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Othello and the Human Spirit

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There is no doubt about the radically bleak world of *Othello*. It is unredeemed and awful – 'not to be borne'.[1] 'Of all Shakespeare's tragedies... *Othello* is the most painfully exciting and most terrible.'[2] 'It is the grimmest Shakespeare I've done. It is completely and utterly non-redemptive.'[3] The evil of Iago appals us, it is without limit. By the end, Othello, Desdemona, Emilia and Roderigo all lie dead, victims of Iago's deception, for which he shows not the slightest sign of guilt or remorse. 'It is only in Goethe's Mephistopheles that a fit companion for Iago can be found.'[4] Othello and Desdemona's helplessness in the grip of Iago's plot is dreadful to watch, particularly as Iago is fully aware of how they can be manipulated –

> For 'tis most easy
> The inclining Desdemona to subdue
> In any honest suit.
>
> 2:iii, 311–13[5]

We despair of Desdemona's inaction and Othello's naivety. But they work out their story blindly, and at the end hope is also dead. I am not the only person to ask why Shakespeare would have written such a bleak play, and why there is no leading character in it without major deficiencies of character, deficiencies that lead directly to the tragedy. Bradley has observed that such deficiencies are an integral part of the tragedies: 'Shakespeare's tragic characters are made of the stuff we find within ourselves... Some, like... Othello, are built on the grand scale; and desire, passion or will attains in them a terrible force... we observe a marked one-sidedness, a predisposition in some particular

1. Samuel Johnson.
2. Bradley, *Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, p. 176. Page numbers refer to the 2nd edition, Macmillan, London, 1905.
3. Simon Russell Beale, speaking at Bath Literature Festival, 10 March 2002.
4. A. C. Bradley, p. 208.
5. All references to the play are from *The London Shakespeare*, edited John Munro, 1957.

direction; a total incapacity, in certain circumstances, of resisting the force which draws in this direction; a fatal tendency to identify the whole being with one interest, object, passion, or habit of mind.'[6] This is quite clearly true of Othello. But to seek an answer to my questions, it is necessary to move on from these useful generalizations, and to examine the specific nature of the play and the particular predispositions of the characters. I will, in doing that, introduce a new perspective on the play's portrayal of human nature, and what it has to tell us about the workings of the human spirit.

Let us look at Othello first – the 'hero', although not really a hero at all. He is a highly successful soldier, sufficiently so for Venice to have chosen him, a foreigner, and black, as its General.[7] He is a man of action:

> A natural and prompt alacrity
> I find in hardness
>
> 1:iii, 231–2

Othello's whole life is centred in his career, and in his ability to 'talk big' about it. His language is extravagant and powerful, but none the less rings true for an adventurer such as he is. He is resourceful, and even as a General, takes it quite naturally, as the man on the spot, to be a surgeon to a wounded man: 'Sir, for your hurts, myself will be your surgeon' (2:iii, 235). He is not a thinker, in fact rarely stops to contemplate his actions for long. When he is with Desdemona, and their departure and all other matters with the Senate are settled, he leaves precipitately with her:

> Come Desdemona, I have but an hour
> Of love, of worldly matters and direction
> To spend with thee; we must obey the time.
>
> 1:iii, 279–99

6. Bradley lecture 1 – 'The substance of Shakespearean tragedy'.

7. Although it was not remarkable that he was a foreigner – Venice 'held it a better course to defend their dominions upon the Continent with foreign mercenary soldiers, than with their homeborn citizens'. *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, 1591, a translation of *De Magistratibus et Republica Venetorum*, G. Contario, 1543, which is believed to be one of Shakespeare's sources.

His whole character can be seen in this action alone – he sees the situation, and with a quick thought he moves to action. 'Hesitation is almost impossible to him. He... decides and acts instantaneously.'[8] Othello's forcefulness can be seen even in conversation; when Iago has intimated that he has thoughts he does not wish to reveal, and persists in his reluctance, Othello pursues the point relentlessly: 'By heaven, I'll know thy thoughts' (3:iii, 166).

Othello is capable of great anger; the power of his anger lies in the fact that it is his dammed-up action. Bradley says 'he was... if once wrought to passion, likely to act with little reflection, with no delay, and in the most decisive manner conceivable',[9] and I think this is an accurate assessment. Less accurate, and to my mind the judgement of a modern intellectual who has no experience of men of Othello's temper, is Gerard – 'once he is convinced of Desdemona's unfaithfulness, surely the next step is to go and discuss things with her or with Cassio; this he never does'.[10] Quite apart from the fact that this ignores Othello's trust in Iago, by this stage of the action, Othello is not a man capable of discussing things; he is more comparable to an enraged bull charging across a field, and just as unstoppable and inaccessible to reason. After Cassio's brawl we see Othello's anger for the first time:

> Now, by heaven,
> My blood begins my safer guides to rule
> And passion, having my best judgement collied,
> Assays to lead the way
>
> 2:iii, 186–9

– and that is only a mild precursor to the tempest of anger and jealousy that convulses him in the later stages of the play. There have been performances that stressed this side of Othello's character – here is a description of Tommaso Salvini's portrayal – 'he pounced upon [Desdemona], lifted her into the air, dashed with her... across the stage and through the curtains, which fell behind him. You heard a crash as

8. Bradley, lectures on Othello, p. 191.

9. Bradley, p. 186.

10. Albert Gerard, 'Egregiously an Ass; the dark side of the Moor. A view of Othello's mind'. *Shakespeare Studies* No. 10, 1957 – reprinted in *Aspects of Othello*, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

he flung her on the bed and growls as if of a wild beast over his prey.'[11] Even if we consider that interpretation too strong, the underlying character is clear – we must describe Othello as a man of strong will, quick of action, whose emotions and thoughts follow a similar pattern – strong; quick; forceful. 'Othello is... a being essentially large and grand, towering above his fellows, holding a volume of force which in repose ensures pre-eminence without an effort, and in commotion reminds us rather of the fury of the elements than of the tumult of common human passion.'[12] There is no one else in the play, not even the other soldiers, remotely like him.

