

## OTHELLO'S GREAT HEART

It has for long been a matter of debate to what extent the great tragedies of Shakespeare constitute a definable genre with common features. Each of the plays resists being reduced to fulfilling a simple pattern, *Othello* on a greater variety of grounds than any other of the plays. In spite of this, we tend to approach the plays with specific generic expectations — often based on a critical tradition going back to A.C. Bradley. These expectations may be so strong as to make us accept readings that are supported by little else.

Here one feature of *Othello's* ending will be discussed, Cassio's short, but crucial remark on his dead general, 'For he was great of heart' (V.ii.361).<sup>1</sup> I shall first sketch the problems to which this remark has given rise because of the generic expectations critics have brought to the play. I shall then try to show, with the help of semantic analysis, that the meaning of Cassio's words is not what it has been taken to be: and I shall finally suggest how this affects the interpretation of the play as a whole.

The ending of *Othello* is unusual among Shakespeare's tragic endings: the hero kills himself, and, as Helen Gardner has put it, in one of the great essays on the play:

No circumstances point away from this close. No living Fortinbras or Malcolm, no dead Goneril and Regan allow us to speak of a purged realm or of the justice of the heavens. There is nothing but the 'tragic loading of this bed' and the comment of the generous Cassio: 'For he was great of heart'.<sup>2</sup>

Cassio's comment seems to offer the only similarity to the other tragedies. It has often been pointed out that the last words spoken about the dead hero and the disposition of his body have a specific function; they govern our ultimate response to the hero.<sup>3</sup> These appreciations put distance between the audience and the stage, and thus acquire the character of a chorus commenting on the events that have been presented. In *Hamlet*, for example, Fortinbras commands:

Let Four captains  
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage, For  
he was likely, had he been put on,  
To have prov'd most royal; and for his passage, The  
soldiers' music and the rite of war  
Speak loudly for him. (V.ii.395-400)

1 All references are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1974)

2 Helen Gardner, 'The Noble Moor', *British Academy Lecture* 1956, repr. in *Shakespeare Criticism, 1935-1960*, ed. by Anne Ridler (Oxford, 1963), pp. 348-70 (p. 366).

3 Harold Jenkins, *The Catastrophe in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Edinburgh, 1969), p. 13.

Hamlet's body is ceremonially carried out, and a 'peal of ordnance are shot off.' In *Othello*, on the other hand, there is little ceremony. After the death of the hero the survivors immediately turn to practical matters: a curtain is drawn to hide the sight of the dead lovers; judgments are made about who will inherit Othello's possessions, who will succeed him in the administration of Cyprus, and who will oversee the punishment of Iago; and the play ends with a reference to the weighty business of informing headquarters in Venice of what has happened. If the Quarto stage direction at V.ii.282 is correct, and Cassio is 'in a chair', then it is Cassio, the new governor of Cyprus, rather than the dead hero, who is carried from the stage at the end. Under these circumstances, Cassio's six monosyllables, *For he was great of heart*, become crucial; they alone have to produce an effect that, in other tragedies, is created with the help of action and rhetoric.

Because Cassio's commentary is too brief to satisfy our generic expectations, Othello's speech preceding his suicide has often been taken to be part of the hero's description governing our final response: it may be that Shakespeare is, in the words of John Holloway, using his character as mouthpiece, and telling us how to watch the play'.<sup>4</sup> Such a reading, however, creates serious problems of a different kind — indeed, it may be at the root of the controversy about Othello's nobility or weakness in twentieth century *Othello* criticism, focusing on Othello's last speech. To what extent should Othello's last speech be explained by its structural place in the tragedy, to what extent by psychology? Othello is plainly speaking about Othello, but does he do so more for the tragedy's sake or for his own?

The *locus classicus* of a psychological interpretation of the speech that neglects its structural place in the play is to be found in T.S. Eliot's essay 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', where he interprets Othello's distance from himself as follows:

What Othello seems to me to be doing is *cheering himself up*. He is endeavouring to escape reality, he has ceased to think about Desdemona, and is thinking about himself. Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself. Othello succeeds in turning himself into a pathetic figure, by adopting an *aesthetic* rather than a moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment. He takes in the spectator, but the human motive is primarily to take in himself.<sup>5</sup>

Eliot's notion of a weak, self-dramatizing Othello was endorsed by F.R. Leavis, and echoed by Robert B. Heilman, who emphasized Othello's 'need for justification, for a constant reconstruction of himself in acceptable terms'.<sup>6</sup>

This view of Othello has not gone unchallenged. Several lines of argument have been drawn up to defend the traditional notion of Othello as a noble

4 John Holloway, *The Story of the Night* (London, 1961), p. 47.

5 Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca' in *Selected Essays* (London, 1951), pp. 130-1.

