
Essential Honor: "Othello" by William Shakespeare

As far as last words of tragic heroes go, Shakespeare's Othello's are distinctly honorable. He says to Lodovico, nobleman who is returning to Venice:

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,

Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,

Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak...

Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,

Perplexed in the extreme... (V, ii: 342-346)

Othello pleads Lodovico to relate the "unlucky deeds" truthfully, without mitigating or exaggerating his crimes. This truthful narration will presumably assure Othello's honor in the future, for it will capture him "as [he] is": a victim of guile who was "Perplexed in the extreme," and therefore an "honorable murderer, if you will" (V, ii: 295). What a Moor indeed—so honorable that he worries of his reputation in a world where he will be dead!

The sensitive reader might perceive a subtle strangeness about these final words of Othello: is it not odd that Othello's final utterances address only his future reputation? Are those words to expect from a man about to commit suicide? Perhaps it is Othello's obsession with honor that strikes a funny chord: like a miser who carries his money to the grave, Othello embraces his respectable name to the death. Why should a man—or for that manner, any man—do so? To better answer this question, let us first consider the importance of reputation to Othello.

As a foreigner who has risen to the rank of a general, Othello is a man "made" by his reputation. The setting of the play is clear: the society is Venice, and Othello is a Moor. We need not dwell on the race of Othello, but rather on his foreign origins. How does a foreigner, even one who originates from "men of royal siege," become so trusted as to command the entire Venetian army (I, ii: 22)? The answer, most certainly, is that he has proven himself in combat. In this aspect Shakespeare draws more or less directly from his source, Cinthio's "The Moor of Venice":

Having given proofs of war of great skill and prudence, [the Moor] was highly esteemed by the Signoria of the Republic, who in rewarding deeds of valor advanced the interest of the state

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(online). Indeed, Othello has established himself as a “brave” and “valiant” man whose name has come to be “highly esteemed.” If we note that valor is closely related to the French *valeur*, or value, this only makes more sense: Othello’s name is his value (OED).

His relationship with Desdemona has similar implications. In Desdemona’s profession of love, we observe that she has fallen in love not with Othello proper, so to speak, but with Othello’s traits: she has seen “Othello’s visage in his mind” and dedicates herself to his “honors and valiant parts” (I, iii: 252-254). Othello’s speech in front of the senate only confirms this: “[Desdemona] loved me”, he says, “for the dangers I had passed” (I, iii: 167-168). In the sense that Othello has captured Desdemona through his virtues and tales, Desdemona has fallen in love with what Othello represents. And, as we will discuss later, Othello is endowed with the gift of poetry: in recounting “the story of [his] life” he has surely—if not unconsciously—enhanced the glory that captures Desdemona’s heart (I, iii: 129). To this extent, Othello’s love affair is also “made” by the same virtues that have made his honorable name.

We do not intend to suggest that Othello and Desdemona share an empty or false love. Nor do we put forth that Othello’s great name is a false representation. Rather, what we should take away from the above is the importance of honor to Othello. He has established himself a highly respectable name in Venice, and it has not only rewarded him with a wife, but also signifies his entire *raison d’être*. Justly so, it is not only in the last scene that Othello shows concern over his reputation.

As his suspicions of Desdemona’s infidelity increase due to Iago’s scheming, Othello laments:

I had been happy if the general camp.

Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,

So I had nothing know. (III, iii: 345-347)

These words contain an understandable logic; Othello anticipates the proverb “ignorance is bliss.” Yet, can we not also take his words to mean that he places honor before the actual fact of being cuckold? Perhaps such a declaration would be too rash without first considering the dramatic progression that follows. “Farewell,” declares Othello, and we observe a veritable crescendo from “Farewell the tranquil mind” all the way to “Farewell... The royal banner, and all quality, / Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!” (III, iii: 348-354). In a mere six lines, Othello transitions from the register of a betrayed lover to the lexicon of war; and herein we perceive a sign of Othello’s active concern of his reputation.

