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PRUDENCE VERSUS WISDOM IN OTHELLO

In his *Redeeming Shakespeare's Words*,¹ Paul Jorgensen has pointed out how an understanding of contemporary connotations of key words can contribute to a fuller appreciation of certain Shakespearean plays. Recognizing Jorgensen's contribution in tracing the significance of the word "honesty" in *Othello*, I submit that an investigation of the connotations of another key word—namely, "jealousy"—may further elucidate the characters of Iago, Othello, and Desdemona. If the basic definition of jealousy is seen to be a tendency toward suspicion, then the relation between that word and the term "Machiavellian prudence" becomes clear and consequently the contrast between Iago's kind of wisdom and that of Desdemona.

Othello's fundamental error is in allowing the germ of suspicion to enter into his thoughts, for his love of Desdemona depends upon an absolute faith in her goodness. That the word "jealousy" could connote distrust or suspicion generally—that is, without regard to love, envy or any other emotion—is fully attested to in this play and other works of Shakespeare as well as in those of his contemporaries.

Chapman so uses the word in *Bussy D'Ambois*: "Oh, miraculous jealousy!"² Do you think yourself such a singular subject for laughter that none can fall into the matter of our merriment but you?" asks Barrisor; and L'Anou chaffs: "This jealousy of yours, sir, confesses some close defect in your self" (I.ii.236 ff.).³ In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Antonio lists some of the Cardinal's devices for ensnaring those whom he suspects as enemies: "...Where he is jealous of any man, he lays worse plots for them than ever was imposed on Hercules" (I.iii.83 ff.). Ben Jonson speaks of "whisp'ring fame" that gives proof to the *jealous* (*Sejanus* II. 195-96).⁴ Shakespeare's Rumor in the Induction of *Henry*

IV, Part II describes himself as a pipe "Blown by surmises, jealousies, conjectures"; and Cassius, hoping to enlist Brutus in the conspiracy, prefaces his flattery with "be not *jealous* on me, gentle Brutus," to which Brutus replies: "That you do love me, I am nothing *jealous*" (I.ii.71 ...161). In none of these instances (and they could be multiplied to the point of tedium) is there any connotation of love-melancholy. It is readily perceived then that, while love is not *necessarily* an ingredient of jealousy, distrust is so.

What we have to do with in the case of Othello, however, is undeniably that type of jealousy which Robert Burton⁵ calls a "bastard branch" of love melancholy. Burton derives his definition from Varchi, with some slight additions from Scaliger, Cardan, and Vives. In any case, his sources are in general agreement concerning the nature of that jealousy "which belongs to married men in respect to their wives":

Jealousy is described and defined to be a certain suspicion which the Lover hath of the party he chiefly loveth, lest he or she be enamoured of another: or any eager desire to enjoy some beauty alone, to have it proper to himself only: a fear or doubt, lest any foreigner should ...share with him in his love. Or (as Scaliger adds) a fear of losing her favour whom he so earnestly affects. Cardan calls it, a zeal for love, and a kind of envy lest any man should beguile us. Ludovicus Vives defines it in the very same words, or little differing in sense.

While Shakespeare did not, of course, read Burton, the two men may very well have been familiar with the same sources. In any event it appears to have been common knowledge that, while the human being shares some of the symptoms of jealousy with brute beasts, only the superior intellect of Man was capable of that jealousy characterized by, or having its roots in, suspicion—a suspicion which might be entirely unfounded. Examples of the terrible fury of beasts which could "brook no corrival" Burton takes from Vives, Oppian, Varchi, and others: bulls, horses, goats, swans, crocodiles, and dogs will fight to the death rather than share their mates. While Man may *arrive* at this stage of brutish irrationality, his initial torment is usually caused by suspicion. Chrysostom observes that the jealous man is "more than ordinarily suspicious"; Vives describes him as amplifying every whisper, misinterpreting everything said or done, prying into every corner. The jealous man, says Burton, conceives "things almost incredible and impossible to be effected even suspecting his wife with his nearest and dearest friends." Ariosto is quoted by Burton as terming jealousy "a

fury, a continual fever, full of suspicion, fear and sorrow, a martyrdom, a mirth-marring monster." Benedetto Varchi in his *Blazon of Jealousie* quotes the same source, using similar terminology: Ariosto, he says, brands jealousy with "five villanous words, every one of them being worse than other ...Suspicion, Feare, Martyring, Frenzie, and Madnesse."⁶ Burton himself follows this sequence closely in his section on "Prognoticks": "Those which are jealous...if they be not otherwise relieved, proceed from suspicion to hatred, from hatred to frenzy, madness, injury, murder, and despair."

