The Comedy of *Othello* ........................................... Victor Strandberg 3

Time and the Narrator in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* .................................................... Laila Gross 16

Dramatic Effectiveness of the Imagery in Yeats’s *At the Hawk’s Well* ....................... Halbert A. Reeves 27

Chaucer’s Host: The Character of Harry Bailly ......................................................... Benjamin C. Harlow 36

Humor in Hemingway’s Toronto Articles ........................................................................ Thomas Neal Hagood 48
The Comedy of Othello

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Although George Bernard Shaw once declared Coriolanus to be Shakespeare's greatest comedy, I think Othello—with all due respect for its tragic outcome—can make a stronger claim to that distinction. By a superfluous gratuity, of course, it is true that the play has tragic impact due to the deaths recorded in Act V, but judging from the bulk of the play (the first four acts), we have good reason to think of Othello as a remarkable comic achievement. Let us assume, for the moment, that Shakespeare might have contrived his plot to expose Iago's duplicity just a moment earlier—say, for example, that the playwright had chosen to have Emilia actually enter the room instead of knocking and calling while the Moor strangles Desdemona (V, ii). If, in this way, the lovers had been spared their lives (just as Romeo and Juliet but for a flimsy ploy of plot might have been spared theirs), we might easily have, instead of a tragedy of revenge, a comedy of forgiveness. Othello would then take its place alongside Shakespeare's bitter comedies, or comedies of satire (as distinct from his fantasy-comedy of romantic wish-fulfillment), lying half-way between the old morality play (angelic Virtue—Desdemona—winning the hero at last from the clutches of the Vice) and Restoration comedy (the cuckold figure worrying over a wife half his age).

In viewing Othello as comedy, I propose to illustrate, in a close study of the text, how this play shares the following features of comic, as opposed to tragic, drama: (1) like Ben Jonson's plays, Othello depicts a world in which rogues prey on fools (and further: Othello shows vestiges of the classical miles gloriosus and the witty servant who outsmarts his master); (2) as in comedy of satire generally, the curve of plot in Othello leads not to self-discovery, as tragedy is supposed to do, but to mere self-exposure; and (3) Othello bubbles throughout (up to the scene of the murder) with an extraordinary fecundity of wit, repartee, and comic dramaturgy more appropriate to the high spirits of the sock than the gloom of the buskin. Indeed, it seems reasonable to say that the truly incredible quality of Desdemona's murder derives as much of its shock effect from the comic mood pervading much of what precedes it as from the innocence of the victim. We had not been prepared for so grisly an ending.
The play's beginning, by contrast, promises an evening of comic entertainment as funny as anything ever written. As the curtain rises, Iago is manipulating the play's two clowns, Roderigo and Brabantio (Desdemona's would-be suitor and her father), into a confrontation meant to wreck Othello's honeymoon ("though he in a fertile climate dwell,/Plague him with flies"—I, i, 70). Stirring the old man's outrage with a series of choice animal images—"Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/Is tupping your white ewe," "you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse," "your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs"—Iago clearly establishes his role as that of the servant who, by his superior wit and agility, governs his master in the classical manner. (Even Roderigo transcends his normal stupidity at this point to contribute a line that fairly hisses its sibilance for Brabantio's benefit—"your fair daughter [is]/Transported . . ./To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor"—I, i, 127).

As Coleridge observed, this opening scene is only a finger exercise for Iago's art—a chance to test out his magnificent insincerity for use on more significant dupes later on. In his splendid opportunism, his smooth use of multifarious masks, and his mastery of language to goad or subordinate other people, Iago must stand out as the true artist figure, the master of creative imagination, in this work. (Probably this artistry of Iago is what Keats had in mind when discussing Shakespeare's "negative capability," his taking "as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen.") It can truly be said of Othello as much as of any of Ben Jonson's plays that this is a world where rogues prey on fools. Iago duping Roderigo out of his money, to such an intoxicating extent that Roderigo says "I'll sell my land" (I, iii, 388); Iago getting Cassio drunk and so for a second time disrupting Othello's honeymoon, causing the outraged Moor to dismiss Cassio as his lieutenant; Iago's subsequent use of that vacant lieutenancy as a prime instrument in causing Cassio and Desdemona to arouse Othello's suspicions of cuckoldom—all this is comic stuff proving a quick and superior intelligence on Iago's

1 My main text is A Casebook on Othello, ed. Leonard F. Dean (New York, 1961). All quotations from Othello are from this text, which is based on the first folio of 1623 with some readings from the quarto of 1622. A number of the critical essays mentioned may also be found in this casebook.

