WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: OTHELLO

by Joost Daalder

[Note: the following discussion of the play has not been offered before, but has been brought in tune with my current thinking about it.—JD]

Othello is not often thought of as a play primarily concerned with madness, yet that is what it is. The fact is not immediately obvious to most of us because of the moral repugnance that Iago's and Othello's actions inspire. But Shakespeare not only shows us Iago's malice and Othello's jealousy; he also leaves us in no doubt that Othello is mad when he suffers his attack of epilepsy. That disease has traditionally always been regarded as manifesting a sick brain, but Shakespeare does not assume that the members of his audience are medically informed. On the contrary, we are given all the relevant facts within the text itself. Iago refers to Othello's fit as "your ecstasy" (IV.i.79), which in the Arden edition from which I quote is glossed as "being beside oneself (the original Greek meaning), the degree of derangement varying from actual madness to hysterical excitement". I see no reason for not interpreting the word as covering the full range of meaning indicated by this gloss: Iago can legitimately claim to say nothing other than that Othello was beside himself when unconscious, but the audience, and particularly in the light of the context, would readily think of the fit as evidence of madness. Iago is probably not at all unwilling to foster this impression in the eyes of others, for he refers to the seizure as a "fit" (I.51), which could mean "a paroxysm of lunacy", as the OED informs us, at the time the play was written (probably 1604). He also warns Cassio, who feels that Othello should be rubbed about the temples when unconscious:

No, forbear,

The lethargy must have his quiet course,
If no, he foams at mouth, and by and by
Breaks out to savage madness... (II.52-5)

Of course Iago is interested in exaggerating. He probably lies in referring to this attack as Othello's "second fit" (I.51), just as in II.iii he has lied about Cassio's supposed drinking habits. Yet the fact remains that Othello does have a fit, and that we can justifiably see it as an attack of madness, just as—equally unfortunately—Cassio easily gets drunk.

Still, to note that Othello suffers from an attack of madness when he falls down is not to say much about the nature of his madness, and to an exploration of that I now turn. I think it helps at once if we consider the possibility that it is not just Othello who suffers from madness, but that he
has much in common, psychologically, with both Brabantio and Iago. Indeed, I submit that madness in the play is shown as arising from the immaturity of males who do not understand the nature of sexuality in either themselves or women. These males are obsessed by sex. They are afraid of it, see it as "dirty", and utterly want to control women, who (in this sick view of things) are not allowed to have any sexuality of their own. As these males are only partly conscious of their own feelings, they are extremely dangerous, and their sexual urge can readily turn into violence. Thus, once Othello feels that his sexual urge towards Desdemona will no longer have its outlet because supposedly she is having a relationship with another man, he kills her.

There is not, ultimately, a great deal of difference between Brabantio's possessiveness towards Desdemona and Othello's. It is not easy to claim that Brabantio's feelings towards his daughter are sexual, but they are certainly possessive, and he appears to have as much of a problem contemplating his daughter's sexual union with Othello as Othello has in facing the possibility that she might have intercourse (does have it, he thinks) with Cassio. Shakespeare stresses the similarity between the two men in an extraordinary, sophisticated display of language. When Brabantio accuses Othello of having practised witchcraft on Desdemona, he says that it would otherwise be impossible:

For nature so preposterously to err. (I.iii.62)

And Othello, speculating about Desdemona's infidelity, contemplates:

...how nature erring from itself. (III.iii.231)

Both men wish Desdemona to have no sexual desire which they cannot control: for her to do so, they feel, is to go against her nature. Of course, they do not admit to themselves or others that their judgement of Desdemona's:"errings" is inspired by a perceived injury to them: if they are aware of that fact, they would be less mad.

But by nature they are suspicious of female sensuality. It is one of the major ironies of the play that Cassio—the very person whom Iago tries to present as Othello's deceitful and lustful rival—does not share such suspicion at all. The presence of Bianca makes plain that Cassio is not lacking in sexuality, but he has no hang-ups about it. Iago tries hard to persuade himself that Cassio is as sexually possessive as he and Othello are:

That Cassio loves her, I do well believe it. (II.i.281)

And he attempts to get Cassio to admit as much. But he does not succeed:

[IAGO] ...she is sport for love.

[CASSIO] She is a most exquisite lady.

[IAGO] And I'll warrant her full of game.

[CASSIO] Indeed she is a most fresh and delicate creature. (II.iii.16-20)

Of course one reason why Shakespeare gives Cassio these speeches is to demonstrate that Cassio is utterly innocent of lustful intentions towards Desdemona. But that is not the only or even the most important point. Cassio does not have them because he is a harmonious person. It is this fact which Iago is jealous of when he says that Cassio has...

