CHAPTER 6

Othello : Comic Elements

_The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice_ (1604) is one of Shakespeare’s great tragedies of love, in which the tragic hero is seen to be overwhelmed by a monstrous passion of jealousy which ultimately invites his own ruin. The action of the play develops through a strong psychological conflict, which finds its outlet through Othello’s jealousy. The villain of the play is Iago whose mischievous plans work behind Othello’s jealousy. Shakespeare sets Iago on both Othello and his wife, Desdemona, and thereupon, the normal pattern of their conjugal life is subverted. This is the root of the tragedy.

To explain it in another way, Othello is a credulous man who loves his wife very much, but not wisely. Iago, the shrewd villain takes advantage of his credulousness in order to bring about his ruin. Iago ingeniously makes some false accusations against Desdemona’s chastity and thus, sows the seeds of jealousy in Othello’s mind. An extremely credulous man that he is, Othello takes every word of Iago’s accusations as the gospel truth. Instead of verifying the truth of Iago’s words, he directly impeaches Desdemona of having lost her fidelity. The idea of Desdemona’s suspected coquetry is so deep-rooted in Othello’s mind that he can hardly brush off his wrong suspicion. Therefore, he disingenuously ignores Desdemona’s pleadings for self-exculpation and thereupon, he ruthlessly strangles her to death. Probably Othello kills his wife just to take revenge on her cuckolding him. Finally, he himself proceeds towards his own ruin when he realizes his honour.
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The discovery, by Othello, of Desdemona's unaltering fidelity towards him perhaps makes him satisfied of his honour but it also fills him with an overwhelming sense of guilt and remorse. The simultaneity of joy and sorrow in the tragic action is what the tragedy achieves for its aesthetic pleasure and beauty. In the process of representing the failure of man to attain optimum goodness, Shakespeare makes us vividly conscious of his essential nobility, grandeur, and immense possibilities.

The action of the whole play is keyed up to a high pitch of seriousness and therefore, it seems so over-bearing to the audience that it badly needs to be relieved. There is hardly any comic element to relieve its intense pathos and seriousness. The clownage scenes, however, have something to produce comic effects but they are also often fraught with tragic import. A marvelous harmony between these contrasting features constitutes the beauty of the play. A short critical survey of the tragedy will suffice to pick out the comic elements sparingly introduced therein:

1) Iago's Diabolical Wit and Humour.
2) Cassio's Drunken Speeches.
3) Roderigo's Foolery.
4) Clownage Scenes.

1) Iago's Diabolical Wit and Humour: Grotesque Comedy

"In Othello, it is the hero who is separated off from the full complexity of the circumstances in the world in which he exists." He is preoccupied with a strong emotion of jealousy, the germ of which is inoculated into his mind by Iago who acts as a Machiavellian villain. Like Lorenzo in The Spanish Tragedy by Thomas Kyd, Iago is a scheming villain, but has a mordant wit. Both Othello and Desdemona fall easy prey to
his trap. In the play, the comic energy is an off-shoot of the emotional subtlety of Iago’s
diabolical wit and humour. In every case, Iago’s hypocrisy, simulation and villainy are
contemptible, malicious and yet laughter provoking.

Throughout the play, Iago moves like an archfiend and his spiteful plotting
against Othello sets him to the frontier of a wicked world. In most cases, Iago’s villainy
is enshrouded with a covering of hypocrisy and therefore, neither Othello nor
Desdemona can hardly see through it. In the end, they both are entrapped and are
jeopardized producing a sense of fatality and irony among the audience.

In the Elizabethan stage, the representation of the scenes of hypocrisy,
simulation, and depravity are often treated as ridiculous. Obviously, Iago’s mock-
affection is as laughable as Richard’s mock-piety. Besides, his soliloquies also bear out
his diabolical wit that work with his grotesque humour. They cast a spell upon the mind
of the audience. Shakespeare’s humour is here expressed through Iago’s wit, which is all
but Mephistophelean. It pleases the pit first and then the audience.

The conversation between Iago and Desdemona in Cyprus gives the audience
some amount of comic relief. In Cyprus, Iago avails himself of talking to Desdemona on
some frivolous matters in which the latter looks disinterested owing to the absence of her
husband. The more Iago talks like a misogynist to her, the greater is Desdemona’s
dreariness, which she conceals in herself. In other words, Desdemona cannot enjoy
anything of Iago’s frivolities, which are pertinent to a courtship comedy.

An astute villain that he is, Iago makes Othello believe that Desdemona is
emotionally involved in a clandestine love with Cassio whom he has given a promotion
to the post of a lieutenant. Even at a psychological moment when both Desdemona and
Cassio are found engaged in talking about Cassio’s reinstatement, Iago brings Othello to
disillusion and makes a derogatory remark: “Ha! I like not that.” (3.3.33). Thus Iago unravels the labyrinth of the evil working of his mind through his soliloquies, which often provoke our laughter.

