

## *Othello* (1604-5)

A few years after *Hamlet* (1599-1600) but before *Macbeth* and *King Lear* (both 1605-6)

### **Characters**

#### **Othello**

NB Black was associated with evil on Elizabethan stage eg Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* - an embodiment of individuality at its most negative: defiance of social order, glories in evil - not unlike the diabolic figure in Morality plays.

The tragedy is that Othello isn't evil - he's like us - he's not perfect but 'as truly as to heaven I do confess the vices of my blood' I, iii 1.261-7.

Elizabethans believed black men had stronger sexual appetites and were more violent than white men. Shakespeare doesn't simply reflect such notions; Othello may become violent but it's not because he's black. Shakespeare was rather conservative in some ways but here he appears to be questioning commonly perceived notions of race. NB he exploited such notions in *Titus Andronicus*, presenting Aaron in a manner consistent with popular belief. In *Othello* he takes the same notions but problematises them.

The paradox is that Othello is black and fair at the beginning. Desdemona, fair in complexion, is made to seem black by Iago, who, though white, has a black heart - 'I am not what I am'.

Shakespeare presents racial prejudice through Iago (with whose views we're hardly likely to sympathise!) and minor characters such as Roderigo and Brabantio. Othello has clearly risen to his current status in spite of racial prejudice - can't know if Shakespeare intended us to see this as laudable part of his nobility (if anything, he's presented as an unusual individual as opposed to a representative of his race) but certainly 20thc audiences will be likely to see it in his way.

Elizabethans would simply have been surprised, some shocked and discomfited, perhaps trying to see Othello as an unusual black man, somehow not 100% Moor. Yet the play underlines the fact the he is a Moor, through and through - he is physically different - characters speak disparagingly of his thick lips etc - not like Aphra Behn's famous Oroonoko in 17thc novel - she repeatedly comments that although he's black, he is European in terms of education, behaviour, even physical appearance - as if he's just been painted black. Shakespeare underlines Othello's difference - he's an outsider.

Iago exploits this eg by telling him, 'I know our country disposition well' - warns him that female infidelity is an accepted Venetian custom! Claims he fears that Desdemona may repent her marriage to Othello when she compares him to 'her country forms' ie young Venetian men; claims that Desdemona 'must have change' once she's 'sated with his body'. Tells us nothing about Desdemona and Othello but a lot about Iago! Maybe he can only understand lust, satiety and disgust. Can see something finer in others but wants to destroy it. This clearly works to an extent because Othello becomes agitated, his language becomes temporarily rhetorical and self-dramatising eg he falsifies his true feelings in his wild assertion that it would have been better no matter how Desdemona had behaved 'So I had nothing known' III iii.

However, Shakespeare reverses the usual stereotypes because Othello isn't a slave but a noble, he's not pagan but Christian. Iago, though white and a soldier, isn't noble and certainly isn't Christian. The Duke articulates this reversal: 'Your son-in-law is far more fair than black' I, iii, 1.289-90. Othello is universally respected, a simple and direct man of action with a natural air of authority. Iago comments that Othello is bombastic, 'loving his own pride and purpose' yet when Iago tells Othello that he could hardly restrain himself when he heard Othello spoken of in 'scurvy' terms (guaranteed to worry and anger most people), Othello simply replies 'Tis better as it is' I ii 1.6. Iago fails to rouse him to anger and Othello reveals quiet dignity, not wounded ego. When Brabantio cries, 'Subdue him at his peril' after much verbal abuse, Othello replies, 'My parts, title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly'.

