No Cloven Hooves

DORIS ADLER
HOWARD UNIVERSITY

Othello combines the traditional conflicts of the English morality play and some of the principles of classical tragedy. The themes dramatized in this complexly structured play are explored and reinforced by language and rhetoric rich in emblematic signification. The tragic history of black Othello, both classical hero brought low by hubris and an allegorical illustration of Everyman's human blindness, is echoed in the persistent repetition of the terms "black" and "white" with all of their metaphorical suggestions and contradictions. To ignore or disregard any one of these complexly intertwined strands diminishes the understanding of the rich tragic texture of *Othello.*

The classic structure of *Othello* is most apparent in its singleness and unity of plot, enhanced by the driving force of compressed time, the relative unity of place, and the absence of either "low" characters or comic material. Although Othello's error in judgment seems, at first glance, to be jealousy, both Othello and Desdemona are vulnerable initially because of their overweening pride that they are above the carnal stings necessary to perpetuate the human race. Othello announces his own godlike immunity in a moment of dramatic irony that rivals the proud blindness of Oedipus. When Desdemona pleads with the Senate to be allowed to follow Othello into battle rather than being forced to remain "a moth of peace" in Venice, Othello supports her request with the following:

> Let her have your voice.
> Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not
> To please the palate of my appetite,
> Nor to comply with heat (the young affects
> In me defunct) and proper satisfaction,
> But to be free and bounteous to her mind.
> And heaven defend your good souls that you think
> I will your serious and great business scant
> For she is with me. No, when light-winged toys
> Of feathered Cupid seel with wanton dullness
> My speculative and officed instruments,
> That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
> Let housewives make a skillet of my helm
> And all indign and base adversities
> Make head against my estimation.
>
> (1.3.295–309)

No mere mortal bridegroom, his marriage yet unconsummated, and his future at the mercy of the dogs of war, Othello seeks only to be free and bounteous to her mind.

Desdemona, too, has married to live on a Platonic plane not shared by most lovers who elope in defiance of parents, tradition, and convention. Described by her father as a maiden, never bold, who has rejected the suits of the curled darlings of Venice, and by Othello as one who placed the responsibilities of managing her father's household before her own desire to hear the stories of Othello's adventures, Desdemona loved Othello for the dangers he had passed and "wished that heaven had made her such a man." This ambiguous wish is, in the main, tacitly emended in the understanding to mean that she wished heaven had made such a man *for her.* The words as stated and read in their literal construction suggest, however, that she wishes she had *been* such a man and serve as strong motive for her plea to accompany Othello to Cyprus:

> My heart's subdued
> Even to the very quality of my lord.
> I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
> And to his honors and his valiant parts
> Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.
> So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
> A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
> The rites for why I love him are bereft me . . .
> (1.3.285–92)

Desdemona, like Othello, would lead the proud life of the plumed helm, but since heaven did not make her such a man, she seeks to become one with the very quality of Othello, master wearer of the plumed helm, one with his mind, his honors, his valiant parts in a marriage to be consummated by the rites of a shared war.

And so the proud pair, joined in their superiority to the "young affects" of their human mortality are ripe for the fall that begins with their kiss in Cyprus. The breathless, broken rhythm and gasping consonants as much as Othello's words are persuasive that Othello desires more than "to be generous and bountiful to her mind." Unless the line is rattled off like a jump-rope rhyme, the stops demanded by the arrangement of consonants in Othello's first response to Desdemona in Cyprus imitates the stopped breath and full throat of intense emotion:

> It gives me wonder great as my content
> To see you here before me. O my soul's joy!
> (2.1.199–200)

The stops and breaks and hissing release of breath are even more evident in the lines

> I cannot speak enough of this content.
> It stops me here; it is too much of joy.
> And this, and this, the greatest discords be
> That e'er our hearts shall make!
> (2.1.214–17)

The lines are equally persuasive to Iago who responds "O, you are well tuned now" (2.1.218).

If this moment is obvious as the beginning of a classic fall, it is also obvious as a deviation from the classic plot structure. The machinery that brings about the catastrophe, the diabolical plotting of Iago, is closer to the machinations of the Vice of the morality play than to the antagonist of a classical tragedy. Othello, himself, in his final meeting with Iago makes the morality-play association explicit as he realizes Iago is a "devil" and looks for his cloven hooves:

> I look down towards his feet; but that's a fable.—
> If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee.
> (5.2.336–37)

In these lines Othello sums up the failure of all drama—classical, morality, or contemporary—all instruction, all human reason. We, like Othello, recognize the cloven-hooved devil of state, page, or pulpit as evil to be shunned or fought, and we, like Othello, fail to see evil in the familiar people and circumstances of our lives: the parent who treats us as property, the lover who consumes and forgets, the preacher who feeds coffers and starves the poor, the politicians who promise peace and take us to war. We, like Othello, recognize the shining winged angel as the realized abstraction of good, and we, like Othello, snuff out the good in guiltless mates and strangers—sandaled sons of carpenters who heal the blind. We, like Othello, all human kind, are too tragically blind to distinguish good from evil, to know black from white, to save ourselves from our own mortality.

