COLOUR
IN SHAKESPEARE

From a doctorate thesis by

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In order to study Shakespeare's use of colour as related to man, it is necessary to trace the history of the man of colour in English and see the development of this conception. No book that I know of has undertaken this task, but several books speak about «slavery» and allied subjects as well as about colour prejudice. From these books we can glean certain facts that, on being put together, will form an introduction to the study of Shakespeare's use of« colour as applied to man. Our study will naturally concentrate on the use of the «Moor», the «Negro», the «Blackamoor» and «slaves» in general, not omitting to mention their place of origin and the way English people, in particular, and Europeans in general, came to know them.

First, let us see what definition the word «Moor» has in English. The O.E.D. (Vol. vi, p. 645) gives the following definition:

> In Ancient History, a native of Mauretania, a region of Northern Africa corresponding to parts of Morocco and Algeria. In later times, one belonging to the people of mixed Berber and Arab race, Mohammedan in religion, who constitute the bulk of the population of North-Western Africa, and who in the 8th century conquered Spain. In the Middle Ages, and as late as the 17th century the Moors were commonly supposed to be mostly black or very swarthy (though the existence of 'white Moors' was recognized), and

hence the word was often used for 'negro':

As we have seen, there is an old confusion between «Moors» and «Negroes» in English. Yet, the use of «Moor» in English seems to have been much earlier than the use of «Negro». If we also refer to the O.E.D. we shall find the following entry on the dates of the uses of the word «Moor», starting from the earliest one:

> 1390: Gower: conf. 1.98, Ther was no grace in the visage, Sche loketh forth as doth a More.
> 1489: Caxton **Sonnes of Aymon** XXVI, 565: He was soo angry for it, that he became as blacke as a moure.

From this entry we understand that a Moor was supposed to be black, or, more precisely, he symbolized blackness. We also understand from this entry and the subsequent ones that the spelling and capitalization of the word were not finally settled till the 17th century.

If we compare this with the definition of a «Negro», we shall find that there is something in common between a «Negro» and a «Moor» as conceived by the minds of English people in the past: first, the O.E.D. mentions that the word was derived either from Spanish or Portuguese and then spread into Latin and other European tongues. Then the dictionary mentions the definition:

> I. 1. An individual (esp. a male) belonging to the African race of mankind, which is distinguished by a black skin, black woolly hair, flat nose and thick protruding lips.

The earliest date that the O.E.D. gives about the use of the word is 1555:

> 1555: Eden **Decades** 239: They are not accustomed to eate such meates as doo the Ethiopians or Negros.

Of course, this does not mean that the year 1555 was the first time that English people began to use the word. It must have been used much earlier before it was recorded. But the date gives us an idea, which is, nevertheless, relative in value.

In fact, Europeans must have known the Moors and Negroes a long time before 1555. The Romans had relations with Africa even long before what is now known as England came into existence. Moreover, writers think it possible that the Romans when conquering Britain had

brought some «Black Slaves» or servants with them and «left them when they hurried back to defend their country against the Barbarians.»[1]

Later, the Europeans got into contact with the Africans by conquering Africa and «kidnapping» or «attracting» Africans to come with them. In this way slavery started its black career. But historians are not unanimous on the first date of the beginning of slavery. Gustard Jahoda, for instance, in his *White Man,* says:

> The first landing of Europeans in the Gold Coast was made by the Portuguese in 1471, and since then there has been uninterrupted contact with the various European nations. ... The most serious challengers (to other traders) were the Dutch, whose main interest was to satisfy the growing demand for slaves, stimulated by the expanding plantations in the West Indies at the beginning of the 17th century.[2]

On the other hand, R. Coupland, in his *The British Anti-Slavery Movement,* says:

> ... and at the outset of the 15th century, the Portuguese ... pushed on, bit by bit, down the African coast will in 1445 they reached the Senegal.[3]

Speaking about the beginning of slavery in Europe, he says:

> Of the European peoples it was the Portuguese who began it, for the simple reason that they were the first to make close contact with mid-Africa.[4]

On page 16, he says:

> By 1448, when the Senegal and the Gambia had been reached and passed, a total of nearly 1,000 slaves had been imported:

On page 18, he says about the employment of slaves in America:

> So Africans were shipped across the Atlantic in fast-

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[1] N. Verrie McCullough: **The Negro in English Literature,** pub. by Arthur Stockwell Ltd., Devon, 1962, p. 15.

[2] 1961, p.l.

[3] 1933, p. 15.

[4] **Op. Cit.** p. 14.

> increasing numbers: by 1576 there were some 40,000 of them in Spanish America. Meantime the Portuguese had adopted the same expedient... Already in 1585 there were 10,000 Negroes in the single province of Pernambuco.

Soon, the English and the Dutch followed suit:

> And, like the Spanish and Portuguese before them, Dutch, French and English began from the beginning of their occupation to stock these colonies with slaves. Nor did they leave the supply of them to the Portuguese. [1]

Though we see that the slave-trade must have acquainted the English with Negroes as early as the 15th century, we see that certain writers are sceptical about the date. They think that the actual period when the «average Englishman» came to know black people was later:

> The average Englishman, however, seemingly had little concept of race or little experience with persons of different colour before the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, when the seas were opened up to British sailors and strange new lands and peoples were contacted. Since this is a historical fact, it is not strange that almost a century and a half had elapsed before the word Negro attained some common usage in the English language in reference to a specific racial group. [2]

This argument may be generally true, especially that some writers do not consider the association of «slavery» with the «Man of Colour» as something taken for granted. From the point of view of colour prejudice, «slavery» is strongly associated with coloured people. The notion even exists in the Bible in the form of the curse of Ham. Ham was coloured as tradition holds, and he received a curse because he had seen the nakedness of his father, Noah. It is better to quote from the Bible:

> And Noah began to be an husbandman, and planted a vineyard: and he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and

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[1] **Ibid,** p. 19.

[2] V. McCullough, **Op. Cit.,** p. 15.