#### **Othello as warrior**

Othello, like many Shakespearean heroes, is 'noble', a warrior - thus associated with 'good' state controlled violence for the good of society - a man of honour. Warriors seen as men of special worth eg Hotspur in *1 Henry IV*; Prince Hal can only become Henry V when he has learned to assimilate some of the warrior virtues embodied in Hotspur eg courage, fortitude, willingness to sacrifice self for the glory and safety of the state. Shakespeare often shows his warriors to be vulnerable, their very warrior qualities leading to their downfall in a world where the qualities of the Renaissance courtier were becoming more

admired than those of the warrior, associated with the old order eg Hotspur dies, as does Coriolanus - they die honourably but must die because they cannot survive in the new order. Othello is part of the same value system as Hotspur and Coriolanus. Othello is a man of action, not a subtle politician - this leads to his downfall; Lodovico calls him 'this rash and most unfortunate man'.

Rather like Titus Andronicus, Othello's warrior instincts become tainted by illegitimate violence - both become corrupted by the evil they think they're fighting in spite of noble intentions. Familiar tragic theme - noble man of great abilities loses moral direction in a world where moral choices are complex and confusing. One of Shakespeare's favourite themes. In *Titus Andronicus*, the focus is on political and social consequences, not personal psychology of Titus - Othello comes from a different tragic tradition - hence focus on Othello himself.

Othello, like Hotspur and Coriolanus in particular, has led his people to victory many times - he's a well respected public figure. Shakespeare presents war as good if it's for just purposes eg he celebrates warrior virtues and just victory in *Henry V*.

### **The bluff soldier.**

The bluff soldier is related to the figure of the fool, who has a special licence to speak truth, an ability to see through the confusion eg Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra* and Kent in *King Lear*. Iago only seems to be the blunt good and trustworthy soldier. Enobarbus is fundamentally different in that he always speaks the truth and his intentions are good. Iago uses apparent truth to disguise his real machinations. Enobarbus is cynical at times but his cynicism is largely tolerant, a result of his perceptive and amused way of looking at human weakness. Iago sees the same flaws in humanity but rather than smiling at them, he exploits them, revelling bitterly in manifestations of human weakness and baseness. Enobarbus is very outspoken; Iago lacks the courage to be genuinely blunt - he just pretends to be. Cassio believes him to be truthful: 'he speaks home'.

### **Notion of honesty**

The theme of honesty is fundamentally important in *Othello* - the notion of being generous and faithful to friends / employers. Ironic - Iago is often spoken of as being honest eg Cassio and Othello call him honest. He is honest in a brutal and limited manner but only for destructive purposes eg telling Othello that Cassio can't hold his liquor. Iago's reputation for honesty fools Cassio, who is persuaded to talk to Desdemona to ask her to plead with Othello on his behalf.

Desdemona is also described as honest - a different kind of honesty ie chastity, truth telling and faithfulness to friends eg Cassio. Ironically, her honesty in this area leads to Othello doubting her. Iago comments that Othello 'thinks men honest that but seem to be so' I iii 1.398 ie he's gullible because he trusts appearances - lacks Iago's perspicacity.

### **Othello and Desdemona**

NB Desdemona means 'unfortunate'.

They don't seem to know each other very well eg Desdemona is sure that Othello would never become jealous. It's an immature relationship, unlike that of Antony and Cleopatra, who are well aware of each other's faults! Their knowledge even of themselves can be patchy - Othello comments that he's old enough not to feel 'the young effects of passion' yet he's adolescent in many of his emotional reactions. Their love is incredibly idealistic - difficult to see how it could survive in the real world - makes them very vulnerable.

Desdemona's possible infidelity - NB even the implication of a wife's infidelity could seriously injure her husband's reputation and could undermine his authority - apart from the inevitable embarrassment at being the butt of jokes about cuckolds, the implication would be that if he couldn't govern his wife properly, he wouldn't be able to govern an army or state. Elizabethans believed strongly in political, social and domestic hierarchies - all intertwined to create ultimate order.

Iago cleverly blends elements of truth in his lies eg Desdemona can deceive - she deceives her father by running off to marry Othello but she tells fibs - she's not a liar. She has integrity and faces her father when possible. She lies about the handkerchief but the audience can understand why - Othello is bullying her and she wants to avoid unpleasantness - she may well be a bit afraid of him.

