state of being in love', and that its deepest impulse is to recapture the primary narcissism of childhood: 'To be their own ideal once more, in regard to sexual no less than other trends, as they were in childhood — this is what people strive to attain as their happiness.'<sup>1</sup> Freud's discussion of narcissism suggests perhaps an underlying psychological reason for the prominence of images of mirrors in medieval and Renaissance erotic literature.<sup>2</sup> It is also closely analogous to the biblical theme of the regaining of Eden, 'a world of original identity', and in art, as Northrop Frye has pointed out, the theme frequently takes the form of a 'return . . . not to childhood but to a state of innocence symbolized by childhood'. Frye remarks also that in romance literature 'the traditional symbolic basis of the sexual quest, which goes back to the Song of Songs in the Bible, is the identification of the mistress's body with the paradisaal garden'.<sup>3</sup>

The association of Desdemona with such symbolism is particularly strong in *Othello* (and accounts in part for Shakespeare's great insistence on her innocence), and Othello's reunion with her on Cyprus, the most ecstatic moment of the play, draws deeply on the primal psychological and religious sources of all erotic yearning. The movement of desire and feeling in *Othello* expresses precisely the state of being in love which Freud describes, and the whole of the scene is infused with visual and verbal hyperboles of erotic exaltation. G. Wilson Knight writes that in this scene Othello is 'essential man', Desdemona 'essential woman', and that 'here especially Othello appears a prince of heroes, Desdemona is lit by a divine feminine radiance: both are transfigured'.<sup>4</sup> I think that Knight does not exaggerate. The scene is incandescent, and any interpretation that ignores its primal beauty and power is substituting a different play for the one Shakespeare wrote. It is true that as Othello speaks, with Iago as witness, we recognize his vulnerability, and we may also find tremors of anxiety in what he says but, given that very vulnerability, his anxiety is justified and functions in this scene as a measure of the extraordinary intensity of his hope and of his love. Iago, unlike his modern critical affiliates, does not mistake the beauty of what he sees:

O, you are well-tun'd now!  
But I'll set down the pegs that make this music,  
As honest as I am.

(II. I. 197)

Iago, of course, succeeds in his malevolent quest, and there can be no question that he does so, in part, as F. R. Leavis has insisted, because 'he represents something that is in Othello — in Othello the husband of Desdemona: the essential traitor is within the gates'. Leavis's conclusion that Othello's love is therefore a

<sup>1</sup> 'Degradation in Erotic Life', Riviere's translation, pp. 60–61; 'On Narcissism', *Works*, xiv, 88, 100.

<sup>2</sup> See Frederick Goldin, *The Mirror of Narcissus* (Ithaca, New York, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> *A Natural Perspective* (New York, 1965), p. 132; *The Secular Scripture*, pp. 149, 153.

<sup>4</sup> *The Wheel of Fire*, p. 111.

pretence and that the play boils down to a study of 'an obtuse and brutal egotism' seems to me not to follow and indeed to exhibit a superficial understanding of the nature both of egotism and tragedy, but I think his initial perception is undeniable.<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare suggests in the simplest mechanics of the opening dialogue of the temptation scene, through Iago's insistent echoing of Othello's own words, that the process we are to witness is fundamentally an internal one, and Iago's psychomachic role would have been unmistakable to Elizabethans. Bernard Spivack has argued, in a now familiar book, that most of Iago's salient stage characteristics are drawn from the figure of the Vice in medieval and Tudor drama:<sup>2</sup> his stage-managing, his artistry in evil which Bradley was the first to emphasize, his aggression through deceit, his corruption of the word, his persistent asides, his intimate relationship with the audience, his vaudevillian gusto, and above all his apparent motivelessness except for the instinct to destroy: all these features were conventional attributes of the Vice. More recent, and I think persuasive, scholarship has suggested, as Othello does when he looks down at Iago's feet at the end of the play, that he is more akin to the devil, and there is considerable evidence that devils and Vices had similar theatrical characteristics.<sup>3</sup> The distinction is not a small one, since as a Vice Iago would be an allegorical expression purely of Othello's own inner disposition to viciousness, while as the devil he dramatizes a temptation to evil that exists both without and within Othello. The difference is most important to our response to the play and I shall return to it, but for the moment we should recognize that in either case Iago represents as deep a wellspring in Othello's soul as Desdemona does and carries as great a religious and psychological resonance.