> he was uncovered within his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his youngest son had done unto him. And he said, **Cursed be Canaan; A servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.**
> And he said, Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem;
> And let Canaan be his servant.
>
> God enlarge Japheth,
> And let him dwell in the tents of Shem;
> And let Canaan be his servant.
>
> Genesis, 9: 20—28)

Of course, the Bible does not state that the curse fell on Ham or Canaan because of his colour, but, all the same, the idea was later spread that all coloured people were slaves by nature, which is a misconception because of what we shall see later. This notion got deeply fixed in the minds of people so that, although the Holy Koran specifies that all men of all colours are brethren, Arabs sometimes use the word «Abeed» (i.e. slaves) in colloquial Arabic to denote also black people in general.

Yet, it has to be noted that even in history there has been no continuity in the concept of black people as slaves. The Arabs knew very well the white slaves whom they called «Greek» or «Roman» slaves and who enjoyed high prestige in the court. Many of these white slaves were educated and brought up in an atmosphere of refinement and art and were treated with great honour. As for the black slaves, many of them enjoyed the same prestige and ascended the stairs of fame and power and very little or no colour prejudice was associated with them. A lively instance of this is the fact that the Mamelukes (who originally were dark slaves) governed Egypt for a long time.[1] As for white slaves and the fact that the word slave did not necessarily mean in the past a black person, Philip Mason says:

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[1] See P. Hitti: **History of the Arabs,** London, Macmillan, 1958, about Mamelukes, pp. 671—82.

> On the other hand, Europeans had for centuries been enslaved by people much darker than themselves and surely in 1604 the idea of slavery would be quite as likely to suggest a dark master and a fair slave as the reverse. C. W. Greenidge in his book **Slavery** emphasises the frequency with which British ships were captured in the Mediterranean by North African pirates.[1]

Nevertheless, conventionally, blackness rather than whiteness has been associated with «slavery» because of the much greater frequency of having black slaves and because the white people would not be expected to consider themselves as slaves. For this reason, we find that Mason retraces his steps and says:

> ... it can hardly therefore be argued that the association of blackness in slavery was close until late in the eighteenth century. On the other side, Brabantio's saying about bond-slaves and pagans does not tell against my argument.[2]

The last sentence is supposed to negate the idea that slaves were only black people. Mason clarifies his point much further when he says:

> Perhaps the germ of an association with slavery was there, but it was certainly not enough to account for all we have noticed. But that darkness has something to do with evil is a feeling much older in the consciousness or subconsciousness of Northern Europe, where men have been ready from the earliest times to personify the Shadow as Dark.[3]

This consciousness that Mason speaks about may have sprung from a feeling of contrast in identification: the white people identify themselves with both whiteness and good and identify evil with an opposite quality.

Mason stresses, like McCullough, that Shakespeare's England did not generally know Moors and Negroes effectively well. He says:

> There cannot have been many people in Shakespeare's audience who had seen a Moor or a Negro. Sailors, of

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[1] **Prospero's Magic, Some Thoughts on Class and Race**, O.U.P., 1962, p. 76.
[2] **Ibid**, p. 77.
[3] **Ibid.**

course, had and people who lived near the docks in London or Bristol, but inland surely very few. [1]

He goes back to history, too, to ascertain the approximate date when slavery began to be of importance in Europe and America:

> Nor did the slave trade to the Americas really flourish till the eighteenth century.
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> This is a point of controversy which needs explanation. Negro slaves were landed in Haiti as early as 1510 and by 1576 there were estimated to be 40,000 in the Spanish possessions in America. The **asiento,** the Spanish contact for their purchase and transport, dated from 1580. But in the sixteenth century the trade was, with a few exceptions, Spanish or Portuguese. Sir John Hawkins took a cargo in 1562 but the trade was not general; there were no British colonies and in their colonies the Spanish had made the trade a monopoly. The first batch landed in Virginia was in 1620 and Sir Reginald Coupland, who made this one of the great studies of his life, writes that **it was not till 1663 that a regular English slave trade began.** [2]

At any rate, by the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century, we see that coloured people begin to be mentioned and described in English books. McCullough believes [3] that travel literature is not of great importance in this respect and so excludes it from his study. He urges that few Englishmen got a knowledge of men of colour through travel literature. Hence, he discusses only poetry and the drama. His study of poetry is more comprehensive than that of the drama.

To ascertain the first mention of black people in English literature is a little difficult. McCullough mentions that «there is evidence that the Black Knight in the Arthurian Legend was a Negro;» [4] On page 15, he goes on:

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[1] **Ibid,** p. 75.

[2] **Ibid,** p. 76.

[3] **Op. Cit.,** p. 15.

[4] **Ibid.** p. 14.

> If the Black Knight was a Negro, whether a Moor, Nubian, and Ethiopian, or some other Negrito person, he would certainly be the first man of colour to appear in English literature since Anglo-Saxon writers, Chaucer, and Spenser seem to omit him.

But he does not mention the evidence.

Maybe, it is quite important to enquire whether the mention of black persons in English literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was associated with any racial prejudice. This is also a controversial point. Several writers believe that racial prejudice did not exist in those times in the same intensity as it exists, for instance, today in the United States or in white South Africa. McCullough refers to a poem by Edward Herbert entitled «Sonnet to Black Itself.» He says that Herbert was «colour-conscious» and not «race-conscious». Then he generalizes by saying:

> Generally, then, it seems as though most of the early writers were primarily concerned with colour, rather than race; and it is inexcusable to think that every time a writer used the word **black** he was referring to a **black person** or a Negro. As we see in Othello, the Moor, Shakespeare makes it quite plain that the Moor is black; but it is not the black alone that determines his race but other physical qualities. [1]

There is some truth in what McCullough says, especially regarding the means to ascertain the race of a black person: the mere mention of the word «black» as in *Othello* would not have convinced critics that Shakespeare meant a really black person had not the colour been coupled with the description of «thick lips», for instance.[2] Also, *black* was loosely used in Elizabethan times to mean just a dark colour, and not always a technically black thing or person. But it remains to be seen how Moors and Negroes were treated by Elizabethans both in real life and in books. Anyone who reads Elizabethan writings extensively will come to the conclusion that Moors and Negroes were hated and compared to devils. A reading of Shakespeare's works such as *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello* as well as *Lust's Dominion* [3] and other

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[1] **Ibid**, p. 17.