Desdemona is so radically different from Othello that one feels there is no real compatibility between them, other than mutual attraction, and that attraction possibly of a different nature in the two of them. Desdemona falls in love with the stories of Othello, with the idea and the romance of him – 'She loved me for the dangers I had passed' (1:iii, 167). She is not a woman of action, in fact in the later stages of the drama one longs for her to actually do something, and to bring Othello to his senses in time to save herself, but she is, relentlessly, adrift in a sea of sympathetic emotion, without an intelligent thought to guide her. She is all sympathy – when Othello has been describing how he told her of his life, he says that he

> Often did beguile her of her tears
> When I did speak of some distressful stroke
> That my youth suffered. My story being done
> She gave me for my pains a world of sighs.
>
> 1:iii, 156–9

Her thoughts are simple – she cares for others, thinks highly of others. When Emilia asks if Othello is jealous, she says

> I think the sun where he was born
> Drew all such humours from him.
>
> 3:iv, 26–7

11. J. R. Towse, *Sixty Years of the Theatre*, 1916, p. 163.
12. Bradley, p. 176.

And despite the evidence of her senses, when soon after faced with Othello's anger, she convinces herself that Othello is not angry with her:

> I was (unhandsome warrior as I am)
> arraigning his unkindness with my soul
> but now I find I had suborned the witness
> and he's indicted falsely.
>
> 3:iv, 151–5

and even in her dying speech she denies any wrong in Othello.

Desdemona is emphatically not a thinker. She cannot weight the balance of good and evil as, for instance, Emilia does. Here is their dialogue about adultery, and how some women are guilty of it:

> DESDEMONA: Wouldst thou do such a deed for the whole world?
> EMILIA: The world's a huge thing: it is great price
> For a small vice.
> DESDEMONA: Good troth, I think thou wouldst not.
> EMILIA: By my troth, I think I should.
>
> 4:iii, 66–70

I am sure that Emilia is being quite honest at this point. Norman Sanders says of this speech 'Emilia's assumption of the façade of moral cynicism is as false as her exterior and conceals a love . . .',[13] but I think this is a misreading of Emilia, who indeed has a love for Desdemona, but can also weigh moral questions in the balance of values. Desdemona does not do that. 'That deep inward division which leads to clear and conscious oppositions of right and wrong, duty and inclination, justice and injustice, is alien to her beautiful soul. She is not good, kind and true in spite of a temptation to be otherwise, . . . she acts on inclination.'[14] She is kind, utterly kind, caring, without malice of any kind, achingly innocent, even seeking pardon for her own slanderer: 'If any such there be, heaven pardon him!' (4:ii, 136). Contrast this with Emilia's immediate response, also about the slanderer: 'A halter pardon him! And hell gnaw his bones!'

13. Norman Sanders, Introduction to *New Cambridge Shakespeare*, 1984 edition, p. 35.
14. Bradley, p. 205.

Desdemona's whole life is centred in her life of feeling, in her heart. 'Desdemona... shows less quickness of intellect and less tendency to reflection than most.'[15] I think that considerably understates the case. We feel sympathy with the warmth of Desdemona's character, for her depth of feeling, but at the same time, for her blindness and inaction we feel frustration and exasperation. This inaction seems at first sight to contradict some of the positive qualities we have seen in her, earlier in the play. She has acted boldly in marrying Othello, and although she later on is fearful, when she denies the loss of Othello's handkerchief, and quite naturally frightened in the last scene when she learns that Othello intends to kill her, I think we have to attribute to her that very positive emotional quality of courage. Her frankness, at the beginning of the play, when facing the Senate, is almost startling:

> And he go to the war
> The rites for why I love him are bereft me
> ... Let me go with him.
>
> 1:iii, 255–8

This frankness is the more remarkable because we could so easily otherwise take her to be a weak and emotional girl. She has ignored her father to marry Othello, and she is, moreover, unapologetic. She is emotional, but without doubt, emotionally strong.

Turning now to Iago, we find a character whose whole inner life is stated in his soliloquies; from the beginning, the jealousy that consumes him, the hatred that he harbours, the plotting, are all revealed to the audience. But until the final dénouement, none of the other major characters ever really suspects this. We hear repeated assertions of his honesty and truthfulness. Othello does so at least three times – the last time, after killing Desdemona, when he tells Emilia who it was that told him of Desdemona's supposed unfaithfulness: 'My friend, thy husband, honest, honest Iago' (5:ii, 156).