The theological dynamics of Iago's usurpation of Desdemona's place in Othello's being is quite explicit, and its essential locus is once again Othello's (and Desdemona's) colour. Iago repeatedly associates his diabolic auspices with the capacity to invert darkness and light:

Hell and night  
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.  
(I. 3. 397)

Divinity of hell!  
When devils will the blackest sins put on,  
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,  
As I do now.  
(II. 3. 339)

It is at the end of the latter speech that he promises to turn Desdemona's 'virtue into pitch', and he fulfils that promise, ultimately, because he succeeds in making Othello believe only in the letter of his own blackness. When Brabantio first taunts Othello to look to Desdemona if he has 'eyes to see', Othello answers, as we have seen, with a testimony of faith which is subsumed by Desdemona's vision of him, 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind'. Midway in the temptation scene, however, once Iago's thoughts, and his own, have begun to take effect, he tells Iago:

Nor from my own weak merits will I draw  
The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt;  
For she had eyes, and chose me. No, Iago;

<sup>1</sup> 'Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero', *Scrutiny*, 6 (1937), 259-83 (pp. 264, 270). For a highly damaging analysis of Leavis's argument, see Holloway, *The Story of the Night*, pp. 155-65.

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (New York, 1958).

<sup>3</sup> Leah Scragg, 'Iago — Vice or Devil?' *Shakespeare Survey* 21 (1968), 53-65.

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!

(III. 3. 191)

This speech is the immediate prelude to his fall, as well as the predication of it, for once he accepts the epistemology of 'normal' Venetian eyesight, he is doomed. After reminding him that Desdemona, 'so young, could give out such a seeming | To seel her father's eyes up close as oak' (III. 3. 213), Iago can thereafter easily persuade him that there must be something monstrous in Desdemona's love for him, and it is an inevitable step to the conclusion that

Her name, that was as fresh  
 As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black  
 As mine own face.

(III. 3. 390)

It is no exaggeration to suggest, given the pervasive spiritual connotations of blackness in the play, that at this point Othello has lost his faith and is in a state of despair. The God-like presumption which masks his subsequent vengeance ('This sorrow's heavenly; | It strikes where it doth love' (v. 2. 21)) only confirms that inner state, as does his increasing incapacity to accept or believe in Desdemona's love. His eventual destruction of her is itself an irremissible, suicidal act. He has loved her as his own flesh, and when he destroys her he destroys himself. And he knows it.

The psychoanalytical ramifications of Iago's aggression against Othello, which is to say, Othello's unconscious aggression against himself, are equally profound and are consonant with the theological overtones. Iago is Desdemona's sexual as well as spiritual antagonist. Where she luminously represents a union of affection and desire, Iago wishes to reduce love 'merely' to 'a lust of the blood, and a permission of the will' (I. 3. 333). He repeatedly assures Roderigo that the love of Desdemona and Othello cannot last, that by its very nature it must fail:

The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts, shall be to him shortly as acerbic as the coloquintida. She must change for youth; when she is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice. (I. 3. 350)

Mark me with what violence she first lov'd the Moor, but for bragging and telling fantastical lies. To love him still for prating?—let not thy discreet heart think it. Her eye must be fed; and what delight shall she have to look on the devil? When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there should be — again to inflame it, and to give satiety a fresh appetite — loveliness in favour, sympathy in years, manners, and beauties; all which the Moor is defective in. Now for want of these requir'd conveniences, her delicate tenderness will find itself abus'd, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor; very nature will instruct her in it, and compel her to some second choice. (II. 1. 219)

Considering the number of critics who, like Auden, end up agreeing with Iago's assumptions, it should be noted that Iago is speaking to Roderigo, the simplest of gulls (and even he objects), and speaking disingenuously. As Iago's soliloquies show, his deepest animus against Othello and Desdemona stems precisely from his belief that their 'free and open nature' makes them capable of proving him wrong. The basic motive of his malignancy, like Satan's, is envy.