In fact, Iago, despises both Othello and Cassio whom he aims at destroying in an insidious way. He persuades Cassio to drink beyond the measure, thus leading him to a dereliction of duty as a newly appointed lieutenant. In this merry-making scene, he sings popular ballads and his vocal music creates an atmosphere of rowdy merriment that befits a festive comedy. Here, for instance, is one of Iago's convivial songs:

Some wine, ho!
And let me the cannikin, clink, clink,
And let me the cannikin clink.
As soldier's a man,
O, man's life's but a span,
Why then, let a soldier drink
Some wine, boys!

We can again trace the same diabolical wit and humour of Iago in his transactions with Roderigo, the fool who falls in love with Desdemona and sends some gold and money through Iago to court her favour. It is highly comical when Iago fully misappropriates the jewellery and does away with Roderigo. The latter serves as the gull of Elizabethan comedy, only with this difference that he is cast into a sinister company.

The grotesque comedy lies in all cases of Iago's villainies machinated against Othello, Desdemona, Cassio and Roderigo. It seems rather comical that Iago is drawn to these foolish persons less for money than for satisfaction provided by his own sense of malevolent humour. It is again amusing to say that Iago's success as a Machiavellian
villain is not so much a result of his diabolical wit as Othello’s credulousness or his promptness to respond to his growing jealousy. The terrible thing about Iago, as Shakespeare conceives him in terms of Elizabethan psychology, is that he is thoroughly rational and even more rational than Othello himself. The very rationalism and witty humour in Iago’s diabolical machinations make him stand a step higher than Othello and the others. He, by virtue of his ready wit and rationalism, always succeeds in his villainous enterprises. He, moreover, does not lack in a capacity for seeing himself in relation to the universal order of things. He makes others appear ridiculous but never makes himself a laughing-stock. This appreciation of Iago’s villainies permeates the whole tragedy and even breathes a spirit of comic levity into its tragic action.

2) Cassio’s Drunken Speeches: Comic Pathos

In Othello, Shakespeare depicts Cassio as a compliant figure, who is appointed the lieutenant by Othello in preference to Iago. Naturally Iago despises both Cassio and Othello and aims at destroying them both. Iago’s personal grudge does not subside till Cassio is dismissed. Iago plots to bring about Cassio’s ruin by fair means or foul.

Iago villainously coaxes Cassio to drink beyond the measure on Othello’s marriage-ceremony. Irresistibly persuaded by Iago, Cassio over-drinks and thereupon, loses his temper and loses control over himself. Naturally he is dismissed on the charge of dereliction of duty. So in an inebriated condition, he speaks certain incongruous words: “Gentlemen; Let’s look to our business. Do not think, gentlemen, I am drunk. This is my ensign, this is my right hand, and this is my left. I am not drunk now. I can stand well enough and I can speak well enough.” (2.3.105-109).
The Elizabethan audience can have necessary relief out of Cassio's drunken speeches as his intoxication due to over-drinking seems apparently ridiculous. There is, however, a slight touch of comic pathos in Cassio's drunkenness that reminds us of Stephano's drunkenness in *The Tempest*. Shakespeare lends a touch of pathos to this apparently comic scene when he makes Cassio exclaims: "Reputation, reputation, reputation- O, I ha' lost my reputation, I ha' lost my immortal part of myself and want remains is bestial! My reputation, Iago, my reputation.” (2.3.256-259).

It is ridiculous to hear Cassio repeat the wrong he has committed by a dereliction of duties. He still hopes to ask Othello for reinstatement by a fervent prayer that would command his sympathy: "Had I as many mouths as Hydra, such an answer would stop them all. To be now a sensible man, by and by a fool and presently a beast! O strange! Every inordinate cup is unblessed, and the ingredient is a devil.” (2.3.297-301).

The drunken speeches of Cassio, in the sombre atmosphere not only excite our pity but also transform the pathos of the whole action into a sort of comic hilarity that hardly befits a tragedy. "The comic structures at the beginning of *Othello* do not, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, arouse comic expectations." Yet the play with the development of its plot, deals with how Cassio stumbles into the pit of comic atmosphere in his drunken condition and makes us laugh. Besides, Cassio's deportment with the clown (3.1) also brings down the tragic seriousness of the play near to a festive comedy.

3) Roderigo's Foolery: Comic Interpretations

In the tragedy, the existence of comic fool is almost untraceable, yet there may be a foolish character like Roderigo who sometimes appears to be comical. Obviously Roderigo plays the fool like Polonius in *Hamlet*. Shakespeare delineates him as a fool
deceived by Iago, even though without any reason for malice against him. In the early part of the play, Roderigo follows Desdemona foolishly to Cyprus on certain military affairs. Like a comic fool, he also disguises himself as a man with beard and appears before Iago who cannot recognize him. Such a sense of comic deceit usually provokes our laughter.

