Othello : Act ii

All the dramas of act ii take place in Cyprus where the Venetian army is in a state of war against the Turks. This brief reference to the Turkish enemy puts the play in the context of the conflict between Muslims and Christians. The southern part of the Mediterranean sea belongs to Muslims and the northern part is an European and Christian territory. The island of Cyprus is in between these two hegemons and each tries to impose its supremacy. Shakespeare, being aware of this clash of civilizations, has deliberately chosen two characters ( Desdemona and Othello) from the two opposite worlds. His intention was probably to show that reconciliation and harmony is possible between Muslims and Christians if mutual recognition of the other was taken into account. He probably pointed to the deep gulf between the two peoples and religions. Hence the failure of their love and their tragic end.

Act I opens on the shore of the island in the midst of a sea storm foreshadowing the forth coming conflicts and tragedy. In the previous act, the civility and rationality of venetian senators succeeded to prevent the conflict between Othello and Desdemona’s father. But in Cyprus/sea, emotions and human villainy will cause tragic events in the coming acts.

While waiting on the sea shore for Othello’s arrival back from the battle, characters like Cassio, Iago, Desdemona, Emelia speak about human manners in general and the new married couple in paticular.Othello is praised for his courage as an army leader. Montano describes him as « brave Othello » (ii. i.38). While Cassio describes Desdemo as a queen, a divinity who deserves respect and devotion.

Cassio.The riches of the ship is come ashore !

Ye men of Cyprus, let her have your knees :

Hail to thee, lady ! and the grace of heaven, Enwheel thee round ! (ii. i. 83-87).

On the opposite side Iago considers women in general as deceiving and inconsistent individuals. Women, for him are pictures( liars), wild cats, players (dishonest) and disloyal to their husbands.

Iago. Come on, come on, you are pictures out o’ doors ;

Bells in your parlours ; wild-cats in your kitchens ;

Saints in your injuries ; devils being offended ;

Players in your housewifery ; and housewives in your beds. (ii.i. 109-113).

One may wonder whether Iago’s knowledge of women is based on grounded understanding of their psychology or rather a mere misogyny. Shakespeare does not provide any single evidence of why Iago is so full of hatred of women. The only possible hint to his hatred of women and Othello is his suspicion of an affair between the Moor and his wife Emelia.

Iago. Not out of absolute lust, (though peradventure

I stand accounts for as great a sin)

But partly led to diet my revenge,

For that I suspect the lustful Moor

Hath leap’d into my seat, (ii.i. 287-291).

We may deduce from this slight hint that Iago hates the Moor out of revenge. He has been cuckolded by the Moor and plans to take revenge and destroy Othello by all means. He first tried to taint his reputation by warning Brabatio against this « unholy » marriage . He failed in this attempt. Now his plan is to affect the mind of Othello by poisoning his ears with lies and allegations. He knows that Othello is physically beyond competition but on the mental leval, the Moor will prove very vulnerable.

Iago. …the thought whereof

Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards,

And nothing can, nor shall content my soul,

Till I am even with him wife, for wife :

Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor,

At least, into a jealosy so strong,

That judgement cannot cure ; which thing to do, (ii. i.291-297).

The main issue of the play is therefore deep hatred and jealousy. In the act I & II, it is Iago who is deeply tormented by the mental wound. In the coming acts, Othello will endure jealousy and infidelity. By so doing, Shakespeare is shedding light on one of the human mental traits that might cause tremendous repercussions. Actually, it is thought that in his tragedies, Shakespeare has tried to explore human nature with a focus on a specific human feature : Jealousy in Othello, ambition in MacBeth, revenge in Hamlet.

In scene three, the seeds of Iago’s villainy are planted in the minds of his victims and will be reaped later on.To attain his macabre objectives, Iago will have recourse to wine to disrupt the self composure of his enemies. Thus he will urge Cassio to drink wine in order to celebrate their victory. But at heart, he plans to oppose Cassio and Roderigo in an armed duel and by so doing he will spoil the happiness of the newly married couple in their nuptial.

Iago.Well, happiness to their sheets !...Come, lieutenant, I have a stoup of wine, and here without are a brace of Cyprus gallants, that would fain have a measure to the health of the black Othello. (II.iii.26-29).

Iago certanly knows that wine has the same destructive effect as jealousy ; the two deminish one’s composure and rationality. Wine will serve his intentions when dealing with victims like Cassio and Roderigo because their peronality lacks the serenity and confidence of Othello. But when it comes to the Moor, Iago will use a more devastating poison, which is jealousy.

Scene three also witnesses a new trial where Othello is the judge. In act I, the senators were the judges listening to both Brabantio and the Moor. Now it is up to Othello to play this role because he still represents the noble qualities of the Venetian society. Indeed, Othello has, up to now been the embodiment of fairness,honor, rationality, composure, and courage. All these qualities are considered a « fig » by Iago whose moto in life is the end justifies the means. Seen from this perspective, the play is a deep reflection on the moral values of Shakespeare’s society and probably of ours even today. What is morality in a society where individuals are obsessed by success and ambition ? Are we aware of the deep harm we might cause to others if selfish interest is the only drive in our pursuit of success ?

Scene three sheds light on a very problematic aspect of Othello’s personality. He knows that his origins are are moorish, that is from the Maghreb and consequently that his culture and religion are from an Islamic one. Still, when judging the night quarrel between Cassio and Rodorego, he says :

Othello. Are we turn’d Tutks, and to ourselves do that

Which heaven has forbid the Ottomites ?

For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl ; (II.iii. 161-164).

His words openly puts him in the category of civilized Christians and not the « barbarous » Ottomans or Muslims. Thus he speaks like any other Christian character in the play who despises Muslims and glorifies his origin. Iago called him in the very beginning of the play « a barbary horse » and barbary is a term coined by the Romans to denigrate any people not belonging to Roman origins. In the coming scenes, Othello will openly break with his borrowed identity and claim his Muslim and Moorish one. Othello’s personality could either be a typical example of schizohprenia or a precursor of a multicultural person.

In this play, Shakespeare makes a tremendous use of some theatrical techniques borrowed from classical drama. One of them is the use of « asides » that allow characters to directly address the audience. Iago constantly uses this technique in order to reveal his secret intentions. Without the « asides » no one could understand the whys and wherefores of Iago’s plans.

Iago. And what’s he then, that says I play the villain,

When this advice is free I give, and honest,

Probal to thinking, and indeed the course

To win the Moor again ? (II. Iii.327-330).