SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

OTHELLO AND COLOUR PREJUDICE

By G. K. HUNTER

Read 19 April 1967

IT is generally admitted today that Shakespeare was a practical man of the theatre: however careless he may have been about maintaining consistency for the exact *reader* of his plays, he was not likely to introduce a theatrical novelty which would only puzzle his audience; it does not seem wise, therefore, to dismiss his theatrical innovations as if they were unintentional. The blackness of Othello is a case in point. Shakespeare largely modified the story he took over from Cinthio: he made a tragic hero out of Cinthio's passionate and bloody lover; he gave him a royal origin, a Christian baptism, a romantic *bravura* of manner and, most important of all, an orotund magnificence of diction. Yet, changing all this, he did not change his colour, and so produced a daring theatrical novelty—a black hero for a white community—a novelty which remains too daring for many recent theatrical audiences. Shakespeare cannot merely have carried over the colour of Othello by being too lazy or too uninterested to meddle with it; for no actor, spending the time in 'blacking-up', and hence no producer, could be indifferent to such an innovation, especially in that age, devoted to 'imitation' and hostile to 'originality'. In fact, the repeated references to Othello's colour in the play and the wider net of images of dark and light spread across the diction, show that Shakespeare was not only not unaware of the implication of his hero's colour, but was indeed intensely aware of it as one of the primary factors in his play.[1] I am therefore assuming in this lecture that the blackness of Othello has a theatrical purpose, and I intend to try to suggest what it was possible for that purpose to have been.

Shakespeare intended his hero to be a black man—that much I take for granted;[2] what is unknown is what the idea of a black

[1] See R. B. Heilman, 'More Fair than Black; Light and Dark in *Othello*', *Essays in Criticism*, i (1951), 313–35.

[2] I ignore the many treatises devoted to proving that he was of tawny or sunburnt colour. These are, however, very worthy of study, as documents of prejudice.

man suggested to Shakespeare, and what reaction the appearance of a black man on the stage was calculated to produce. It is fairly certain, however, that some modern reactions are not likely to have been shared by the Elizabethans. The modern theatre-going European intellectual, with a background of cultivated superiority to 'colour problems' in other continents, would often choose to regard Othello as a fellow man and to watch the story—which could so easily be reduced to its headline level: 'sheltered white girl errs: said, "Colour does not matter"'—with a sense of freedom from such prejudices. But this lofty fair-mindedness may be too lofty for Shakespeare's play, and not take the European any nearer the Othello of Shakespeare than the lady from Maryland quoted in the Furness New Variorum edition: 'In studying the play of *Othello*, I have always *imagined* its hero a white man.' Both views, that the colour of Othello does not matter, and that it matters too much to be tolerable, err, I suggest, by over-simplifying. Shakespeare was clearly deliberate in keeping Othello's colour; and it is obvious that he counted on some positive audience reaction to this colour; but it is equally obvious that he did not wish the audience to dismiss Othello as a stereotype nigger.

Modern rationalizations about 'colour' tend to be different from those of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. We are powerfully aware of the relativism of viewpoints; we distinguish easily between different racial cultures; and explicit arguments about the mingling of the races usually begin at the economic and social level and only move to questions of God's providence at the lunatic fringe.

The Elizabethans also had a powerful sense of the economic threat posed by the foreign groups they had daily contact with—Flemings or Frenchmen—but they had little or no continuous contact with 'Moors', and no sense of economic threat from them.[1] This did not mean, however, that they had no racial or colour prejudice. They had, to start with, the basic common man's attitude that all foreigners are curious and inferior—the more curious the more inferior, in the sense of the proverb quoted by Purchas: 'Three Moors to a Portuguese; three Portuguese to an Englishman.'[2] They had also the basic and ancient sense that black is the colour of sin and death, 'the badge of hell, The hue of dungeons, and the Schoole of night'

[1] See G. K. Hunter, 'Elizabethans and Foreigners', *Shakespeare Survey*, xvii ('Shakespeare in His Own Age') (1964), 37–52.

[2] See M. P. Tilley, *A Dictionary of Proverbs* (1950), M. 1132.

(as Shakespeare himself says).[1] This supposition is found all over the world (even in darkest Africa)[2] from the earliest to the latest times; and in the West there is a continuous and documented tradition of it.[3] It may be worth while giving some account of this. In Greece and Rome black was the colour of ill luck, death, condemnation, malevolence. The Roman feeling about the colour is well summed up in Horace's line:

hic niger est; hunc tu, Romane, caveto[4]

—on which the Delphin editor comments: 'Niger est] Homo pestilens, malus, perniciosus: contra est candidus, albus.' The soldiers of Brutus were dismayed to meet an Ethiop just before the battle of Philippi.[5] In Lucian's *Philopseudes* (§ 31) we hear of a ghost met in Corinth: 'when the Spirit appeared . . . he was squalid and long-haired and blacker than the dark' (μελάντερος τοῦ ζόφου). Suetonius tells us of a play, being rehearsed at the time of Caligula's death, in which the infernal connotations of the colour were used with self-conscious art. In this play Egyptians and Ethiopians played the parts of the inhabitants of the underworld.[6]

The coming of Christianity made no break in the tradition. Indeed, Christian eschatology seems to have taken over the black man from the underworld with great speed and enthusiasm. In the dream of Marcellus in the *Acts of Peter* (*c.* A.D. 200)[7] a demon appeared 'in sight like an Ethiopian . . . altogether black and filthy'. In the third-century *Acta Xanthippae* the devil manifested himself as the King of Ethiopia.[8] In the so-called 'Epistle of Barnabas' the devil is called ὁ μέλας.[9] In another early text the martyrdom of Perpetua is represented as a battle between the saint and a black-faced Egyptian—the

[1] *Love's Labour's Lost*, IV. iii. 254 f.

[2] See V. W. Turner, 'Colour Classification in Ndembu Ritual', *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. M. Banton (1966); Arthur Leib, 'The Mystical Significance of Colours in . . . Madagascar', *Folk-lore*, lvii (1946), 128–33; Joan Westcott, 'The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegba, the Yoruba Trickster', *Africa*, xxxii (1962).

[3] See Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, s.v. Schwartz.

[4] Horace, *Satires*, I. iv. 85.

[5] Plutarch, Brutus, xlviii.

[6] Suetonius, Caligula, lvii.

[7] M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (1924), p. 323 (Acts of Peter, § 22).

[8] See M. R. James, *Apocrypha Anecdota* (*Texts and Studies*, ii. 3) (1893), 54.

[9] Ed. Funk, *Patres Apostolici*, i. 48.

devil, of course.[1] Among the visitors to the much-tried St. Anthony was the devil as a *μέλας παῖς*;[2] in Cassian's *Collationes Patrum* the devil appears several times *in figura Aethiopis taetri*.[3] And so on; I have elsewhere given later examples of the same religious visions.[4] They went on, unchanging, into Shakespeare's own day.