The progression of Othello's symptoms from suspicion through murder to despair will be seen to follow this traditional pattern: Shakespeare has managed (in Othello's Job-like suffering) to indicate "martyring" and (in the hero's suicide) to suggest the ultimate in despair. Between the scene where the poet shows us Iago planting the germ of suspicion in Othello's mind and that where he depicts the cool justicer proceeding toward the task of execution, we are allowed to witness Man in a state of frenzy. When he would tear Desdemona all to pieces, Othello has reached the stage of the enraged bull; after he has fallen into a fit, he is aptly reminded by Iago that he has failed to play the part of a Man. The animal imagery used by Othello when he envisages his wife's infidelity further emphasizes the bestial state into which he has fallen; and the affront to human dignity which he displays in striking his wife in public illustrates the degree to which passion has overcome his rational faculties.

Yet this descent had its origins in *suspicion*—that basic element of human jealousy of which the animal presumably is incapable. Furthermore, even in his rage, Othello reveals a quality in Man which is uglier than that of the impassioned beast. When he plans to kill Desdemona in the very bed she has contaminated, when he declares he "will be found most cunning in [his] patience" (IV.i.91), he is imitating neither bull nor crocodile nor elephant nor any other beast save Man. It is as if Shakespeare were saying with Swift's Houyhnhnm Master: Behold how much more terrible than the beast is this creature who has a spark of Reason.

Though Othello may be bestial in his frenzy, his initial suspicion he learned from a creature more dangerous than an infuriated bull—namely, Iago. In following the prudent Machiavellian, he is embracing the attitude of one who trusts nobody, believes in nothing, and assumes

that mankind generally is evil. The dominant characteristic of Iago is this tendency toward suspicion, a tendency which as we have seen could be and often was (by Elizabethans) termed jealousy. Jealousy is, indeed, Iago's rule of life: suspect, be wary, assume the worst. It is his "nature's plague/To spy into abuses, and oft [his] jealousy/Shapes faults that are not" (III.iii.146-48).⁷ He suspects people in general: all men who behave ceremoniously toward their superiors are but "knee-crooking knave[s]" (I.i.42...44); all women can be bought for gold; no young woman could possibly be faithful to an older man (see I.iii.342 ff. and II.i.230); fair or dark, wise or foolish, all women do "foul pranks" (II.i.142). Such is the burden of his speech whether he be in solitary meditation, actively attempting to corrupt Othello or Roderigo, or merely engaging in raillery with the ladies.

Iago also suspects particular people—admittedly without evidence: his own wife, the "lusty (?) Moor,"⁸ Cassio, Desdemona. "For mere suspicion," he will proceed as if he had evidence (I.iii.395). Given his "most pregnant and unforced position" (II.i. 239)—namely, that everybody is predisposed to evil—it is "apt and of great credit" that nobody is faithful either in love or in friendship (II.i.294 ff.).

As Jorgensen points out, to say that a thing is "apt and of great credit" is merely to say "I suspect"; but to Iago—believe, think, and suspect are "of one piece."⁹ It is a kind of thinking which can safely be indulged in only by the complete cynic—only by one who is prepared to abandon all faith in human nature.

This bent of mind will I believe readily be recognized as "Machiavellian." What may not be so obvious, however, is that this particular Machiavellian trait is a perversion of the ancient virtue of Prudence. Elizabethan—Jacobean England was not entirely persuaded of the wholesomeness of the ancient virtues in any case;¹⁰ and Machiavelli's distortion of Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude was exceeded, if possible, by his distortion of the virtue of Prudence.

Richard Barckley in his *Discourse of the Felicitie of Man* (1598) deploras the fact that

so small account [is] made of morall vertues...now adayes, that the vices next to them are taken for the vertues themselves...to dissemble and deceeve, is now taken for wisdom or prudence, a singular vertue that cannot [properly] be dissevered from honestie and plaine meaning. One saith be warie and circumspect how thou believe any thing: these be the sinewes of wisdom, so as now we may say with the poet: —nam fronte polito

Astutari vapidò servant sub pectore vulpem.¹¹ In *The...Humane Condition* (1600) J. Perrot warns his readers that too much circumspection often turns to "jealousies, or suspition without cause." His ensuing description of the overly-prudent man is virtually a thumbnail sketch of the demi-devil who misled Othello:

...if a prudent man exceede his bounds, he sheweth himselfe to be a subtile searcher of things hidden; a finder and a follower of al faultes, evil, full of pride, crafty, an enemy to innocency, a commender of crimes, and in conclusion, accompted of al men as of a lewd person, ungodly, and very wicked.