6 F. R. Leavis, 'Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero, *Scrutiny* 6 (1937), pp. 259-83; Robert B. Heilman, *Magic in the Web: Action and Language in 'Othello'* (Lexington, Ky., 1956), p. 166.

hero, referring to stage practice, dramatic tradition, and the structure of the play. Nevill Coghill, for example, has shown that Eliot's interpretation is impossible to put across on the stage, and that, if it is correct, it turns out to be a criticism of Shakespeare's craftsmanship rather than of Othello's character.<sup>7</sup> John Holloway has argued that Othello's last speech should not be considered to be a piece of private musing, but a conventional genre piece: many figures in Shakespeare sum up their lives before they die — Gaunt, Hot-spur, Henry IV, Warwick in *Henry VI*, Hamlet, and Antony.<sup>8</sup>

These possible explanations are based on the assumption that Othello is to be dealt with in terms of common psychology, but that may not be the case. As Helen Gardner has shown, there is much in the play to suggest Othello's *mythological* nature, which renders interpretation in terms of psychology inappropriate — a point to which I shall return.

The interpretation of Othello's last speech as that of a psychologically weak character may thus be said to be contradicted by stage practice, by dramatic tradition, and by the presentation of the Othello figure. But are these refutations of the Eliot-Leavis doctrine necessary? Is there not a refutation in the play itself, as John Dover Wilson suggests, in Cassio's words after Othello's death: *For he was great of heart?* Dover Wilson closes his introduction to the play with a reference to 'Cassio's epitaph, brief, but sufficient'.<sup>9</sup>

Brief it is, but is it sufficient? Critics have always felt somewhat dissatisfied with its being so short; Sanders goes as far as calling it a 'lip-service remark'.<sup>10</sup> Disregarding the question of what Cassio's words mean, it is also awkward that this 'epitaph' should be in the form of a dependent clause. The grammatical context makes it difficult for the phrase to free itself from the immediacy of the scene, and to become a chorus. Moreover, Cassio's words immediately follow upon Othello's suicide, a strong theatrical effect that must diminish the effect of Cassio's words as 'epitaph'; the Fortinbras speech, in contrast, comes forty lines after Hamlet dies. Indeed, it may be that Cassio's words are an immediate response to the death, like Horatio's 'Now cracks a noble heart' (*Hamlet*, V.ii.359).

The major editions are silent about what exactly Cassio's phrase means. The only edition that comments upon it, the one prepared by Lawrence J. Ross, makes explicit what seems to be obvious: Cassio explains

7 Nevill Coghill, *Shakespeare's Professional Skills* (Cambridge, 1964), p. xiv.

8 Holloway, p. 155. There is a larger problem with the Eliot-Leavis reading of Othello. Any interpretation that emphasizes Othello's psychological weaknesses leaves us two possibilities of explaining them. On the one hand, they may be representative of human weakness in general — Othello then is Everyman. But this is unlikely (at least with a seventeenth century audience), most obviously because of his colour and his exotic origins. On the other hand, if his weakness is ascribed to his colour and origins, we feel that his case may be interesting for anthropologists but does not directly concern us; and we lay Shakespeare open to the charge of racism.

9 John Dover Wilson, and Alice Walker, eds *William Shakespeare, Othello* (Cambridge, 1957), p. lvi.

10 Norman Sanders, ed. *William Shakespeare, Othello*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge, 1984), p. 20.

by way of 'homage to his lost hero overriding prescribed disapproval' (Granville-Barker), why he was apprehensive of such an outcome. In Shakespeare's view, greatness of 'heart' can go with profoundly wrong and futilely wasteful misuse of powers.<sup>11</sup>

There is a wide consensus among critics — Eliot and Leavis characteristically do not mention the passage — that Cassio's words refer to magnanimity.<sup>12</sup> Cassio seems to be taking up a motif from Othello's speech: that he was someone 'that lov'd not wisely but too well' (V.ii.344). This meaning is supported by our generic expectations at this point in a Shakespearean tragedy, of a posthumous appreciation of the hero. It is supported — and this may come as a surprise by little else.