2 Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism, ed. T. M. Raysor (Cambridge, 1930), I, p. 44.

3 Keats's comment on "Negative Capability" appears in his letter to George and Thomas Keats dated December, 1817; and his comment on Iago and Imogen occurs in his letter to Richard Woodhouse, dated October 27, 1818. Both of these letters are quoted in the Riverside edition of Keats's Selected Poems and Letters, ed. Douglas Bush (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 261, 279.
part. As to whether Othello is by contrast a fool, rather than some higher sort of dupe, is a major question that determines how "comic" this work is. A. C. Bradley’s opinion that "any man situated as Othello was would have been disturbed by Iago’s communications, and . . . many men would have been made wildly jealous" would seem to exculpate Othello, but Leo Kirschebaum points out that when Roderigo, Cassio, and Emilia are separately told that Desdemona is unchaste, each refuses to believe it—"the only one who believes this accusation is Othello!"

Unfortunately for Bradley’s interpretation that Othello is "by far the most romantic figure among Shakespeare’s heroes," there is a good deal of evidence that Iago is quite right in thinking that Othello “will as tenderly be led by th’ nose/As asses are (I, iii, 407)—which stupidity is a comic, not a tragic, defect. There is, to begin, a notable streak of the miles gloriosus in Othello’s character—the braggart soldier whose concern for his reputation as a warrior hero repeatedly makes him Iago’s puppet. Willing “with all my heart” to leave Desdemona on their wedding night so as to fight the Turks in Cyprus, Othello later greets her on Cyprus with a martial rather than marital epithet—“O my fair warrior!” (I, iii, 279 and II, i, 183). Likewise, Othello shows in his deepening jealousy that what he most fears to lose is not his wife’s love so much as his status as a warrior hero, which is his instinctive first concern in the following lamentation:

I had been happy if the general camp,  
Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body,  
So I had nothing known. O now forever  
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!  
Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars  
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!  
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,  
The spirit-stirring drum, th’ ear-piercing fife,  
The royal banner, and all quality,  
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!  

Farewell! Othello’s occupation’s gone!  
(III, iii, 345-357)

This characterization is consistent to the end. Even after his act of murder has been proven a ghastly mistake, Othello takes

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5 Leo Kirschbaum, "The Modern Othello," *English Literary History*, II (1944), 286.  
time out from his remorse to think of his warrior status—"I am not valiant neither;/But every puny whipster gets my sword" (V, ii, 243); and in his final oration, Othello (broken of rank and about to be left in solitude) claims an audience for his suicide by invoking remembrance of his warrior exploits: "Soft you! a word or two before you go./I have done the state some service, and they know't" (V, ii, 338).

This concern for his image as a warrior hero does not make Othello a fool, but it does show him to be quite simple-minded. And this simple-mindedness nears that of a comic fool in some of the crucial scenes of manipulation. In all the great jealousy scenes, where Othello must choose between faith in his wife or in Iago's "evidence," it is noteworthy that Iago produces his evidence only after goading the Moor into a volcanic rage more appropriate to bull-baiting in the arena than to the dawning wisdom of a tragic hero. "Trifles light as air" is Iago's own description of his weightiest evidence, the handkerchief, and his lesser evidence often consists of no more than a bold arch of the eyebrow or an insinuating edge in the voice. Here, for example, is the opening gambit in the jealousy motif, Iago and Othello entering from one side of the stage and Cassio taking leave of Desdemona at the other:

IAGO. Ha! I like not that.
OTHELLO. What dost thou say?
IAGO. Nothing, my lord; or if—I know not what.
OTHELLO. Was that not Cassio parted from my wife?
IAGO. Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it, Seeing you coming.
OTHELLO. I do believe 'twas he.

(III, iii, 34-40)

And as the scene winds toward its climax, almost any of Shakespeare's other tragic heroes might have some slight suspicion that they were being baited in such an exchange as the following:

IAGO. My lord, I see y'are moved.
OTHELLO. No, not much moved:
I do not think but Desdemona's honest.
IAGO. Long live she so! and long live you to think so!

(III, iii, 223-5)

Likewise, when Othello bids fair to jeopardize Iago's scheme with his demand, "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore!/Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof" (I, iii, 359), Iago saves his skin not by providing the ocular proof (which does not exist
anyway), but by goading the big fellow into a stupor of outrage in which proof becomes irrelevant:

IAGO. Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on,
    Behold her topped?
OTHELLO. Death and damnation! O!
IAGO. . . . It is impossible you should see this,
    Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys . . . .

(III, iii, 395-403)

(The efficacy of Iago's above animal imagery is seen later when Othello terminates his welcoming speech to Lodovico thusly: "You are welcome, sir, to Cyprus.—Goats and monkeys!"—IV, i, 274.) Thus, Othello's "ocular proof" is diminished to the level of Iago's fabricated dream, embellished as usual by Iago's mastery of slanted language—

In sleep I heard him [Cassio] say, "Sweet Desdemona,
    Let us be wary, let us hide our loves!"
And then, sire, would he gripe and wring my hand,
Cry "O sweet creature!" and then kiss me hard
As if he plucked up kisses by the roots
That grew upon my lips; then laid his leg
Over my thigh, and sighed, and kissed . . . .

(III, iii, 419-425)

Only after softening up his victim in this way—"led by the nose as asses are"—does Iago produce the "trifle light as air" as his centerpiece, again with a crucial embellishment of language and imagination: "such a handkerchief—/I am sure it was your wife's—did I today/See Cassio wipe his beard with" (III, iii, 437-9). On the strength of such ocular proof as this, Othello proceeds at once to pass the death sentence upon his wife and to promote Iago to that lieutenancy the loss of which had occasioned Iago's initial desire for retribution:

OTHELLO. Look here, Iago:
    All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven.
"Tis gone.
Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!

(III, iii, 445)

and:

OTHELLO. Come, go with me apart. I will withdraw

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7 T. S. Eliot apparently alludes to this scene in the headnote to his poem, "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleisteen with a Cigar," where the baedeker scenery of gondola and palace is interrupted by "goats and monkeys." (Burbank is visiting Bleisteen's brothel in Venice.)
To furnish me with some swift means of death
For the fair devil. Now art thou my lieutenant.
IAGO. I am your own for ever.

(III, iii, 476-9)

At the beginning of Act IV, Othello is led by the nose into an apoplectic fit (he actually faints here) as Iago baits him with a series of questions that must provoke all but the dullest fool's suspicions. Sent by Desdemona to calm her husband's unaccountable anger, Iago inquires—as though these were abstract topics for academic discussion—what Othello would think of four hypothetical situations: (1) what of a "kiss in private"?; (2) what if a woman "be naked with her friend in bed/An hour or more, not meaning any harm"?; (3) what "if I give my wife a handkerchief—"?; and (4) "What/If I had . . . heard him say—as knaves be such abroad/Who . . . cannot choose/But they must blab—"? Note the gradations here: the questions lead from a kiss to lying naked in bed to the handkerchief and finally, in order of climax, to the question of reputation, the prospect that Cassio has been boasting of his conquest in public. To most men, suspicion of being baited would arise at least with question two above, but Othello charges the red flag with eyes shut every time. To the question of a kiss in private, he rumbles, "An unauthorized kiss," and to that of the handkerchief, he pliably fumes, "By heaven, I would most gladly have forgot it!—. . . he had my handkerchief!" The fourth question, suggesting that Iago had heard Cassio "blab," calls forth a scene more suited to the comic than tragic genre, the imagined cuckold desperately anxious to know how the gossip about him is going:

OTHELLO. Hath he said anything?
IAGO. He hath, my lord; but . . . no more than he'll unswear.

OTHELLO. What hath he said?
IAGO. Faith, that he did—. . .

OTHELLO. What? What?

(IV, i, 29-33)

Stricken faint by apoplexy at this point, Othello recovers in time to deliver himself over yet once more to a splendid bit of opportunism: Cassio having happened by, Iago asks Othello to hide—out of earshot, of course—and watch "the fleers, the gibes, and notable scorns/That dwell in every region of his face," whereupon Iago entertains Cassio with talk about his whore, Bianca. This sort of nonsense must be taken as a gambit better suited to the cuckold of Restoration comedy than to a tragic hero of Lear's or Hamlet's growing realism. Instead of being "by far the most romantic figure among Shakespeare's heroes," as
A. C. Bradley put it, Othello bids fair in such scenes as these to be his most comically foolish hero—gullible and unconscious to the point of outright stupidity. To be sure, other tragic heroes like King Lear may have been outlandishly foolish and gullible, but not, like Othello, steadily or even increasingly so to the end of the play. Whether a comedy or tragedy, this is surely a work in which a rogue preys on fools.