Roderigo's folly is that he is frivolously infatuated with Desdemona and tries his best to win her heart. When Othello promotes Cassio to the post of the lieutenant, in view of his military skill at the battle against the Turks, Iago becomes extremely envious of Cassio’s promotion and thereupon, instigates Roderigo to pick a quarrel with him. In fact, Iago uses Roderigo as an instrument to be set on Cassio who is already intoxicated by over-drinking. However, Roderigo, who is devoid of intelligence and virtue, cannot arouse any feeling of enmity.

Roderigo’s foolery is further seen when he foolishly sends some gold and money to Desdemona through Iago. But instead of offering the jewellery to Desdemona, Iago fully appropriates the money and thus deceives him. Soon after Roderigo is killed by Cassio under the instigation of Iago who wants to obliterate the claimant of the valuable presentations. Thus, Iago villainously get the upper hand and Roderigo’s gullibility is exploited to produce comic effects.

4) Clownage Scenes : Comic Relief

The clownage scene in the Elizabethan drama is one of the most important comic elements in both tragedy and comedy. In Shakespeare’s plays, the clownage scenes pulsate with their humourous talks, jokes, drollery or witty humour of the clowns that create an atmosphere of levity and laughter. “To enliven the audience the Devil of
the Miracle plays was introduced and another lively personage called vice was the predecessor of our modern clown and jester. In *Othello* there is however, no such Medieval Devil though Iago may be called an incarnation of devil but not a clown.

The clown in *Othello*, as is found in *Antony and Cleopatra*, appears to Desdemona only when the atmosphere is sternly macabre and serious. In the play, the clown, however, appears first with a band of Musicians in the third act and their conversation brings the seriousness of action near to the verge of festive comedy.

Clown. Why, masters, ha’ your instruments been in Naples, that speak I’th nose thus.?

Musician. How sir, how?

Clown. Are these, I pray you, wind instruments?

Musician. Ay, marry are they, sir.

Clown. O, thereby hangs a tale.

Musician. Whereby hangs the tale, sir?

Clown. Marry, sir, by many a wind instrument that I know. But masters, here’s money for you, and the general so likes your music that he desires you, for love’s sake, to make no more noise with it.

Musician. Well, sir, we will not.

Clown. If you have any music that not be heard to ’t again; but as they say, to hear music the general does not greatly care.

Musician. We ha’ none such, sir.

Clown. Then put up your pipes in your bag, for I will away, vanish into air, away. (3.1.3-20).
The clown moves away from the Musicians to Cassio when he looks dejected with his unexpected demotion. It is strange enough to note that Cassio asks the Musicians to play their music in order to entertain him. He even runs into a frivolous discourse with the clown which also refreshes his heavy heart.

The same clownage repeats itself in the third act, shifting from Cassio to Desdemona who also looks pensive owing to Othello's suspicions of her. A brief dialogue between Desdemona and the clown touches the brink of pathos and thereupon, relieves it to some extent:

**Desdemona.** Do you know, sirrah, where lieutenant Cassio lies?

**Clown.** I dare not say he lies anywhere.

**Desdemona.** Why man?

**Clown.** He's a soldier, and for me to say a soldier lies, 'tis stabbing.

**Desdemona.** Go to. Where lodges he?

**Clown.** To tell you where he lodges is to tell you where I lie.

**Desdemona.** Can anything be made of this?

**Clown.** I know not where he lodges, and for me to devise a lodging and say he lies here or he lies there, were to lie in mine own throat.

**Desdemona.** Can you enquire him out, and be edified by report?

**Clown.** I will catechize the world for him; that is, make questions, and by them answer.

**Desdemona.** Seek him, bid him, come hither, tell him I have moved my lord on his behalf, and hope all will be well.

**Clown.** To do this is within the compass of man's wit, and, therefore, I will attempt the doing it. (3.4.1-22).
In the above dialogue, the frivolities of the Clown lighten the gloom pervading Desdemona's heavy heart. The appearance of the clown may seem incongruous to such a somber atmosphere. Yet it is thought that: "Shakespeare's use of the clown is often so happy and unexpected that this character could hardly be spared from Shakespearean drama. If the clown were gone, something would be missing from the whole. The purity and nobility of the plays would doubtless be enhanced, but their meaning would be rejected and their philosophy would suffer."

It is true that this clown does not show the subtlety of invention that goes into the making of his counterparts in other Shakespearean tragedies. We can hardly say, of Othello's clowns what has generally been said of the Shakespearean clown in general. The inclusion of the clownage scenes in Othello undoubtedly goes fully against the classical convention, but in the Elizabethan stage, the appearance of the clown often creates a hilarious situation even in the midst of intense pathos and gloom. "The clown in Othello has so poor a part, in a single scene with Cassio that a comic actor of ability could hardly be expected to refrain from eking it out with invention." It can again be said that the clown scene in Othello is so insignificant that they seems to be there merely for comic relief and jealousy for no other purpose. Yet the role of the clown to Desdemona, before she is killed by her husband, emphasizes a clear undertone of a grim comedy.

NOTES


(The quotation and all subsequent references to the play are made from this edition and they have been incorporated in this text.)