The linguistic change from Greek or Latin to English did not free the word *black* from the associations that had formed round *μέλας* or *niger*. As *candidus* had combined the ideas of white skin and clear soul, so the word *fair* served to combine the ideas of beauty and whiteness. Black remains the adjective appropriate to the ugly and the frightening,[5] to the devil and his children, the wicked and the infidel. In the medieval romances, the enemies of the knights are usually Saracens, often misshapen and monstrous (eyes in forehead, mouth in breast, etc.) and commonly black.[6] This is a tradition that Shakespeare picks up in his description of Thomas Mowbray as a Crusader,

> Streaming the ensign of the Christian cross
> Against black pagans, Turks and Saracens.[7]

There was then, it appears, a powerful, widespread, and ancient tradition associating black-faced men with wickedness, and this tradition came right up to Shakespeare's own day. The habit of representing evil men as black-faced or negroid had also established itself in a pictorial tradition that persists from the Middle Ages through and beyond the sixteenth century. This appears especially in works showing the tormentors of Christ, in scenes of the Flagellation and the Mocking, though the tormentors of other saints are liable to have the same external characteristics used to show their evil natures. Thus in the south porch of the Cathedral of Chartres, the executioner

[1] *Passio Perpetuae*, ed. J. A. Robinson, *Texts and Studies*, ii. 1 (1891), 76 f.

[2] See *Patrologia Graeca*, xxvi, col. 849 a.

[3] See *Corpus Scriptorum Eccl. Latinorum*, xiii (1886), 32, 55.

[4] G. K. Hunter, loc. cit.

[5] See Walter Clyde Curry, *The Middle English Ideal of Personal Beauty* (1916). I have not been able to see J. E. Willms, *Über den Gebrauch der Farbenbezeichnungen in der Poesie Altenglands* (München, 1902). The kind of shock that could be produced by the association of blackness and beauty is illustrated by the Scottish tournament of 1505 in which James IV set up a negress as the Queen of Beauty, and himself as 'the wild knight' defended her honour. (See *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, III, xlviii ff., lii, 258 f.) The scandal that this caused can be discovered from Pitscottie.

[6] See, for example, *Cursor Mundi*, 8077; *Sir Ferumbras*, 2785; *Alisaunder*, B. 6402.

[7] *Richard II*, iv. i. 94 f.

of St. Denis is shown as negroid (Pl. XXI*a*). The alabaster tablets produced in England in the late Middle Ages, and exported to the Continent in large numbers, frequently have enough pigment remaining to show some faces coloured black. W. L. Hildburgh, writing in *Archaeologia*, xciii (1949), assumes that there is a link between this characteristic and the medieval drama: 'the very dark colour of the faces of the wicked persons [is] intended to indicate their villainous natures; in some tables the faces of the torturers and other iniquitous persons are black' (p. 76). E. S. Prior, *Catalogue of the Exhibition of English Medieval Alabaster Work* (1913), had made the same point: 'the blackening of the faces of the ruffians and executioners and heretics as seen in many of the tables was no doubt a stage trick' (p. 21, n. 1). There is a good example in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, a crucifixion which the 1836 catalogue describes thus: 'the penitent thief looks towards Christ and the other has his face averted and is painted as a negro' (p. 146). Again, A. Gardner, writing of English medieval sculpture, tells us that 'In the martyrdom scenes the executioners are given hideous faces, which seem sometimes to have been painted black', *English Medieval Sculpture* (1951), p. 310. He illustrates a good example showing the martyrdom of St. Catherine (fig. 609, p. 309). Further examples are described in 'Medieval English Alabasters in American Museums', *Speculum*, xxx (1955), where the Scourging and the Resurrection are both marked by this feature. Wall-paintings in English churches preserve evidence of the same usage. A Massacre of the Innocents from Croughton (Northants.), illustrated in Borenius and Tristram, *English Medieval Painting* (1927) as plate 51, shows dark-faced soldiers. The Church of St. Peter and St. Paul at Pickering (N. Yorks.) has splendid fifteenth-century wall-paintings—not yet properly photographed—in which both Herod and the scourgers are given dark faces. Herod is represented in the same way, it may be noticed, in an alabaster tablet described in *The Archaeological Journal*, lxxiv (1917), plate xiii.

Among the sixteenth-century painted windows of King's College Chapel, Cambridge, the Scourging itself does not have this feature, but the window above (window X), intended as a typological comment on it ('Shimei cursing David'), gives a dark face to Shimei, the *vir sanguinum et vir Belial* (2 Samuel, 16. 7), as the legend tells us.

Among illuminated manuscripts, the Luttrell Psalter has a black scourger on fol. 92^{v} (Pl. XXI*b*), and the Chichester Psalter,

now in the John Rylands Library, has several full-page pictures of the Passion, in which the tormentors are black with grossly distorted features (see Pl. XXII*a*). The *Très-Belles Heures de Notre Dame* du Duc Jean de Berry has a full-page Scourging, with two white tormentors and one black (Pl. XXII*b*). Bodleian MS. Douce 5—a Book of Hours of Flemish Provenance and fourteenth-century date—has a similar scene. The most celebrated picture in which this tradition appears is the Scourging by Giotto in the Arena Chapel in Padua. In this the negro scourger stands alone brandishing his rod above the head of Christ. Among the many monographs devoted to Giotto no one seems to have pointed to the tradition with which I am here concerned.

The latest picture which uses this tradition, so far as I know, is a martyrdom of St. James, attributed to Van Dyck, sold by Weinmüller of Munich in 1958 (Catalogue 721, item 501—Pl. XXIII).

It is suggested by several of the authorities cited here that the pictorial tradition was associated with theatrical usage. Certainly the drama of the Middle Ages seems to have used black figures to represent the evil of this world and the next. Creizenach[1] describes the European diffusion of the black faces. The surviving accounts of the Coventry cycle (which some think Shakespeare may have seen—and which he *could* have seen) retain the distinction between 'white (or saved) souls' and 'black (or damned) souls'.[2] The English folk-play describes St. George's enemy as (*inter alia*) 'Black Morocco Dog', 'Black Prince of Darkness', or even 'Black and American Dog'.[3] In Thomas Lupton's *All for Money* (1558( )77) 'Judas cometh in like a damned soul in black'.[4] Udall's *Ezechias*, acted in Cambridge in 1564 is stated to have represented the leader of the Assyrians as a giant and made his followers coal-black. As the reporter of the performance tells us:

> Dicta probat fuscis miles numerosus in armis
> Tam nullas tenebras dixeris esse nigras.[5]

[1] *Geschichte des neueren Dramas*, i (1911), 201. An interesting detail appears in footnote 3 on this page: 'Wie intensiv die Bemalung war, ergibt sich den Summen, die in Frankreich den Barbarien und Badestubenbesitzern für Reinigung der Teufel bezahlt wurden.' (See also E. J. Haslinghuis, *De Duivel in het drama der Middeleeuwen* [1912], p. 182.)

[2] See Thomas Sharp, *A Dissertation upon the Coventry Mysteries* (1825), pp. 66, 70.

[3] E. K. Chambers, *The English Folk Play* (1933), p. 28.

[4] Ed. E. Vogel, *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, xl (1904), l. 1439.

[5] See F. S. Boas, *University Drama in the Tudor Age* (1914), pp. 94 ff.

