

Thomas Rymer, from *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693)

From all the Tragedies acted on our English Stage, Othello is said to bear the Bell away. The Subject is more of piece, and there is indeed something like, there is, as it were, some phantom of a Fable. The Fable is always accounted the Soul of Tragedy. And it is the Fable which is properly the Poets part. Because the other three parts of Tragedy, to wit the Characters are taken from the Moral Philosopher; the thoughts or sence, from them that teach Rhetorick: And the last part, which is the expression, we learn from the Grammarians.

This Fable is drawn from a Novel, compos'd in Italian by Giraldi Cinthio, who also was a Writer of Tragedies. And to that use employ'd such of his Tales, as he judged proper for the Stage. But with this of the Moor, he meddl'd no farther.

Shakespear alters it from the Original in several particulars, but always, unfortunately, for the worse. He bestows a name on his Moor; and styles him the Moor of Venice: a Note of pre-eminence, which neither History nor Heraldry can allow him. Cinthio, who knew him best, and whose creature he was, calls him simply a Moor. We say the Piper of Strasburgh; the Jew of Florence; And, if you please, the Pindar of Wakefield: all upon Record, and memorable in their Places. But we see no such Cause for the Moors preferment to that dignity. And it is an affront to all Chroniclers, and Antiquaries, to top upon 'um a Moor, with that mark of renown, who yet had never faln within the Sphere of their Cognisance.

Then is the Moors Wife, from a simple Citizen, in Cinthio, dress'd up with her Top knots, and rais'd to be Desdemona, a Senators Daughter. All this is very strange; And therefore pleases such as reflect not on the improbability. This match might well be without the Parents Consent. [...] What ever rubs or difficulty may stick on the Bark, the Moral, sure, of this Fable is very instructive.

First, This may be a caution to all Maidens of Quality how, without their Parents consent, they run away with Blackamoors.

Secondly, This may be a warning to all good Wives, that they look well to their Linnen.

Thirdly, This may be a lesson to Husbands, that before their Jealousie be Tragical, the proofs may be Mathematical.

[...] Shakespear in this Play calls 'em the supersubtle venetians. Yet examine throughout the Tragedy there is nothing in the noble Desdemona, that is not below any Countrey Chambermaid with us.

And the account he gives of their Noblemen and Senate, can only be calculated for the latitude of Gotham.

The Character of that State is to employ strangers in their Wars; But shall a Poet thence fancy that they will set a Negro to be their General; or trust a Moor to defend them against the Turk?

With us a Black-amoor might rise to be a Trumpeter; but Shakespear would not have him less than a Lieutenant-General. With us a Moor might marry some little drab, or Small-coal Wench: Shake-spear, would provide him the Daughter and Heir of some great Lord, or Privy-Councillor: And all the Town should reckon it a very suitable match: Yet the English are not bred up with that hatred and aversion to the Moors, as are the Venetians, who suffer by a perpetual Hostility from them [...]

Nothing is more odious in Nature than an improbable lye; And, certainly, never was any Play fraught, like this of Othello, with improbabilities.

The Characters or Manners, which are the second part in a Tragedy, are not less unnatural and improper, than the Fable was improbable and absurd.

Othello is made a Venetian General. We see nothing done by him, nor related concerning him, that comports with the condition of a General, or, indeed, of a Man, unless the killing himself, to avoid a death the Law was about to inflict upon him. When his Jealousy had wrought him up to a resolution of's taking revenge for the suppos'd injury, he sets Iago to the fighting part, to kill Cassio; and chuses himself to murder the silly Woman his Wife, that was like to make no resistance.

His Love and his Jealousie are no part of a Souldiers Character, unless for Comedy.

But what is most intolerable is Iago. He is no Black-amoor Souldier, so we may be sure he should be like other Souldiers of our acquaintance; yet never in Tragedy, nor in Comedy, nor in Nature was a Souldier with his Character [...] This he knew, but to entertain the Audience with something new and surprising, against common sense, and Nature, he would pass upon us a close; dissembling, false, insinuating rascal, instead of an openhearted, frank, plain-dealing Souldier, a character constantly worn by them for some thousands of years in the World.