[2] **Othello**, I, i, 66.

[3] Some writers ascribe this play to Marlowe and some to Dekker or to others. I have a feeling it is not Marlowe's at all.

plays will convince one that non-white persons had a bad impression on an Elizabethan audience who were mainly prejudiced against those people because of the difference of colour and race and religion.[1] I shall return to this point later in the course of my discussion of Shakespeare's use of the man of colour. It can be said now that the seeds of racial prejudice can be traced as far back as the Elizabethan age although most writers believe that the Elizabethans were not as prejudiced as some people in the twentieth century.

The general attributes of beauty concerning human beings in Shakespeare are the conventional Elizabethan aspects of a white face and body and red cheeks. Armado, in *Love's Labour's Lost* epitomizes these attributes when he says:

> My love is most immaculate white and red.
>
> (I, ii, 95)

Florizel, in *The Winter's Tale,* taking the hand of Perdita, says:

> ... I take thy hand, this hand,
> As soft as dove's down and as white as it
> Or Ethiopian's tooth, or the fann'd snow that's bolted
> By the northern blasts twice o'er.
>
> (IV, iv, 376)

and there are many examples in the Sonnets, the Poems, and the Plays where *white* fights with *red* in the cheeks, and other images and conceits depicting beauty in colour. Lying in sharp contrast with this conventional usage is the use of coloured men and women. There are several references to coloured or dark people in Shakespeare, but most important of them are four: the Dark Lady of the Sonnets, the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice,* Aaron in *Titus Andronicus,* and Othello. The other references are either brief and casual or there is little or no mention of colour in them. Sush references are those made to Caliban and his mother; no specific colour is attached to these two characters.

From the start, we encounter two main problems in the study of the Man of Colour in Shakespeare: first, we have to identify certain

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[1] See Bernard Harris, «A Portrait of a Moor», **Shakespeare Survey** XI (1958), 89—97.

characters as being either white, dark or black, and secondly, we have to look into the treatment of these characters by both the audience and playwright.

As for the Dark Lady of the Sonnets, opinion has always been divided on whether she was actually black or just dark. Certain writers have suspected that the exaggerated use of the colour «black» in the Elizabethan age made Shakespeare describe her as black while actually she was only a brunette. Other writers maintain that she was dark and that she was possibly a Moor. Moors occasionally visited England in those times, as may be inferred from Bernard Harris's article already referred to in the *Shakespeare Survey,* and from the portrait of the Moorish ambassador contained in the article on page So, it is possible that she was a Moor or a Blackamoor. But those writers who assert that she was a Negress refer to such lines in the Sonnets as show the nature of her hair and other characteristics which stamp her with a Negroid stigma. We may quote some of these lines from the Sonnets:

> In the old age black was not counted fair,
> Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;
> But now is black beauty's successive heir,
> And beauty slander'd with a bastard shame
>
> (Sonnet CXXVII)

But the lines which in the opinion of these writers clinch the problem are the following, from Sonnet CXXX:

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
> Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
> If snow be white, why then her breasts are **dun;**
> **If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.**
> I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
> But no such roses see I in her cheeks.

The contrast between *white* and *black* and *red* and *red* (in her cheeks) is typical of Shakespeare's art in the manipulation of colour. Some writers concentrated on the word «dun» and inferred that the Dark Lady was only «dull brown» as the word denotes and not black as coal. Some have even considered it far-fetched and improbable that Shakespeare should fall in love with a black Negress. I see no good reason why he could not have fallen in love with such a person. And

such writers are tainted by what I call an «intellectualized» racial prejudice which Shakespeare does not seem to have felt himself. It is true that he mentions in the foregone lines that «black» was not fair and that it is a kind of shame to have beauty associated with blackness. But in this he merely mirrors the temper of his age when black colour was strongly associated with witchcraft and evil spirits.

If the Dark Lady of the Sonnets is still a source of disagreement with regard to her colour and race, Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* is almost a solved problem. Most critics mainly depend on a drawing by Henry Peacham, in his famous illustration of *Titus Andronicus* in stating that Aaron was coal-black. The illustration can be seen in many books on Shakespeare, as in E.K. Chambers' *Shakespearean Gleanings.*[1] McCullough, for instance, says about Aaron that he is «as black as midnight».[2] Other writers say almost the same thing. This is easily proved from the text of the play. Perhaps the most convincing proof that Aaron is as black as ink is his words to Tamora when he describes his hair; as we see, it is the hair of a Negro:

> What signifies my deadly-standing eye,
> My silence and my cloudy melancholy,
> **My fleece of woolly hair that now uncurls**
> Even as an adder when she doth unroll
> To do some fatal execution?
>
> (II, iii, 36)

Of course, this confuses Aaron with a Negro. But we know now that the Elizabethans made little distinction between Moors and Negroes in their writings. Of all the major Elizabethan dramatists that I have read, Marlowe seems to be nearest in his accuracy to our modern conception of Moors and Negroes. He mentions the two races as different species in *Tamburlaine.*

Yet, not all references to Aaron say clearly that he is black. Sometimes he is referred to as «swarth»; Bassianus says to Tamora after discovering her with the Moor:

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[1] Oxford University Press, 1944.

[2] Op. Cit. p. 28.

Believe me, queen, your **swarth** Cimmerian
Doth make your honour of his body's hue,
Spotted, detested, and abominable.