Only Roderigo knows the whole story. It is true that Iago's wife Emilia does have some slight suspicion of him, which she refers to when discussing a slanderer of Desdemona –

15. Bradley, p. 204.

> Some such squire he was,
> That turned your wit the seamy side without
> And made you to suspect me with the Moor
>
> 4:ii, 146–8

and also in these lines spoken after she has given Iago the handkerchief:

> What he'll do with it
> Heaven knows, not I.
> I nothing but to please his fantasy.
>
> 3:iii, 301–3

So she is somehow aware that he does have his own fantasy world. But these are the only signs in the play that anyone apart from Roderigo knows that Iago is not what he seems. Her suspicion is as nothing compared to the reality of his deception. Iago is the character who is, in the context of the play at any rate, pure deceit, a total separation of image and reality. This is clear from the beginning of the play, when Iago says

> Whip me such honest knaves. Others there are
> Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,
> Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
> And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
> Do well thrive by 'em, and, when they have lined their coats,
> Do themselves homage: these fellows have some soul,
> And such a one do I profess myself.
>
> 1:i, 49–55

We have characterized Othello as the man of action, Desdemona as full of heart; neither of these has the quality of saying one thing and thinking another; but Iago is a thinker – he has the possibility that thought provides, of untruthfulness, of the lie. 'Iago's powers of dissimulation and of self-control must have been prodigious.'[16] Not that this ability is new, it goes back at least to Odysseus, when it possibly was new, but it is this absorption in his own thought that is Iago's very

16. Bradley, p. 217.

nature. He despises honesty. He does not have the propensity to immediate action that Othello has; Iago broods, plans, plots. He even says that to him, an idea is as good as perception –

> . . . I hate the Moor
> And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
> 'has done my office. I know not if 't be true;–
> but I for mere suspicion in that kind
> will do as if for surety.
>
> 1:iii, 371–5

So for Iago the truth of an idea is simply not important, all that is important is the fact that the idea lies in his thoughts. False ideas can take root in anyone, and this is how jealousy works, as Emilia tells Desdemona:

> But jealous souls will not be answered so
> They are not ever jealous for the cause
> But jealous for they're jealous.
>
> 3:iv, 159–61

But what guards against unfounded jealousy is a healthy feeling for truth, which is what Iago completely lacks. This breathtaking carelessness for truth contrasts with the care he takes with what he says to the world:

> IAGO: My lord, you know I love you.
> OTHELLO: I think thou dost;
> And for I know thou'rt full of love and honesty
> And weigh'st thy words before thou giv'st them breath.
>
> 3:iii, 121–3

Iago does indeed weigh his words, but not against truth, he weighs them with the deception of his intellect. Bradley refers to Iago's 'intellectual superiority so great that [the audience] watch its advance fascinated and appalled'.[17] It has to be said, in response to that, that Iago is not being compared with any intellectual competitors worth speaking of.

17. Bradley, p. 177.

Iago's process of thought is displayed clearly later on in the play, when he has to face unforeseen circumstances, and improvise the workings of his plot as it proceeds:

> I have rubbed this young quat almost to the sense,
> And he grows angry. Now, whether he kill Cassio,
> Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other,
> Every way makes my gain. Live Roderigo,
> He calls me to a restitution large
> Of gold and jewels that I bobbed from him
> As gifts to Desdemona:
> It must not be.

So he has decided on Roderigo's fate. He continues with Cassio –

> If Cassio do remain,
> He hath a daily in beauty in his life
> That makes me ugly; and besides, the Moor
> May unfold me to him: there stand I in much peril.
> No, he must die. Be't so.
>
> 5:i, 11–21

A plot that takes place, to start with, only in Iago's head, has of course no visible dramatic evidence until it comes to fruition; as Peter Levi has pointed out, 'the audience must have [Iago's schemes] constantly explained in detail, because Iago is a perfect actor and his machinations would otherwise ... be unplumbed'.[18]

Iago has Roderigo to do much of the dirty work, only interesting himself in action when the secrecy of his own plans are threatened. He could have killed Cassio himself, but he chooses that another does it. The only act he undertakes completely alone is the murder of his own wife – here, for once, he does act quickly. Bradley describes Iago as having 'very remarkable powers both of intellect and will',[19] and says 'in intellect (always within certain limits) and in will (considered as a mere power, and without regard to its objects), Iago *is* great'.[20] But look at the type of will Bradley refers to here – not external actions but self

18. Peter Levi, *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare*, Macmillan, 1988.
19. Bradley, p. 218. 20. Bradley, p. 219.

control, inner control, planning, dissimulation. 'All of his real life is inward.'[21] Iago is quick of perception as well as thought – 'his quickness and versatility in dealing with sudden difficulties and unforeseen opportunities, have probably no parallel among dramatic characters'.[22] Bradley later qualifies this view: 'Compare him with Hamlet, and you perceive how miserably close is his intellectual horizon; such a thing as a thought beyond the reaches of his soul has never come near him.'[23] It is interesting to compare Simon Russell Beale's actor's view of Iago – 'I don't see Iago as dazzlingly brilliant – his plot is the oldest trick in the book. It's easy. He's not a brilliant Machiavelli, just an ordinary mean little sneak.' Whatever view we take, Iago is clearly the most aware of the leading characters, but is totally tied up in his own thoughts, in himself. 'His creed... is that absolute egoism is the only rational and proper attitude'[24] – (note the word 'rational' in that sentence). 'He has a spite against goodness in men,... because it... disturbs his faith that egoism is the right and proper thing.'[25] He displays no warmth of feeling – he is 'by no means a man of strong feelings and passions, but decidedly cold by temperament... equally unassailable by the temptations of indolence or of sensuality'.[26] The only feelings he evidences are jealousy and hatred – negative emotions, all antipathy. He despises others, especially Roderigo. And he is fearful and suspicious of everyone – not only does he suspect Othello of cuckolding him, but Cassio also 'I fear Cassio with my nightcap too' (2:ii, 294). As Bradley points out, Iago's statements are not to be trusted, but I think he does describe himself accurately when he says 'For I am nothing if not critical' (2:i, 120). Thought is, of course, inherently critical, and the process of thinking requires a separation from its objects; it is separate also from emotion. And so Iago does not understand love other than as lust, and holds that reason needs to control sensuality:

> If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions: but we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts; whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion.
>
> 1:iii, 323–8

21. Norman Sanders. 22. Bradley, p. 218. 23. Bradley, p. 236.
24. Bradley, p. 219. 25. Bradley, p. 221. 26. Bradley, p. 218.