Desdemona is impulsively good - in agreeing to help Cassio she pesters Othello - she's too helpful! He jokes that she'll make him lose patience by nagging - she's unwise.

She's attractive and loving and given lyrical lines and touching scenes eg when she asks Emilia how she can win Othello back. Othello is fundamentally idealistic in his approach to Desdemona but when he fears she has been unfaithful his language becomes very sensual - images of taste and smell are often juxtaposed with images of foulness and corruption - cf Hamlet.

Jealousy leads to a temporary perversion of his passion. Jealousy isn't necessarily a defining feature of Othello's character. In *The Winter's Tale* Leontes is a man whose jealousy is a 'diseas'd opinion' - it's self-engendered and self-perpetuated - opposite to Othello; in addition, he's been married for years and should know his wife and he's surrounded by people who tell him Hermione is innocent. Othello's attitude is perhaps symptomatic of vulnerability due to being middle aged, newly married, of a different race etc - a number of complicated factors. Othello only has Emilia to counteract the poison of Iago's suggestions - natural that he should trust Iago, whose word he takes in preference to that of a 'simple bawd'.

End of the play - Desdemona makes remarks which could be seen as a confession - ambiguous. If she has a reputation for fibbing, maybe Othello simply takes the worst possible meaning eg he takes the phrase

'loves I bear to you' as love affairs. When Iago tells him that Cassio has confessed, Desdemona comments, Cassio has been betrayed and I am undone - one can see how Othello misinterprets things. Major problems in communication - odd cos they are in many respects kindred spirits.

Killing Desdemona - Can interpret his actions either as fatal expression of uncontrolled anger or as response to what he perceives to be justice - or mixture of both, each fuelling the other; when he realises he has committed murder not justice, he kills himself, again responding to justice. When he kills himself, he shows the courage and control of the warrior, rather as Macbeth ultimately reasserts his warrior values in facing justice and certain death at the hands of Macduff. Othello believes he's sending himself to torment and eternal separation from Desdemona. He asks that his great love and perplexity be recorded but not extenuated.

When Desdemona dies she dies loving and loyal - bit sentimental but supposed to be touching - picture of the ideal pious Renaissance wife, submitting to her husband, even when wrong, sure of her reward in Heaven. Not strong enough character to be the anchor of the love plot - Romeo and Juliet are much stronger?

### **The handkerchief**

Othello feels wonder that Desdemona can love him. Wonder is linked to superstition - hence belief in the handkerchief. Many in Shakespeare's audience would have been genuinely superstitious - some still believed in witches and spells etc. The play was performed for James I - he was particularly interested in supernatural power - not that we have that in Othello but they would have been more kindly disposed to the story of the charmed hankie than we are.

Othello seems to believe 'there's some wonder in this handkerchief'(III,4, 1.55), that there's 'magic in the web of it' as he recounts the tale of the 'charmer' who could almost read people's thoughts and gave it to his mother. Desdemona, true to her almost childish characteristic of listening wide eyed to Othello's tales, is impressed and almost frightened: 'would to God that I had never seen it'. Almost feels witchcraft, manifested in the handkerchief, is working against her love. It is a love token, her 'first remembrance from the Moor'. It was given to Othello's mother and she gave it to him for his wife. Desdemona is told that if she loses it she'll lose his love. The loss of such a keepsake clearly presages doom - worthless except as a proof of love but a powerful symbol. Ironic - she only forgets it because of her concern for Othello who is sick. The perfection of her love destroys her. The handkerchief 'drops' as if by fate - has been described as like a veil of severance between their hearts.