In order to determine the meaning of *great of heart* we have to move outside the province of literary studies, and turn to methods that have been developed in historical linguistics and semantics, methods that should be rigorously applied to all old texts, before the critic begins the task of interpretation. These methods have over the years yielded much for Shakespearean studies, but it may be useful to recall some of them. Firstly, the meaning of a semantic unit should not be defined in terms of reference, but in terms of sense, i.e. according to the way it is used: two semantic units have the same meaning if they are used in the same manner. Secondly, in substituting a modern expression for a Shakespearean one, we should choose one that fits (more or less) *all* the contexts in which the semantic unit occurs. Finally, the meanings of a word should always be checked against its history. Meanings that seem to fit a particular Shakespearean context may have to be rejected, because they are attested only centuries later.<sup>13</sup>

Let us turn to Cassio's words with these principles in mind. Part of the difficulty in determining the meaning of *great of heart* is that all the words are common, and it is therefore difficult to study all the contexts in which they occur. Spevack's concordance lists *great* 946 times, *of* 17079 times, and *heart* 1066 times.<sup>14</sup> But there can be no doubt that *great* means 'large in size or dimensions (also in the figurative sense)' and thus often 'of extraordinary quali

11 Lawrence J. Ross, ed. *William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1974), note to V.ii.357. Ross is quoting Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, vol. IV (London, 1963), p. 245.

12 It seems to have been Dr. Johnson who, in his edition, established the critical commonplace of Othello's being 'magnanimous'. A short and unsystematic list includes A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London (1904), 1965), p. 195; Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* (Cambridge, 1930; repr. London, 1961), p. 173; A. L. French, *Shakespeare and the Critics* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 120; Heilman, p. 113; Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare's Tragic Sequence*, Second edition (Liverpool, 1979), p. 104; A. D. Nuttall, *A New Mimesis* (London, 1983), p. 132; Sanders, p. 20.

13 The relevant procedures and what they mean for Shakespearean studies have been spelled out by Ernst Leisi, 'Zur Bestimmung Shakespearescher Wortbedeutungen' in *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch* 100 (1964), 209-26. They have since been applied in the *Englisch-deutsche Studienausgabe der Dramen Shakespeares* (Munich: Francke), of which he is one of the editors, along with Werner Habicht and Rudolf Stamm.

14 Marvin Spevack, *A Complete and Systematic Concordance to Shakespeare*, 6 vols. (Hildesheim, 1968-70).

ties, eminent, magnanimous'.<sup>15</sup> *Heart* means 'the muscular viscus in the thorax which propels the blood through the arteries', the centre of life itself and everything that is either located in the centre, or emanates from it according to Elizabethan beliefs. As figurative use is frequent, the meaning of *heart* is difficult to express in a single modern word; it includes as abstract meanings as those of modern 'soul', as well as 'mind' in general.

Fortunately, as we go through the examples, we soon notice that *great* and *heart* often appear together in a manner that suggests a close association between them — one that makes the usual abstract understanding of *great of heart* improbable. The nine collocations of the two words in Shakespeare<sup>16</sup> indicate that they should be understood in terms of Elizabethan physiology: under the stress of passion, there is an over-production of bodily fluids; the blood fills the heart; it swells, and becomes great, in the physical sense. If it cannot find any outlet in words or deeds, it will break — notions that frequently recur in Shakespeare.<sup>17</sup>

The argument that *great* in this context should be understood in a phy-siological sense is supported by grammatical and historical considerations, and, above all, by Shakespeare's usage.

Where *great* means 'of extraordinary qualities, eminent' and is linked with an abstract quality, the preposition used is *in*: *great in knowledge, great in villainy, great in substance*.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, *of* is frequently used in the sense 'in respect of, in the matter of, in point of, in'.<sup>19</sup>

Historical considerations point in the same direction: understanding *great* in an abstract sense presupposes a notion of *heart* that actually excludes the meaning of *great* indicating physical size, and instead suggests 'of extraordinary qualities'. This more metaphorical concept of *heart* is to be found in the period when humoral psychology, in which the heart plays such a crucial part, has lost its influence on people's thinking (and survives, as it does today, only in isolated dead metaphors like *a broken heart*). The collapse of humoral psy-

15 Alexander Schmidt, *Shakespeare-Lexicon*. (Berlin (1868), 1962). Schmidt's *Shakespeare-Lexicon* is often underrated as a source for the study of Shakespearean meanings. Scholars tend to prefer the *OED*, or Onions' *Shakespeare Glossary* based on it — without realizing that the *OED* usually accepts (and even quotes) Schmidt's definitions. See *great*, 5, and *heart*, 1.

16 *The Taming of the Shrew*, V.ii.171; *As You Like It*, II.vi.4; *All's Well That Ends Well*, IV.iii.330; *King John*, V.ii.55; *Richard II*, II.i.228; *Henry IV*, Part I, V.iv.70; *Henry IV*, Part 2, IV.iii.111; *Othello*, V.ii.361; *Coriolanus*, V.vi.103.