In John Redford's *Wit and Science* (? 1530) we seem to have a moral transformation scene *coram populo*, expressed in terms of face colouring. Wit goes to sleep on Idleness's lap. Idleness then tells us:

> Well, whyle he sleepth in Idlenes lappe,
> Idleness marke on hym shall I clappe. (434 f.)[1]

When Wit awakens he is taken for Ignorance (child of Idleness); he looks in a glass and exclaims:

> hah, goges sowle,
> What have we here, a dyvyll?
> This glas I se well hath bene kept evyll
> . . . . . .
> Other this glas is shamefully spotted,
> Or els am I to shamefully blotted.
> . . . . . .
> And as for this face
> Is abhominable as black as the devyll. (826–40)

Even in a proverbial title like 'Like will to like quoth the Devil to the Collier' the widespread and universally accepted point is exposed as part of the air that Englishmen of Shakespeare's age breathed. Indeed, as late as Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* (1676) stray reference to the Devil's blackness was supposed to be intelligible to a theatrical audience ('like a devil in a play . . . this darkness . . . conceals her angel's face').[2]

How mindlessly and how totally accepted in this period was the image of the black man as the devil may be seen from the use of 'Moors' or 'Morians' in civic pageants. 'Moors' were an accepted part of the world of pageantry.[3] There were Moors in London Lord Mayor's Pageants in 1519, 1521, 1524, 1536, 1541, 1551, 1589, 1609, 1611, 1624,[4] who seem to have acted as bogey-man figures to clear the way before the main procession. They were sometimes supplied with fireworks for this purpose, and in this function seem to have been fairly indifferent alternatives to green-men, wodewoses, devils. As

[1] Malone Society Reprints (1951).

[2] *The Plain Dealer*, IV. ii.

[3] Moors (like dwarfs and fools) were found also in the human menageries that the courts of the Renaissance liked to possess. The Moors at the court of James IV of Scotland appear often in the Treasurer's Accounts. One item there throws an interesting light on their status: 'The nuris that brocht the Moris barne to see (i.e. to be seen), be the Kingis command' (volume iii, p. 182).

[4] See Malone Society Collections, iii (1945).

Withington has remarked,[1] 'it seems obvious that all these figures are connected'; they are connected as frightening marginal comments on the human state—as inhabitants of those peripheral regions in the *mappae mundi* where Moors, together with

> Anthropophagi and men whose heads
> Do grow beneath their shoulders,

rubbed shoulders (such as these were) with Satyrs, Hermaphrodites, salvage men, and others of the species *semihomo*.[2] An extreme example of this status of the Moor appears in the report of the pageant for the baptism of Prince Henry in 1594. It had been arranged that a lion should pull the triumphal car; but the lion could not be used, so a Moor was substituted.[3]

Renaissance scepticism and the voyages of discovery might seem, at first sight, to have destroyed the ignorance on which such thoughtless equations of black men and devils depended. But this does not prove to have been so. The voyagers brought back some accurate reports of black and heathen; but they often saw, or said they saw, what they expected to see—the marvels of the East.[4] In any case the vocabulary at their dis-

[1] R. Withington, *English Pageantry*, i (1918), 74.

[2] The association of the negro with *semihomines* appears in a sixteenth-century sword-dance of 'Mores, Sauvages et Satyres', cited by Chambers (*Mediaeval Stage*, i. 199, n. 5), and in the decoration of the 'vasque de Saint Denis' (*c.* 1180) decorated with sculptures of 'Sylvanus, satyr and negro' (see H. W. Janson, *Apes and Ape-lore* (1952), p. 55). The *vasque* also uses a sculpture of an ape, and this may be associated with the others as a further illustration of the *semihomo*. The confusion of the ape and the negro has a considerable history. The negress at the Court of James IV of Scotland who was set up as 'Queen of Beauty' (see above, p. 142, n. 5) was compared to an ape; Dunbar tells us 'Quhou schou is tute mowitt lyk ane aep' ('of an blak-moir'). Joseph Glanvill (*Scepsis Scientifica* [1665]) suggests that the apes (rather than the negroes) are the descendants of Cham. The confusion was a useful one for the defenders of negro slavery, and drew extra support from the often-repeated stories that orang-utangs frequently stole away and ravished black women. Thus Edward Long in his *History of Jamaica* says that 'The equally hot temperament of their women has given probability to the charge of their admitting these animals [monkies or baboons] to their embrace' (ii. 383). Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on Virginia* (written in 1781), treats as an acknowledged fact 'the preference of the Oranootan for black women' (Question XIV).

[3] See *A True Reportary of the Baptisme of Frederik Henry, Prince of Scotland* (1594) (S.T.C. 13163).

[4] See R. Wittkower, 'Marvels of the East', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, v (1942), 159–97. See also L. Olschki, *Storia letteraria delle scoperte geografiche* (Firenze, 1939), and R. Romeo, *Le scoperte americane*

posal frustrated any attempt at scientific discrimination. The world was still seen largely, in terms of vocabulary, as a network of religious names. The word 'Moor' had no clear racial status. The first meaning in the *O.E.D.* (with examples up to 1629) is 'Mahomedan'. And very often this means no more than 'infidel', 'non-Christian'. Like *Barbarian* and *Gentile* (or *Wog*) it was a word for 'people not like us', so signalled by colour. The word *Gentile* itself had still the religious sense of *Pagan*, and the combined phrase 'Moors and Gentiles' is used regularly to represent the religious gamut of non-Christian possibilities (see *O.E.D.* for examples). Similarly, *Barbary* was not simply a place in Africa, but also the unclearly located home of Barbarism, as in Chaucer (Franklin's Tale, 1451, Man of Law's Tale, 183).

I have suggested elsewhere that the discoveries of the voyagers had little opportunity of scientific or non-theological development.[1] And this was particularly true of the problems raised by the black-skinned races. No scientific explanation of black skins had ever been achieved, though doctors had long disputed it. Lodovicus Caelius Rhodiginus in his *Lectionum Antiquarum libri XXX* (1620) can cite column after column of authorities; but all without conclusive answers. We hear among the latest reports of Africa collected in T. Astley's *New General Collection of Voyages* (1745) that the blackness of the Negro is 'a Topic that has given Rise to numberless Conjectures and great Disputes among the Learned in Europe' (ii. 269). Sir Thomas Browne in three essays in his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (VI. x–xii) not only declared that the subject was 'amply and satisfactorily discussed as we know by no man' but proceeded to remedy this by way of amplitude rather than satisfactoriness. The theological explanation was left in possession of the field. Adam and Eve, it must be assumed, were white; it follows that the creation of the black races can only be ascribed to some subsequent *fiat*. The two favourite possibilities were the cursing of Cain and the cursing of Ham or Cham and his posterity—and sometimes these two were assumed to be different expressions of the same event; at least one might allege, with Sir Walter Ralegh, that 'the sonnes of Cham did possesse the vices of the sonnes of

nella coscienza Italiana (1954), who puts the idea expressed here with great clarity: 'Idee e valori preesistenti operano direttamente sui viaggiatori, spingendo a intendere in conformità ad essi testimonianze dubbie, discorsi in lingue sconosciute, fenomeni poco spiegabili' (p. 14).

[1] G. K. Hunter, loc. cit.