This quality of self-control in Iago is well recognized by Othello, who speaks of him:

> the heart
> That passion cannot rule.
>
> 3:iii, 127–8

And Iago himself, despite his false exterior, expresses his own views on how a man should govern his own emotion well enough when he says to Othello, whom he has already raised to a high pitch of jealousy:

> Marry, patience
> Or I shall say y'are all in all in spleen
> And nothing of a man.
>
> 4:i, 86–8

But self-control is not the only way of looking at it – Iago seems destitute of any positive emotions. 'He shows no trace of affection, and in presence of the most terrible suffering he shows either pleasure or an indifference which, if not complete, is nearly so.'[27] 'Iago's emotional relationship to the audience, [and everyone else in the play,] is "I don't give a damn what you think."'[28] Iago does not really understand the emotional lives of others; although he plays on Othello's emotions, he has not foreseen the results, and 'the intrigue releases more passion than he had anticipated'.[29] Although Iago feels jealousy himself, his emotional life is, at best, severely stunted, and wholly negative. Here is Beale's summary of him – 'I say Iago is in hell and I mean it. I think that is what it is to be a psychopath, to have no moral structure, to experience no love anywhere in your own self or anywhere else. It is as though you have a lump of basalt in your stomach, where you focus all the hatred in your life.' Such is the character who drives the tragedy to its awful conclusion.

So Shakespeare presents us with these three leading characters – a man of action, a woman who lives strongly in her emotions, and a man

27. Bradley, p. 220. 28. Beale.
29. Barbara Heliodora C. de Mendonca, *Shakespeare Survey*, No. 21, 1968.

wrapped up in his own thoughts. All unbalanced, all hopelessly one-sided. But they are human, they are by no means symbolic characters who represent these concepts, this is Shakespeare; the characters are real. Othello does have thoughts, but they are almost immediately translated into action, or into the frustrated action of anger. Take his masterly and immediate response when Desdemona asks the Senate that she be allowed to go with Othello – he immediately suggests that they should be 'free and bounteous to her mind' (1:iii, 264) and immediately refutes any thought that her presence will impair his military performance. This is quite clearly an intelligent and well-thought response, but, as we should expect from Othello, delivered as an immediate response to the situation. Later on, when Othello agonizes over his course of action, we hear his thoughts wavering about Desdemona:

> Yet I'll not shed her blood
> Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow.
> And smooth as monumental alabaster.
> Yet she must die.
>
> 5:ii, 3–6

Here Othello is forced to think, under the influence of Iago's desperately cruel suggestions; he is already 'wrought, perplexed in the extreme' (5:ii, 347–8) and far from his normal self. But note the difference from the thoughts of Iago, who under pressure argues himself logically to a conclusion. Othello is not using logic, but only wavering between opposite conclusions, based on his conflicting emotions. I give these examples to make clear that this one-sidedness of the three main characters is a broad generalization, but powerful, and all the more relevant because these characters are, within the context of the theatre, real human beings. 'I find Iago painfully real.'[30] In the same manner, Iago does have feelings, and will, but his feelings act like subterranean forces, act with great power and move him to his actions, but he is not in control of them. It is their emotional life that drives all the characters, gives them the urge to action. With Iago it is jealousy and hatred, constant, and uncaring. The reasons he gives for action vary, but the underlying emotional impulse does not. Coleridge

30. Peter Levi.

has elaborated this; the immediate reason for action he calls the *motive*, and the underlying emotional drive the *impulse*.[31] This is why Coleridge refers to the 'motive-hunting of motiveless malignity'[32] of Iago; to Iago the immediate motive is unimportant, because his emotional life is totally self-interested, 'I never found man that knew how to love himself' (1:iii, 311–12) – which would except himself, but for the fact that he seems to have no love at all, even for himself, and no desire for it – 'a complete lack of concern about whether he's loved or not'.[33] He has total antipathy to the world. The emotional life of Desdemona is the opposite, she is all sympathy and care for others, she is hardly conscious of her own interests. Othello swings between the two, he starts the play with enormous love for Desdemona, but as soon as false ideas and jealousy are planted in him by Iago, he swings to righteous hatred, and, with his active character, to the actions that follow from that. All the characters, in their different ways, despite Iago's claims to the contrary, and Othello's view that he is not easily jealous, are slaves to their own emotions.