Before examining the use of black and white as a rhetorical method of reaffirming that man is too blind to distinguish black from white, it is imperative to look closer at the morality, or allegorical structure, of *Othello* and particularly at the role of Iago within that structure. One has only to consider the initial popularity of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* to recognize that the long tradition of the realized abstractions of the seven deadly sins continued as a central expectation of Shakespeare's audience. These sins, identified in medieval tradition as pride, envy, avarice, sloth, anger, gluttony, and lechery were expanded in the morality drama to include other permutations of evil. The pride of both Othello and Desdemona was probably more apparent to the audience of Shakespeare's day than it is to us. True, both Othello and Desdemona are sincere, virtuous, blind to any pride in their well-mated assumption that they are among that happy breed who are above the physical desire shared by lesser newly-wed mortals. Pride does not appear as a recognizable, imperious enslaver, and Iago has no cloven hooves.

While Pride is evident in the assumption of superiority shared by Othello and Desdemona and in Othello's rhetoric and actions, other familiar figures from the morality structure are more obvious. Othello becomes a monster of jealousy; Cassio is brought down first by "the devil drunkenness" and then by "the devil wrath" (2.3.315–16); Iago conjures an image of the demon lust that racks the minds first of Brabantio and then of Othello, and Bianca dramatizes the power of that demon in her submissive pursuit of Cassio. But Iago, himself, comes closest to impersonating one of the realized abstractions of the morality play; in motive and method Iago is a consummate realization of Despair, the sin held to be more deadly than pride despite the place generally

given to pride as the most deadly of the seven sins. Of course, in a major sense of the word, despair is pride, for despair knows there is no good, no happiness, no hope. This pride in ultimate knowledge is the ultimate hubris and will brook no threat of contradiction. Despair must destroy all evidence of good to reaffirm that there is no good, all happiness to prove there is no happiness, all hope to prove there is no hope. Despair must prove wiser than all wisdom.

Iago, who names too many reasons for his hatred of Othello for any to be believed, like the figure of Despair in *The Faerie Queene,* creates deadly discontent in all those he encounters by rationally probing and enflaming their secret areas of weakness. Unlike Spenser's representation of Despair, Iago has no grisly, dull-eyed countenance to make him immediately recognizable; there are no cloven hooves. The bright bubble of happiness veers away from the obvious danger of the malcontent and is too often burst by the seemingly innocent question or comment of a seemingly disinterested friend or associate: "Are you going to wear that?" "Do you really trust him?" "I like not that."

Honest Iago leaves no bubble unburst. The smug ignorant assurance of the foolish Roderigo that he can pay an agent to acquire whatever his heart desires is such an open playground for the temptation of despair that Iago takes him to destruction and damnation in his spare time. By blatantly addressing the racial prejudice and fears that Brabantio has kept buried beneath his self-flattering hospitality to the prestigious African general, Iago allows the old father no way to salvage his image of himself as an important member of the Senate, to maintain a loving relationship with his daughter, or to continue life itself. Iago catches Cassio between his weakness for drink and the weakness of his need to be one of the boys and quickly destroys his happiness in his promotion. Having already exposed Emilia's anxiety about her adequacy as a wife by suggesting her disloyalty to him with Othello, Iago persuades her to disloyalty to Desdemona by demanding the handkerchief; he must destroy her enduring loyalty by taking her life. The constant, noble, loving nature of Othello and Desdemona, their love, and their happiness are negations of despair and must be destroyed if the knowledge of despair that there is no constancy, no nobility, no love, no happiness is to be reaffirmed. Iago knows they must be conquered; he does not know the specific area of attack until Othello and Desdemona "fall" in love in Cyprus; then he knows exactly which strings to play.