Cain'.[1] The Cham explanation had the great advantage that 'the threefold world' of tradition could be described in terms of the three sons of Noah—Japhet having produced the Europeans, Shem the Asiatics, while the posterity of Ham occupied Africa, or, in a more sophisticated version, 'the Meridionall or southern partes of the world both in Asia and Africa'[2]—sophisticated, we should notice, without altering the basic theological assumption that Cham's posterity were banished to the most uncomfortable part of the globe, and a foretaste of the Hell to come. This geographical assumption fitted in with the wisdom that the etymological doctors had in the Middle Ages been able to glean from the word *Ham*—defined as '*Cham: calidus*, et ipse ex praesagio futuri cognominatus est. Posteritas enim eius eam terrae partem possedit quae vicino sole calentior est.'[3] When this is linked to the other point made in relation to the Cham story—that his posterity were cursed to be slaves[4]—one can see how conveniently and plausibly such a view fitted the facts and desires found in the early navigators. Azurara, the chronicler of Prince Henry the Navigator's voyages, tells us that it was natural to find blackamoors as the slaves of lighter skinned men:

> these blacks were Moors (i.e. Mahomedans) like the others, though their slaves, in accordance with ancient custom which I believe to have been because of the curse which, after the Deluge, Noah laid upon his son Cain [*sic*], cursing him in this way: that his race should be subject to all the other races in the world. And from his race these blacks are descended.[5]

The qualities of the 'Moors' who appear on the Elizabethan stage are hardly at all affected by Elizabethan knowledge of real Moors from real geographical locations, and, given the literary modes available, this is hardly surprising. It is true that the first important Moor-role—that of Muly Hamet in Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (*c.* 1589)—tells the story of a real man (with whom Queen Elizabeth had a treaty) in a real historical situation. But the dramatic focus that Peele manages to give to

[1] *The History of the World*, I. vi. 2.

[2] A. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin* (1605), p. 119.

[3] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, VII. vi. 17. (*Patrologia Latina*, lxxxii, col. 276.)

[4] See St. Ambrose, *Comment. in epist. ad Philippenses* (*Pat. Lat.* xvii, col. 432): 'servi autem ex peccato fiunt, sicut Cham filius Noe, qui primus merito nomen servi accepit.'

[5] *Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* (Hakluyt Society, xcv [1896], 54).

his Moorish character is largely dependent on the devil and underworld associations he can suggest for him—making him call up 'Fiends, Fairies, hags that fight in beds of steel' and causing him to show more acquaintance with the geography of hell than with that of Africa. Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* is liberated from even such slender ties as associate Muly Hamet with geography. Aaron is in the play as the representative of a world of generalized barbarism, which is Gothic in Tamora and Moorish in Aaron, and unfocused in both. The purpose of the play is served by a general opposition between Roman order and Barbarian disorder. Shakespeare has the doubtful distinction of making explicit here (perhaps for the first time in English literature) the projection of black wickedness in terms of negro sexuality. The relationship between Tamora and Aaron is meant, clearly enough, to shock our normal sensibilities and their black baby is present as an emblem of disorder. In this respect, as in most others, Eleazer in *Lust's Dominion* (*c.* 1600)—the third pre-Othello stage-Moor—is copied from Aaron. The location of this play (Spain) gives a historically plausible excuse to present the devil in his favourite human form—'that of a Negro or Moor', as Reginald Scott tells us—but does not really use the locale to establish any racial points.

These characters provide the dominant images that must have been present in the minds of Shakespeare's original audience when they entered the Globe to see a play called *The Moor of Venice*—an expectation of pagan devilry set against white Christian civilization—excessive civilization perhaps in Venice, but civilization at least 'like us'. Even those who knew Cinthio's story of the Moor of Venice could not have had very different expectations, which may be summed up from the story told by Bandello (III. xxi) in which a master beats his Moorish servant, and the servant in revenge rapes and murders his wife and children.[1] Bandello draws an illuminating moral:

> By this I intend it to appear that a man should not be served by this sort of slave; for they are seldom found faithful, and at best they are full of filth, unclean, and stink all the time like goats. But all this is as nothing put beside the savage cruelty that reigns in them.

[1] Bandello, *Novelle*, Book III, novel xxi, derived from Pontanus (Opera, i. 25 b), and translated by Belleforest, *Histoires tragiques*. The story was apparently Englished in ballad form, in 1569, 1570, and again in 1624, 1675. See Hyder Rollins, 'Analytical Index' (*Studies in Philology*, xxi [1924]), item 2542: 'a strange petyful novell Dyscoursynge of a noble Lorde and his lady with thayre ij cheldren executed by a blacke morryon.'

It is in such terms that the play opens. We hear from men like us of a man not like us, of 'his Moorship', 'the Moor', 'the thick-lips', 'an old black ram', 'a Barbary horse', 'the devil', of 'the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor'. The sexual fear and disgust that lies behind so much racial prejudice are exposed for our derisive expectations to fasten upon them. And we are at this point bound to agree with these valuations, for no alternative view is revealed. There is, of course, a certain comic *brio* which helps to distance the whole situation, and neither Brabantio, nor Iago nor Roderigo can wholly command our identification. None the less we are drawn on to await the entry of a traditional Moor figure, the kind of person we came to the theatre expecting to find.

When the second scene begins, however, it is clear that Shakespeare is bent to ends other than the fulfilment of these expectations. The Iago/Roderigo relationship of I. i is repeated in the Iago/Othello relationship of the opening of I. ii; but Othello's response to the real-seeming circumstance with which Iago lards his discourse is very different from the hungrily self-absorbed questionings of Roderigo. Othello draws on an inward certainty about himself, a radiant clarity about his own well-founded moral position. This is no 'lascivious Moor', but a great Christian gentleman, against whom Iago's insinuations break like water against granite. Not only is Othello a Christian, moreover, he is the leader of Christendom in the last and highest sense in which Christendom existed as a viable entity, crusading against the 'black pagans'. He is to defend Cyprus against the Turk, the 'general enemy Ottoman'. It was the fall of Cyprus which produced the alliance of Lepanto, and we should associate Othello with the emotion that Europe continued to feel—till well after the date of *Othello*—about that victory and about Don John of Austria.[1]

Shakespeare has presented to us a traditional view of what Moors are like, i.e. gross, disgusting, inferior, carrying the symbol of their damnation on their skin; and has caught our over-easy assent to such assumptions in the grip of a guilt which associates us and our assent with the white man representative of such views in the play—Iago. Othello acquires the glamour of an innocent man that *we* have wronged, and an admiration stronger than he could have achieved by virtue plainly represented:

[1] See G. K. Hunter, loc. cit.

> . . . as these black masks
> Proclaim an enshield beauty ten times louder
> Than beauty could, displayed.

(Is it an accident that Shakespeare wrote these lines from *Measure for Measure* in approximately the same year as he wrote *Othello*?) Iago is a 'civilized' man; but where, for the 'inferior' Othello, appearance and reality, statement and truth are linked indissolubly, civilization for Iago consists largely of a capacity to manipulate appearances and probabilities:

> For when my outward action doth demonstrate
> The native act and figure of my heart
> In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
> But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
> For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.

Othello may be 'the devil' in appearance: but it is the 'fair' Iago who gives birth to the dark realities of sin and death in the play:

> It is engender'd. Hell and night
> Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light

The relationship between these two is developed in terms of appearance and reality. Othello controls the reality of action; Iago the 'appearance' of talk about action; Iago the Italian is isolated (even from his wife), envious, enigmatic (even to himself), self-centred; Othello the 'extravagant and wheeling stranger' is surrounded and protected by a network of duties, obligations, esteems, pious to his father-in-law, deferential to his superiors, kind to his subordinates, loving to his wife. To sum up, assuming that *soul* is reality and *body* is appearance, we may say that Iago is the white man with the black soul while Othello is the black man with the white soul. Long before Blake's little black boy had said

> I am black, but oh my soul is white.
> White as an angel is the English child,
> But I am black as if bereaved of light.

and before Kipling's Gunga Din:

> An' for all 'is dirty 'ide
> 'E was white, clear white inside . . .
> You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din!