Why, we ask, this turbulent swell in register? How does war relate to Desdemona’s perfidy?

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Othello's climactic exclamation "Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!" brings insight to the question (III, iii: 357). We generally understand "Othello's occupation" to be that of a warrior who leads the "glorious war[s]" of the Venetian army. Is it possible that this warring occupation hinges upon Desdemona's fidelity? The answer, precisely, is that it should not but according to Othello, it does. For Othello believes that his occupation is not merely to lead the army; it is to lead the army as an honorable general. By instantly associating Desdemona's perfidy with his own "occupation", Othello betrays his true concern: the fact that "[His] name, that was as fresh / as Dian's visage" has been "begrimed and black / as his own face" (III, iii: 386-388)!

We are now in a position to answer the original questions of this essay: Othello carries his honor to his grave because, quite simply, his existence is honor par excellence. Since his high reputation constitutes his entire value and essence, his life must be dedicated to maintaining this name to the very last. Thus, it seems, we have explained the puzzle of Othello embracing his honor to his grave. But to conclude the essay here would surely be premature. Indeed, we have merely revealed a subtler question: if Othello considers himself "An honorable murderer" who "nought... did in hate, but all in honor", than why does he kill himself (V, ii: 294-295)?

Othello's final speech—immediately followed by his suicide—concludes:

... in Aleppo once,

Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk

Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,

I took by th' throat the dog

And smote him—thus. (V, ii: 352-356)

We may consider these words as a veritable boast—Othello proudly demonstrates how he "smote [the dog]—thus." And herein lies the contradictory nature of his suicide. On one hand he indirectly gives himself a dishonorable name as one who "Beat a Venetian and traduced the state"; on the other hand, as we have seen, he clearly and consciously dies with honor. What indeed can we say about this strange death?

At this point, let us bring into light Othello's tragic flaw. A consultation of the Oxford English Dictionary reveals that "tragic flaw" originates from the Greek word hamartia which can mean "fault", "error", "guilt", or "shortcoming". The invention of the term "tragic flaw" was, however, in tandem with a specific idea of the word hamartia: according to Cooper, author of Aristotle on Art of Poetry, hamartia "lays the emphasis upon the want of insight within the man, but is elastic

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enough to mean also the outward fault resulting from it" (OED). This hamartia, as we will see, aptly illustrates the death and tragedy of Othello.

Othello's flaw comes into play where his other qualities fail. In terms of strengths, we know that aside from his honor and valiance, Othello possesses the gift of poetry. Consider, for example, the speeches that begin "It gives me wonder" or "Never, Iago" or "Behold, I have a weapon" (II, i: 182-192; III, iii: 453-462; V, ii: 261-282). Few would contest the claim these speeches are anything short of magnificent poetry. And if we examine his verse, we realize that as a true poet, Othello is also equipped with great imaginative powers. It is difficult, indeed, to read the hellish images that he evokes without ourselves feeling shivers: "roast me in sulphur! / Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!" (V, ii: 278-281).

On the other hand, Othello lacks in intellectual reflection, and certainly is no match for Iago's wit. As A. C. Bradley observes in his lectures entitled *Shakespearean Tragedy*, "Othello's mind, for all its poetry, is very simple. He is not observant. His nature tends outward. He is quite free from introspection, and is not given to reflection" (154-5). Nowhere in *Othello*, of course, do we find any character that comes close to rivaling Iago in intellect. So clever is Iago that even his wife, Emilia, does not suspect him of any evildoing—for when she finally discovers Iago's lies, she repeats thrice "my husband?" in utter disbelief (V, ii: 134-135). In this sense, we cannot accuse Othello of being particularly slow of mind. Yet, it is a flaw in the valiant Moor's armor, and a fatal one at that, too.

