

OTHELLO - A REPRESENTATIVE TRAGEDY OF THE RENAISSANCE

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The present paper has a two-fold purpose: it aims at an analysis of Shakespeare's Othello as a tragedy, focusing on the departures from the classical model. Aristotle's Poetics will provide the referential theories. This study also aims at the understanding of tragedy as a dramatic form which takes hold of and gives expression to the tragic element in life.

Tragedy, as a literary form, was carried over to England through Seneca, a Roman philosopher from Nero's time. Towards the end of the 16th c., the traditions of the classical theatre mingled with the native subject matter and native forms. A wide variety of tragedies then appeared, assuming humanistic characteristics. During this period an internal division of the English theatre took place: on the one hand, the neo-classic conception of tragedy, with the force of the Senecan example, in severe accord with the Aristotelian precepts. It was supported by a powerful critical theory, which was given expression to in Sidney's Defense of Poesy. On the other hand, the "open" theatre of Shakespeare, drawing its strength from the actual performance of the Elizabethan playwrights and from the plain fact of box-office success. This new trend violated many a precept of neo-classicism. It took from Seneca his rhetoric, his ghosts, and his flair for horror and blood-vengeance, but

not the austere, artificial practices of the neo-classic stage. The new tragedy escaped the Hellenic model, mastering and framing it in its own measure.

We shall proceed now to examine the so-called "violations" of the Aristotelian rules in Othello, by looking at its structure and comparing it to the formalistic concepts of the Poetics.

According to Aristotle, the prologue was the first part to appear in a text, quite separate from the body of the play. It gave an account of the facts that had brought about the action, eliminating suspense from the unfolding of the story. This prologue would be followed by the chorus, whose functions were to reflect upon the events, to verbalize the collective memories, fears, and aspirations as well as to provide the voice of wisdom and common sense. Neither of these two parts can be found in Othello. While the ancient tragedy worked upon the audience's previous knowledge of the myth, Shakespeare's tragedies work upon its ignorance of the subject matter. The "open" theatre dispenses with the chorus. Very interestingly, the characters soliloquize and their lines have something of a choric effect. They display general reflections or broodings over plans. An instance of this innovation is Iago's speech, as his idea of the scheme against Othello begins to grow:

How? How? Let's see
After some time, to abuse Othello's ears,
That he is too familiar with his wife:

He has a person, and a smooth dispose
To be suspected: fram'd to make women false.
The Moor is of a free, and open nature,
That thinks men honest, that but seem to be so,
And will as tenderly be led by th'nose
As asses are.

I have't: it is engender'd: Hell, and Night,
Must bring this monstrous birth, to the World's
light.

(I.iii.)

Iago's asides can also be said to perform the role of the chorus, for, by addressing the audience, he breaks its total emotional involvement with the action. Thus, they provide for the distanciation which interpolated comments always generates. For example, the scene in which Cassio leaves taking Desdemona by the hand:

He takes her by the palm; ay, well said, whisper;
with little a web as this will I ensnare a great
a fly as Cassio. Ay, smile upon her, do; I will
gyve thee in thine own courtship...

(II.i.)

Aristotle comments on the language used in tragedies saying that it is to be "embellished, (...) through the medium of verse alone or with the aid of song." So, according to him the speeches should be delivered in verse, which is not the case in Othello. An illustration of the different kinds of dramatic speech is found in this play, for Shakespeare uses verse and prose with great artistry to gain particular

effects of tone, mood, and atmosphere. The distinction between the use of prose and that of verse is clear: prose dialogue keeps the scene on the every day level, whereas verse heightens the atmosphere, giving dignity and emotion to the speaker. In Othello, blank verse is the natural speech of the protagonist. He is a heroic and dignified person. Iago, on the other hand, is a lower character altogether. He speaks mostly in prose, but at times he breaks into verse, especially in his soliloquies. It is interesting to notice that the change in Iago's speeches coincide with the changes in his mood. The real Iago, speaking true to himself, uses verse, which is the natural expression of emotion on the Elizabethan stage. But Iago, the jocular, the mocker, uses a quick prose. Prose shows that the mask is on, that he is self-controlled. The passages quoted before are a good example of such changes in language.