Othello sees the handkerchief in the hand of Cassio's paramour, Bianca, a prostitute. His desire for revenge focuses first on Cassio: 'How shall I murder him, Iago?' Iago digs at him, telling him to take it 'like a man' ie there are lots of cuckolds so it's not significant. Does nothing to allay his fears! 'but yet the pity of it, Iago' IV, i 1.191 - direct appeal to friend - desperate for human support. Othello speaks of Desdemona with loving regret as a person not just an attractive body - speaks of her skill as 'an admirable musician' and being 'of so high and plenteous wit and invention'. Yet the idealism of his love leads him to the opposite extreme and when he believes he has proof of her infidelity, he comments, 'Now I do see 'tis true' ie love has gone and revenge is invoked.

Othello's killing Desdemona can be seen as an outward symbol of the anguish lovers inevitably inflict on each other eg Romeo and Juliet (written about 10 years earlier). In the tragic mode, love is a straining after the impossible - has within it the seeds of its own death. It can be re-born but not as human love - as a kind of divine love - must die in the process - suggestion of this in *Antony and Cleopatra* (written a year or so after *Othello*) - also clearly significant in *Romeo and Juliet*, where their last kiss in death represents love after death - possible that we are to read the same symbolism into Othello's last kiss of Desdemona, although he clearly expects eternal separation so perhaps it is a poignant reminder of their earlier joy at being reunited and a symbol of what might have been.

### **Iago**

A catalyst, who diabolically discerns the inevitable seed of death. The element of tragedy is innate in Desdemona and Othello - if it wasn't it couldn't be developed by Iago. His function is to expedite disaster. He isn't designed to be a believable human being - he's more a disembodied intelligence, an abstract potentiality of the human conscience; may also represent the darker side of Othello.

Iago's dramatic heritage lies in the morality plays - derived from the figure of Vice and shares many of

the characteristics of such characters: delight in his 'skill', seeing it as 'sport' and seeking to ruin victims, elaborate pretence to be the victim's friend; he also shares the clever and manipulative speech of stage 'Machiavels'.

Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* in 1513 - he discussed appropriate behaviour for people in high positions if they wanted to retain authority at all costs eg Edmund in *Lear* - wants control over state by ruthless means. Machiavelli embodied the devil to Elizabethans. In Elizabethan plays, it's usual for Machiavellian figures to victimise and torment good people by manipulating and prompting the weak eg Roderigo or the wicked to do evil deeds. Their schemes work by manipulating what is essentially good eg Emilia and Cassio, who is devoted to Othello as general.

Iago is the centre of the play - he acts, the others REACT. Macbeth is goaded by his wife but Iago acts on a purely individual level. Coleridge referred to it as 'motiveless malignancy' cf Satan in *Paradise Lost* (1667?) - evil for evil's sake. He loves his machinations: 'Pleasure and action make the hours seem short' II iii l.369. Iago is ruthless - he maims Cassio and murders Roderigo, yet he seems to regard his schemes as entertaining.

Act 1 sc 1 - we see Iago's motive - he resents Cassio's promotion over him in the army ranks: 'I am worth no worse a place' l.385ish. Also hates Othello: 'I hate the moor' and thinks he may have slept with his wife. Iago seems to act simply because he enjoys manipulating and destroying people - feelings about Cassio and Othello may be attempts at rationalising or justifying his actions or may simply fuel them.

### **Iago's plans - the brawl**

Iago's plan to convince Othello of Desdemona's disloyalty enables him to gain revenge on Cassio too. He uses Roderigo, his dupe, to provoke Cassio to a brawl while Iago encourages Cassio to drink. Roderigo is easily conned because he wants Desdemona and believes Iago's lies that she will soon tire of Othello. Iago finds out what people most want and encourages them to believe that in helping him, they will obtain it.

Othello is presented here as a figure of authority - stern and passionless. He is responsible for the administration of justice and reveals himself to be calm and efficient - he can't let Cassio off simply because he likes him. NB Othello isn't simply a dupe - he has no reason to doubt Iago's testimony here - it's skillfully couched in terms which make it appear that Iago is trying to extenuate Cassio's behaviour; this helpful guise is one of Iago's most effective weapons and everyone is taken in. Roderigo acts as a contrast to Othello because he sees part of Iago's evil and yet is still duped. For Othello, public duty and justice must prevail over personal affection - faces the same dilemma with Desdemona later.