[...] Nor is our Poet more discreet in his Desdemona, He had chosen a Souldier for his Knave: And a Venetian Lady is to be the Fool.

This Senators Daughter runs away to (a Carriers Inn) the Sagittary, with a Black-amoor: is no sooner wedded to him, but the very night she Beds him, is importuning and teizing him for a young smock-fac'd Lieutenant, Cassio. And tho' she perceives the Moor Jealous of Cassio, yet will she not forbear, but still rings Cassio, Cassio in both his Ears.

Roderigo is the Cully of Iago, brought in to be murder'd by Iago, that Iago's hands might be the more in Blood, and be yet the more abominable Villain: who without that was too wicked on all Conscience; And had more to answer for, than any Tragedy, or Furies could inflict upon him. So there can be nothing in the characters, either for the profit, or to delight an Audience.

The third thing to be consider'd is the Thoughts. But from such Characters, we need not expect many that are either true, or fine, or noble.

And without these, that is, without sense or meaning, the fourth part of Tragedy, which is the expression can hardly deserve to be treated on distinctly. The verse rumbling in our Ears are of good use to help off the action.

In the Neighing of an Horse, or in the growling of a Mastiff, there is a meaning, there is as lively expression, and, may I say, more humanity, than many times in the Tragical flights of Shakespear.

[...]

Desd. I will not leave him now,
Till Cassio is recall'd.
I have sent to bid Cassio come speak with you.
Othel.—Lend me thy Handkerchief.
Desd.—This is a trick to put me from my suit.
I pray let Cassio be receiv'd agen.
Em.—Is not this man Jealous?
—'Tis not a year or two shews us a man— [III. iv. 32-3, 52, 87-8, 99, 103]

As if for the first year or two, Othello had not been jealous? The third Act begins in the morning, at noon she drops the Handkerchief, after dinner she misses it, and then follows all this outrage and horrible clutter about it. If we believe a small Damosel in the last Scene of this Act, this day is effectually seven days.

Bianca.—What keep a week away! seven days, seven nights,
Eightscore eight hours, and lovers absent hours,
More tedious than the Dial eightscore times.
O weary reckoning! [III. iv. 173-76]

Our Poet is at this plunge, that whether this Act contains the compass of one day, of seven days, or of seven years, or of all together, the repugnance and absurdity would be the same. For Othello, all the while, has nothing to say or to do, but what loudly proclaim him jealous: her friend and confident Emilia again and again rounds her in the Ear that the Man is Jealous: yet this Venetian dame is neither to see, nor to hear; nor to have any sense or understanding, nor to strike any other note but Cassio, Cassio.

[...]

But the Hankerchief is brought in at last, to stop all holes, and close the evidence. So now being satisfied with the proof, they come to a resolution, that the offenders shall be murdered. [...]

Oth. That Handkerchief, that I so lov 'd, and gave thee,
Thou gav'st to Cassio.
Desd. No by my Life and Soul;
Send for the man and ask him.

Oth.—By Heaven, I saw my Handkerchief in his hand—
—I saw the Handkerchief. [V. ii. 48-50, 62, 66]

So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief! Why was not this call'd the Tragedy of the Handkerchief? What can be more absurd [...] Had it been Desdemona's Garter, the Sagacious Moor might have smelt a Rat: but the Handkerchief is so remote a trifle, no Booby, on this side Mauritania, cou'd make any consequence from it.

[...] Rather may we ask here what unnatural crime Desdemona, or her Parents had committed, to bring this Judgment down upon her; to Wed a Black-amoor, and innocent to be thus cruelly murder'd by him. What instruction can we make out of this Catastrophe? Or whither must our reflection lead us? Is not this to envenome and sour our spirits, to make us repine and grumble at Providence; and the government of the World? If this be our end, what boots it to be Vertuous?

Desdemona dropt the Handkerchief, and missed it that very day after her Marriage; it might have been rump'd up with her Wedding sheets: And this Night that she lay in her wedding sheets, the Fairey Napkin (whilst Othello was stifling her) might have started up to disarm his fury, and stop his ungracious mouth. Then might she (in a Traunce for fear) have lain as dead. Then might he, believing her dead, touch'd with remorse, have honestly cut his own Throat, by the good leave, and with the applause of all the Spectators. Who might there upon have gone home with a quiet mind, admiring the beauty of Providence; fairly and truly represented on the Theatre.