(II, iii, 74)

Later in the same speech, Bassianus describes Aaron as a «barbarous Moor». Lavinia, who is made to share in reviling Tamora, mentions the Moor, too, referring to him as a raven:

.....I pray you, let us hence
And let her joy her **raven**-colour'd love;

(II, iii, 83)

But the irony is that Tamora herself and her breed are likened by Lavinia to ravens too. Of course colour is not implied but the raven is taken as a symbol of evil. This «raven» symbol is brought forth again by Titus when Aaron guilefully tells him that the Emperor would set his two convicted sons free if he cut his hand and sent it to the Emperor. Herein, colour is plainly intended. Titus is joyful:

O gracious emperor! O gentle Aaron!
Did ever **raven** sing so like a lark
That gives sweet tidings of the sun's uprise?

(III, i, 159)

Most emphatic of the references to the blackness of Aaron is the following line said by Aaron himself:

Aaron will have his soul black like his face.

(III, i, 206)

It is the custom of the Elizabethans to make black characters in the drama speak about themselves as black. To me, this is the most degenerate use of colour as it makes black characters even look at themselves in the eye of white people, thus becoming a mouthpiece of those white people in pronouncing their judgement on themselves. In most cases in Elizabethan drama this element of self-consciousness is not natural. Shakespeare's use of it wavers between the possible and the probable, sometimes proving to be technically expressive, in heightening the effect of a certain characteristic, and sometimes becoming too naively expressed so that the words stand out as odd and

the tone tends to be discordant. Here in Aaron's words referred to, the playwright succeeds in divulging the secret of the Moor's heart, a complexity of feelings of inferiority and revengeful desires, perhaps because Aaron is always reminded of his old slavery. But Shakespeare does not dwell on a deep analysis of his villainous character or on the display of his motives. It seems to me that he depended on the conceptions his audience had about such characters which gradually became too flat to arouse any such considerations as motives or psychological causality. Moreover, Aaron's revengeful words (as seen in the line quoted above) may show that Aaron is not merely incensed against society but even also against the Gods who made him black. His insistence on evil-doing may be interpreted as a Satanic revolt against God who made him the black devil he is. Of course Shakespeare is reticent on such considerations, but the reader or the audience must needs formulate a certain theory about Shakespeare's philosophy in the way he dressed his characters. It has long been stressed by various critics and readers that *Titus Audronicus* is a mass of discordant elements and a parade of unconvincing characters. In particular, the role Aaron plays has been severely commented upon to the effect that it is a motiveless character, resembling Iago in many ways.[1] Shakespeare criticism has so far progressed only to this point and failed to question the role of stock characters and the general philosophy that besets their dramatic function. It is true that if Shakespeare wrote *Titus Andronicus* he must have been still experimenting and that many faults could be found in his work. But it is high time to reconsider the meaning of such characters as Aaron and analyse the causes of their alienation from their society. Shakespeare is not going to help us a lot in this quest, but our study of Shakespeare's times on one hand and the study of aliens in society will help us uncover the pall of ambiguity that encompasses the soul and actions of characters like Aaron. In this respect, it is far from satisfactory simply to argue that in Shakespeare's times there was a strong association between magic and black persons and that the devil was represented as a black person, though such an association is important to be known. Besides, Aaron is not the flat character some critics want him to be. He is once handled as a live

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[1] He is likened to Iago for his motiveless villainy.

character in the scenes where his black son is in danger of being slaughtered. Both to Tamora's lascivious sons and later to Lucius, he shows his determination to protect his son (in the latter case, even with his own life). Instead of attacking Shakespeare for using a flat motiveless» character, we should rather enquire into the creation of this character and try to understand the underlying factors that make him what he is. Is it far-fetched to assume that Shakespeare himself was responsible for the creation of Aaron or for his elaboration after Peele had introduced him? And is it far-fetched to consider that Shakespeare wanted to show in the person of Aaron the way an «alien» behaves under particular circumstances and the way people treat him? Is Othello not a similar but a maturer example of the treatment of an «alien» in a white society? I have the feeling that if Shakespeare did revise *Titus Andronicus*[1] as some critics protest he did, then the creation of Aaron's son or the words of Aaron about the Blackamoor child are Shakespeare's. But as for the possible motive of Aaron, I judge that it is his strong relation with Tamora, the Queen of the Goths who grieves for her son whom Titus kills, that justifies his malignant plots. Yet, I suspect that a link is missing and it is possible that a certain part of the play has been omitted for a cortain reason. It could be the great length of the play which made Shakespeare omit certain scenes which supply the missing link between Aaron's actions and Tamora's desire of revenge.

Yet it is true that Shakespeare (or the true writer of *Titus Andronicus*) supplies us with no background about Aaron and hence we see such critics as C.N. Coe say:

> I think my analysis of Aaron will support the contention that the typical, indiscriminate praise of Shakespeare for creating characters who are invariably true to life will not stand the test of careful investigation. [2]

On pages 11 and 12 Coe says:

> Such lack of motive..., all this wickedness and deceit undertaken with no end in view and no purpose to accom-

[1] See «Introduction to **Titus Andronicus**, by J. D. Wilson, Cambridge Edition.

[2] Charles Norton Coe: **Shakespeare's Villains**, N.Y., 1957, p. 10.

plish, leads us to regard Aaron as nothing more than a stage villain similar to the type that in nineteenth century melodrama would be readily distinguished by the black mustache. Aaron becomes for us no product of that "one supreme creator" whom Swinburne extols; he is merely an agent to further the action. Aaron's crimes are not motivated by any desire for revenge, any understandable feeling of hatred or jealousy, any greed for wealth or power, which one could readily recognize as an explanation for evil. It is doubtful whether even a Freudian psychoanalyst could explain Aaron, who combines in one man all the worst qualities of a ravisher, sadist, and pyromaniac. Nor are we given any clue as to his background. Aaron is bad because the plot requires a villain.

