

October 17. Lecture on "Meta-drama in Othello"

Turning from Hamlet to Othello, what is contrast we find!

Hamlet, almost the last play of the old Elizabethan era, a problem play,  
filled with questions, as embodied in the ghost as a question-mark,  
as realized in the defective heroines' "frailty";

Othello, the first play of the new Jacobean era (from James I, 1603),  
set in Renaissance Venice (recalling MV) and Venetian Cyprus,  
opening on seemingly human level, with conversation between two men,  
only problem at first, what are they talking about?

Here are two men, Iago and his stooge Roderigo, on whom he is sponging,

Iago as ensign to the Moor, encouraging Rod in his suit for Desdemona,  
but Desdemona has already been won by the Moor in clandestine marriage.

Iago professes his allegiance to himself, "In following him I follow but myself"  
adding the blasphemous assertion, "I am not what I am." (name of God)

Together they come before the house of D's father Brabantio, senator of Venice,  
shouting to awaken him, informing him of his daughter's elopement

leading him to where Iago knows he will find the Moor (as he calls Othello),  
but Iago goes first to Othello, leaving Roderigo to lead B with armed group.

Then they come before Othello, who has already received another group of men,  
summoning him to Council of State, to deal with Turkish menace,

raising two problems, one personal, and the other political

Thirdly, all together come before Council under Duke (Doge),

First dealing with B's charge against Moor, who has to explain himself,  
and Desdemona is summoned, as heroine, third in succession to Iago and Oth.

Duke accepts O's explanation, sends him to Cyprus, with Desdemona.

Here we already have elements of meta-drama, in form of morality play,

with Othello as Man, Iago as villain, and Desdemona as angel/ heroine,  
also looking to form of mystery play, with O as Jesus, Iago as Judas

Next, between Venice and Cyprus, storm at sea overcoming Turkish fleet,  
allowing the Venetians to sail through to Cyprus with safe arrival.

O's lieutenant, gallant Cassio, welcoming "the divine Desdemona",

"Hail to thee, lady, and the grace of heaven,/ Before, behind thee and on every hand  
Enwheel thee round!" (cf. Luke i.28, the "angelic salutation")

(i.e. Desdemona compared to the Virgin Mary, also in Memorare, Salve Regina).

Last, Othello arrives, welcomes Desdemona with exaggerated words,

"If it were now to die,/ Twere now to be most happy!"

Now holiday in Cyprus, with opportunity afforded to Iago to tempt Cassio,  
making him drunk, fight with Cypriot leader, deposed by Othello,  
persuading him to seek intercession of Desdemona (as of Virgin Mary)  
then hinting to Othello that D is secretly in love with Cassio.

Thus the whole of Act III Sc 3 devoted to temptation of Othello by Iago,  
as O is deceived into jealousy, even desiring to kill Desdemona,  
in which Mystery shows O now as Judas to D as Jesus, I as Satan;

And thus the whole development of the play from situation in Act I  
from Venice to Cyprus in Act III, under guidance of Iago as stage-manager,  
to climax of tragedy in Act V (here at least is parallel with stages of Hamlet).

Now we see cruel smothering of D by O in bed, after his quiet soliloquy,

"It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!/ Let me not name it to you, you  
chaste stars!/ It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,/ Nor scar that whiter  
skin of hers than snow/ And smooth as monumental alabaster./ Yet she must  
die, else she'll betray more men./ Put out the light, and then put out the light."

Then, when it is too late, all is revealed, thanks to Iago's wife Emilia.

Till then, Iago has deceived everyone by appearance of "honesty", even his wife,  
but now his concealed deception is revealed, much to O's despair,

"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! O Desdemona, Desdemona dead! O, O, O!"

Then over and above his murder of D, he goes on to kill himself in remorse,

"One that loved not wisely but too well,/ Of one not easily jealous, but being  
wrought/ Perplex'd in the extreme, of one whose hand,/ Like the base Judean,  
threw a pearl away,/ Richer than all his tribe."

But suicide while embracing Desdemona, "I kissed thee ere I killed thee, no way  
but this,/ Killing myself, to die upon a kiss." (unlike Judas)

Finally, meta-drama implies not only Morality or Mystery plays (so clear in O)  
but also religious situation in Elizabethan England

We may see something of Henry VIII in Othello, as in Macbeth, Lear, etc.

Catholic faith of medieval England in Desdemona, as in Cordelia

Machiavellian advisers of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I in Iago

= Thomas Cromwell, William and Robert Cecil

Esp. looking through Cymbeline and Winter's Tale to Henry VIII.

taking all Jacobean plays together, in three groups of four,  
in view of ideal heroines, present and absent.