Then there is the question of self-recognition. Does Othello, like Oedipus or King Lear, ever come to know himself through his loss and suffering? The evidence shows that he not only fails to learn through his error, but he actually does all he can to stave off self-knowledge right up through his final speech in Act V. As Winifred Nowottny and Robert Heilman have so ably pointed out, the thematic structure of Othello centers around a series of trial scenes, in which either Othello is tried (by Brabantio and Desdemona in Acts I and IV) and judged very fairly, or in which Othello tries other people (Cassio in Act II and Desdemona in Acts IV and V) and proves a most harsh and peremptory arbiter. 8 The play’s last trial, in which Othello tries, judges, and executes himself, provides the substance of what follows Desdemona’s murder, and is our main focus in the issue of self-recognition.

Emilia is the detective and prosecutor in this trial, which begins with Desdemona’s dying statement:

DESDEMONA. A guiltless death I die.
EMILIA. O who hath done this deed?
DESDEMONA. Nobody—I myself. Farewell.
Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell! [She dies] (V, ii, 122-125)

Rather than question himself concerning his wife’s saintly deathbed forgiveness, Othello first seems to grasp the excuse she offered—“You heard her say herself, it was not I”—and then he actually gloats to think that this lie for his benefit might well have sent Desdemona unshriven to hell: “She’s like a liar gone to burning hell! ’Twas I that killed her.” Emilia now produces overwhelming evidence of Desdemona’s innocence as she exposes, in short order, the fraudulence of Iago’s lies and of the handkerchief. Moreover, upon being stabbed by Iago, she adds her own deathbed testimony to Desdemona’s—and Emilia was not about to risk hellfire by dying in perjury: “Moor, she was chaste. . . . So speaking as I think, I die, I die” (V, ii, 250).

Again, far from questioning himself in the face of this evidence, Othello falls back on the warrior hero’s impulse to break out of here: “I have another weapon in this chamber;/It is a sword of Spain. . . . Uncle, I come forth” (V, ii, 251).

Pitifully grasping at his “evidence” to the very last, Othello ignores even Iago’s confession (LODOVICO: “This wretch hath part confessed his villainy”—V, ii, 296), and tries for one last time to vindicate his innocence by the handkerchief. But, finally, he has to accept the combined weight of Iago’s confession, Cassio’s testimony, and Roderigo’s letter and so arrive—as the very last character to do so—at the fact of his guilt:

OTHELLO. How came you, Cassio, by that handkerchief
That was my wife’s?
CASSIO. I found it in my chamber;
And he himself confessed but even now
That there he dropped it. . . .
OTHELLO. O fool! fool! fool!
CASSIO. There is besides in Roderigo’s letter,
How he upbraids Iago . . . .

(V, ii, 319-324)

So the evidence points inescapably to unwarranted murder, and, true to his warrior hero’s code, Othello kills himself in punishment. But how serious a punishment this is may be questioned, for Othello wanted to die in any case—“For in my sense, it’s happiness to die” (V, ii, 290). And as Heilman points out, this execution of himself serves only overt justice: though the warrior hero is not afraid to die, Othello is most unwilling, even now, to have that immortal part of himself, his reputation, suffer. Hence he summons an audience to witness his noble gesture; the others had been about to leave him solitary:

LODOVICO. Your power and your command is taken off,
And Cassio rules in Cyprus. . . .
Come, bring away!

OTHELLO. Soft you! a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service and they know’t.

(V, ii, 331-339)

As T. S. Eliot puts it, “Othello has ceased to think about Desdemona and is thinking about himself . . . ; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself.”9 Clearly, Othello’s final concern is not remorse for his guilt, but his reputation in history:

I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. Then you must speak
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well . . . .

(V, ii, 340-344)

That last line is the crucial one as concerns self-knowledge and self-judgment, and it indicates that Othello is so far from self-discovery as to fit merely the comic mode of mere self-exposure. If anyone loved not wisely but too well, it was clearly Desdemona, whose forgiveness and self-sacrifice even at the risk of damming her soul for love ought to have taught Othello his own shortcomings. Even if Desdemona had committed adultery, Othello ought by such a standard as hers to have forgiven rather than murdered—if it had really been her rather than his reputation that he “loved too well.” Thinking back to the murder scene when Desdemona had begged (and Othello denied) first banishment, then just one day’s grace, then half an hour, and last just time to say one prayer, we may well find this judgment that Othello loved too well very ironic indeed, especially since the time for one prayer would have been just enough to allow for Emilia’s saving intervention:

DESDEMONA. O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!
OTHELLO. Down, strumpet!
DESDEMONA. Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight!
OTHELLO. Nay, an you strive—
DESDEMONA. But half an hour!
OTHELLO. Being done, there is no pause.
DESDEMONA. But while I say one prayer!
OTHELLO. It is too late. [Smothers her.]