Perrot warns against associating with men who are "by nature politique and well practised or of great experience in worldly matters:...they are of all people most pernicious and most dangerous to converse, or to be dealt withal" (pp. 52-53).

Granting a certain naivete in Othello which makes him an easy prey to Iago, I cannot share the sentiments of those who see in his initial tendency toward trustfulness a tragic flaw. In this play and elsewhere in Shakespeare, faith in one's fellow men is commonly considered a virtue, while a lack of that faith—that is, a tendency toward mistrust—is called "base". It is the trusting Desdemona whom we love and the cynical Iago whom we hate; it is the earlier Othello of "free and open nature" whom we admire and the Othello of "cunning patience" for whose sake we as fellow rational animals blush.

Beaumont and Fletcher's Philaster, in trying to ward off his suspicions of Arethusa, declares: "To suspect/Were base, where I deserve no ill" (I.ii.93-94).¹² In like manner, both Desdemona and Othello associate jealousy with baseness of mind. Emilia's suggestion that Othello could be jealous seems to Desdemona no less than ridiculous

.....my noble Moor
Is true of mind and made of no such baseness
As jealous creatures are. ... (III.iv.26-28)

Othello is indignant at Iago's implication that he might suspect one whom he loves; and in giving expression to this indignation he uses the terms "jealousy" and "suspicion" interchangeably:

Thinkst thou I'd make a life of *jealousy*,
To follow still the changes of the moon
With fresh suspicions? (III.iii.177-79)

An early sixteenth-century treatise by one Bp. St. Martyn entitled *The Rule of an Honest Lyfe* associates craftiness with a tendency toward suspicion. Being a true Aristotelian, however, the author recommends the *via media* with regard to prudence as well as to the other three ancient virtues. The overly-prudent man, he finds, "occupyeth subtle suspicyons to the reproch of y^e cryme & faute of some other...[and is]...an enemye to symplycte & playnnes, an inventor of fautes...But who so ever ledeth his lyfe in y^e even & equale balaunce thereof hath nothyng ȝ hym suspicious nor crafty." Perrot and Barckley, writing at the end of the century, saw how men had failed to achieve this Aristotelian "equal balance"—how, indeed, they tended toward the Machiavellian extreme of being overly-prudent, overly-wary, overly-suspicious.

But is St. Martyn's "equale balaunce" possible in the love relationship? Leaving aside his assurance that such a balance precludes suspicion and craftiness, do we not have here something like Polonius' advice to his son? Or, what is more to the point, do we not have something similar to Iago's advice to Othello: "Wear your eye thus, not jealous nor secure" (III.iii.198)? The question we must ask ourselves at this point is whether true love *can* thrive in this half-way house. Or, better still, is this well-balanced prudence the kind of wisdom which led Desdemona to forsake all others and follow her Moor?

Iago's advice arises out of wordly wisdom—a wisdom which by the end of the paly is shown to be the worst kind of folly. And Othello's initial error is seen to be his mistaking this prudence for true wisdom. Acknowledging his own ignorance of the ways of all but the military world, the Moor readily accepts Iago's superior knowledge of human nature generally and of the relationship of the sexes in particular:

This fellow
knows all qualities, with a learned spirit,
 Of human dealings. (III.iii.258-260)

And later, in response to Iago's description of the general prevalence of marital infidelity, Othello can only answer: "O, thou art wise; 'tis certain" (IV.i. 75).

Adopting this prudence as wisdom, Othello cuts himself off from the higher wisdom of love and trust which is Desdemona's guide in human relationships. In her innocence she refuses to believe that Emilia would

commit adultery "for the whole world." Emilia's argument is one worthy the wife of Iago:

In troth, I think I should; and undo 't when I had done. Marry, I would not do such a thing for a joint-ring, nor for measures of lawn, nor for gowns, petticoats, nor caps, nor any petty exhibition; but, for the whole world,—why, who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch? I should venture purgatory for 't.

Why, the wrong is but a wrong i' the world: and having the world for your labour, 'tis a wrong in your own world, and you might quickly make it right.

(IV.iii.71...82)

The existence of Iago's millions of cuckolds is also confirmed by Emilia. To Desdemona's protestations that she does not think there is any such woman, Emilia replies: "Yes, a dozen; and as many to the vantage as would store the world they played for" (IV.iii.84-85).

Like Juliet, however, Desdemona remains uncontaminated by her cynical tutors. No demi-devil¹⁴ could ever convert her love to hate, her faith to jealousy. For she is possessed of a higher wisdom than that Prudence which encourages suspicion of one's fellow men. Desdemona knows about the weakness of human nature, but this knowledge merely strengthens her love: pondering the baffling behavior of her husband, she concedes that we must remember that "men are not Gods" (III.iv.148). As a Christian she doubtless knows also that there is "[no] breast so pure/But some uncleanly apprehensions/ Keep leets and law-days [there]" (III.iii.138-140). Yet, such a reminder of Man's fallen nature she would never have considered as evidence against her lord.