Despite the qualifications that I have noted above, the three different tendencies in the leading characters – to thoughts, will, and emotion – are striking. Wilson Knight has commented on the distinctive nature of the characters – 'Othello, Desdemona, Iago, however, are clearly and vividly separate...within analysis of these three persons and their interaction lies the meaning of *Othello*... Interpretation must be based not on unity but differentiation.'[34] None of these characters is a well-balanced human being; none has the capability of wholeness. All three of them are inwardly helpless, unable to direct, or even to attempt to direct, their own destiny, in the way that, say, Hamlet attempts to do. There is something lacking in them. Look at the character of Hamlet – he has strong emotions, but rationalizes them, thinks on them, agonizes over his actions. He struggles inwardly, but he finally does act, does, despite the tragedy, achieve some wholeness of character; he is, to use the usual word, a hero, albeit a flawed hero. But what is it that we are talking about when we describe Hamlet as a hero? It is, at least in the case of modern heroes (and Shakespeare is the beginning of

31. See *Omniana*, 1812, No. 119, in *Shorter Works and Fragments* 1:310.
32. Coleridge marginal note 1818. 33. Beale.
34. The Othello music, in *Wheel of Fire*, G. Wilson Knight, 1930.

modern in this context) a quality that brings wholeness; it is the human spirit, that brings meaning and purpose to life, that restrains and guides emotion, brings thoughts into line with reality and truth, and governs action to bring it into harmony with the thoughts and the feelings. It is the individuality of human nature, it is that which has been achieved in this life. It can be seen in the struggle with moral values that we perceive in Hamlet. If we now look back at Othello, Desdemona, Iago, we find none of this, simply none. They lack the incarnate human spirit that can bring the forces of thought, emotions, and actions into an integrated whole. The morality of action that Hamlet struggles with is absent in *Othello* – morality appears as tradition – the leading characters do not struggle with finding their own morality of action. 'Alone among the tragic heroes, Othello is a patient rather than an agent worked on by forces outside himself, as total a victim of deception as any character in the Shakespeare canon.'[35] *Othello* is a drama of the human spirit, but it is a drama of the *absence* of the conscious human spirit, the terrible consequences of the lack of spirit in human beings, when the forces of thought, emotions, and will work independently, and how inadequate they are revealed to be, when acting as more or less independent agents. After seeing Othello strike Desdemona, Lodovico, horrified, says, 'Is this the noble Moor?' (4 :i, 254).

It is the spirit which makes man or woman noble, and incorruptible; without it such nobility as there appears to be, as Othello has, is built on sand. It is the spirit in man which constrains evil, and confines the forces of the soul to their right sphere of action. Evil can enter when good, i.e. the spirit, is unable or unwilling to do its work of forming reality in the right way. Look at Roderigo, surely the most degenerate character in the play from this point of view – he thinks, but he is led astray in his thoughts; he acts, but only when incited to it by Iago; and he is apparently devoid of any true feeling other than desire for Desdemona. Iago can confide in him, as in no other that we know of, because he knows that Roderigo is totally manipulable, a man almost without character at all. 'Very want of character and strength of passion, like wind loudest in an empty house, constitute his character.'[36] Behind the one-sidedness of the main characters stands a puppet, without any strengths at all.

*

35. Norman Sanders. 36. Coleridge, *Lectures 1818.*

At this point it is well to ask to what extent the division of thought, feeling, and action in the play was created instinctively by Shakespeare, or to what extent he might have drawn on a knowledge of contemporary thought, philosophy, and medicine. The conceptual basis I have outlined above would certainly not have leapt out at me so clearly from the play, had I not already been familiar with it, in my case from the work of Rudolf Steiner, who elaborated the threefold nature of the soul and the unifying spirit from numerous points of view in his lectures and books.[37] In terms of the body, Steiner related thinking, feeling, and action to the head, the rhythmic system, including heart and lungs, and the metabolic/limb system, respectively, and, as we shall see, this division also appears clearly in Elizabethan thought.

It is of course very difficult to say to what extent Shakespeare's wisdom was intuitive and to what extent he is drawing on the thought of his time. A great deal of scholarly activity has failed to come to any definite conclusions about the extent of Shakespeare's learning, but some things are fairly clear. T. W. Baldwin comments that the tradition of Shakespeare's 'little learning' 'rests squarely and solely on Jonson's "small *Latine* and lesse *Greeke*" statement...even taken literally, it grants to Shakespeare what we would now consider a fair command of Latin',[38] and Lily B. Campbell comes to the conclusion that Shakespeare 'was a man familiar with the learning of his day, a student of philosophy, and a purposive artist'.[39] We may therefore with some justification look for examples of the threefold division in contemporary English and Latin texts that Shakespeare might have read (Greek was a language few could read in Elizabethan times). The Latin literature was quite extensive, including Ficino's translations of the leading Greek philosophers. Amongst the Latin writers, Cicero and Seneca formed part of the standard grammar school education, and one of the few near certainties in our knowledge of Shakespeare's reading is that he would have studied them in his youth, and been familiar with their

37. The interested and serious reader is referred to Steiner's works. Many of his more introductory works focus on a fourfold division of man. These correspond to the doctrine of the four humours, whilst the division of thinking, feeling, and action, which appears in many of his later works, corresponds to the medieval doctrine of the three spirits.

38. T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakespeare's small Latine and lesse Greeke*, University of Illinois Press, 1944.

39. Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*, Cambridge University Press, 1930.