Othello had represented the guilty awareness of Europe that the 'foreigner type' is only the type we do not know, whose foreignness vanishes when we have better acquaintance; that

the prejudicial foreign appearance may conceal a vision of truth, as Brabantio is told:

> If virtue no delighted beauty lack
> Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.

This reality of fairness in Othello provides a principal function for Desdemona in the play. Her love is of a spiritual intensity, of a strong simplicity equal to that of Othello himself, and pierces without effort beyond appearance, into reality:

> I saw Othello's visage in his mind.

Her love is a daring act of faith, beyond reason or social propriety. Like Beauty in the fairytale she denies the beastly (or devilish) appearance to proclaim her allegiance to the invisible reality. And she does so throughout the play, even when the case for the appearance seems most strong and when Iago's power over appearances rides highest. Even when on the point of death at Othello's hands, she gives testimony to her faith (martyr in the true sense of the word):

> Commend me to my *kind* lord.

Othello is then a play which manipulates our sympathies, supposing that we will have brought to the theatre a set of careless assumptions about 'Moors'. It assumes also that we will find it easy to abandon these as the play brings them into focus and identifies them with Iago, draws its elaborate distinction between the external appearance of devilishness and the inner reality.

Shakespeare's playcraft, however, would hardly have been able to superimpose these new valuations on his audience (unique as they were in this form) if it had not been for complicating factors which had begun to affect thought in his day.

The first counter-current I should mention is theological in origin and is found dispersed in several parts of the Bible. It was a fairly important doctrine of the Evangelists that faith could wash away the stains of sin, and the inheritance of misbelief, that the breach between chosen and non-chosen peoples could be closed by faith. The apostle Philip baptised the Ethiopian eunuch and thereupon, says Bede, the Ethiop changed his skin.[1] The sons of darkness could be seen to become the sons of light, or as Ephesians 5. 8 puts it:

> For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as the children of light.

[1] Bede, *Super Acta Apostolorum Expositio* (*Pat. Lat.* xcii, col. 962).

Jerome remarks on this (in Epistle xxii, § 1):

> He that committeth sin is of the devil (John, 3: 8). Born of such a parent first we are black by nature, and even after repentance, until we have climbed to Virtue's height we may say *Nigra sum sed speciosa, filiae Hierusalem.*

Only after conversion, he goes on, will the colour be changed, as by miracle, and then will the verse be fitting: *Quae est ista, quae ascendit dealbata?* (Cant. iii. 6 and viii. 5—Septuagint version).

Augustine hangs the same point on an interpretation of Psalm 73 (74 in the English Psalter), v. 14. The verse in the Authorized Version reads 'Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness', but the Vulgate version has . . . *Dedisti eum in escam populis Ethiopibus.* Augustine[1] asks who are meant by the Ethiopians; and answers that all nations are Ethiopians, black in their natural sinfulness; but they may become white in the knowledge of the Lord. *Fuistis enim aliquando tenebrae; nunc autem lux in Domino* (Ephesians 5. 8). As late as Bishop Joseph Hall, writing one of his *Occasional Meditations* (1630) 'on the sight of a blackamoor', we find the same use of *nigra sum sed speciosa*:

> This is our colour spiritually; yet the eye of our gracious God and Saviour, can see that beauty in us 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.

The relevance of this passage to Othello need not be stressed.

The grandest of all visual representations of this view that all men are within the scope of the Christian ministry ('We, being many, are one body in Christ', says St. Paul in Romans 12. 5) is probably the portal of the narthex at Vézelay (Pl. XXIV), displaying the relevance of the pentecostal spirit of evangelism even to the monsters on the verge of humanity—Cynocephali and long-eared Scythians, whose relation to the Christian world had been debated by St. Augustine and other Fathers. But this monument has been treated with admirable fullness by Émile Mâle,[2] and it is no part of my function either to repeat or dispute what he has said.

[1] St. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (*Pat. Lat.* xxxvi, col. 938).

[2] Émile Mâle, *L'Art religieux du XII^e siècle en France* (1922), pp. 328 ff.

Moreover, Vézelay does not touch on the colour question. And visual images are obviously of crucial importance here in establishing the idea of the black man as more than a patristic metaphor, as a figure that might be met with in real life. For the image of the black man, considered in relation to the scheme of the Christian Evangel, we have to turn in the main to representations of the three Magi. In early Christian art there seems no evidence that the three kings were shown different from one another. As early as the eighth century,[1] however, the *Excerptiones Patrum*, attributed to Bede, had described Balthazar, the third king, in the following terms:

> Tertius, fuscus, integre barbatus, Balthazar nomine, habens tunicam rubeam.[2]

I may quote Mâle on this description:

> It should also be noted that . . . the term *fuscus* applied to Balthazar by the pseudo-Bede was never taken literally, and it was only in the fourteenth and still more in the fifteenth centuries that the king has the appearance of a Negro.[3]

It would be interesting to know what factors impeded the development of the black Balthazar in iconography. For as early as 1180, in the great typological sequence at Klosterneuburg, Nicholas of Verdun had represented the Old Testament type of the Epiphany—the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon—with a Negro Sheba (Pl. XXV*a*)—a feature to be met with elsewhere (e.g. Pl. XXV*b*).

It was another typological parallel, however, that probably did most to establish the black Balthazar—that between the three kings and the three sons of Noah. The genuine Bede makes this point in his commentary on Matthew:

> Mystice autem tres Magi tres partes mundi significant, Asiam, Africam, Europam, sive humanum genus, quod a tribus filiis Noe seminarium sumpsit.[4]

and this view was given general diffusion in the *Glossa Ordinaria*.[5] If we suppose that Cham became the father of the black races, it follows that one of the Magi must represent these races. Balthazar carries on his face the curse of Cham, but reveals the

[1] For the dating see P. Glorieux, *Pour revaloriser Migne* (1844), and J. F. Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland* (1929).

[2] Pseudo-Bede, *Excerptiones Patrum* (*Pat. Lat.* xciv, col. 541).

[3] Émile Mâle, *The Gothic Image* (1958), pp. 214–15.

[4] Bede, *In Matthaei Evangelium Expositio* (*Pat. Lat.* xcii, col. 13).

[5] Walafridus Strabus, *Glossa Ordinaria* (*Pat. Lat.* cxiv, col. 73).

capacity for redemption through faith available to all races. And such another is Othello.