Othello fires Cassio and Cassio goes to Iago for advice. Iago suggests that he ask Desdemona to plead for him. Iago is intrigued by the possibilities of his evil jokes - loves manipulating people - a control freak! His methods are appalling but intriguing - very clever eg he lets Othello wind himself up. He plants thoughts by suggesting their opposites eg when he pretends to be arbiter in the brawl between Cassio and Roderigo - by suggesting Cassio is innocent, he subtly suggests the opposite.

## **The Persuasion scenes**

Act 3 sc 3 is tremendously important. 1st phase is intriguing - Iago initiates it. 1.35 fails cos Desdemona is direct about Cassio - very open. Desdemona is impulsive and spontaneous - saves herself by truth here. 1.95 is very successful - Iago repeats things, as if he doesn't want to say something. 1.137 rouses Othello to think Iago's got something on his mind, tells him he doesn't have to tell what's on his mind - intrigues Othello. He plays on Othello's own words and his fears then lets Othello talk of it himself eg he tells Othello to beware of jealousy and thus plants the seeds of it! see 1.169 - jealousy hadn't been mentioned before. Othello gets worked up then calms down and resolves not to be jealous cos there's no proof - at this stage at least his rationality prevails over his insecurity. Very dramatic - tension created by the focus on their reactions.

Next phase is that Othello wonders if Desdemona has been unfaithful. Turns on Iago and says he's responsible. Iago is shaken but he has the handkerchief, which he knows will provide powerful ammunition. He pretends to be offended and leaves Othello in two minds. End of Act 3 sc 3 - no-one had suggested killing Desdemona - he effectively suggests it - one would kill a rival in a courtly situation, not one's wife! Iago draws Othello in, saying 'don't think like that' and thus constantly telling him how to think. Tells him in 1.249 of Act 3 sc 3 to drop it - clever - knows Othello won't because he can't.

Iago's speech is energetic, exhibiting a compulsive hatred of that which is good. Rhythms become slower when he's dissimulating. In the temptation scenes he's less attacking than usual, pretending to speak reluctantly and hesitantly - direct parody of Othello's speech, which is flowing. The ordered harmonies of Othello's habitual speech express the ordered universe he inhabits, with good and evil at opposite poles and easily identifiable. Iago throws him into a state of confusion and he can no longer distinguish between good and evil - in his state of moral horror and emotional chaos, his speech comes to sound rather more like Iago's - aggressive eg 'I'll chop her into messes, 'goats and monkeys' and other ugly animal imagery and grossly sensual images such as 'lie with her, lie on her?'

Act 3 sc 3 1.460f - dramatic and daring. Iago almost takes Desdemona's place (not sexually!) in an awful inversion of natural relationships built on trust and love - almost a reverse marriage, based on lies and bitterness. Othello kneels and Iago kneels beside him in a travesty of the marriage vows, with Iago vowing to put Othello first and to obey him (obvious parallel with marriage ceremony) and ultimately declaring, 'I am your own for ever.' The scene underlines Othello's fatal trust in Iago eg 'I am bound to you forever'. Can also be seen as a travesty of a religious or knightly oath - particularly appropriate in that Othello is a warrior; Iago is now his 'lieutenant', the post which had (in reality) lately been occupied by Cassio.

Iago wants to take Cassio and Desdemona's place in relation to Othello. If Cassio was dreaming of Desdemona, when Iago gets into the bed, he's taking Desdemona's place in a sense. He wants the job that Cassio gets, a position of esteem; he wants to be Othello's confidant and to influence him. NB Iago's jealousy that starts everything, not Othello's - he's jealous of Cassio's promotion and jealous that Othello may have slept with his wife. He manages to manipulate Othello so that he can transpose jealousy onto him. During the next act Othello seems to have forgotten the revenge vow (hasn't - it's just fatigue and stress etc) but Iago maintains it.