Stoic theme of the control of passions – 'we [should] keep all our passions and appetites under the government and direction of reason' (Cicero).[40] Certainly the Stoic influence is strong in Shakespeare – witness the speeches about reason governing passions quoted earlier, and Hamlet's words to Horatio:

> Give me that man
> that is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
> in my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart.
> *Hamlet*, 3:ii, 63–5

Cicero and Seneca are not the kind of writers where we expect to find a discussion of the subdivisions of the soul, but Seneca does make a passing reference, albeit significant only to those already familiar with such ideas - 'There are three kinds of life, and it is a common question as to which of them is best. One is devoted to pleasure, a second to contemplation, a third to action.'[41] We do however find a threefold division of the soul quite clearly in Renaissance thought, in works that we would have to classify today with the rather narrow modern term of medical, although they are of course much broader than that. The title of chapter 2 of Ficino's 'De Triplice Vita' is 'What diligent care we should take of the brain, the heart, the stomach, and the Spirit'. In this chapter he says 'Now the blood is made by that natural power which flourishes in the liver and the stomach. The lightest part of the blood flows into the fountain of the heart, where flourishes the vital power. The spirits generated from this ascend to the citadels of the brain ... in there the animal force dominates'.[42] This is the doctrine of the three spirits, that features strongly in the medical psychology of Elizabethan times, alongside the better known doctrine of the four humours. Here is an example from a medical book published in 1582 – 'If we take hede to the soule in comparyson to his workyng, we fynde thre maner vertues, Vegetabilis, that gevethe lyfe[,] Sensibilis, that geveth felynge,

40. Cicero, *The Offices*, Book 1 XXXIX, translated by Thomas Cakman, 1699.

41. Seneca, essay 'On Leisure', translated John W. Basore, Heinemann, 1928. Translation available on Ben Schneider's website, Stoics.com.

42. Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, translated by Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark, Centre for Mediaeval and Early Renaissance Studies, State University of New York, 1989.

Racionalis, that geveth reason'.[43] The concept of four humours dates back to Hippocrates, and the concept of the three spirits was added by Galen (130–200), the Greek physician whose work formed the basis of mediaeval medicine.[44] 'Of these species he notices three as amongst the most excellent faculties, according to Plato, and yet they appear to act differently in different subjects; from whence Plato seems to have imagined three species or varieties of soul, located the one in the liver, another in the heart, and a third in the brain.'[45] Although translations of Galen into English were published in 1574 by John Jones and 1586 by Thomas Gale, his works are vast, and it seems unlikely Shakespeare would have read them.[46] The doctrines however appear in more accessible contemporary works. A good example is Timothy Bright, whose *Treatise of Melancholie* of 1586 was popular enough to go into two editions in its first year. Bright says 'the braine is the chiefe instrument of sense, and motion, which it deriveth by the spirit before mentioned, into all the partes of the bodie... the harte is the seate of life, and of affections, and perturbations, of love, or hate, like, or dislike,... the liver is the instrument of nourishment, and groweth'.[47] Bright is of some interest in relation to Shakespeare, because the stock of the printer Vautroller, who printed the above work, passed later into the hands of Richard Field, who was Shakespeare's fellow townsman, and the publisher of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece.*

Bright is also helpful in characterizing the differences in body, soul, and spirit – some other works of the time by no means make clear the conceptual distinctions as clearly as he does here – 'I know commonly there are accompted three spirits: animall, vitall, and naturall: but these are in deede, rather distinctions of diverse offices of one spirit.' A similar view is found in Thomas Newton, who after discussing the

43. Bartholomews, *de Proprietatibus Rerum*, 1360?, published in England, 1495, 1535, and with comments by Batman, 1582. Quote from 1582 edition, p. 14.

44. The Elizabethan Statutes of 1570 specify that the textbooks of university lecturers in medicine are to be Hippocrates and Galen.

45. John Redman Coxe, *The Writings of Hippocrates and Galen epitomised*, Lindsay and Blakiston, Philadelphia, 1846, p. 551, from Galen XXIV, 'That the qualities of the mind depend upon the temperament of the body'.

46. Although Sir John Falstaff claimed to have read some! *Henry IV Part 2*, Act 1 scene 2 103.

47. Timothy Bright, *A treatise of Melancholie*, 1586, printed by Thomas Vautroller. Bright had a good enough reputation to be treated by later writers as an authority to be respected.

three spirits at some length, mentions 'The power of the Spirite which is infused and breathed by God above, into these lower bodyes'.[48] These statements lead us to the ancient concepts of body, soul, and spirit, where the spirit as such is essentially a unity, whilst the soul is the middle domain between body and spirit, and is the field of action where the spirit works in a threefold way, reflecting the larger division in microcosm. It is therefore important to distinguish between the threefold nature of the soul, and the larger picture of body, soul, and spirit. This latter division can also be found in Renaissance works, for instance in Paracelsus: 'Spirit, Soul and Body, we must know, but they signifie nothing else but the three principles, i.e. Mercury, Sulphur, and Salt. For Mercury is the spirit, Sulphur the soul, and Salt the body... the soul alone is that medium which joins the spirit to the body.'[49] 'The world edifice is made in two parts – one tangible and perceptible, and one invisible and imperceptible... The tangible part is in turn composed of three parts – Sulphur, Mercury, and Salt. The invisible also consists of three parts – feeling, wisdom, and art.'[50]

The threefold division of the soul is also found in earlier works, available to Shakespeare in Latin translation. The division of brain, heart, and liver is found in Plotinus, who was as esteemed as Plato in Renaissance times (although he is somewhat alarmingly unorthodox in insisting that the heart is the seat of anger).[51] A contemporary translation of Aristotle's *Ethics* uses these words: 'The Solle of Man hath thre powers, one is called the lyfe vegitable: in the whiche man is partener with tres and with plantes; the second power, is the life sensible in the whiche a man is partener with beastes,... The third, is called solle

48. Thomas Newton, *The touchstone of complexions*, 1576. Chapter 3, p. 20.

49. Paracelsus, *Of the Nature of Things*, translated into English by J.F., 1650. Although Paracelsus was not translated into English until 1650, his teachings were influential in England and other countries after his death, and John Hall, the doctor who married Shakespeare's daughter Susanna in 1607, was 'almost certainly trained by a Paracelsan school of medicine' (Peter Levi, *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare*, 1988, pp. 264–5). There is however 'no evidence that John Hall influenced the medical references of Shakespeare' (R. R. Simpson), and Shakespeare's plays contain many medical references which must have been written before Hall moved to Stratford.