The sense that inferior and black-faced foreigners might in fact be figures from a more innocent world close to Christianity grew apace in the Renaissance[1] as the voyagers gave their accounts, not of highly organized Mahomedan kingdoms, but of simple pagans, timid, naked as their mothers brought them forth, without laws and without arms (as Columbus first saw them and first described them)[2] and perhaps having minds naturally prone to accept Christianity.[3] The old ideals and dreams of travellers, the terrestial paradise, the fountain of youth, the kingdom of Prester John, assumed a new immediacy. And so the old impulse to bring the Evangel to all nations acquired a new primitivist dynamic. An interesting demonstration of this is supplied in a Portuguese picture of the Epiphany *c.* 1505, sometimes attributed to Vasco Fernandes, where a Brazilian chief, in full regalia, replaces the black Balthazar (Pl. XXVI). Alongside the view that such black pagans could only acquire Christian hope by enslavement grew an alternative vision of their innocence as bringing them near to God, by way of nature. Nowhere was the opposition between these two views more dramatically presented than in the famous debate at Valladolid between Sepulveda and Las Casas.[4] Sepulveda asserted that the American Indians were 'slaves by nature', since their natural inferiority made it impossible for them to

[1] There is an iconographic parallel in the use of negro figures to represent primitive innocence, in Bosch and perhaps elsewhere. Fränger, *The Millennium of Hieronymus Bosch* (1952), notes (p. 108): 'This scene takes place in the presence of a Nubian girl, who is *nigra sed formosa* like the black bride of the Song of Songs (i. 5). We are doubtless justified in regarding these negresses, who appear so often in the picture, as embodiments of the innocence that had not yet vanished from the primal condition of tropical nature.'

[2] Quoted in R. Romeo, *Le scoperte americane nella coscienza italiana del Cinquecento*, p. 19; L. Olschki, *Storia letteraria delle scoperte geografiche*, pp. 11–22.

[3] So Columbus in the journal of his first voyage (16 October 1492): 'They do not know any religion, and I believe they could easily be converted to Christianity, for they are very intelligent.' The Bull *Inter cetera* of 1493 (which divided the New World between Spain and Portugal) speaks of the Indians as *gentes pacifice viventes . . . nudi incedentes, nec carnibus vescentes . . . credunt unum Deum creatorem in celis esse, ac ad fidem catholicam amplexandam et bonis moribus imbuendum satis apti videntur.*

[4] Described most fully in English in L. Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians* (1959).

achieve the light of the gospel without enslavement.[1] Las Casas, on the other hand, dwelt on the innocence of the Indians, living *secundum naturam*, on their natural capacity for devotion, and on the appalling contrast between the mild and timid Indians and the inhumanity of their 'civilized' or 'Christian' exploiters. Of these two it was of course Las Casas who made the greatest impact in Europe. We should not forget that the Valladolid debate was decided in his favour; but it was not in Spain, but in France and England that primitivism grew most rapidly. Spanish claims to the New World and Spanish brutality in the New World combined the forces of jealousy, frustrated greed, and local self-righteousness so as to create (even if with initially polemical purpose) a whole new critique of European Christian pretensions. It could now be said that white European Christianity had been put to the test in America (the test being the salvation of souls) and had been found wanting. 'Upon these lambes', writes Richard Hakluyt (quoting Las Casas), 'so meke, so qualified and endewed of their maker and creator as hath bene saied, entred the spanishe, incontinent as they knew them, as wolves, as lyons and as Tigres moste cruell of long tyme famished'.[2] Fulke Greville puts the same point even more categorically:

> And in stead of spreading Christian religion by good life, [the Spaniards] committed such terrible inhumanities as gave those that lived under nature manifest occasion to abhor the devilry character of so tyrannical a deity [as the Christian God].[3]

The crown of all such Renaissance primitivism is Montaigne's *Essays*, and especially that on the Cannibals, where the criticism of Spanish Christianity has become a *libertin* critique of modern European civility. Shakespeare, in *The Tempest*, seems to show

[1] See Eric Williams, *Documents of West Indian History* (1963), item 155, discussing the view that a 'negro cannot become a Christian without being a slave'. Cf. the summary of Sepulveda's position in Hanke, op. cit., pp. 44 f. The same views persist today, though with interesting modifications in the vocabulary: 'He (the Negro) requires the constant control of white people to keep him in check. Without the presence of the white police force negroes would turn upon themselves and destroy each other. The white man is the only authority he knows.' (Quoted in E. T. Thompson, *Race Relations* [1939], p. 174.)

[2] *A Discourse on the Western Planting* (1584) printed in *The Writings of the two Richard Hakluyts*, vol. ii (Hakluyt Society [second series], lxxvii [1935], p. 258).

[3] Fulke Greville, *Life of Sir Philip Sidney* (1652), ed. Nowell Smith (1907), p. 116.

a knowledge of this essay,[1] and certainly *The Tempest* reveals a searching interest in the status of Western civilization parallel to Montaigne's, and a concern to understand the point of reconciliation between innocence and sophistication, ignorance and knowledge.

Of course, we must not assume that Shakespeare, because he had these concerns in *The Tempest*, must have had them also in *Othello*; but *The Tempest* at one end of his career, like *Titus Andronicus* at the other end, indicates that the polarities of thought on which *Othello* moves (if I am correct) were available to his mind.

I have spoken of 'polarities' in the plural because it is important to notice that Shakespeare does not present his *Othello* story in any simple primitivist terms. *Othello* is not adequately described as the exploitation of a noble savage by a corrupt European.[2] This is an element in the play, and it is the element that Henry James found so seminal for his own images of the relationship between American and European;[3] but it is not the whole play.

Othello has *something* of the structure of a morality play, with Othello caught between Desdemona and Iago, the good angel and the evil angel. Iago is the master of appearances, which he seeks to exploit as realities; Desdemona, on the other hand, cares nothing for appearances (as her 'downright violence and storm of fortunes | May trumpet to the world'), only for realities; Othello, seeing appearance and reality as indissoluble cues to action, stands between the two, the object of the attentions and the assumptions of both. The play has something of this morality structure; but by giving too much importance to this it would be easy to underplay the extent to which Othello becomes what Iago and the society to which *we* belong assumes him to be.

There is considerable strength in the anti-primitivist side of

[1] Disputed in M. T. Hodgen, 'Montaigne and Shakespeare', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, xvi (1952), 23–42. Miss Hodgen finds a similarity of elements used to praise primitive life in Louis le Roy, Boemus, Vespucci, Mexia, etc.

[2] But Iago's Spanish name (and his nautical imagery) may represent Shakespeare's awareness of this potentiality in his play at some level of his consciousness. The relevance of the figure of Sant' Iago Matamoros (Moor-slayer) has been suggested by G. N. Murphy, 'A Note on Iago's name', *Literature and Society*, ed. B. Slote (1964).

[3] See Agostino Lombardo, 'Henry James *The American* e il mito di Otello', *Friendship's Garland: Essays presented to Mario Praz*, ed. V. Gabrieli (1966), pp. 107–42.

the great Renaissance debate (as that is represented in *Othello*) and this lies in the extent to which the whole social organism pictured is one we recognize as our own, and recognize as necessarily geared to reject 'extravagant and wheeling strangers'. I speak of the social organism here, not in terms of its official existence—its commands, duties, performances; for in these terms Othello's life is well meshed into the state machine:

> My services which I have done the Signiory
> Shall out-tongue his complaints.

I speak rather of the unspoken assumptions and careless prejudices by which we all conduct most of our lives. And it is in these respects that Iago is the master of us all, the snapper-up of every psychological trifle, every unnoticed dropped handkerchief. It is by virtue of such a multitude of our tiny and unnoticed assents that Iago is able to force Othello into the actions he expects of him. Only the hermit can stand outside such social assumptions; but, by marrying, Othello has become part of society in this sense, the natural victim of the man-in-the-know, the man universally thought well of. And Iago's knowingness finds little or no resistance. We all believe the Iagos in our midst; they are, as our vocabulary interestingly insists, the 'realists'.