Coe then quotes Shakespeare, which is worthwhile to quote here too in order to show that Coe is essentially right in his conclusions:

Lucius: Art thou not sorry for these heinous deeds?
Aaron: Ay, that I had not done a thousand more.
Even now I curse the day, and yet, I think,
Few come within the compass of my curse,
Wherein I did not some notorious ill:
As kill a man, or else devise his death;
Ravish a maid, or plot the way to do it;
Accuse some innocent and forswear myself;
Set deadly enmity between two friends;
Make poor men's cattle break their necks;
Set fire on barns and hay-stacks in the night,
And bid the owners quench them with their tears,
Oft have I digg'd up dead men from their graves,
And set them upright at their dear friends' doors,
Even when their sorrows almost were forgot;
And on their skins, as on the bark of trees,
Have with my knife carved in Roman letters,
'Let not your sorrow die, though I am dead.'
Tut! I have done a thousand dreadful things
As willingly as one would kill a fly,
And nothing grieves me heartily indeed
But that I cannot do ten thousand more.

(V, i, 123—144)

Perhaps it was such characterization of Aaron that made Tolstoy have a poor idea of Shakespeare's capabilities.[1] Coe quotes another passage and says:

> As these passages show, Aaron is nothing more than a type, and Elizabethan audiences would probably recognize him as such; for, according to Elizabethan psychology, Aaron's physical blackness alone would do much to explain his villainy, since audiences in Shakespeare's day believed that there was a "close correspondence between outer seeming and inner being" and that physical beauty tended to signify goodness, whereas ugliness was associated with evil.[2]

We have to add that blackness, as it appears from Shakespeare's sonnets about the Dark Lady, was considered as ugly. It is very difficult to state whether this fact made the Elizabethans race-conscious or only colour-conscious. But I am inclined to think they had a certain amount of racial prejudice because they ascribed all evil and lack of manners and religion to coloured people. They also hated them. What would racial prejudice be if it were not that?

Coe justly calls Aaron a «conventional type of villain», a «Machiavellian villain», and a character which is given «neither motive nor individuality».[3] He concludes on the same page by saying:

> An awareness of Aaron's essential flatness tends, however, to modify the claims of those whom I have called indiscriminating critics, those who tend to be all-inclusive rather than selective when they praise Shakespeare's characters.

Coe earlier compares Aaron as a Machiavellian villain with Iago and Richard III who, he says, have more motives. Hazelton Spencer almost does the same thing and says:

> Aaron is certainly a Shakespeare portrait, the first of his Machiavellian villains, and a better one than Peele or Greene ever drew, surpassing Lorenzo of the **Spanish Tragedie** and fully the equal of Marlowe's Barabas.[4]

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[1] See G. Wilson Knight's chapter «Tolstoy's Attack on Shakespeare» in his book **The Wheel of Fire**, O.U.P. paperbacks, 1964, pp. 270—297.

[2] **Op. Cit.**, p.13.

[3] **Op. Cit.**, p.14.

[4] **The Art and Life of William Shakespeare**, N.Y., 1940, p.212.

In fact, *Titus Andronicus* enjoyed a great dramatic success during Shakespeare's time. In order to fully appreciate it one has to compare it to the other revenge plays acted in those times. Imitating *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Jew of Malta,* among others, *Titus Andronicus* tends to surpass these models. Spencer says:

> Shakespeare's determination to write a revenge play that would make his models look tame is perfectly apparent to anyone who knows the drama of the sixteenth century. With the rashness of the talented novice, he lays everything on thick.[1]

The exaggeration of the characterization of Aaron goes hand in hand with the exaggeration of the actions, for the play is full of blood and atrocities. The influence of the Senecan type seems to have found its way into *Titus Andronicus,* too.

It is difficult, at first, to state whether Shakespeare himself was influenced by the colour-prejudice his audience harboured. But if we consider the fact that Aaron is almost the only coloured villain (with the exception of Caliban and his mother) in his plays, we will appreciate the idea that Shakespeare was not esentially prejudiced against coloured people, although he reacted to black persons with a certain feeling of suspicion. In fact, he has two types of coloured people in his plays: the degenerate type, taken by the Elizabethans to symbolize evil, like Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* (and Zanche in Webster's *The White Devil);* the second type is the noble and elevated character, sometimes described as black, as in Othello, and sometimes described as tawny, as the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice.* The creation of Othello, which, as we shall see later, is different from the simple Moor mentioned in Cinthio, proves that Shakespeare could see nobility in coloured characters in the same way as he saw «beauty» in his Dark Lady of the Sonnets.

It is interesting, before leaving the whole subject of Aaron and *Titus Andronicus,* to say something about other persons mentioned as coloured in this play. This is the son of Aaron that Tamora gives birth to. In the stage directions of Act IV, Scene II it says: *Enter a Nurse,*

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[1] Ibid.

with a blackamoor child in her arms. Since the child has a mother of white colour and a father of black colour, most probably his colour will be neither black nor white but in between, which has been termed as «blackamoor». Yet, the nurse describes the child as: «A joyless, dismal, black, and sorrowful issue:» (IV, ii, 66). Aaron retorts asking a question: «Zounds, ye whore is black so base a hue?» (IV, ii, 71). Later, Aaron dwells on the praise of «coal-black» colour, referring to the colour of the swan's black legs. In Act V, the Second Goth says he has heard Aaron say to the child: «Peace, tawny slave, half me and half thy dam!» (V, i, 27) which clearly indicates the real colour of the child: it is tawny, neither white nor black. In Act IV (ii, 175), Aaron says to the child: «Come on, you thick-lipped slave, I'll bear you hence;» which makes him look like a negro as his father.

It is to be noticed that the two scenes where Aaron defends his little son express Shakespeare's humanitarian feelings too. Almost for the first time an Elizabethan playwright shows his prejudiced audience that a Negro or a Moor is a human being and has a wealth of goodly feelings. The black child is also technically used as a means to elicit a confession from Aaron who otherwise would not have confessed to all the crimes he has committed or plotted.

The Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice,* proposes a point of discussion similar to that of Aaron in that it touches colour-consciousness. Yet the treatment of this Moorish character is completely different from that of Aaron. First, he is a «tawny» man, as shown by the stage directions. Secondly, he is not involved in crimes and villainy but comes to ask the hand of Portia. Yet, though the Prince of Morocco is thought of as a noble man, he is treated with something approaching disgust or boredom. The first time Portia hears that he has come to try his luck with her with four others she says:

> If I could bid the fifth welcome with so good a heart as I can bid the other four farewell, I should be glad of his approach: if he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me. (I, ii, 140—145)

It seems from the start that she is too aware of his colour and compares him to a devil in complexion, although she is also conscious

of his worth. In Act II, Scene vii (the end), after Morocco fails in winning Portia in his choice of the wrong casket and leaves, Portia observes:

> A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go.
> Let all of his complexion choose me so.

It is here that Shakespeare departs from his usual miscegenation which we see in Othello, and probably in the marriage of Jessica and Lorenzo. Critics, nevertheless, have not agreed on whether Portia is colour-conscious or race-conscious. McCullough even acquits her of being colour-conscious. There is some contradiction in what he says:

> Portia's later character and capacity for love and justice do not admit her being guilty of race hate or colour-consciousness in the general sense. It appears, then, that Shakespeare and the Elizabethan merely thought of that which was dark, black, or off-colour as exotic, undesirable, evil or of ill omen. It is truly difficult to conceive that twentieth-century race-consciousness was a dominant trait in the thinking of Shakespeare and the Elizabethan.[1]

I believe that Portia is at least colour-conscious and that she is prejudiced against the Prince of Morocco because of his colour as is shown by the explicit words of Shakespeare and there is no need to deny what is evident. In the same play we hear that Launcelot Gobbo, a servant to Shylock, is having an affair with a Negress. This is another example of miscegenation in Shakespeare unless one proves that Launcelot himself was a Negro or black in colour. Or, as McCullough observes, Shakespeare might not have really meant Negro in referring to Launcelot's mistress although he uses the term, for he evidently considered a Moor and a Negro one and the same. «The terms Negro and Moor were used interchangeably well into the eighteenth century, and there seemingly was no clear-cut distinction between the two.»[2]

With *Othello*, probably performed at court on November 1, 1604[3], we come to another play where race and colour play an important

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[1] **Op. Cit.**, p.26.
[2] **Ibid.** p. 27.
[3] Hazelton Spencer, Op. Cit., p.318.

role. This time it is a maturer play and the coloured character is the hero himself. It is noteworthy that the colouring of the character of Othello is all Shakespeare's work because the original story from which Shakespeare drew his plot only mentions the word «the Moor» without any elaboration on his colour. The story of Cinthio, being F.E. Taylor's translation, begins like this:

> There once lived in Venice a Moor, who was very valiant and of a handsome person; and having given proofs in war of great skill and prudence, he was highly esteemed by the Signoria of the Republic, who in rewarding deeds of valour advanced the interests of the State.[1]

From this passage it seems that the Moor, as Thomas Rymer[2] strongly claims, is not given a name. He is just called the Moor. Another fact is that he is both handsome and noble; the Republic of Venice greatly depended on his skill in war and advanced him as a reward to his services. So, the nobility of Othello in Shakespeare is not Shakespeare's own invention. But the name, Othello, the Moor of Venice, is his. There is, however, one mention of the Moor's blackness in Cinthio's tale, which Shakespeare reverently applies too, namely the mention that Desdemona was supposedly unfaithful to Othello because of her aversion to his blackness. The tale says that the Ensign (also not given a name by Cinthio) tells the Moor:

> 'I can't deny it pains me to the soul to be thus forced to say what needs must be more hard to hear than any other grief; but since you will it so, and that the regard I owe your honour compells me to confess the truth, I will no longer refuse to satisfy your questions and my duty. Know, then, that for no other reason is your lady vexed to see the Captain in disfavour than the pleasure that she has in his company whenever he comes to your house, and all the more since she has taken an aversion to your blackness.'
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> These words went straight to the Moor's heart; but in order to hear more (now that he believed true all that the

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[1] **Othello Unveiled** by R.V. Subbarau, Madras, p. 238.

[2] Rymer is infuriated because Shakespeare styles Othello as "The Moor of Venice." See **The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer**, edited by Curt A. Zimansky, O.U.P. & Yale Univ. Pr. p. 131.

> Ensign had told him) he replied, with a fierce glance, 'By heavens, I scarce can hold from plucking out that tongue of thine, so bold, which dares to speak such slander of my wife!' [1]

In Shakespeare, it is Othello who retorts to himself: 'Haply, for I am black' (III, iii, 263) and this is a different tone from Cinthio's in which the Ensign tells him that «Desdemona» showed aversion to his blackness. I wonder which device is more successful. In Cinthio, there must be a stronger relation between the hero and the villain so that the villain could insinuate to his colour. In Shakespeare, the colour of Othello as expressed as a reason for the supposed unfaithfulness of Desdemona is mentioned by the hero himself in a way that suggests that he has believed Iago. What in Cinthio is a cause, is a result in Shakespeare.

Apart from this single reference in Cinthio there is no other mention of Othello's blackness at all and it becomes insignificant. Yet Shakespeare makes so much use of it that the colour «black» alone is mentioned ten times in reference to complexion and other things. Thus colour is employed to explain stiuations or to make others involved and there is always a latent contrast between darkness and light or blackness and fairness in the play.