17 E.g., *Henry IV*, Part 1, III.i.26; *Richard II*, III.iii.140. *Titus Andronicus*, V.iii.13. Falstaff ascribes what is usually viewed as resulting from the stress of passion (Ruth L. Anderson, *Elizabethan Psychology and Shakespeare's Plays*, University of Iowa Studies, III, 4. Iowa City, 1927. 86-7) to the effect of sack: 'the sherris warms the blood, and makes it course from the inwards to the parts' extremes. It illumineth the face, which as a beacon gives warning to all the rest of this little kingdom, man, to arm, and then the vital commoners and inland petty spirits muster me all to their great captain [the heart], who great and puff'd up with this retinue, doth any deed of courage; and this valor comes of sherris.' (*Henry IV*, Part 2, IV.iii.106-13).

18 Cp. *All's Well That Ends Well*, II.v.8; *King John*, III.i.116; *Richard II*, III.ii.35; cp. also *All's Well That Ends Well*, III.iii.2, and II.vii.14; *Henry VIII*, V.iv.42 and 46.

19 See *OED*, 35, and Schmidt for examples from Shakespeare. The only other collocation involving *great* and *of is great of birth*, cp. in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, III.iv.4.

chology happened in the wake of Descartes' philosophy, with its separation of mind and body. We would therefore expect that *great of heart* would come to mean 'magnanimous' only in the later seventeenth or even the eighteenth century. Indeed, the first example in the *Oxford English Dictionary* where the collocation of *great* and *heart* (in *great-heartedness*) may refer to 'magnanimity' is from 1813, long after our expectation.

Finally, we can turn to Shakespeare's usage, and as we understand *great* in the physical sense, our findings should be supported by the collocations of *big* and *heart*. The following meaning then emerges: 'passionate, having strong emotions'. The kind of emotion need not be specified; it may be grief, anger, or something else. In *Richard II* Ross expresses the frustration he feels about the King's injustices with the following words:

My heart is great, but it must break with silence,  
Ere't be disburdened with a liberal tongue. (II.i.228-29)

The servant in *Julius Caesar* who, on seeing Caesar's body, cries out in grief 'O Caesar!' is told by Antony:

Thy heart is big; get thee apart and weep.  
Passion, I see, is catching, [for] mine eyes,  
Seeing those beads of sorrow stand in thine,  
Began to water, (III.i.281-85)

Elsewhere the collocation of *great* and *heart* is used in connection with anger. In *Coriolanus*, the hero answers Aufidius' charges by insulting him. He begins his speech with

Measureless liar, thou hast made my heart  
Too great for what contains it. (V.vi.102-103)

Just as Aufidius' capacity to lie is without limits, so Coriolanus is overwrought to the extent that his heart threatens to rupture his chest.<sup>20</sup>

The result of a physiological process can also be transferred to a person's disposition. *Great heart* in these cases may refer to courage or boldness. Thus, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the reformed Kate addresses Bianca and the widow with the words

My mind hath been as big as one of yours,  
My heart as great, my reason haply more,  
To bandy word for word and frown for frown; (V.ii.170-73)<sup>21</sup>

In Shakespeare's English *great of heart* then means 'passionate, having

<sup>20</sup> Further examples of this usage: *As You Like It*, II.vi.4; *King John*, V.ii.55; *Richard III*, V.iii.347; *Henry VI*, Part 3, II.ii.111, and also Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, ed. by Philip Edwards, *The Spanish Tragedy* (London, 1959), I.iv.14.

<sup>21</sup> Further examples of this usage: *All's Well That Ends Well*, IV.iii.330; *Troilus and Cressida*, *Coriolanus*, 111.0.128, *Cymbeline*, IV.ii.77.

strong emotions (of an unspecified kind)', or 'bold'. Semantic analysis and the immediate context, which was discussed above, make it difficult to interpret Cassio's words as a tribute to the *magnanimity* of his master. It rather suggests a meaning like 'beside himself', or even 'desperate'. Cassio's words do not take up Othello's reference to one 'that lov'd not wisely but too well', but rather to one 'being wrought/Perplexed in the extreme' (V.ii.344-46).

The meaning suggested by the immediate context is supported by the development of the play's action. In II.iii.205, when trying to settle the quarrel between Cassio and Montano, Othello loses self-control for the first time: 'My blood begins my safer guides to rule' — i.e. passion is threatening to overpower reason. At the end of III.iii. Othello dismisses his love for Desdemona and admits hate instead into his heart:

Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne  
To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught,  
For 'tis of aspics' tongues! (III.iii.448-50)

In V.ii.63 he addresses Desdemona with the words 'O perjurd woman, thou dost stone my heart', i.e. she makes it hard as stone. There is no reason why Cassio's final words should not be understood in the same manner.