EMILIA. (calls within) What, ho! my lord, my lord!

(V, ii, 78-83)

The malevolence of this passage (“Down, strumpet!”) seems hardly compatible with Othello’s self-estimate — after Desdemona’s innocence has been established—as “an honorable murderer, if you will,/For naught did I in hate, but all in honor” (V, ii, 294). Clearly, what Othello “loved too well” was not his wife at all, but his pride, or sense of “honor,” as an earlier conflict between love and pride demonstrated:

OTHELLO. But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago,
the pity of it, Iago!
IAGO. If you are so fond over her iniquity, give her patent
to offend; for if it touch not you, it comes near nobody.
OTHELLO. I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me!
IAGO. O, 'tis foul in her.
OTHELLO. With mine officer!
IAGO. That's fouler.

(IV, i, 206-215)

Whenever his man seems about to get out of his grasp due to some noble emotion—"the pity of it, Iago!"—Iago needs only to call upon Othello's pride to bring him into line again. "Cuckold me!" is surely a roar of self-centered pride, not of love—yet Othello finally judges himself to have loved Desdemona too well.

Then, too, this appeal to pride as the sure way of keeping his puppet in hand is uncomfortably reminiscent of the way Iago defuses the moronic Roderigo's rebellions:

Enter Roderigo.
IAGO. How now, Roderigo?
RODERIGO. I do not find that thou deal'st justly with me... The jewels you have had from me to deliver to Desdemona would half have corrupted a votarist [nun]... I will make myself known to Desdemona. If she will return me my jewels, I will give over my suit and repent my unlawful solicitation; if not, assure yourself, I will seek satisfaction of you... IAGO. Why, now I see there's mettle in thee; and even from this instant do build on thee a better opinion than ever before.

(IV, ii, 173 ff.)

It is no credit to Othello that he and Roderigo are so pliable to the same device of the puppet-master—the appeal to pride. And Othello's is a pride that, unlike King Lear's (or even Roderigo's), endures to the end, Othello admitting only a mistake in judgment ("O fool! fool! fool!") but not a flaw of character in his closing self-assessment. In saying that he loved his wife too well, rather than not well enough, Othello retreats into a final self-delusion sharply contrary to the self-knowledge of the classical tragic hero such as Job, Oedipus, or Orestes. His deceiver exposed at last, Othello promptly goes on to deceive himself in a farewell speech more amenable to satire than to tragedy. Though his loss is indeed tragic, Othello remains a comic figure in his failure to see and blame himself rightly. He is more an object of satire than of pity.

In addition to these larger elements of comic archetype (the cuckold fearful for a wife half his age), character (rogues and fools), and plot (leading to self-exposure, not self-discovery), Othello derives a comic mood from the innate ludicrousness of
its subject matter. As Edward Albee has most recently demonstrated in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the theme of cuckoldom—even in a serious play—is stock material for laughter long into the evening when handled by a witty and original writer. And Shakespeare tickles his audience continuously in *Othello*, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, with ribald witticisms. From the time of the rousing opening confrontation with Brabantio already noted, the play is permeated with sexual allusions couched in animal or appetite imagery: “unbitted lusts,” “goats and monkeys,” “the beast with two backs,” “[she must] heave the gorge, disrelish the Moor,” “thou shalt taste her body,” and the like. Emilia makes a classic metaphor of the man-woman relationship by extending such appetite imagery: “They [men] are all but stomachs, and we all but food;/They eat us hungerly, and when they are full,/They belch us” (III, iv, 104). Ironically, the basis for this appetite metaphor is the romantic Othello, his harsh treatment of Desdemona making this quip necessary.