...a daily beauty in his life.
That makes me ugly. (V.i.19-20)

The mere fact that Cassio is what he is—that he is not, like Iago, obsessed with sexual desires and fears, that he is in no sense a maimed individual—inspires Iago with the feeling that by comparison he is "ugly". Cassio's daily beauty does not lie in anything specific which he has, but in his psychology, although—and this is exactly one of Iago's major problems—Iago does not understand either Cassio or himself sufficiently to be able to make the comparison which Shakespeare wishes us to see.

Although Iago cannot stimulate Cassio into thinking of Desdemona as a possessive male might, he finds Brabantio and Othello responsive because their natures are similar to his. All three of these men are mentally sick and undoubtedly the potency of Iago's influence is due in part to his capacity for feeling just what he wants his victims to feel. Hence he does not need to force his imagination when he conjures up a sick image of Desdemona as a sexual being; the picture comes to him readily enough:

Even now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe... (I.ii.88-9)

Iago himself sees the sexual act as bestial and profoundly fascinating as well as repugnant, and the racism of his words seem similarly enforced. He assumes, instinctively as much as intellectually, that Brabantio will see things the same way, and he is not mistaken. It is no accident either that he spontaneously describes Desdemona as "white" and that later Othello refers to "that whiter skin of hers than snow" (V.ii.4): these men want to believe in a woman who is both utterly spotless and dead. Othello's later violence is already anticipated in Iago's obsession with a black ram who violates her. The sickness of his sexual imagination—always both attracted and repelled by what he sees as the bestiality of sex—is emphasized several times: "you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse" (I.ii.110-1), "your daughter, and the Moor,
are now making the beast with two backs” (II.115-7). It is from this point of view, I believe, that we have to consider his arresting picture of the dream in which Cassio supposedly makes love with Desdemona:

In sleep I heard him say “Sweet Desdemona, 
Let us be wary, let us hide our loves;”
And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand, 
Cry out, “Sweet creature!” and then kiss me hard, 
As if he pluck’d up kisses by the roots,
That grew upon my lips, then laid his leg 
Over my thigh, and sigh’d, and kiss’d, and then
Cried “Cursed fate, that gave thee to the Moor!” (III.i.425-32)

It might seem tempting (as it is to some modern critics) to see the passage as telling us something about one or more homosexual relationships in the play. After all, Iago conjures up a picture of another man approaching him sexually. But I do not think that this is Shakespeare’s point. Nowhere else in the play is there any sign that any of the men are in any sense homosexual. Shakespeare must mean something different. The surface meaning is the most important one: Iago wants Othello to imagine that he (Iago) is Desdemona, and that Cassio is involved in an adulterous relationship with her.

But the form of Iago’s presentation of the imaginary situation is of peculiar interest. First of all, he presents the incident as though it really occurred, and this increases its potency. Secondly, it is striking how easily he appears to imagine what he describes: presumably Shakespeare wants us to see how Iago’s imagination is by nature no less sex-obsessed, and no less jealous, than Othello’s. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the incident is presented as though it occurred in reality, but showed Cassio’s sexual urge as it manifested itself in a dream.

This, although we can hardly assume that Iago knows as much, associates sex with the unconscious. Perhaps Iago means that as Cassio expressed his longing in a dream, we cannot doubt that it is something he really feels. But Shakespeare indicates more to us: our sexual urge is the stronger, he implies, to the extent that we are not aware of it.

The picture of Cassio’s dream has no applicability to Cassio, but it makes excellent sense if we relate it to males who are sexually possessive. Iago’s imagination presents the sexual urge as existing in the unconscious (i.e. a dream) because he himself is not aware of its strength in him, and it is because he does not understand his own psychology that his obsessiveness is readily communicated to Othello, who also is not aware of what lives in his unconscious. Returning to Othello’s attack of epilepsy in IV.i., we may perhaps conclude that his fit expresses how he is now totally under the domination of the forces of his unconscious. His sexual urge, and the fear and possessiveness associated with it, have in part not been conscious to him before, but now he is overwhelmed by these intense emotions as his unconscious unleashes them and temporarily eclipses his conscious mind. It does not seem an accident that Shakespeare uses a lapse into total unconsciousness as evidence of Othello’s insanity. Neither, of course, is it an accident that Brabantio is also presented as responding to Iago at the level of the unconscious. Iago’s sick fantasy about Othello’s supposedly bestial relationship with Desdemona readily strikes a chord with Brabantio because such fantasies also occur when he is unconscious:

This accident is not unlike my dream.
Belief of it oppresses me already. (I.i.142-3)

Shakespeare does not, of course, wish us to believe that what occurs in our dreams is necessarily more valuable than what lives in our conscious minds. Rather, the point is that Brabantio does not understand the importance of his dream. While he thinks of it as revealing a truth about Desdemona, Shakespeare wants us to realize that it exposes something which Brabantio should acknowledge: his hidden fear that Desdemona will injure him by having a sexual relationship which he cannot control. These men are dangerous because they hide from their conscious minds unwelcome feelings and fail to comprehend their unconscious promptings; ultimately, it is their hidden motivation which drives them and destroys them. Thus Brabantio’s unacknowledged possessiveness finds a ready response when he says to Othello:

Look to her, Moor, have a quick eye to see: 
She has deceiv’d her father, may do thee. (I.i.292-3)

The insanity of this speaker, or for that matter Othello, can be explained in the following terms. The speaker wants to have complete control over the sexual desire, indeed the whole personality, of Desdemona. But as this rationalization is a lie and what is in the unconscious cannot be concealed forever, the unconscious will strike back— with the more strength the longer the process of concealment lasts. Before that, the person involved is insane because there is a divorce between what is the truth (banished into the unconscious) and a “truth” merely invented; the person lives in a fantasy world without knowing that, and without realizing the explosive power of what is hidden in the unconscious.

Iago shows such insanity to a nicety. Much of what he says is sexually based but the product of an unconscious force which his seeming cleverness is not knowingly in contact with. Thus he imagines the most amazing things. One supposed reason for harming Othello which he offers is:

…it is thought abroad, that ‘twixt my sheets
He’s done my office. (I.iii.385-6)

In other words, Iago—as fantastically as Othello himself—imagines that his wife has been unfaithful to him. At this stage, he adds, “I know
not if 't be true’; but somewhat later he has grown more convinced of the truth of his fiction:

...I do suspect the lustful Moor
Hath leap’d into my seat. (II.i.290-1)

It hardly needs stressing that Shakespeare has provided us with this sick imagining on Iago’s part not only to show us that it is indeed sick and parallels that of Othello, but also to reveal especially that Iago will be likely to succeed in his attempt to arouse Othello’s jealousy exactly because—just as indefensibly—experiences such jealousy himself.

And his sexual sickness goes further. His suspicion—to him a certainty—of Othello’s relationship with Emilia in its turn leads him to believe that he desires to have intercourse with Desdemona—not as he explains, out of lust, but ‘partly to diet my revenge’ (II.i.289) for Othello’s supposed leaping into his (Iago’s) ‘seat’.

Here we have evidence of a pronounced trait in Iago to imagine that others are always determined to injure his ego. Not all of his paranoia can be seen as sexually motivated. For example, when Othello decides to make Cassio his lieutenant instead of Iago he admits rather bombastic decision (“'I have already chosen my officer”—I.i.17) creates an extraordinary sense of wounded pride in Iago. Shakespeare appears to create him—and Othello for that matter—as a basically insecure man, whose insecurity will be especially, but not uniquely, evident in the sexual sphere.

Othello’s insecurity underlies the very way in which he comes to be married to Desdemona:

She lov’d me for the dangers I had pass’d,
And I lov’d her that she did pity them. (III.iii.167-8)

We may doubt whether Desdemona was wise to love Othello for the reasons stated, but at least she showed complete unselfishness in her love. This ability to direct her feelings outwards is, of course, what she shows towards the very end, and it is perhaps the most important factor which sets her apart from her self-obsessed husband. Emilia and Cassio are likewise capable of showing feeling for others. But Othello loved Desdemona—as he here himself reveals—not for her own person, but for her pity of his experience. He does not himself appear to see this deficiency in his psychology.

Indeed, Othello has little knowledge of what drives him. When he is sent to Cyprus, he is keen to have Desdemona with him, and tells the Senate:

...heaven defend your good souls that you think
I will your serious and great business scant,
For she is with me. (III.iii.266-8)

Yet at the end of the play there is no doubt that his private life is exactly what has affected his public performance. He naively believed, it seems, that he would be able to control his feelings for Desdemona without knowing just what those feelings were. It is not as though he is sexually addicted to her; it is only when his security is threatened by Iago’s claims about her putative infidelity that his sexual possessiveness immediately comes to the fore.