On this reading, the grammar of Cassio's speech is apt.

This did I fear, but thought he had no weapon;  
For he was great of heart.

These words are Cassio's immediate reaction to Othello's suicide, and they help to explain what we see on stage. Cassio has known Othello, and he has been present during the moments leading up to his suicide; he is not surprised therefore. The fact that Othello was *great of heart* indicates the reason for Cassio's having been afraid. There is an apologetic or even defensive tone to his remark that he had not realized Othello had a weapon. Otherwise, we gather, he would have prevented his suicide. The brevity of Cassio's speech then does not present a problem, because it no longer carries as much weight as in the traditional interpretation. His words do not have to stand out as a Chorus; rather they help to make the transition from Othello's suicide to Lodovico's speech closing the play.

What are the implications of this reading for the interpretation of *Othello*? The importance of a single, though crucial, phrase must not be overrated; too much depends on the overall approach we choose to the play, and it is impossible to discuss the ramifications of this here. The debate between the traditionalists and the representatives of the Eliot-Leavis line is not directly affected: the reading suggested does not support either side. One crucial argument used in the debate, however, has lost its validity. But the reading suggested here may help to shift the focus of attention to another problem: the relationship between the Venetians and Othello. Cassio speaks to the Venetians and he also speaks for them — he is of their party. His helpless reaction to Othello's suicide underscores the dividing line between the radically different worlds of Othello and

Venice. Not even Cassio crosses the line at the end; he remains on the side of the Venetians, who cannot grasp Othello's world of absolutes.

The radical difference between the world of Venice and Othello is a point central to Helen Gardner's reading of the play. She highlights the thematic parallels between Othello's last speech and his address to the Venetian Senate in I.ii.; both concern the difficult relationship between Othello and Venice.

Othello is like a hero of the ancient world *in* that he is not a man like us, but a man recognized as extraordinary. He seems born to do great deeds and live in legend ... He has the heroic capacity for passion. But the thing which most sets him apart is his solitariness.

Unlike Hamlet, she suggests, Othello is a mythological figure. He is presented as 'a vision of man free',<sup>22</sup> in his love as well as in his death. This view of him as 'a hero of the ancient world' is also supported by his suicide. In Shakespeare suicide is considered — where it is not an act of desperation as in *Romeo and Juliet* — in terms of Roman heroism.<sup>23</sup>

Othello's mythological stature is not only defined by his colour and his origins, by his words and his deeds, but also by the way the Venetians are presented — an aspect not discussed in Helen Gardner's essay: like most critics she seems to take for granted that the world of the Venetians is the one familiar to us. The culture of Venice presented in *Othello* (and also in *The Merchant of Venice*) is based on Christian values, sophisticated and civic, and also profit-oriented and practical. The culture of Venice places value on anticipation (cp. the debate in the Senate in I.iii.), and on persistence in pursuing goals. Othello's values are quite different. In II.i.183-94, for example, he describes love as something absolute; Desdemona, the daughter of a Venetian nobleman, cautiously expresses her hope that their love may grow in time. When Othello cashier Cassio, his decision is final; but both Cassio and Desdemona believe that persistence and the use of indirect ways can reverse his decision. Desdemona dies with the Christian hope that there is a truth that is not of this world; with Othello no such perspective is suggested. In the world of Venice — unlike the world of antiquity — suicide is seen as an act of desperation, and as a sin.

Cassio's reaction to Othello's suicide draws our attention to still another problem: the extent to which critics have tended to see the familiar values of the Venetian world as a standard to be accepted without questioning.<sup>24</sup> At the end the villain is punished; social order is superficially restored. But the Venetians have not gained new insight. The limitations of their metaphysical order and, implicitly, that of the audience, have been challenged. Therefore we cannot end up simply agreeing with the Venetians. Our final position should rather be one from which both worlds and their tragic relationship can be seen. We may be forced into this position by having our generic expectations thwarted, by an ending that is even more abrupt and oppressive than we may have expected.

University of Basel

BALZ ENGLER

<sup>22</sup> Gardner, pp. 352-3.

<sup>23</sup> Cp. *Macbeth*, V.viii.1-2; *Hamlet*, V.ii.341-2; *Julius Caesar*, V.v.; *Antony and Cleopatra*, IV.xiv.

<sup>24</sup> Eliot deserves our admiration for having sensed the Venetians' attitude towards Othello at the end, but he is scarcely correct in reading this view into the entire play.