*Othello* himself contributes to this verbal wit by comparing his visit with Desdemona to a trip to a brothel—“OTHELLO. (to Emilia) Leave procréants alone and shut the door” (IV, ii, 28)—and then paying Emilia off as though she were a madam when he takes his leave (“OTHELLO. You, you, ay, you!/We have done our course; there's money for your pains”—IV, ii, 93). These comic elements are supported by such wholly comic episodes as Iago's wit-combat with Desdemona (II, i, 118-162) and the clown's puns with the musicians (“Thereby hangs a tail”—III, i, 8) as well as by all the scenes in which Roderigo turns up for yet one further beguilement. Overarching the whole work is the dour but fascinating humor of jealousy mocking the meat it feeds on, and of the strapping warrior hero led around by his orderly—the lion by a monkey.

In sum, then, there is much to be relished in the comedy of *Othello*. Yet, as we know, the play is not a comedy. The pathos of Desdemona—her persistent innocence and forgiveness, her “willow” song, her pitiful last ploy of breaking out the wedding sheets-funeral shroud—together with Othello's final sense of the magnitude of his loss makes this a movingly sad ending to what had been a terribly funny piece of work. And the final picture of the lovers stretched dead in their wedding bed is indeed gruesome enough to “poison sight,” as Lodovico phrases it, forming a drastic contradiction in mood from the high spirits of the beginning in front of Brabantio's house.

How, then, do we account for this play—or, at least, for the bulk of it which we might call the comedy of *Othello*? Considering how a small twist of plot in Act V might well have trans-
formed *Othello* into one of his typical comedies of forgiveness (Desdemona being clearly perfect material for such a theme), and considering too how the playwright holds the godlike power of deciding the destiny of his characters, one might wonder if Gloucester in *King Lear* was not misplacing the blame somewhat in calling us flies that the gods kill for sport. It was Shakespeare, not the gods, who had to decide whether he was going to make Othello another Leontes, to have a second chance after learning his error; and when we remember the near rescue of Romeo and Juliet in the tomb in connection with Desdemona's near rescue here, it might not be blasphemy to speculate whether Shakespeare engages us with his animated brain children only to kill them off callously in the end, like swatting flies for sport. *King Lear* is a similar case in point: the old man, having been stripped of his throne, family, and dignity, crawls to a slow, painful comeback at last (returns to sanity, regains his daughter, reascends his throne), only to be crushed like a worm in the last two pages. Little wonder that Doctor Johnson (a dangerous man to disagree with, T. S. Eliot said) was indignant at the sadistic nihilism of such a work, and would read *Lear* only in his own revised "happy ending" version. There may be something deeply cynical in a man who, as Keats said, delights as much in creating an Iago as an Imogen.

Or a more likely way of accounting for the comedy of *Othello* is that it serves a psychological purpose. According to Freud, laughter is therapeutic because it may relieve anxiety.

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10 Just before Lear's heart bursts, Albany gives over his reign: "For us, we will resign, during the life of this old majesty, to him our absolute power" (*King Lear*, V, ii, 200-202).


12 In his criticism of *King Lear*, Johnson approvingly notes that "Cordelia, from the time of Tate, has always retired with victory and felicity. And, I might relate, . . . I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor." Quoted from the Rhinehart Edition, *Rasselas, Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson (New York, 1958), p. 297.

13 In his "Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious," Freud endorses Herbert Spencer's essay, "Physiology of Laughter," and adds: "the French authors (Dugas) designate laughter as a 'detente,' a manifestation of release of tension, and A. Bain's theory, 'Laughter a relief from restraint,' seems to me to approach Spencer's conceptions nearer than most authors would have us believe" (*The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, ed. A. A. Brill (New York, 1938), p. 733). Freud's own formulation sees humor as a defense mechanism against psychic pain: "The defense processes are the psychic correlates of the flight reflex and follow the task of guarding against the origin of pain from inner sources. . . . Humor can now be conceived as the loftiest of these defenses" (p. 801).
as does the comic relief in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, or it may as in Hamlet’s case loosen the lid on repressions. Hamlet’s puns and jokes and songs—in the graveyard, for example—serve to relieve his horror and anxiety over his father’s recent death, just as his crude sex jokes to Ophelia relieve his revulsion toward Gertrude’s “incest.” But *Othello*, I think, is Shakespeare’s funniest tragedy: its dangerous laughter does not give comic relief to the spectators or personal therapy to a character so much as it lays a trap of ambivalence, heightening the awfulness of loss by making the audience all the more unprepared for it. None other of Shakespeare’s works sustains so comic a pitch only to end in so stunningly grim a conclusion. One of the funniest and saddest plays ever written, *The Tragedy of Othello* gets its awful final power by means of the comedy of *Othello*. 