With Othello, a lapse into prose denotes the opposite — a break-down of control. Othello speaks prose only when he falls into a fit and when he sees the handkerchief in Cassio's hand:

Oth.: (...) To confess, and be hanged, and
then to confess: I tremble at it.
Nature would not invest herself in
such shadowing passion without some
instruction. It is not words that shake
me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips.
Is it possible? Confess. Handkerchief.
O! devil. (Falls in a trance.)

(IV.i.)

Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be
damned to-night; for she shall not live.
No, my heart is turned to stone; I strike
it and it hurts my hand. O the world hath
not a sweeter creature; she might lie by
an emperor's side and command his tasks.

(IV.i.)

In Othello the cast itself also deserves some consideration. While the Greek tragedy presented no more than three actors on the stage, the Shakespearean tragedy in general, and Othello in particular, present a large cast of characters. The stage is crowded, which constitutes another deviation from the classical model. In fact, the Elizabethan stage was suitable to the needs of the playwright. It was built on more than one level, making it possible for the several actors to enter and exit easily.

Aristotle elaborates on the unity of action, in Ch. VIII, as he says that "the imitation is one when the plot imitates one action and it is a whole." What is emphasized here is that unity means cohesion. In this sense, Othello is in accord with the Greek model. Very interestingly, the unity of action is the only one mentioned by Aristotle. The unities of place and time were established by Ludovico Castelvetro, a literary critic of the Renaissance, in his commentary on the Poetics. The neo-classic followed the three unities as a dogma. At this point the "open" drama again departed from the model, since it broke with the accepted unities. In Othello, the action unfolds in different places and time passes on. The idea of time-flow is a very important trait

in the Renaissance. The Elizabethans were fully aware that "tempus fugit," which attracted and yet frightened them. With the Greeks it was different: emphasis was put on the action. The only time implied was the one needed to portray the whole situation.

Another point that may be inferred from the reading of the Poetics is the unity of tone. That is, there should be a maintenance of the same mood and atmosphere, the tragic and the comic sense of life being kept apart. In Shakespeare there is a combination of tragic and comic elements, providing a mingling of tones. A good example is the Clown, in Othello: his lines break the somber atmosphere of the tragedy.

Violence on the stage is another diverging point: whereas in the Greek tragedies violent scenes happened off stage and were reported by the chorus, in the Elizabethan stage there can be found many instances of violence. In Othello, the strangling of Desdemona and the suicide of the protagonist are actually performed before the eyes of the audience.

Historically, it is known that tragedy emerged out of a religious ritual in the ancient Greece. However, in the England of the 16th century this communal and ritualistic focus shifts from a concern with gods and fate to a concern with the passions of men, taking on a moral pattern. The audience became an important element as it was asked to imagine, to respond to the aesthetic experience. It seems suitable to discuss here the concept of catharsis, as it is achieved "through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." Aristotle merely used the term

without defining it. Many interpretations have appeared. During the Renaissance, Aristotle's definition was revived and catharsis was interpreted in the moral sense of regarding the spectator purified by the tragedy. What is emphasized here is the criterion of emotional response, which, once again, stresses the permanent concern of the playwrights with the audience.

As it has been pointed out so far, the departures from the classical model are explained and somewhat justified as being a manifestation of an age in which man became the "measure of all things." The humanistic and individualistic pattern of the Renaissance permeates Shakespeare's tragedies. His deviations are the stroke of a genius who fully apprehended and displayed the spirit of his time.