Iago nevertheless prevails with Othello, as I have already suggested, because Othello eventually internalizes Iago's maleficent sexual vision and sees himself

with Iago's eyes, rather than Desdemona's; and again the nexus of his vulnerability, as of his romantic distinction, is his age and colour. At a critical turn in the argument of the temptation scene, Othello wonders that 'nature' should be 'erring from itself' in Desdemona (III. 3. 227). It is a line that could be construed and meant as a protest against Iago's insinuations, but Iago quickly transforms it into a deeply subversive sexual indictment:

Ay, there's the point: as — to be bold with you —  
 Not to affect many proposed matches  
 Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
 Whereto we see in all things nature tends —  
 Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,  
 Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.

(III. 3. 232)

Shortly afterwards, Othello adopts those thoughts as his own, and explicitly associates them with his colour and his age:

Haply, for I am black  
 And have not those soft parts of conversation  
 That chamberers have, or for I am declin'd  
 Into the vale of years — yet that's not much —  
 She's gone; I am abus'd; and my relief  
 Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage,  
 That we can call these delicate creatures ours,  
 And not their appetites!

(III. 3. 267)

This is the crux of Othello's fall, and his union with Iago's world of blood lust follows immediately. He believes that Desdemona cannot be true because he becomes convinced that he himself is unlovable and, believing that, he also becomes convinced that Desdemona's manifest attraction to him is itself perverse, a 'proof' of her corruption. Just before he strangles her, he and she have the following acutely painful dialogue:

OTH. Think on thy sins.

DES. They are loves I bear to you.

OTH. Ay, and for that thou diest.

DES. That death's unnatural that kills for loving.

(V. 2. 43)

I am not altogether sure what these lines mean. Desdemona may be referring to the sin of disobeying her father. Othello may be condemning Desdemona for her very desire for him, or he may be projecting upon her his incapacity to accept his own desires, probably both. And hovering over the lines may be the sense of guilt of the original sin, which was at once physical and spiritual. But whatever their precise meaning, the lines convey the ultimate horror of the play, which is Othello's radical rejection of the precept upon which his, or any, marriage is founded: 'So men are bound to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his own wife, loveth himself.' The tragedy of Othello is that finally he fails to love his own body, to love himself, and it is this despairing self-hatred which spawns the enormous savagery and degradation and destructiveness of his jealousy.

The awesome energy of Othello's jealousy, its primitive and superstitious vindictiveness, is a function of the same primal forces that animated his earlier

exaltation and love. As a child matures, he must inevitably be separated from his mother, he must confront the reality first that she is not a part of him and then that she has a sexual love for his father from which he is obviously and necessarily excluded. In the Freudian cosmology this conflict is inescapable, and the child, before he experiences his inevitable Œdipal defeat and learns to reconstitute himself, experiences profound feelings of betrayal and rivalry and rage and threats of the loss of identity and of nurture. It is this constellation of feelings that is the primal source of sexual jealousy and that is tapped directly in the second half of *Othello*:

. . . alas, to make me  
The fixed figure for the time of scorn  
To point his slow unmoving finger at! — O, O!  
Yet could I bear that too; well, very well;  
But there, where I have garner'd up my heart,  
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 cistern for foul toads  
To knot and gender in! Turn thy complexion there,  
Patience, thou young and rose-lipp'd cherubin —  
Ay, here, look grim as hell.

(iv. 2. 54)

This is not a pleasant passage to contemplate, but it is very important to an understanding of the play, for its conflation of images of the breast and of the womb expresses the precise etiology of Othello's jealous anguish and suggests the tragic vulnerability of a love so absolutely rooted in, and dependent upon, the exaltation of symbiotic union.