The dramatic function of Iago is to reduce the white 'reality' of Othello to the black 'appearance' of his face, indeed induce in him the belief that all reality is 'black', that Desdemona in particular, 'where I have garnered up my heart'

> . . . that was fresh
> As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
> As mine own face.

Thus in the bedroom scene (v. ii) Othello's view of Desdemona is one that contrasts

> that whiter skin of hers than snow
> And smooth as monumental alablaster

with the dark deeds her nature requires of her.

> Put out the light, and then put out the light,

he says; that is, 'let the face be as dark as the soul it covers'; and then murder will be justified.

This intention on Shakespeare's part is made very explicit at one point where Othello tells Desdemona,

> Come, swear it, damn thyself; lest, being like one of heaven, the

devils themselves should fear to seize thee; therefore be double-damn'd—swear thou art honest. (IV. ii. 36 ff.)

What Othello is asking here is that the white and so 'heavenly' Desdemona should damn herself black, as Esdras of Granada had done in Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, with the result that:

> His body being dead lookt as blacke as a toad: the devill presently branded it for his own.[1]

It is, of course, to the same belief that Shakespeare alludes in Macbeth's 'The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon'.

The dark reality originating in Iago's soul spreads across the play, blackening whatever it overcomes and making the deeds of Othello at last fit in with the prejudice that his face at first excited. Sometimes it is supposed that this proves the prejudice to have been justified. There is a powerful line of criticism on *Othello*, going back at least as far as A. W. Schlegel,[2] that paints the Moor as a savage at heart, one whose veneer of Christianity and civilization cracks as the play proceeds, to reveal and liberate his basic savagery: Othello turns out to be in fact what barbarians *have* to be.

This view, however comforting to our sense of society and our prejudices, does not find much support in the play itself. The fact that the darkness of 'Hell and night' spreads from Iago and then takes over Othello—this fact at least should prevent us from supposing that the blackness is inherent in Othello's barbarian nature. Othello himself, it is true, loses faith not only in Desdemona but in that fair quality of himself which Desdemona saw and worshipped: ('for she had eyes and chose me'). Believing that she lied about the qualities she saw in him it is easy for him to believe that she lies elsewhere and everywhere. Once the visionary quality of *faith*, which made it possible to believe (what in common sense was unbelievable) that she *chose* him—once this is cancelled, knowingness acquires a claim to truth that only faith could dispossess; and so when Iago says

> I know our country disposition well;
> In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks
> They dare not show their husbands.

Othello can only answer 'Dost thou say so?' Once faith is gone, physical common sense becomes all too probable:

[1] Nashe, *Works*, ed. McKerrow, ii. 326.

[2] August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Art* (1815), ii. 189.

> Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
> Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.

The superficial 'disproportion' between black skin and white skin conquers the inward, unseen 'marriage of true minds'. Similarly with the disproportion between youth and age: 'She must change for youth'; being sated with his body she will find the error of her choice. The tragedy becomes, as Helen Gardner has described it, a tragedy of the loss of faith.[1] And, such is the nature of Othello's heroic temperament, the loss of faith means the loss of all meaning and all value, all sense of light:

> I have no wife,
> O insupportable! O heavy hour!
> Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
> Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe
> Should yawn at alteration.

Universal darkness has buried all.

But the end of the play is not simply a collapse of civilization into barbarism, nor a destruction of meaning. Desdemona *was* true, faith *was* justified, the appearance was not the key to the truth. To complete the circle we must accept, finally and above all, that Othello was not the credulous and passionate savage that Iago has tried to make him, but that he was justified in his second, as in his first, self-defence:

> For nought I did in hate, but all in honour.

The imposition of Iago's vulgar prejudices on Othello ('These Moors are changeable in their wills', etc.) is so successful that it takes over not only Othello but almost all the critics. But Iago's suppression of Othello into the vulgar prejudice about him can only be sustained as the truth if we ignore the end of the play. The wonderful recovery here of the sense of ethical meaning in the world, even in the ashes of all that embodied meaning—this requires that we see the final speech of Othello as more than that of a repentant blackamoor 'cheering himself up', as Mr. Eliot phrased it.[2] It is in fact a marvellous *stretto* of all the themes that have sounded throughout the play. I shall only dwell on Othello's self-judgement and self-execution, repeating and reversing the judgement and execution on Desdemona and so, in a sense, cancelling them. Othello is the 'base Indian' who threw away the white pearl Desdemona, but he is

[1] Helen Gardner, 'The Noble Moor', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, xli (1955).

[2] T. S. Eliot, 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', reprinted in *Selected Essays* (1932), p. 130.

also the state servant and Christian who, when the Infidel or 'black Pagan' within him seemed to triumph,

> Took by the throat the circumcised dog
> And smote him—thus.

With poetic justice, the Christian reality reasserts its superior position over the pagan appearance, not in terms that can be lived through, but at least in terms that can be understood. We may rejoice even as we sorrow, catharsis is achieved, for

> What may quiet us in a death so noble,

as this in the Aleppo of the mind?

It is often suggested that *Othello* is a play of claustrophobic intensity, painfully narrow in its range of vision. A. C. Bradley finds in it 'the darkness not of night, but of a close-shut murderous room'; he assumes that this is due to a limitation in its scope 'as if some power in his soul, at once the highest and the sweetest, were for a time in abeyance . . . that element . . . which unites him with the mystical poets and with the great musicians'. Elsewhere he refers to it as 'a play on a contemporary and wholly mundane subject'.[1] Many other notable critics have felt the same. Granville Barker believes that it is 'not a spiritual tragedy in the sense that the others may be called so . . . it is a tragedy without meaning, and that is the ultimate horror of it'.[2]

Given the approach to the play outlined in this essay I think it is possible to modify the view shared by these great critics. If we think of the action not simply in terms of the bad Iago's unresisted destruction of the good Othello, and of the bad Othello's unresisted destruction of Desdemona, but see these actions instead in terms of prejudice and vision, appearance and reality, indeed in terms of the whole question of civilization as canvassed, for example, in Montaigne's Essays—if we see these large questions as begged continuously by the action we may feel that some wider vision has been let into 'the close-shut murderous room'.

The domestic intensities of *King Lear* have been seen usefully and interestingly (by Theodore Spencer, for example) in relation to the intellectual history of the Renaissance.[3] The position of the king obviously calls on one set of traditional assumptions,

[1] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), pp. 177, 185, 186.

[2] Harley Granville Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (fourth series [1945]), pp. 156, 175.

[3] Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (1943).

while Edmund's doctrine of nature equally obviously draws on the views of the *libertins*, of Montaigne and Machiavelli. The pressure of these larger formulations may be seen to add to the largeness of scope in the play. *Othello*, on the other hand, is thought not to be a play of this kind. 'The play itself is primarily concerned with the effect of one human being on another',[1] says Spencer. It is true that Iago operates in a less conceptualized situation than Edmund; but the contrast between his world view and that of Othello is closely related to the contrast between Edmund and Lear. On the one side we have the chivalrous world of the Crusader, the effortless superiority of the 'great man', the orotund public voice of the leader, the magnetism of the famous lover. The values of the world of late medieval and Renaissance magnificence seem compressed in Othello—crusader, stoic, traveller, believer, orator, commander, lover—Chaucer's parfit knight, Spenser's Red Cross, the Ruggiero of Ariosto. In Iago we have the other face of the Renaissance (or Counter-Renaissance), rationalist, individual, empirical (or inductive), a master in the Machiavellian art of manipulating appearances, a Baconian or Hobbesian 'Realist'.