We should again emphasize the mismatch between Othello and Iago: in the words of critic Harold Bloom, "Othello is a great soul hopelessly outclassed in intellect and drive by Iago" (438). Such being the nature of the play, however, Othello is the guiltiest for not seeing through Iago's false nature. After all, despite having the most interactions with Iago, Othello can not perceive even the most fundamental of Iago's lies: "I am not what I am" (I, i: 64). Othello does not realize that Iago is not what he seems to be; on the contrary, he calls Iago "honest" more than ten times throughout the play. This is Othello's hamartia. A man lacking in reflection, he cannot perceive the difference between what seems and what is.

This flaw is in part related to what we might deem Othello's philosophy, or simply nature. Towards the middle of the play, Iago remarks "Men should be what they seem"; Othello, ignorant to the great dramatic irony of Iago's comment, responds "Certain, men should be what they seem" (III, iii: 126-128). Just as his own nature "tends outward," so does he believe the nature of others to be the same. Iago sums up this fault well: "The Moor is of a free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so" (II, I: 390-391). Indeed, it is simply not in Othello's nature to doubt others—hence he walks completely unfamiliar grounds when he attempts to confirm Iago's lies.

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Iago cleverly puts forth that while both Cassio and Desdemona might seem innocent, they are in fact guilty of adultery. He urges Othello to consider that Desdemona, “so young, could give out such a seeming” as to hide from her father her love for Othello (III, iii: 206). Othello is therefore forced to contemplate an epistemological question that he is in no way equipped to answer. How to know the difference between what seems and what is? Is Desdemona really the chaste wife she appears to be, or does her “nature er[r] from itself” (III, iii: 227)?

The tragedy is already foretold when Othello’s hamartia blinds him from the chastity of his own wife; but we can only watch on as his nature fails him further. A man who tends to trust appearances, Othello demands none other than “the ocular proof” (III, iii: 360) of Iago’s accusations. Yet when the alleged proof comes in the form of a handkerchief—an object that indeed is nothing—Othello conclusively declares to Desdemona:

That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee

Thou gav’st to Cassio... Sweet soul, take heed,

Take heed of perjury; thou art on thy deathbed.

(V, ii: 49-51)

Only a man with Othello’s nature would trust ocular proof as scanty as a handkerchief, and ignore his wife’s pleas of innocence. Indeed, so convinced is Othello that he even invents the lie that Cassio “confessed... that he hath used [Desdemona]” (V, ii: 68-71)! To his blindness of what is, we may add his stubbornness in the belief of what merely seems.

All of this culminates in the tragic final act of Othello, and brings us back to the origin of this essay: Othello’s death. Apart from the obvious consequences of the tragedy, how does his hamartia relate to his death? First, we should note that Othello’s steadfast belief in what seems is logical and even fitting in relation to his honor. For what is honor? It is but a common agreement on a certain quality; a highly esteemed man is esteemed only because we regard him with deference. There exists no man who appears highly esteemed and is actually not an esteemed man. In this sense, honor dictates no discrepancy between what appears and what actually is. So it is only natural that Othello, man of honor, believes uniquely in appearances.

Or consider the converse of this argument: is it possible that Othello’s hamartia is a product of his honor? After all, we have already established that Othello is honor par excellence; how could such a man not put all faith in “seeming”? Indeed, any man made by—and of—his reputation should possess Othello’s tragic flaw. To an extent, this assertion may seem almost obvious: since Othello’s honor and hamartia both belong to his very nature, they must be

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intrinsically related. But we cannot disparage its implications. For if Othello's essence has created his tragic flaw, than the entire tragedy is a result of his very existence!

We may therefore view Othello's death as a natural resolution to the tragedy. Come the last scene of the play, the stage is strewn with bodies, and Iago's manipulations are revealed; Othello realizes the extent of his mistakes and bewails, "O fool! fool! fool" (V, ii: 323)! It is a condemnation of Iago, but also a moment of epiphany: Othello realizes his foolishness, or blindness to what actually was—his tragic flaw. And this epiphany is none other than a complete negation of his existence. For how can honor coexist with "seeming"? Indeed, Othello has been dishonored; hence the flame of his very essence must be extinguished. That is *The Tragedy of Othello the Moor of Venice*.

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