It may be argued that Desdemona never really knew either Othello or the world: there was more weakness in the one than she guessed and more evil in the other than she could comprehend. But her kind of wisdom is presented by the playwright as a higher kind¹⁵ than that possessed by any other character in the play—a wisdom which could have led to far greater happiness than the prudence which her husband was persuaded to embrace.

Othello is accurate in declaring that he was "not easily jealous" (V.ii.345): everything in the early part of the play points to the fact that he was not a man given to suspecting others.¹⁶ Is he also accurate in describing himself as "one that loved not wisely but too well" (V.ii.344)? I think he is. To love wisely was, for the Elizabethan

Christian, to love with complete Faith, Hope, and Charity—not with the reservations dictated by “prudence.” Lacking complete faith, Othello was doomed to “dote, yet doubt, to suspect, yet strongly love” (III.iii.170). He loved too well to follow the Iago-way completely, but with insufficient wisdom to follow the Desdemona-way. Near the end of the play, Iago is called many vile names. Perhaps the most appropriate is “Spartan dog,” an epithet which I take to connote “Stoical” hardness and “cynical” mistrust, traits which could not coexist with love as Desdemona understood it.

Footnotes

- 1 Berkeley, 1962.
- 2 Within the quotations the italicizing of the words jealousy and jealous, prudence and prudent, suspicion and suspicious is mine throughout.
- 3 In *Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. Robert Ornstein and Hazelton Spencer (Boston, 1964), the word “jealousy” is here glossed as “suspicion”.
- 4 For *Philaster and The Duchess*, I have used *Drama of the English Renaissance*, ed. M.L. Wine (New York, 1969), where “jealous” is glossed as “suspicious”. *Sejanus* is edited by Jonas Barish for The Yale Ben Jonson (New Haven, 1965).
- 5 *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. I have used Part 3, Sec. 3 from the edition by Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan Smith (New York, 1927), pp. 821-847.
- 6 Trans. R.T. (1615), pp. 10-11.
- 7 All quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Complete Works....*, ed. Hardin Craig (Glenview, Illinois, 1961).
- 8 In II.i.304 Iago claims to suspect “the lusty Moor” with his wife. That Iago does not himself believe Othello to be “lusty,” however, is evident when in the next scene but one he declares that “her [Desdemona’s] appetite shall play the god/ With his [Othello’s] weak function” (II.iii.354).
- 9 “Perplex’d in the Extreme,” *SQ* 15, No.2 (1964), 270.
- 10 My recent study of Othello’s propensity for justice and fortitude points out the dangers thought by Elizabethans to be inherent in too great reliance on pagan virtues. See “All-in-All Sufficiency in *Othello*,” *ShakS* (1970), 209-21.
- 11 Like Barckley, William Vaughn (*Golden Grove*, 1600) explicitly associates pagan prudence with Machiavelli:
Wisdome among the aunccient heathen was no other thing but a certaine kind of prudence to manage and handle great causes & matters of policy...But wisdome among Christians hath obtained a higher title, to wit, a knowledge [of]...our salvation...through...Jesus Christ. As for worldly wisdome, I wish[men] not so pretiously to esteeme it, as the doe: for what else are the wise men of this world, save gay politicians, Machiavellians, and niggards...(Sig. M5).
- 12 See Note 4.
- 13 Sig. B7r. Two translations of this work (which was falsely attributed to Seneca) are listed in *STC*, one dated 1538, the other 1546.
- 14 I am not suggesting that Emilia is the demi-devil that Iago is—merely that she shares his concept of wisdom.
- 15 Terence Hawkes (“Iago’s Use of Reason,” *SP* 18 [1961], 160...164) shows that Desdemona possesses the “higher Reason” which Man shares with the angels. Robert Heilman (*Magic in the Web* [Lexington, Kentucky: 1956], p.210) argues that Desdemona “may act truly while believing falsely about the world is not entirely false; she herself is a part of the world and, as such, is a proof that it is not so altogether evil as Iago pictures it.
- 16 E.E. Stoll (*Shakespeare Studies* [New York, 1960]), p. 94 speaks of jealousy as “an inborn inclination to suspect or hearken to suspicion.” Kenneth Muir (“The Jealousy of Iago,” *English Miscellany* 2 [1951], p. 65) cites Dostoevsky to the effect that “Othello was not jealous, he was trustful.”