We do well to see how quickly Othello’s suspicions are aroused. In III.iii, when Cassio has just left Desdemona, Iago at once says, ‘Ha, I like not that’ (I.3.5). Othello’s reply, ‘What dost thou say?’, may simply reveal that he did not hear what Iago said. But the dialogue then takes quite a different turn. Iago says: ‘Nothing, my lord, or if—I know not what’. This is a highly enigmatic phrase, to say the least, and it would not be unreasonable for a normal person to suppose that Iago is implying something sinister without being honest enough to state his mind. Othello, however, does not examine Iago but immediately believes that something really is amiss, and asks: ‘Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?’ His suspicion that something is wrong is seemingly confirmed by Iago’s:

Cassio, my lord?...no, sure, I cannot think it,
That he would sneak away so guilty-like,
Seeing you coming.

Contrary to Iago’s insinuation, Cassio is not deceitful. It would be right for Othello to reject what Iago says against him. But Othello, now very obviously alarmed without reason, merely says, ‘I do believe ‘twas he’. Such are the reactions of the person who in V.ii.345 still speaks of himself as “one not easily jealous”.

Othello’s difficulty is that his lack of self-knowledge very quickly leads him to believe the worst of his wife and his lieutenant, as jealousy is a product of the imagination—at least in his case, as in Iago’s, and (in a sense) Brabantio’s. Of course, Shakespeare complicates the issues somewhat for us. For example, Othello has known Iago much longer than Desdemona. He is black, inexperienced in the graces of social intercourse, and ageing (see III.iii.267-70). He is born a naturally violent man (see I.ii.231-3). And Iago plays his hand deftly, in particular with regard to the handkerchief. But despite such factors, we should see Othello’s sick fantasy for what it is. It is the product of a mind which proceeds without evidence, fed by a sexual possessiveness of which it is not aware; as a result, Othello insanely invents a reality which does not exist but in which he passionately believes—so passionately that he comes to kill his wife in the conviction that she has done a wrong not only against him but potentially against all men (V.i.6).

Othello’s tendency to act on his own beliefs rather than evidence may already underlie his choice of Cassio as his lieutenant; at any rate, it certainly comes to the fore in II.iii, where, without reason, he believes
Iago's account of the brawl in which Cassio was involved, and sacks Cassio without asking him whether Iago's story is correct. The incident shows that Othello's judgement is erratic well before he is consumed with sexual jealousy; presumably, he believes Iago unhesitatingly because he wishes to feel secure. Yet on the other hand, Othello maintains a crazy fiction that he is interested in evidence. Thus he insists concerning Desdemona's supposed infidelity:

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.iii.194-6)

The absurdity of the proposition lies particularly in the fact that he feels he needs 'proof'. If he were a normal man, thus Shakespeare clearly implies, he would reject Iago's poisonous accusations. In other words, he would continue to trust the evidence which first led him to love Desdemona. But Othello is not normal: he wants definite evidence that either his wife does not love him or that she does. Or so it seems. Soon, it becomes obvious that he wants to be shown proof that she does not love him:

Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore,
Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof. (II.365-6)

In essence, then, he wants to find "proof" of what his imagination has led him to believe—not objective evidence.

Still in this same scene (III.iii) the similarity of Othello's and Iago's minds is portrayed on stage by their kneeling together in the service of "black vengeance" (I.454), which perhaps even Iago is insane enough really to believe necessary. At any rate, Shakespeare emphasizes that there is a sick harmony of souls here which sets these men apart from their sane wives.

Othello is a startling, searching play. Shakespeare does not give us just the story of an essentially benevolent but misguided man who is manipulated by an evil schemer whose motives are seemingly obscure. Instead, the play is one which demonstrates the insanity of men who readily relate to each other rather than women because they do not understand that sexual feelings which they have tried to repress continue to haunt them from the unconscious, leading them to distort reality and ultimately to destroy the women they claimed to love. Interestingly, Shakespeare is perhaps in other play as much in tune with modern ideas as to how madness is most likely to come into being. I do not want to overemphasize the sexual origin of the madness exhibited by characters in this play, though that is obviously important. Rather, I believe that the play's significance lies particularly in Shakespeare's understanding of the role of the unconscious as a depository for dangerous feelings of which we would be better to be aware, as otherwise we will live in a world of fantasy and violence.

Suggestions for Pairing

Shakespeare's other tragedies: Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear.

Carson McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe.

W. Somerset Maugham, Miss Sadie Thompson.