The first problem that relates to colour of man in *Othello* is Othello's particular colour and his race. Much has been written about this point but there has been no general agreement among critics as to whether Othello was really black or dark. What I mean by «he was» is what Shakespeare wanted him to be because in the historical sense there is no extant proof that he was either black or dark. Being a Moor, he would have to be generally dark or brown in colour though the existence of white Moors is not ruled out. But since «blackness» is once mentioned in Cinthio whence Shakespeare derived his plot, it seems quite certain that Shakespeare did not think of a white Moor. We add to this the fact that Shakespeare ofen uses the word «black» with Othello. So, if some critics presume that Othello could have been white, they must be talking only from a historical point of view and

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1 **Othello unveiled**, pp. 240-241

not from a dramatic point of view where Shakespeare himself is concerned.[1]

To determine the colour of Othello, we should refer to Shakespeare alone and not to our «prejudiced» or «idealized» conceptions about things. Coleridge, who idealized Othello and Desdemona, and the American critics in general profess that Othello's colour could not be «black» and that Othello must not be considered as a Negro. The American critics think it is rather disgusting to make the angelic Desdemona marry a black Negro, and this attitude smells of racial prejudice that is not in Shakespeare but in some of his critics. These critics argue that Shakespeare could not have thought of allowing this miscegenation, and deduce from that consideration that Othello was only dark in colour, that is, tawny or swarthy. They claim he was an ordinary Arab and others believe he was an Ethiopian.[2] But all these arguments centre around an unwarrantable thesis. To them, Othello could not have been the noble Othello we know had he been a Negro and allege that only Aaron, the symbol of evil, could be thought of as a Negro. It seems now that most critics agree that Othello's visage was black and that although this affected his marriage Desdemona declares: 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind', (I, iii, 253). Most critics have thought that the colour of Othello affects the aspects of his marriage with Desdemona, and many theories were forwarded to solve this problem. Some critics make him a Negro since Shakespeare and his contemporaries differentiated little between Negroes and Moors. But the soberer critics think him a Moor, a black Moor, and consider the attachment of blackness to him as a residual of the lack of discrimination between Negroes and Moors in Shakespeare's time. Hazelton Spencer says «and, while he is not a Negro, he is a Moor and therefore «black» to the Venetians.»[3] As for A.C. Bradley, he says about Aaron, «Yet he is 'Aaron the Moor', just as Othello is 'Othello the Moor'.»[4] In a footnote on page 165, Bradley speaks about the production of *Othello* and the relation of Othello's colour:

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[1] See the possibilities of Othello's colour in McCullough, **Op. Cit.**, p. 32.

[2] **Op. Cit.**, p. 322. (Hazelton Spencer).

[3] **Op. Cit.** p. 322.

[4] **Shakespearean Tragedy**, Macmillan, London (in paperbacks), p. 163.

> I will not dicuss the further question whether, granted that to Shakespeare Othello was a black, he should be represented as a black in our theatres now. I dare say not. We do not like the real Shakespeare. We like to have his language pruned and his conceptions flattened into something that suits our mouths and minds. And even if we were prepared to make an effort, still, as Lamb observes, to imagine is one thing and to see is another. Perhaps if we saw Othello coal-black with the bodily eye, the aversion of our blood, an aversion which comes as near to being merely physical as anything human can, would over-power our imagination and sink us below not Shakespeare only but the audiences of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

I do not quite understand whether Bradley is only reflecting the impression of the modern audience in Europe and America or also reflecting his own. From the tenour of his speech here and elsewhere it seems he is far from being racially prejudiced. McCullough[1] speaks about an American production of Othello as staged by Margaret Webster and Paul Robeson. The production has been analysed by Margaret Marshall in a review in the October 13, 1943 issue of *The Nation*. Marshall says a friend «wondered if the sympathy for Iago was an expression of a prejudice against a Negro Othello. The answer is no.» She continues:

> It was rather the expressing of a secret admiration for the man who exercises power — of which every human being secretly feels himself capable — and this admiration includes a kind of contempt for anyone, with white or black, yellow or brown, over whom that power is successfully exercised. [2]

«Both Robeson and Webster have tried to prove that Othello is a Negro; they have attempted to prove that Othello is a play about race.» [3] McCullough says both theories are false and foolish. There is something interesting in Marshall's words. She says that the essential quality of Othello is his «foreignness» and his exoticism. «The stress upon his blackness points up his alien, not his racial, character.» And

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1 **Op. Cit.**, p. 46.
2 **Ibid.**
3 **Ibid.**

she concludes, «There is no particular reason why a Negro should not play Othello or, for that matter, why a Negro should.» McCullough, comparing between Marshall's words and those of Thomas Rymer and Blanche Coles [1], concludes:

> Though this American production received considerable acclaim, we do not see in Marshall's criticism the point of view of Coles and Rymer. Certainly, Othello is not a play of race, and only by following a raceless approach to the play will the reader or viewer discover the true tragic thrill of Shakespeare's play. [2]

Rymer, the «Elizabethan bloodhound», bays at *Othello* and considers it a failure. He sardonically calls it the play of the Handkerchief. He blames Shakespeare for raising the standard of the Moor and giving him a high rank. Coles, on the other hand, tries to prove that Othello was not actually black except in the eyes of the Venetians. Rymer does not differentiate between a Negro or a Moor in discussing Othello, that is, he does not care whether Othello was either one. His words are:

> Shall a poet thence fancy that they (the Venetians) will set a Negro to be their general, or trust a Moor to defend them against the Turk? With us, a blackamoor might rise to be a trumpeter but Shakespeare would not have him less than a lieutenant-general. With us a Moor might marry some little drab or small-coal wench; Shakespeare would provide him the daughter and heir of some great lord or privy-councilor... 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 lie; and certainly never was any play fraught like this of Othello with improbabilities. [3]

Rymer was talking from a classical point of view and was biased and prejudiced while Shakespeare was not. If we reverse the words of

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[1] See her book: Shakespeare's Four Giants, Rindge, New Hampshire, 1957, pp. 80-81.

[2] **Op. Cit.**, p. 46.

[3] Rymer, **Op. Cit.**, p. 131 onwards.

Rymer we may approach the spirit of Shakespeare and learn that Shakespeare had no prejudice whatsoever against Negroes or Moors and that his presentation of Aaron the Moor was on the basis of presenting a flat character whose villainy only the audience of Shakespeare could understand well. If Shakespeare was carried away with his audience in *Titus Andronicus*, he stopped to think objectively in *Othello*.