A similar condensation of imagery accumulates around the handkerchief, the accidental hinge of the plot whose 'triviality' has so bedevilled the play's critics from Rymer onwards. 'That handkerchief', Othello first explains,

Did an Egyptian to my mother give.  
She was a charmer, and could almost read  
The thoughts of people; she told her, while she kept it,  
'Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father  
Entirely to her love; but if she lost it,  
Or made a gift of it, my father's eye  
Should hold her loathely, and his spirits should hunt  
After new fancies.

(iii. 4. 55)

The superstitious cast of this speech is a regression not merely to Othello's literally primitive past, but to the primitive world of a child's merger with his mother, and there is already implicit in what Othello says the sense of his own primal betrayal. It is not then essentially an accident that the handkerchief should become co-extensive in his mind with his jealous fantasy of Desdemona's actual betrayal of him and with his thoughts of revenge:

Lie with her — lie on her? We say lie on her when they belie her. Lie with her. Zounds, that's fulsome. Handkerchief — confessions — handkerchief! To confess, and be hang'd for his labour — first, to be hang'd, and then to confess! I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus — pish! — noses, ears, and lips. Is't possible? Confess! Handkerchief! O devil! [*Falls in a trance.*] (iv. 1. 35)

What has clearly become insupportable for Othello in this scene is the fulsomeness of his own sexual instincts and, as his verbal and physical decomposition suggests, his jealous rage against Cassio is ultimately a rage against himself which reaches back to the elemental and destructive triadic fantasies which at one stage in childhood govern the mind of every human being.

In the broadest sense, Othello's behaviour in the second half of the play is a dramatization of guilt. In Christian terms the temptation scene recollects the fall of man, which Augustine interpreted as an allegorical representation of an essentially psychomachic process, the disorder of the soul by which reason becomes subjected to passion. In analogous psychoanalytic terms, the guilt is the aggression of the unconscious, again an internal process, in which Iago represents one part of Othello and Desdemona another and in which his destruction of Desdemona is a literal enactment of his ultimately self-destructive aggression against himself. I do not think it follows, however, as most theological and psychological critics seem to believe, that the play is therefore throughout or essentially a pathological study either of an idolator or a narcissist, however many attributes of both Othello may in fact demonstrate. It seems to me, on the contrary, for a number of reasons, that such approaches profoundly misconstrue, where they do not utterly ignore, the play's actual experience.

To begin with, and one cannot overemphasize the point, Desdemona is as much a part of Othello's soul, whether spiritually or psychically conceived, as Iago. She is not a fantasy, or rather she is a fantasy made flesh: the life, not only the imago, of that union of tenderness and desire, that unconditional love, towards which all men aspire. And Othello marries her, the whole first half of the play celebrates his incandescent erotic feelings for her, and in the second half his torment and decomposition can be measured, as they always are in his own consciousness, by his loss of her. It is deeply fitting in his final speech, and cheering to us if not to him, that his dying recognition that she was true should enable him genuinely to recover a sense of his former being, just as his delusion that she was faithless had caused him to lose it.<sup>1</sup>

Correspondingly, Iago does not constitute the whole of Othello's spiritual state or of his unconscious. He is not simply a projection of Othello's own disposition to vice, though he of course plays upon it. He is not a Vice but, as he himself repeatedly announces and everyone else in the play eventually recognizes, a 'hellish villain' (v. 2. 371). He is the eternal tempter who succeeds because he attacks in Othello not just his frailty but the frailty of all men. Auden suggested, astutely, that Iago 'treats Othello as an analyst treats a patient except that, of course, his intention is to kill not to cure'. Auden went on to observe that everything Iago says 'is designed to bring to Othello's consciousness what he has already guessed is there';<sup>2</sup> but a further and crucial point should be made, which is that what is 'there' exists as part of the unconscious life of all men. It is not peculiar to Othello, though it is tragically heightened in him. The issue is not an abstract one in *Othello*, because within the world that Shakespeare creates in the play honest Iago is a spokesman for what everyone else, save Desdemona, feels or believes or represents. Othello's guilt, in fact, pervades his society, and Iago has only to return to him the image of himself