Tragedy and the tragic hero will be considered, henceforth, under a more ethical criterion. The Aristotelian definition of tragedy, in Chapter VI, has it as:

(...) an imitation of an action, and of a certain magnitude, in language embellished (...) in the form of action, not narrative (...), arousing pity and fear and bringing about the purgation of such emotions.

Further on, in Chapter XIII, the tragic hero is delineated as:

A man who is not eminently good or just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous, passing from good to bad fortune.

Genuine tragedies bear the same features concerning the tragic hero, although there seems to be some flexibility in terms of form. Every tragic drama exhibits a central character isolated from his fellows, caught in a limit situation — the tragic conflict. The protagonist shows an astonishing courage, but he is doomed. Forces working within the hero, echoing those without, threaten to split him apart. His ruin is brought about by a tragic flaw, which is not a moral one but lies beyond the limits of right or wrong. There is a marked one-sidedness. When the hero is faced with two equally justifiable and clashing values, he espouses one and by doing so he is forced to let go of the other. He, then, identifies himself wholly with the power that moves him. Whereas in the Greek tragedy the emphasis was on the action itself, during the Renaissance, by force of Humanism and Individualism taken to extremes, the hero as an individual is emphasized. Othello is a tragic hero. Although he is not a king, he is a warrior hero, with his magnificence and his sense of patrician caste. His path unfolds from happiness to a complete collapse. His fall is inevitable.

The relationship between character and plot is so intimate in a tragedy that we speak of "inevitability," that is, the events are related through probability and necessity. Because of the internal structure of the play, the action takes a certain course and not another. In relation to Othello, because of his internal make-up and of the circumstances that surround him, the catastrophe is inevitable. His flaw is his readiness to accept everything as truth.

Iago verbalizes it, saying that "the Moor is of a green and open nature that thinks men honest." In addition, Othello's jealousy, sense of inferiority, total dependence on his self-esteem on being loved, are part of the naïve and child-like qualities which account for his yielding to ignoble suspicion.

Surrounding the protagonist, other characters are involved in the action and their function is, in part, to place the hero's struggle in perspective. Such is the role played by Iago in this play. His fate counterpoints that of Othello. The same relationship exists in the portrayal of Desdemona and Emilia. Desdemona is the female apotheosis of the Venetian courtesy-world. She does not step outside the role demands. Before Othello's accusations, she collapses and cannot resist, responding inertly to his savagery. Her fate is counterpointed by that of Emilia who is strong, and also the most complete individual character in the play. Their reactions to Othello help to frame his personality and make his characteristics stand out.

In Othello, the hero's conflict is not that of an undivided soul against external forces — Iago, for instance — but of a divided soul struggling against itself. The clashing values inside Othello are his love for his wife and his strong sense of honour. Because of his exceptional nature, which precludes half-heartedness, his commitment with his honour is so strong that his love has to be destroyed.

Othello's degree of awareness is very high. He knows he is renouncing what he most cherishes. Nevertheless, he

freely embarks upon an intentional course, and experiences the results of his choice. In Act V, scene ii, in a soliloquy, Othello reveals his everlasting love and his profound suffering:

(Kisses her)

O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword! One more, one more
Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
And love thee after. One more, and this the last:
So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep,
But they are cruel tears; this sorrow's heavenly,
It strikes where it doth love.

Othello accepts full responsibility for his deed. "It was I that killed her," he says. When he learns that Desdemona is innocent it is too late for him. He knows he has killed her not out of hatred but all in honour. He punishes himself by committing suicide.

When the tragic hero falls, he is the embodiment of the tragic element in the world. The tragic protagonist is ultimately a symbol of the individual's effort to come to terms with himself and with the world. He is never to be blamed but, on the contrary, profoundly respected.

In conclusion we may say that in Othello there is an epitome of the patterns for tragedies as created by Shakespeare, who is no mere imitator of his contemporaries. This play, with all its "innovations" concerning the classical models, is far from being diminished in its value: it is a monument of a remarkable genius and, behind him, of a remarkable age.

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