Iago's strategy is daring - he suggests that Othello should listen to him talking to Cassio - very risky. They're talking about Bianca, a prostitute but Othello assumes it's Desdemona because he sees things through his jealousy and Iago's suggestions. Bianca comes in - again - very dramatic. It's all done by abstraction and tricks, not ghosts and magic.

## **Cassio's Dream (according to Iago!)**

Horace argued that dreams can be a sick person's fancy or delusion. Homer argued that they may be divinely inspired and prophetic.

Iago describes Cassio's dream, talking in his sleep to Desdemona - pack of lies then says it was only a dream - very effective. NB Satan known as the father of lies. Iago succeeds by lies not goading like Lady Macbeth.

NB Iago's linguistic voyeurism - likes talking about sex; his report of Cassio's dream has a sort of leering quality - cf Milton's Satan talking to Eve in *Paradise Lost* (1667?).

Act 4 sc 1 1.32 - Iago really puts the knife in - describes what Cassio and Desdemona have supposedly done. Othello faints - very dramatic. Othello is a strong man, with a strong stage presence - it's a physical

manifestation of the strength of his emotions. Very dramatic - powerful warrior brought low. Iago tells everyone it's epilepsy, presumably to make Othello look weak and to make it look as if he's been hiding the illness from them.

## **Imagery**

### **The Storm**

Storm imagery is deeply significant - cf *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*. The storm represents chaos in the macrocosm that presages chaos in the microcosm of Othello's soul. There was no storm in Cinthio's tale (probable source).

Real storm - Othello entrusts Desdemona to Iago's care during the crossing. In a tragic sense, he continues to leave Desdemona in Iago's hands or at his mercy, throughout the play. Desdemona survives the natural storm, which lets 'go safely by / the divine Desdemona' II, i, 1.68-73. Iago's storm, an unnatural one, cannot be seen and will destroy her - it's something so unnatural and malicious that it's beyond her ken - she has no hope of surviving it. Shakespeare is aware that naivety and innocence may be attractive and laudable but they are also qualities which, if not tempered with experience and wisdom, will make a character very vulnerable.

The storm creates a frightening and uncertain atmosphere which unsettles the audience (imagine suitable wobble board crashing sounds!) and renders us aware of the vulnerability of the characters. Cassio comments, 'I have lost him on a dangerous sea' (II,i 1.46), prefiguring him losing Othello in a worse storm. He explains, 'the great contention of the sea and skies / Parted our fellowship' (II,i 1.92-3), prefiguring Iago separating them later.

The elements are threatening - they 'cast water on the burning bear' and 'Quench the guards of the ever fixed pole' - the guards are 2 stars in the little bear - important to navigation ie vital navigation aids are lost to sight - parallels the psychological world of Othello eg 'passion having my best judgement collided [darkened] / Assays to lead the way' II,iii.195-8. Interesting cos shows Othello has a degree of self-knowledge - this is his natural state of self-awareness but suggests his underlying vulnerability to strong emotion and difficulty in governing it - which Iago will pinpoint and exploit.

Othello uses storm imagery on several occasions, referring to himself as a 'labouring bark' and Desdemona as the 'calm' harbour in the storm of life - a common enough image - Renaissance women were supposed to create a domestic harbour for their men. When his bloody thoughts are sweeping him along he compares them to the Pontic sea, 'Whose icy current and compulsive course / Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on' III, iii 1.461-2.

The sea imagery continues throughout the play. At the end Othello comments, 'Here is my journey's end', the 'very sea-mark of my utmost sail' V,ii 1.268-9 ie storm winds of passion lead to the calm of death of *Antony and Cleopatra*. It's also symptomatic of the fact that his moral world is no longer confused - he recognises evil in Iago and good in Desdemona.