In the conflict of Othello and Iago we have, as in that setting Edmund, Goneril and Regan against Lear and Gloucester, a collision of these two Renaissance views. Bradley points to a similarity between Lear and Othello, that they are both 'survivors of a heroic age living in a later and smaller world'. Both represent a golden age naïvety which was disappearing then (as now, and always). Lear's survival is across a temporal gap; his long life has carried him out of one age and stranded him in another. But Othello's travel is geographical rather than temporal, from the heroic simplicities of

> I fetch my life and being
> From men of royal siege

into the supersubtle world of Venice, the most sophisticated and 'modern' city on earth, as it seemed to the Elizabethans.

Here, if anywhere, was the scene-setting for no merely domestic intrigue, but for an exercise in the quality of civilization, a contest between the capacities and ideals claimed by Christendom, and those that Christians were actually employing in that context where (as Marlowe says)

> . . . Indian Moors obey their Spanish lords.[2]

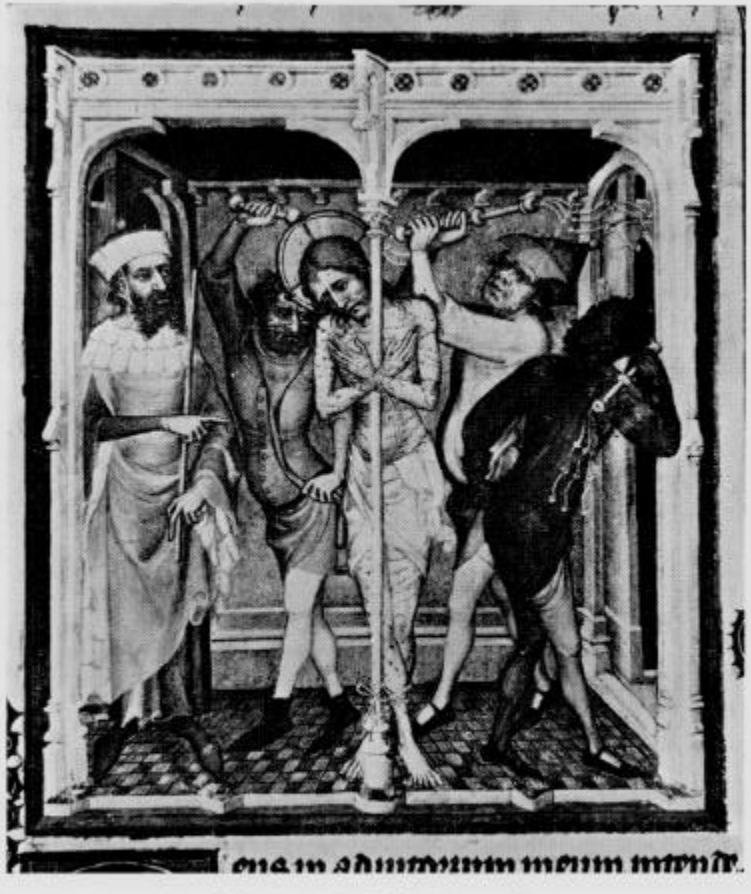
[1] Spencer, op. cit. (1961 ed.), p. 126.
[2] Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, I. i. 122.

Othello's black skin makes the coexistence of his vulnerable romanticism and epic grandeur with the bleak or even pathological realism of Iago a believable fact. The lines that collide here started thousands of miles apart. But Shakespeare's choice of a black man for his Red Cross Knight, his Rinaldo, has a further advantage. *Our* involvement in prejudice gives us a double focus on his reality. We admire him—I fear that one has to be trained as a literary critic to find him unadmirable—but we are aware of the difficulty of sustaining that vision of the golden world of poetry; and this is so because *we* feel the disproportion and the difficulty of his social life and of his marriage (as a social act). We are aware of the easy responses that Iago can command, not only of people on the stage but also in the audience. The perilous and temporary achievements of heroism are achieved most sharply in this play, because they have to be achieved in *our* minds, through *our* self-awareness.

a. The Execution of St. Denis. Chartres Cathedral, South Porch

b. The Scourging of Christ. Detail. British Museum, Luttrell Psalter, Add. 42130, f. 92^{v}

a. The Tormenting of Christ. John Rylands Library, Lat. MS. no. 24

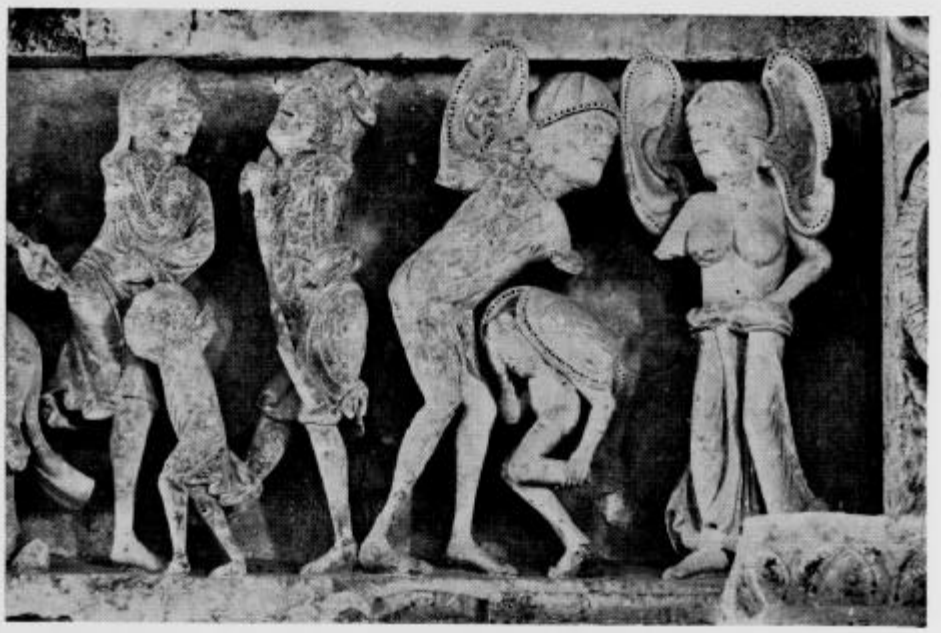


b. The Scourging of Christ. *Très-Belles Heures de Notre Dame* du Duc Jean de Berry, Tierce

The Martyrdom of St. James. ? Van Dyck. Sold by Weinmüller of Munich in 1958 (Cat. 721, item 501)

PLATE XXIV

a. Portal of Narthex, Sainte-Madeleine, Vézelay



b. Long-eared Scythians. Detail. Portal of Narthex, Sainte-Madeleine, Vézelay

a. The Epiphany and the Visit of the Queen of Sheba. Nicholas of Verdun. Klosterneuburg Retable

b. Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Tapestry formerly in the Pringsheim Collection, Munich

PLATE XXVI

The Epiphany. ? Vasco Fernandes. Museum at Viseu, Portugal, *c.* 1505