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The Secret of Shakespeare (part 3)

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OTHELLO

THE essential feature of man's primordial state was the union of his soul with the Spirit; and one of the most universal symbols of the regaining of that state is marriage, the union of lovers. The prototype of this symbolism in Christianity lies in Christ's own references to himself as "the Bridegroom"; and the Middle Ages were dominated by the conception of the Church or, microcosmically, the soul as the bride of Christ. Let us quote from the beginning of Ruysbroek's *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage:*

"This Bridegroom is Christ, and human nature is the bride; that which God has made in His own image and after His likeness. And in the beginning He had set her in the highest and most beautiful, the richest and most fertile place in all the earth; that is, in Paradise. And He had given her dominion over all Creatures; and He had adorned her with graces; and had given her a commandment, so that by obedience she might have merited to be confirmed and established with her Bridegroom in an eternal troth, and never to fall into any grief, or any sin.

Then came a beguiler, the hellish fiend, full of envy, in the shape of a subtle serpent.... And the fiend seduced the bride of God with false counsel; and she was driven into a strange country, poor and miserable and captive and oppressed, and beset by her enemies; so that it seemed as though she might never attain reconciliation and return again to her native land.

But when God thought the time had come, and had mercy on the suffering of His beloved, He sent His Only Begotten Son to earth, in a fair chamber, in a glorious temple; that is, in the body of the Virgin Mary. There he was married to this bride, our nature."[1]

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[1] Jan van Ruysbroeck, *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage,* translated by C. A. Wynschenk Dom. pp. 3-4. (John Watkins, 1951).

Mediaeval art was continually expressing this union, in various ways, as for example in pictures of the mystical marriage of St. Catharine of Alexandria with Christ, she representing the perfect soul and he the Spirit. But the Virgin Mary, in virtue of her Assumption and Coronation and her function as Co-Redemptress, also stands for the Spirit, and so by extension may a perfect woman. In *The Divine Comedy,* when Dante reaches the Garden of Eden on the top of the Mountain of Purgatory, Beatrice his beloved, personifying spiritual wisdom, descends from Heaven and the two meet in the terrestrial Paradise; and in the *Faerie Queene,* the sequel to the Red Crosse Knyghte's victory over the dragon is his marriage to the Lady Una.

In *Othello* the black Moor and his white lady are soul and Spirit. Like Cordelia, Desdemona is "the pearl of great price" which was wantonly thrown away. Othello describes himself as:

One whose hand
Like the base Judean threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe.

As for Iago, Othello says of him, after his iniquity has been revealed:

I look down towards his feet; but that's a fable,

meaning: I look down to see the devil's cloven hooves; but since I see that Iago, who is unquestionably the devil, has ordinary human feet, I now learn that the current idea about the devil's feet is a mere fable. Then he strikes at Iago with his sword saying:

If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee,

and in fact he cannot kill him. Iago remarks to the Governor:

I bleed, sir, but not killed.

The sudden and secret marriage of Othello and Desdemona at the beginning of the play has taken Iago by surprise. But this union of soul and Spirit is only virtual; it marks the outset of the spiritual path, not the end, and symbolizes initiation rather than realization; and the first scene opens upon the devil preparing to do all in his power to wreck the marriage before it can come to fullness. To start with he can do little, for although husband and wife are temporarily separated, the Senate agrees that Desdemona shall follow Othello to Cyprus; but their first night there together is disturbed by the

drunken brawl which Iago has staged; and the next morning he begins to imbue Othello with the suspicion that Desdemona is unfaithful to him, so that the two lovers are never really in peace together until at the end they are lying dead side by side upon the marriage bed. Only then, after it has passed through the "narrow gate" of death, is the soul truly united with the Spirit.