Iago's accurate knowledge of the fine points of human susceptibility is a central stroke in Shakespeare's portrayal of despair. Othello, beset both by messengers from the Senate and by Brabantio's men at the Sagittary in the first hours of his marriage, is calm, dignified, and eminently rational; Othello, aroused by the alarm bell in the first hours of his time alone with Desdemona in Cyprus when he is no longer a platonic lover, is as fiery and angry as Iago could wish him to be. Desdemona, urged by Cassio, at Iago's instigation, to plead his case on the morning after she has discovered that she has neither married Othello only for his mind and quality as a warrior nor been married only that he might be free and bounteous to her mind, is ripe to overflowing with the short-lived power of the new and pleasing bride who might well

excerpt from

Doris Adler of Howard University, D.C. title: "No Cloven Hooves"

send her new husband for golden apples from the Hesperides and fully expect to make apple pie for dinner. Iago can be certain that now that Othello has discovered that his free uncircumscribed condition is lost to Desdemona in a love that has awakened all his youthful affects, he will be more than willing to believe that she affects all men in the same way that she has affected him. Caught in the passion to which he had assumed himself to be superior, Othello, in his innocent pride, will assume all lesser men to be even more susceptible. Once Othello imagines Desdemona's power to be universal, and Desdemona longs to test her individual power with Othello, Iago has both of them ready to surrender to despair. With his plan successfully initiated and his victims in his sights, Iago calls upon the "Divinity of hell" (2.3.370) to make everything seem other than it is; virtue will seem evil, evil will seem virtuous. Metaphorically, black will seem white, and white will seem black, and neither love nor reason will provide eyeglasses for man's tragic blindness.

start here

With the union of black Othello with white Desdemona and the evident "blackness" of the white Iago, the metaphors and multiple signification of *black* and *white* are at work in the tragedy from its opening moments. There are few words that carry more complex, confounding baggage. The confusion began early in our language when Old English *blaekan,* meaning to burn or scorch, was used for the color of charcoal, the total absorption, or the total absence of light, and *blac,* a word similar in appearance and sound, was used for shining white, the total reflection or presence of light; the two words in early documents are not always distinguishable even by context. But usage worked to polarize them. The association of the words with day and night, light and darkness, ignorance and knowledge, blindness and sight, clean and dirty, good and evil, had a long history before they were used to distinguish peoples of European and African origins. In northern Europe, long before equatorial and subequatorial peoples were known to exist, the power of evil was represented as a figure of darkness, first as a black dog and later as a black demon. In early mystery and morality plays the devil, or the force of evil, was a figure dressed in black. The long, ugly history of the exploitation and enslavement of Africans and those of African descent undoubtedly encouraged the conflation of the complex connotations of *black* and *white* with the skin color of those of European ancestry and those of African ancestry.

Othello explores, inverts, and confuses these complex connotations. The greater part of the play takes place at night, in darkness. It includes a noble black hero married to one whiter than monumental alabaster, and draws on and compounds all the familiar negative uses of black, positive uses of white or fair, and then, through rhetorical and theatrical devices, confounds all the confusions already present in the terms black and white. Within the play Othello's African blackness is associated, on the one hand, with nobility, courage, and exotic adventure. On the stage he traditionally wears white. But increasingly his color is coupled, rhetorically, with animals, bestiality, criminality, literal and moral filth, sorcery, the pit of darkness, and the devil himself. White, or more often fair, with its other meaning as just or evenhanded, signifies all beauty, virtue, heavenly shows, and even, in a witty scene with deadly rhetoric, humans as opposed to nonhumans. Iago, jesting with Desdemona as they await Othello's ship,

makes *black,* signifying a brunette, synonymous with *foul,* and *white* synonymous with *wight,* or person (2.1.156, 173).

All is other than it seems. Black Othello is described by the Duke as being metaphorically white. White Iago is a villain, metaphorically a black villain. Bianca, a white whore whose name means *white,* is metaphorically morally black. Only Desdemona, whiter than monumental alabaster, is both literally and metaphorically white. How logical that Othello, who has long understood that prejudice-blinded Venetians assumed that a black face meant a black soul, should be led to believe that he had wrongly assumed that Desdemona's white face revealed her white soul. Just as there are no cloven hooves, so there are no halos or wings. All mortals are too tragically blind to distinguish metaphor from reality, good from evil, black from white.

Othello combines the structural and thematic traditions of ancient classical tragedy with conventions of the English morality play and sets them forth in dramatic and rhetorical images of black and white that engage our human reason, our human fears, and, all too often, our human weaknesses. The tragedy that reveals our mortal blindness has, all too often over the centuries, been seen and read with eyes too blind to distinguish between the literal simplicity and the metaphorical complexity of *black* and *white,* too blind to recognize the primal evil of despair in the open honest face of a clever, witty man, too blind to see beyond the prevailing conventions of a particular time and place. *Othello* is a great metaphor for the tragic reality of mortal blindness.