50. Paracelsus, *Selected*, Jolande Jacobi, 1951, p. 92, from the complete works, Part 1 vol. 9 p. 178, 'Die drei (vier) Buchen des Opus Paramirum'.

51. 'Reason, therefore, is in the head... growth is localised in the liver, anger in the heart', Plotinus, *Enneads* IV Book 3 p. 425, *Complete Works*, translated by Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, Platonist Press, New Jersey, 1918.

reasonable, by the whiche a man differeth from all other thinges, for there is none reasonable but man'.[52] As well as the subdivision of the soul, there are also three types of soul mentioned, as in Aristotle – 'The masses... ask for nothing better than the life of enjoyment. Broadly speaking, there are three main types of life: the one just mentioned, the political, and thirdly the contemplative'.[53] J. A. K. Thomson says this division is attributed to Pythagoras. A similar division appears in Plato – 'the soul of each individual... is, like the city, divided into three forms... the philosophic... the victory-loving and honour-loving... the money loving or gain loving form... we say that of men also there are three primary classes – the lovers of wisdom, the lovers of victory, the lovers of gain.'[54]

As the above examples show, the division of the soul into three forces, spirits, or qualities, has existed in some form since Plato and Aristotle, and has been a feature of medical thought since Galen. An Elizabethan scholar familiar with the more medically oriented works would certainly find the idea recognizable; it was an important feature of the medical concepts of the time. It is a reasonable assumption that many well-educated Elizabethans would have been familiar with the idea. But was Shakespeare familiar with it? Whilst I ought to be hesitant in proposing anything as dangerous as a firm conclusion, the internal evidence for Shakespeare's knowledge of it is strong. As far as I am aware, no trace of the doctrine of the three spirits has previously been identified in Shakespeare, but if we look for mention of the physical organs related to the three spirits, then we find that clear references to them appear in no less than five of the plays, spread out over his career. They are used when a character is emphasizing the power and completeness of a commitment.[55] I therefore suggest that the concept was not only familiar to Shakespeare, but a commonplace of his thought, to be used when such an emphasis was needed. It is

52. John Wylkinson, *The Ethiques of Aristotle*, 1547.
53. Aristotle, *Ethics*, Book IV, translated by J. A. K. Thomson, Allen & Unwin, 1953.
54. Plato, *The Republic*, 580/581, translated by A. D. Lindsay, Dent, 1935.
55.
> When liver, brain and heart,
> These sovereign thrones, are supplied, and filled
>
> *Twelfth Night*, 1:i, 36–7

> On forfeit of my hands, my head, my heart
>
> *Merchant of Venice*, 4:i, 208

not the only possibility; it is conceivable that Shakespeare was using a phrase common in Elizabethan times, but then if a phrase is in common use, it is only the more likely that an educated person would know something of its meaning. Shakespeare would certainly be likely to know something of the meaning if he had some knowledge of medicine – which does seem to be the case. R. R. Simpson in his *Shakespeare and Medicine*,[56] summarizes his view: 'that he [Shakespeare] was aware of the current medical thought there can be little doubt'. This awareness may of course have come various ways: from reading; from friends; direct experience; or from a mixture of the common knowledge of educated people, and specific research for the plays; but the conclusion remains much the same. If we grant to Shakespeare some familiarity with medicine, then that familiarity would most probably include one of the major medical theories of the time. Whatever conclusion we draw, this cannot of course settle the question as to how much of the background of *Othello* was acquired knowledge, and how much was inspiration; that we will never know. But what is relevant, is that one of the plays where an explicit reference to the threefold division occurs is *Othello*. This occurs when Iago, wishing to emphasize his total commitment to Othello, says

> So your hand and heart,
> your brain and every function of your power
>
> *Henry VIII*, 3:ii, 186–7
>
> ... which I will add
> to you, the liver, heart, and brain of Britain
>
> *Cymbeline*, 5:v, 13–14

Falstaff, in his long defence of 'a good sherris sack' (*Henry IV Part 2* scene 3), also covers a similar list, amidst other details, in his detailed description of the effects of liquor. I have not, however, included this in the five references.

Both in Falstaff's speech and Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, 'spirits' are referred to in the context of the blood and the heart, which does come close to the medical use of the term. This might possibly represent a simplified expression of the doctrine that was used in common parlance.

56. R. R. Simpson, *Shakespeare and Medicine*, Livingstone, 1959. Simpson is not the only doctor to have written upon the subject, but does take account of earlier work. As a medical professional, Simpson takes interest in medical practice rather than medical theories. The doctrine of the three spirits is much less well known than the four humours, and it is not surprising that he does not mention it.