But it has a foretaste of Paradise, when the Moor arrives in Cyprus to find that Desdemona is already there before him. Her speedy coming has been almost miraculous, for as Cassio says:

> *Tempests themselves, high seas and howling winds,*
> *The gutter'd rocks, and congregated sands,*
> *Traitors ensteep'd to clog the guiltless keel,*
> *As having sense of beauty, do omit*
> *Their mortal natures, letting go safely by*
> *The divine Desdemona.* (II. 1)

When Othello enters he says:

> *It gives me wonder great as my content*
> *To see you here before me. O my soul's joy!*
> *If after every tempest come such calms,*
> *Let the winds blow till they have waken'd death!*
> *And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas*
> *Olympus-high, and duck again as low*
> *As hell's from heaven!*

We have here an anticipation of the terrible "storm" that is to follow, but also, in a sense, a guarantee of the final peace.

It may be asked: If Desdemona symbolizes the Spirit, why does she not see through Iago, as Cordelia would undoubtedly have done? But apart from the fact that Desdemona's proneness to think well of people unless given good reasons for not doing so is an aspect of her generosity and childlikeness and therefore part of her perfection, it must be remembered that a symbol can never account for every aspect of the higher reality that it symbolizes. One has the impression that no one was more critical of Shakespeare's symbols than the author himself and that in his later plays he was

continually striving to make his symbols fuller and more all-embracing. It is probable that Claudius in *Hamlet* represents Shakespeare's own consciousness of the inadequacy of Falstaff as a personification of the devil; and Iago is certainly an "improvement" on Claudius. Similarly the transcendence of Cordelia no doubt partly reflects Shakespeare's consciousness of certain shortcomings in Desdemona as a symbol of the Spirit. None the less, granted that a symbol must always fall short in some respects, Desdemona is unquestionably adequate to fulfill her function in this play. She is convincingly perfect, and human perfection is a symbol of Divine Perfection. Moreover she is the ideal complement to Othello. The Ancient Worlds and the Middle Ages held that every human being is perfectly matched by another human being of the opposite sex. The two may be separated by time and space and may never meet in this life, but if they do, no ordinary earthly passion can compare with the love that each feels for the other. Consequently, since a true symbol must be perfect of its kind, we may say that where the symbolism of sexual love is used, only such total and "absolute" love as this is fully worthy to represent the primordial relationship between soul and Spirit, and it is clear that Shakespeare had no less than such love in mind when he drew the characters of Romeo and Juliet, for example, of Othello and Desdemona, and of Antony and Cleopatra. In *Othello,* as in these other plays, we are made to feel that there is something cosmic and universal in the intense mutual attraction between the lovers; and our thoughts leap to identify themselves with Othello's when he says in the last scene, with reference to his wife's death:

> *Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse*
> *Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe*
> *Should yawn at alteration.*

Iago, by far the most villainous of all Shakespeare's villains, is his last representation of the devil as such, and it is difficult to conceive how this representation could be surpassed. In his subsequent plays, as we shall see, it suits his purpose better to let his villains represent certain aspects of evil, without actually personifying evil's root. Edmund, in *King Lear,* is no doubt the second most villainous of Shakespeare's villains, but there is no common measure between him and Iago as regards what motivates their crimes. Edmund's chief motive is worldly ambition, whereas Iago's villainy is ultimately determined by love of evil and hatred of good. They have none the less much in common

as regards outlook, and this outlook serves, incidentally, as a clear indication of where Shakespeare stands in the transition from Middle Ages to Renaissance which was still not quite complete in the England of his day. More than once his drama is a meeting place, almost a battleground, for the two points of view; and it is significant that Iago and Edmund are both out and out humanists, that is, typically representative of the Renaissance, and typical rebels against mediaeval tradition. Iago even goes so far as to deny the existence of virtue as an ideal since that implies, most unhumanistically, that there is some power above man which sets a standard for man to conform to.

> *Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens to the which our wills are gardeners.…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.* (I, 3)

Iago might almost have said: "Thou, reason, art my goddess" just as Edmund does in fact say

> *Thou, nature, art my goddess.* (I, 2)

Either remark is centrally humanist, for according to humanism, humanity is the highest thing in existence, and humanity as such is limited to reason and to nature. Beyond reason, which marks nature's upper boundary, the supernatural begins. Under the flag of Renaissance humanism, naturalism in art and rationalism in thought march together side by side. It is clearly humanism, the rationalistic denial of all that is superhuman and supernatural, that the mediaeval Hamlet means by the word "philosophy" when he says:

> *There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,*
> *Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.* (I, 5)[2]

[2] These lines are certainly not directed against Horatio. The possessive "your" is here general and impersonal. The Arden editors quote as a parallel Hamlet's *Your worm is your only emperor for diet.*

Nor can there be any doubt that Hamlet is here voicing Shakespeare's own view. The same may be said of the equally mediaeval Duke of Vienna in *Measure for Measure* when he sums up Barnadine's-badness:

> *Sirrah, thou art said to have a stubborn soul*
> *That apprehends no further than this world.* (V, 1)

In *Othello,* unlike *Hamlet,* Hell and Purgatory are treated separately and successively. Almost the whole of *Othello is* taken up with the descent into Hell: the soul, personified by the Moor, gradually plumbs the very depths of error, that is, of thinking that black is white and white is black, that falsehood is truth and truth falsehood. But although the descent is gradual, there is no correspondingly gradual development of soul in this play. The first stage of the journey only becomes spiritually effective when, at the bottom of Hell, the truth suddenly breaks in upon Othello like a flash of lightning which lights up in retrospect the whole descent that he had made in darkness, and he is transformed in an instant from a dupe to a wise man. Then follows Purgatory, with an equally concentrated brevity. Although compressed into only a few lines, its anguish is so intense that it altogether convinces us of expiation and purification. Othello anticipates, and therefore wears out to nothing, all that would have separated him from Desdemona, *this heavenly sight,* on the Day of Judgment *when we shall meet at compt.* He cries out:

> *Whip me ye devils,*
> *From the possession of this heavenly sight!*
> *Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!*
> *Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!* (V, 2)

Then, as it were in sign that his expiation is complete, a deep calm settles upon his sadness almost from that moment until the end.

The everlasting union of soul and Spirit after death is indicated by Othello's dying *upon a kiss* and also by the *marriage sheets* on the bed of death, a detail that Shakespeare stresses just as much as he stresses the fact of Henry IV's death in the Jerusalem Chamber.

Everything is really explained in the Moor's own objective judgment of himself at the end when he tells the Venetians that they must speak of him as

Of one that loved not wisely but too well,
Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme.

He does not mean by the words *not wisely but too well* that he had loved Desdemona too much, but on the contrary that he had not loved her enough. Wisdom here is certainly not worldly wisdom such as might limit the extent of passion, but wisdom in the higher sense which would have added its light to the heat of passion and made him *see* that Desdemona was in fact goodness itself. Then he would have been proof against Iago's deceptions, whereas a blind love which had too much passion in proportion to its wisdom made him a relatively easy victim. In this play it is blindness above all that characterizes fallen man, leaving a loophole for him to be wrought, that is, worked on by the devil, until he is so perplexed that he comes to believe the exact opposite of the truth.

Unlike Shakespeare's other heroes, the Moor is almost perfect even at the outset, and this partly helps to make the quickness of his passage through Purgatory so convincing. It is as if only one element were lacking to complete his perfection, an element of wisdom or vision. Now the descent into Hell for the discovery of the soul's worst possibilities is only necessary because these possibilities are an integral part of the psychic substance and need to be recovered, purified and reintegrated, for in order to be perfect the soul must be complete. This question will have to be considered more fully in connection with *Measure for Measure.* For the moment it is enough to bear in mind that the lost and perverted elements have first to be found and then redeemed, and that the interval between finding and redemption is likely to be fraught with danger. The case of Othello might be described by saying that when he reaches the bottom of Hell he finds a hitherto unknown blind eye, namely the lost element of vision, lying in the depths of his soul. *Corruptio optimi pessima,* and since this eye, as well as being virtually the most precious is also the most powerful of the psychic elements, it is able to transmit its blindness to the rest of the soul, and he throws away "the pearl of great price." Then dawns the truth. Shakespeare achieves here an overwhelming impact of a kind which drama alone, of all the arts, makes possible. Emilia's revelation of the innocence of Desdemona and the villainy of Iago, her instantaneous and dazzlingly clear proof that white is white and black is black, comes as a *fiat lux.* The blind eye is filled with light and takes its rightful

place at the summit of the soul. “The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner.”