<sup>1</sup> See Frye, *Fools of Time*, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> *The Dyer's Hand*, p. 266.

which he can see reflected, not in fantasy but in reality, in the world about him. Brabantio, who was formerly his friend, who 'lov'd' and 'oft invited' him to his house, vilifies him and believes that Desdemona is bewitched and that the marriage is obscene; and, as we have observed, the opening of the play implicates us as well as Venetian society in this deep racial prejudice. Cassio idolizes Desdemona and at the same time is capable of a sexual relationship only with a whore of whom he is essentially contemptuous (which is a deliberate change from Cinthio, where he is married). And in a proleptic version of Othello's fall, he gets drunk and violent on Othello's wedding night. The only other marriage in the play is Iago's and Emilia's, and although Emilia's portrayal is very complex it is nevertheless obvious that Iago has little affection for her and that at least the premises of her own worldly realism are not far from his. Only at the end, in a response to Desdemona's fidelity which neither she nor certainly Iago would ever have anticipated, does she move into another realm of feeling and value, and even then she finds Desdemona's marriage incomprehensible, if not repellent: 'She was too fond of her most filthy bargain' (v. 2. 160). The 'proper' Lodovico, to be sure, floats into view at the end of the play as a hypothetical husband, but he is a visitor to the play's tragic experience, like Fortinbras in *Hamlet*, not a part of it; he picks up the pieces at the end. It is no wonder that Othello, literally an alien by his profession, his background, his colour, and his age, should in such a world find it tragically impossible to hold to the Scriptural belief, which is also Desdemona's, that he is 'black, but beautiful'. Freud remarked in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that 'in an individual neurosis we take as our starting-point the contrast that distinguishes the patient from his environment, which is assumed to be "normal"'.<sup>1</sup> No such assumption can be made about the environment of *Othello*, either in Venice or Cyprus. It is not normal, it is itself guilt-ridden, and Othello is at once its victim and its heroic sacrifice.

In a tragic universe, it is worth stressing, guilt is inescapable, and the hero commands our minds and hearts not because he is sick or healthy, saved or damned, but because he most deeply incarnates and experiences the inexorable tragic conditions that we recognize in our own existence. In *Othello* those tragic conditions are explicitly sexual, whether they are understood in religious or psychological terms, and from an Elizabethan or modern perspective. Freud's own view, expressed consistently in his writing, was that the Oedipal drama which forms the basis of all human sexual development is fundamentally tragic, and in the essay from which I quoted at the start of this discussion, 'The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life', he argued that the dissociation of affection and sensuality which characterizes cases of actual psychical impotence is in the last analysis a condition of all human beings; that the two currents of erotic feeling, 'the same two that are personified in art as heavenly and earthly (or animal) love', are rarely completely fused in civilized man. He remarked:

It has an ugly sound and a paradoxical as well, but nevertheless it must be said that whoever is to be really free and happy in love must have overcome his deference for women and come to terms with the idea of incest with mother or sister. Anyone who in the face of this test subjects himself to serious self-examination will indubitably find that at the bottom of his heart he too regards the sexual act as something degrading, which soils and contaminates not only the body.

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, XXI, 144.

Freud concluded that 'however strange it may sound, I think the possibility must be considered that something in the nature of the sexual instinct itself is unfavourable to the achievement of complete gratification'.<sup>1</sup> The whole of this essay is the nucleus of Freud's later, more celebrated, discussion of aggression and guilt in *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

Freud, of course, did not originate these ideas. Similar concepts are inherent and often developed in a considerable body of medieval and Renaissance literature combining erotic and theological themes, and in his own time Shakespeare would have found them stated with Freudian explicitness in Montaigne's 'Upon Some Verses of *Virgil*', the essay from which he almost certainly drew directly in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Since Montaigne actually tended himself to degrade women, he demonstrates as well as parallels Freud's thought. His essay deals with sexuality, and a large part of it constitutes an argument against the possibility of uniting the affection that belongs to marriage and 'the insatiate thirst of enjoying a greedily desired subject' that belongs to sensual love:

Love disdaineth a man should hold of other then himselfe, and dealeth but faintly with acquaintances begun and entertained under another title; as mariage is. . . . Nor is it other than a kinde of incest, in this reverent alliance and sacred bond, to employ the efforts and extravagant humor of an amorous licentiousness. . . . Wedlocke hath for his share honour, justice, profit and constancie: a plaine, but more generall delight. Love melts in onely pleasure.