### **Heaven and Hell Imagery**

Desdemona referred to as 'divine Desdemona' II,i 1.68-73ish, associated with heavenly purity and goodness eg 'hail to thee, lady' - cf religious element in *Winter's Tale* (Hermione) and Cordelia in *Lear* - spiritual worth but in non Christian context. Othello, like Cassio, associates Desdemona with Heaven: 'If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself' III,iii, 1.282.

Yet Iago woos Othello from his faith in Desdemona, drawing him to fiendish violence, 'Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell'(Othello). Desdemona now becomes 'fair devil' even 'devil' IV,i, 1.235 and 239 before he strikes her publicly. J.Mclauchlan argues in his study of *Othello* (in the *Studies in English Literature* series) that Heaven and Hell become confused in Othello's mind just as the sea and sky were confused in the physical storm. When he fears Desdemona is untrue he feels he's in Hell - hence he calls Emilia 'You...that keep the gate of hell' IV, ii 1.92-4. NB The play is predicated on Christian belief structure - Othello really believes in Heaven and Hell. Hence he tries to persuade Desdemona to confess her sin and ask for grace before he kills her: 'I would not kill thy soul'. When he comes to see his mistake he feels he's damned and that he deserves it - he wants punishment - 'Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!', 'Whip me, ye devils'.

Although Desdemona, Othello, Cassio, even Emilia, ask the heavens to intervene, this doesn't happen. Unlike Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, whose sins are less excusable, Othello isn't granted a period of

repentance and happiness.

## **Themes**

### **Good v. Evil**

Traditional theme - evil destroying good ie reversal of divine order - cf morality plays. Abstract evil in *Othello* - not a dark and bloody atmosphere as in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* with ghosts etc. Iago is alone in his destructiveness. *Othello* is not an allegory but within the scheme of imagery, Desdemona represents Heaven and Iago Hell - dramatisation of the tension in Othello's soul.

### **The individual v. society**

Shows how human nature deteriorates under pressure, how order in society is precarious. Shakespeare discusses both the personal and socio-political aspects of this perennial problem. NB The fall of a great man, though personal, inevitably has socio-political implications. The public Othello suffers as the private man becomes more distraught.

Shakespeare was interested in the relation between our social obligations and our individual desires. He's more sympathetic to the social view - individualism can be dangerous even if intentions are good eg Cordelia in *Lear* - prioritises individual notions of personal integrity over social duty to behave respectfully to the King her father. When things become personal, noble characters can be drawn away from loyalty to state, passion can govern as opposed to discipline and reason - personal vendettas, in particular, become the core of characters' ruin. As the Chinese proverb warns: 'He who seeks revenge must dig two graves.'

### **Elizabethans re violence:**

Dual view:

1. Violence leads to disorder so is dangerous to society. Innate in human nature, individual and lawless. Private revenge was prohibited by Elizabethan law but the code of honour required defence of family. OK if avenger offers self to Providence as tool to punish evil.
2. Violence is necessary, sometimes even good, when disciplined and for the sake of good government eg state governed ie warriors.

### **Elizabethans and Revenge**

As Christians they believed it to be wrong but as Renaissance people, they felt it to be right. It's from this conflict that much of the tension of revenge tragedy springs cf *Hamlet*. Othello must be condemned because he assumes that revenge is appropriate to justice and that killing is appropriate to revenge. NB Othello is not strictly speaking a revenge tragedy. It's one of Shakespeare's tragedies of love in an extreme situation, menaced from outside cf *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*. Yet it is also perhaps Shakespeare's most profound presentation of revenge.

In *Hamlet* we have to think about revenge: it raises questions such as 'Is there an appropriate way of dealing with evil?' In *Othello* we feel the issues related to revenge. Francis Bacon in his essay 'Of Revenge' commented: 'Revenge is a kind of wild justice'. Shakespeare seems to be taking a similar view.

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