Act III

Act III marks the turning point in the play. Indeed, and like all classical tragedies, the structure of the play shifts from order to disorder, from harmony to chaos. In Othello, the first two acts were characterized by love between the Moor and Desdemona, by certainty that the Moor had on all matters, by trust and confidence in his friends and companions. All this will collapse and under the villainous deeds of Iago.

The first words and events in act I, scene i confirm this when musicians are invited by Cassio to play in order to celebrate the happy union of Othello and Desdemona.

Cas. Masters, play here, I will content your pains,

Something that’s brief, and bid “Good morrow, general.” [They play. III.i.1-3.

Music symbolizes the harmony of the time being and the utter love between the members of the couple. Their love now is probably more harmonious than the sound of the music played by the Masters. When their music is heard, the Clown found it so obnoxious that he ordered them to stop playing and leave. It sounds more like noise than harmonious sounds.

 Clo. Why, masters, ha’ your instruments been at Naple,that they speak i’the noise thus?

But? Masters, here’s money for you, and all loves, to make no more noise with it. III.i.1-10.

The tragic shift from harmony to chaos is what the third act will dramatize and it is Iago who will orchestrate this sudden shift. To achieve his villainous plans, Iago will adopt some tactics, namely diminishing the degree of certainty in his victims’ minds and naming what his victims fear most.

 As far as raising doubt in his victims’ mind is concerned, Iago will diminish Othello’s certainty and knowledge when referring to the possibility of a secret affair between Cassio and Desdemona.

Iago. Ha, like not that.

Oth. What dost thou say?

Iago. Nothing, my lord, or if\_I know not what. III.iii.35-38

The purpose of such ambiguous statements is to insinuate that an illicit affair links Cassio and Desdemona without naming it in clear words. The ambiguity of his words works like poison on the mind of Othello, who, all of a sudden, discovers that his total trust and confidence in Desdemona might be questionable. This indicates the end of his certainty and total knowledge of world affairs, and the beginning of uncertainty and doubt. From now on the battle that Othello will fight and the enemy he will confront are totally different from the classical battles he fought and won so far, either against the Turks, pirates or rivals. The new enemy is internal; it is inside his mind and for this, Othello is unskilful to win the day. Iago knows this very well because he was his companions for many years. He, therefore, attacks him where he is the weakest and most fragile. Othello’s mind will, from now on, be disrupted by the poisonous words Iago will pour in his mind. The lack of knowledge he has on the private thoughts and intentions of his wife or Cassio weakens him tremendously. He will even have to confront a mortal knowledge that he should not have known and this mortal knowledge is what Iago teaches him. Normally knowledge is expected to empower us by learning new matters and truths. But the mortal knowledge he wrongly acquires will cause his tragic downfall. This knowledge sounds like a sordid monster, a devastating poison.

 Oth. Think, my lord? By heaven, he echoes me,

As if there were some monster in his thought,

Too hideous to be shown: thou didst mean something; III.iii.110-113.

The second strategy adopted by Iago to demolish the Moor is to name what others fear to know. Iago’s intention is to convince Othello that Desdemona betrays him but he would never pronounce this in clear and plain words. He raises suspicious questions and never gives his opinion; he leaves his victim wrestle with doubt and come to the willed and planned conclusion.

Oth. Why of thy thought, Iago?

Iago. I did not think he had been acquainted with her.

Oth. O yes, and went between us very often? Is he honest?

Iago. Honest, my lord?

Oth. Honest? ay, honest.

Iago. My lord, for aught I know.

Oth. What dost thou know?

Iago. Think, my lord? Iii.III. 106-110.

Othello never thought that his wife Desdemona might betray him with Cassio because he trusted them confidently. Iago will deliberately point to the secret sexual liaison between Cassio and Desdemona.

Iago. O, beware jealousy;

It is the green-ey’d monster, which doth mock

That meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss

Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger:

But O, what damned minutes tells he o’er

Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves! III.iii. 169-174.