Like Freud, Montaigne finds something paradoxically degrading about the very 'acte of generation':

In al other things you may observe decorum and maintaine some decency: all other operations admit some rules of honesty: this cannot onely be imagined, but vicious or ridiculous. . . . Surely it is an argument not onely of our originall corruption, but a badge of our vanity and deformity. On the one side nature urgeth us unto it: having thereunto combined, yea fastned, the most noble, the most profitable, and the most sensually-pleasing, of all her functions: and on the other suffereth us to accuse, to condemne and to shunne it, as insolent, as dishonest, and as lewder to blush at it, and allow, yea, and to command abstinence. Are not we most brutish, to terme that worke beastly which begets, and which maketh us?

Montaigne, like Freud, observes the ultimate incapacity of erotic instincts to be fully satisfied or harmonized:

But withall it is against the nature of love, not to be violent, and against the condition of violence, to be constant. . . . It is not a passion meereley corporeall. If no end be found in covetousnesse, nor limit in ambition, assure your selfe there is nor end nor limit in lechery. It yet continueth after satiety: nor can any man prescribe it or end or constant satisfaction: it ever goeth on beyond it's possession, beyond it's bounds.

Montaigne says finally of marriage that 'It is a match whereto may well be applied the common saying, *homo homini aut Deus, aut Lupus*. . . . *Man unto man is either a God or a Wolfe*'.<sup>2</sup>

It is within this polarized erotic universe that Othello moves, and he traverses its extremes not only in the larger parabolic action of his marriage and its destruction, but in the very constitution of his being. At the exact hinge of the play's action,

<sup>1</sup> Riviere's translation, pp. 62, 65, 68.

<sup>2</sup> *The Essayes of Michael Lord of Montaigne*, translated by John Florio, 3 vols (London, 1910), III, 105, 72, 77, 106, 115, 75.

just after Desdemona leaves him with her plea for Cassio, and the instant before Iago begins his attack, Othello says,

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul  
But I do love thee; and when I love thee not,  
Chaos is come again.

(III. 3. 91)

These well-known lines spring from the heart of Othello's existence and describe the essence of the paradox that at once animates and destroys him. Read as doctrine by theologically-minded critics, they can open up disturbing vistas,<sup>1</sup> since, if Desdemona is finally to be understood as the pearl of great price, Othello's absolute commitment to her should redeem him, but the answer is that the play's vision is tragic, not eschatological, and tragedy, as Frye says, concerns 'being in time', not in heaven.<sup>2</sup> And on earth the tragic fact is that a man cannot be as one flesh with his wife and at the same time obey St Paul's other injunction that 'they which have wives, be as though they had none' (1 Corinthians 7. 29). Nor, considered psychologically, can a man experience the continuous feeling of being in love, in all its primal intensity, without a regression to the chaos of the unconscious from which that feeling comes.

The ultimate meaning of *Othello*, however, is not doctrinal. At the end, in his last words, I think Othello speaks the basic truth, both of his experience and of our response to it, when he says that he is 'one that lov'd not wisely, but too well' (v. 2. 344). The play has deep affiliations with romance. It is a full and moving anatomy of love, not a clinical diagnosis or demonstration, and Othello is its hero not because he achieves triumph or suffers defeat, though he does both, nor because he learns or does not learn a theological or psychological lesson, but because he is indeed, as Cassio says, 'great of heart', and because he enacts for us, with beautiful and terrifying nakedness, the primitive energies that are the substance of our own erotic lives.

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert G. Hunter, *Shakespeare and the Mystery of God's Judgments* (Athens, Georgia, 1976), pp. 127-58.

<sup>2</sup> *Fools of Time*, p. 3.