Oth.—Why, how shou'd she be murdered?

Em. Alas, who knows?

Oth. You heard her say her self it was not I.

Em. She did so, I must needs report a truth.

Oth. She's like a liar gone to burn in Hell.

'Twas I that did it.

Em. O, the more Angel she!

And you the blacker Devil.

Oth. She turn'd to folly, and she was an Whore.

Em. Thou dost belye her, and thou art a Devil.

Oth. She was false as Water.

Em. Thou art rash as Fire,

To say that she was false: O she was heavenly true. [V. ii. 126-35]

In this kind of Dialogue they continue for forty lines farther, before she bethinks her self, to cry Murder.

Em.—Help, help, O help,

The Moor has kill'd my Mistress, murder, Murder. [V. ii. 166-67]

But from this Scene to the end of the Play we meet with nothing but blood and butchery, described much-what to the style of the last Speeches and Confessions of the persons executed at Tyburn: with this difference, that there we have the fact, and the due course of Justice, whereas our Poet against all Justice and Reason, against all Law, Humanity and Nature, in a barbarous

arbitrary way, executes and makes havock of his subjects, Hab-nab, as they come to hand. Desdemona dropt her Handkerchief; therefore she must be stifl'd. Othello, by law to be broken on the Wheel, by the Poets cunning escapes with cutting his own Throat. Cassio, for I know not what, comes off with a broken shin. Iago murders his Benefactor Roderigo, as this were poetical gratitude. Iago is not yet kill'd, because there never yet was such a villain alive. The Devil, if once he brings a man to be dipt in a deadly sin, lets him alone, to take his course: and now when the Foul Fiend has done with him, our wise Authors take the sinner into their poetical service; there to accomplish him, and do the Devils drudgery.

Philosophy tells us it is a principle in the Nature of Man to be grateful.

History may tell us that John an Oaks, John a Stiles, or Iago were ungrateful; Poetry is to follow Nature; Philosophy must be his guide: history and fact in particular cases of John an Oaks, or John of Styles, are no warrant or direction for a Poet.... History might without any preamble or difficulty, say that Iago was ungrateful. Philosophy then calls him unnatural; But the Poet is not, without huge labour and preparation to expose the Monster; and after shew the Divine Vengeance executed upon him. The Poet is not to add wilful Murder to his ingratitude: he has not antidote enough for the Poison: his Hell and Furies are not punishment sufficient for one single crime, of that bulk and aggravation.

Em. O thou dull Moor, that Handkerchief thou speakest on,
I found by Fortune, and did give my Husband:
For often with a solemn earnestness,
(More than indeed belong'd to such a trifle)
He beg'd of me to steal it. [V ii. 225-29]

Here we see the meanest woman in the Play takes this Handkerchief for a trifle below her Husband to trouble his head about it. Yet we find, it entered into our Poets head, to make a Tragedy of this Trifle.

Then for the unraveling of the Plot, as they call it, never was old deputy Recorder in a Country Town, with his spectacles in summoning up the evidence, at such a puzzle: so blunder'd, and bedoultefied: as is our Poet, to have a good riddance: And get the Catastrophe off his hands.

What can remain with the Audience to carry home with them from this sort of Poetry, for their use and edification? how can it work, unless (instead of settling the mind, and purging our passions) to delude our senses, disorder our thoughts, addle our brain, pervert our affections, hair our imaginations, corrupt our appetite, and fill our head with vanity, confusion, Tintamarre, and Jingle-jangle, beyond what all the Parish Clarks of London, with their old Testament farces, and interludes, in Richard the seconds time cou'd ever pretend to? Our only hopes, for the good of their Souls, can be, that these people go to the Playhouse, as they do to Church, to sit still, look on one another, make no reflection, nor mind the Play, more than they would a Sermon.

There is in this Play, some burlesk, some humour, and ramble of Comical Wit, some shew, and some Mimickry to divert the spectators: but the tragical part is, plainly none other, than a Bloody Farce, without salt or savour.