> Witness that here Iago doth give up
> The execution of his wit, hands, heart,
> To wronged Othello's service
>
> 3:iii, 469–71

and this last reference should remind us that although the characterological structure of the play can be expressed in these ideas, Shakespeare, of all dramatists, does not present us with ideas, with an abstract categorization of the three soul qualities; what he presents us with is life itself. It is not the concepts that explain Shakespeare, but Shakespeare who demonstrates the meaning of the concepts. He presents us with actual living human beings, who live out the consequences of their character traits, engaged in the continual struggle between good and evil. And that raises a further question – what is Shakespeare showing us, in *Othello*, about the way evil works in the soul? In this play at least, Shakespeare does not present us with a simple battle between good and evil characters. It would be easy enough to view Iago as simply evil, and Desdemona as pristinely good, but we have to look more carefully at the way evil works in the play, before we can understand how a character like Othello is led to the murder of his innocent wife. The source of the tragedy is Iago's hypertrophied thought life. The implication of this is that the thought life is the place where evil gets its toehold, driven by immature or partly conscious emotions, and free to work because the spirit is unable to control it. If evil takes full control in this way, as indeed it does with Iago, then without the control of the active human spirit, as the play tells us, evil will triumph. The implications for the nurturing of the human spirit, and the education of the whole human being, including the emotional life, are obvious.

We cannot of course consider that thoughts are inherently evil. As Bradley says, 'Iago's insight, dexterity, quickness, address, and the like, are in themselves admirable things; the perfect man would possess them ... he would possess also Iago's ... self-control, and ... would stand above the impulses of mere feeling, lord of his inner world.'[57] Bradley's concept of 'lord of his inner world' corresponds exactly to what I have described as the conscious human spirit. What a difference there would be between Iago without it, and the 'perfect man' with it! Iago says, 'I

57. Bradley, p. 234.

am not what I am' (1:i, 66), but the voice of the spirit *is* the 'I am'. 'Iago expresses his policy of Machiavellian deceit in a parodied negation of the Scriptural words in which God announces his nature – "I am that I am" (Exodus iii. 14).[58] His own diabolic nature is implied. I do not think that a point such as this is too obscure for an Elizabethan; bred on the Bible and trained in verbal wit, to have apprehended at a first hearing, especially if the actor knew what he was saying.'[59] Iago is certainly not self-aware in the context of the spirit expressed in the words 'I am' – the spirit that comes to awakening so clearly in Hamlet. Hamlet is a spirit embodied on the stage, fully involved with the actions on the stage, as an *incarnate* spirit. In *Othello* on the other hand, the spirit is *discarnate*, is for the most part a pure spectator, is not on the stage, has to watch helplessly as the consequences of the drama unfold. '*Othello* is essentially outside us.'[60] Bloom says that 'Iago's triumph is that he has caused Othello's inner man to collapse',[61] but the fact is that the real inner man was never there in the first place.

So *Othello* is a drama of the discarnate spirit; but there is something of an exception to that statement, one character in the play who does come towards a condition of balance, does achieve some slight measure of awakening. That is Emilia. Bradley's usual penetrating comments on her are enlightening, and as he says, our attitude to her during the play does change considerably. Before the murder of Desdemona, she does seem stupid and unsuspecting, and we, the audience, who are of course more aware than she is at this point, are horrified when she hands the handkerchief to Iago. Having realized what she has done, she says

> Poor lady, she'll run mad
> When she shall lack it.
>
> 3:iii, 321–2

but it is already too late, Iago has taken it. However, when faced with

58. The writing of *Othello* predates the translation authorized by King James, but 'I AM THAT I AM' is also the translation in the Geneva Bible, which being of reasonable size and price was the first Bible widely bought for home use in England. Shakespeare does quote from the Geneva translation, although he may also have been familiar with other versions read in churches, including the official Vulgate – 'ego sum qui sum'.

59. S. L. Bethell, 'Shakespeare's Imagery; the diabolic images in *Othello*', *Shakespeare Survey* 5, 1952.

60. G. Wilson Knight.

61. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 1994.

the true horror of Iago's deception, and how she has allowed herself to be used with the handkerchief, she does start to wake, with the words:

EMILIA: O God! O heavenly God!
IAGO: Zounds! Hold your peace!
EMILIA: 'Twill out, 'twill out. I, peace!
No, I will speak as liberal as the North:
Let heaven and men and devils, let them all,
All, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak.
IAGO: Be wise, and get you home.
EMILIA: I will not.

5:ii, 220–24

In those words we immediately feel her standing against the others; not just a woman refusing to obey her husband, but an individual starting to awake. 'She is the only person who utters for us the violent common emotions which we feel.'[62] Emilia's words that follow the above passage are the action that leads to the fulfilment of Iago's doom, the just reward for his plot. In the brief scene before Emilia is murdered by her own husband, a spirit does awake, does appear on stage, but briefly, and too late to prevent the tragedy. Her response has the rapidity of Othello's actions, her thought has the connection with reality that Iago's thoughts do not, and she has too the depth of feeling of a Desdemona. Most of all, she has awoken, she has become a conscious individual. She is not yet a hero, but she provides the only glimpse of heroic qualities in the play.

So in *Othello* there is no incarnate spirit. 'There is not much comfort at the end of *Othello*... it has no hero. The most terrible thing about it is Othello's consciousness.'[63] What is lacking is the spirit. Without it, human beings tear themselves, and each other, apart. What more graphic demonstration could we have of what the human spirit is, and what it does, than the story of a world without it? *Othello* is a warning; it is a signpost, but a signpost pointing away – what it lacks, that is what we need. And the evidence of that lack lies before us everywhere. *Othello* does not give a remedy, but it is a diagnosis of a possible state of the world, and, if we do not heed the warning, a terrible prognosis for the future.

62. Bradley, p. 241. 63. Peter Levi.