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Interdisciplinary Humanities 202:002

14 September 2014

That’s He That Was Othello

1. **Iago’s Motivations** – One of the difficulties in ascertaining the motives of Iago is that Shakespeare didn’t really attempt to humanize or justify his actions. Iago seems to suspect Othello, saying, '”twixt my sheets he has done my office,” yet has little evidence to confirm his suspicion other than gossip (Act I, Scene iii, Line 390). Iago also opens the play by venting his frustrations of Cassio’s promotion above him.

To further muddle the issue, Iago swears to secrecy the second that his plot is uncovered: “Demand me nothing: what you know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak word (Act V, Scene ii, Line 302).” Because Shakespeare broke the norm of the villain confessing once his crime came to light, the audience will never really know what his true motivations are. Once out of the moment, Iago clammed up and refused to explain himself further.

1. **Techniques and Efficacy –** Iago tricks Othello into believing that his wife is unfaithful by first convincing him that he is his faithful confidant, then laying the seeds of suspicion against Michael Cassio in subltle ways. One of the reasons why Iago is so effective is because of his well orchestrated hemming and hawing, a seeming friend who doesn’t want to talk down on Cassio, yet knows he must bring his betrayal to light. He speaks,

*“I do beseech you—Though I perchance am vicious in my guess*

*As, I confess, it is my nature’s plague*

*To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy*

*Shapes faults that are not (Act III, Scene iii, Line 144)”*

Iago uses a careful mixture of ambiguity and mud-slinging, carefully disguising his intentions with the appearance of it being a warning from a friend.

1. **Philosophy of Iago** -

*“How poor are they that have not patience!*

*What wound did ever heal but by degrees?*

*Thou know’st we work by wit, and not by witchcraft;*

*And wit depends on dilatory time.*

*Does’t not go well? Cassio hath beaten thee.*

*And thou, by that small hurt, hast cashier’d Cassio:*

*Though other things grow fair against the sun,*

*Yet fruits that blossom first will first be ripe:*

*Content thyself awhile. By the mass, ’tis morning;*

*Pleasure and action make the hours seem short (Act II, Scene ii, Line 380).”*

I really love this particular portion of Iago’s monologue/dialogue, particularly in context of the surrounding action. As Rodrigo comes back to discuss their plot and announces his intent to return to Venice, Iago delivers this speech, manipulating Rodrigo into staying. As the words continue, he becomes increasingly excited, finally climaxing with the realization that the night has passed while he plotted against Cassio and Othello. The reason I find this so insightful is because Iago truly seems enraptured by his evil thinking. He talks about killing and defaming like excited craftsmen talk about their projects or young children describe their daily pursuits. It gives us an insight into the mind of the criminally evil.

1. **Desdemona and Emilia –** Desdemona seems to fit the mold of a conservative, unassuming woman who seeks the pleasure of her husband.

*“DESDEMONA. He says he will return incontinent:*

*He hath commanded me to go to bed,*

*And bade me to dismiss you.*

*EMILIA. Dismiss me!*

*DESDEMONA. It was his bidding: therefore, good Emilia,*

*Give me my nightly wearing, and adieu:*

*We must not now displease him (Act IV, Scene iii, Line 13).”*

In this passage, we see the subservient nature of Desdemona, who is willing to obey Othello at the cost of offending her attendant Emilia. To her, there is no question of what she ought to do, for her husband has spoken. Emilia, on the other hand, takes an extreme opposite approach:

*“DESDEMONA. Wouldst [cheat on your husband] for all the*

*world?*

*EMILIA. Why, would not you?*

*DESDEMONA. No, by this heavenly light!*

*EMILIA. Nor I neither by this heavenly light;*

*I might do’t as well i’ the dark.*

*DESDEMONA. Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the*

*world?*

*EMILIA. The world’s a huge thing: it is a great price*

*For a small vice (Act IV, Scene iii, Line 63).”*

While Desdemona in her newlywed naiveté wonders at the existence, if not the motives, of women who would not pander to their husbands’ will, Emilia admits somewhat wryly that in a moment of temptation and with the right incentive, her loyalty to her husband would vanish.