Doubt and lack of knowledge will raise all the dormant demons that Othello tried desperately to combat from childhood onwards. Now he faces his vulnerability when realizing that he knows very little about women and is inferior in matters of social upbringing. His Moorish and black origins make him inferior in matters of social manners but, to his mind, ethically superior to all Venetians.

Oth. ...Haply, for I am black,

And have not those soft parts of conversation

That chamberers have...III.iii. 267.269.

His tragic flaw is to trust Iago teach him such manners; for Iago will teach him a mortal knowledge that tragically will cause havoc in the city. Iago teaches him that in Venice both men and women are disloyal to their partners and that sexual desire outdoes virtue and loyalty.

Iago. I know our country disposition well;

In Venice they do let god see the pranks

They dare not show their husbands: their best conscience

Is not to leave undone, but keep unknown.

Oth. Dost thou say so?

Iago. She did deceive her father, marrying you;

And when she seem’d to shake and fear your looks,

She lov’d them most. III.iii. 204-212.

Being mentally destabilized by the poisonous words of Iago, Othello will insist on having an ocular proof to confirm Iago’s allegations. Curiously enough, the proofs Othello will receive are a dream concocted by Iago when in his sleep, Cassio was pronouncing his love for Desdemona.

Iago. I lay with Cassio lately,

And being troubled with a raging tooth,

I could not sleep.

There are a kind of men so loose of soul,

That in sleeps will mutter their affairs,

One of this kind is Cassio:

In sleep I heard him say”sweet Desdemona,

Let us be wary, let us hide our love”; III. Iii. 419-426.

The second ocular proof that Othello will take for granted as evidence of his wife’s infidelity is the handkerchief she lost in her chamber and was picked by Amelia and then given to Iago. The symbolic nature of the handkerchief made it so precious to Othello who could not tolerate that his wife would donate it to his rival.

Oth. That’s a fault: that handkerchief

Did an Egyptian to my mother give,

She was a charmer, and could almost read

The thoughts of people; she told her, while she kept it

‘Twould make her amiable and subdue my father

Entirely to her love: but if she lost it,

Or made a gift of it, my father’s eye

Should hold her loathly, and his spirits should hunt

After new fancies: she dying gave it me

And bid me, when my fate would have me wive,

To give it her; I did so, and take heed on ‘t

Make it a darling like your precious eye,

To lose, or give ‘t away, were such perdition

As nothing else could match. III. iv.53-66.

To Othello, the handkerchief stands for every single precious memory of his childhood and family. It reminds him of his mother and how she seduced her husband; it also stands for the unique reminder of Othello’s dead mother. The handkerchief is also the symbol of love, fidelity, identity, and honor; virtues that the mortal knowledge has smashed for good. The handkerchief could also symbolize a bridge between the occident and the orient, humans and spirits, the dead generation and the new one. These two opposite worlds are unlikely to meet because they differ in so many aspects. The mother tried to preserve her husband from temptation as Othello tried to preserve Desdemona from Venetian chamberers. In both generations women die out of pain or murder as if the red strawberries embroidered on the handkerchief indicate blood. In both couples, it stands for the impossible love that even magic cannot restore. The magic tales told by Othello to subdue Desdemona could not resist against the sea of troubles and obstacles that Iago caused.

 Last but not least, the misogynistic words uttered by Iago and those pronounced by his wife Emilia, underline the deep mistrust between male and female characters in the play and society in general.

Emil.’Tis not a year or two shows us a man:

They are all but stomachs, and we are but food;

They eat us hungerly, and when they are full,

They belch us. III.iv. 100-104.

The words of Iago and Emilia concord in stating the impossibility of lasting and genuine love between men and women in the Venetian context, and probably everywhere else. It is as if Shakespeare insinuates how love is an ephemeral emotion that cannot last for long because of the unreliable and complex nature of the human condition.