Although Moors are not black in reality, most of Shakespeare's critics nowadays concede that Othello was black because they depend on what Othello says about himself in the play and because of the other references to his «blackness» such as «sooty bosom» (I, ii, 707), Iago's words about «an old black ram tupping your white ewe» (I, i, 88) and the Duke's words that «Your son-in-law is far more fair than black» (I, iii, 291) as well as others. Yet some American critics argue, with a certain degree of justification, that the use of «blackness» is loose in Shakespeare and Elizabethan writers. These critics assume that Othello was actually only dark and only looked black to the Venetians who showed some racial prejudice. We have already referred to Hazelton Spencer's words on the subject.[1] To see the major American view we may refer to Blanche Coles' views on the subject of Othello's colour. Coles does not seem prejudiced, but if one looks deeper into her writings one can see that she prefers «white blood» to other blood and that she extols Caucasian features.[2] On what seem to be Negroid features in Othello, she rejects the idea that Othello was a Negro and she doubts the meaning of Roderigo's words when he refers to Othello as «thick-lips». She says that «No other character in the play attributes any such negroid features to Othello, and it should be remembered that Roderigo has a half-insane prejudice against and hatred for Othello».[3] Coles goes as far as rejecting that Othello was essentially black and comments on Brabantio's words in his reference to Othello's «sooty bosom» (I, ii, 70):

> Brabantio refers to his "sooty bosom", but may he not have meant his hairy chest? Some rather fair men have black

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1 Vid. infra p. 244.

2 Blanche Coles, **Shakespeare's Four Giants**, New Hampshire, 1957, p. 81.

3 **Ibid**, p. 80.

> hair on their chests. The word "sooty" seems to apply more aptly to this interpretation than it does to a more black body. [1]

This suggestion has earned Coles the scepticism and ridicule of other critics. For instance, McCullough says about the last comment:

> And when Brabantio speaks of Othello's sooty bosom, this would-be critic asks the question: "May he not have meant his hairy chest?" One is forced, then, to ask was it customary for Othello to parade around barechested? [2]

On the same page he accuses her of indulging in «vituperation and fuzzy conjecturing».

On another occasion, Coles doubts if the words of Iago should be believed in his reference to Othello's colour:

> All other characters refer to Othello respectfully as "the Moor" or "the valiant Moor." It is only Iago who brings out the racial comparison when he refers to Othello as a black ram and Desdemona as a white ewe. Is it not possible that the foul-mouthed Iago's obscene description has been taken too seriously? [3]

This is a weighty point and many other critics wondered in general whether it was safe to take Iago's words as completely true. Such doubts centre round his words about Othello, that «it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets He hath done my office:» (I, iii, 394). If many critics doubted that Iago's words here may not indicate that Iago did in fact hear that rumour (as Iago was only trying to invent a certain motive for his malignity), why should it not also stand that his references to the «blackness» of Othello are also exaggerated and not meant literally? But, of course, we have also Othello's words himself about himself such as those words when he speaks about what Desdemona has become after her supposed «faithlessness»:

> Her name, that was as fresh

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[1] **Ibid.**

[2] **Op. Cit.**, p. 39.

[3] **Op. Cit.**, p. 80.

> As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black as mine own face. (III, iii, 388)

It is such lines that made most modern critics and producers consider Othello actually «black».

Coles pursues her point further by affirming that Shakespeare never knew the American Negro because he died in 1616 while the first American colonization began in 1607 and 1620. She says:

> Shakespeare may have had some hearsay knowledge of negroes in the wilds of Africa, from the tales of explorers, but he really knew only the **black men of northern Africa** who had lived along the shores of the Mediterranean and who for centuries had been in contact with **white civilization.**[1]

I have italicized the above words because I think that Coles is contradicting herself. She has already stated that Othello could not have been black because the Moors (including northern Africa) were not essentially black. Secondly, I have italicized «white civilization» because in fact in those times there was hardly any white civilization at all. It was the apex of Eastern or Islamic civilization.

The soberer words of Coles are like these:

> In Shakespeare's time people of dark complexion were often called "black". In the Elizabethan age the English were a fairer people than they are today, and brunettes were possibly as rare as natural blondes are in our time. True, Othello speaks of himself as being black, but Cleopatra also called herself black, and we do not think of her as a negress. In the Sonnets and in **Love's Labour's Lost,** black is constantly employed in the sense of dark complexioned. Othello was a **Mauritanian prince.** The Venetians had nothing to do with Negroes, but they had much intercourse with the Moors, who were a civilized, warlike, enterprising race, such as might well furnish an Othello.[2]

This passage, said to be summarized from Hudson, is generally a sound argument except that the writer also contradicts herself here

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[1] **Ibid,** p. 81.

[2] **Ibid.**

by depending on Iago's words that Othello comes from Mauretania. It is Iago who says that Othello «goes into Mauretania and takes away with him the fair Desdemona, unless his abode be lingered here by some accident:» (IV, ii, 230). Coles might argue that some of Iago's words at least can be taken seriously. But it remains to show which words are to be taken as indicating facts and which cannot be taken as such.

Saying that there are at least 18 references to the colour of Othello in the play and that Othello himself speaks about himself as «black», William O. Raymond says:

> It has been argued that we must discount references to the Moor's colour on the lips of his enemies, but could Brabantio have had such a violent reaction to the marriage of his daughter if there had been no colour prejudice in the minds of his fellow-Venetians? Has he not this in mind when he speaks of her as having incurred "a general mock"? Would he have harped upon the theme that Desdemona through the spell of magic drugs had been constrained to "fall in love with what she fear'd to look on", if none of the Senators except himself felt that Othello's colour constituted any objection to the marriage? [1]

So, to this writer, the words of Othello's enemies regarding his colour are to be taken as facts, especially as they are corroborated by Othello's words. Earlier, Raymond mentions that he thinks that Othello is black»:

> The colour of Othello is an even more significant element of motivation than his race in the evolution of the plot of the play. It has been I think sufficiently proven that while the hero, as his personality is revealed in speech and action, is the poet's romantic conception of an adventurous and noble Moor, his colour is black rather than bronze, since Shakespeare did not discriminate between the outward cast of features of the Negroid and Moorish races.[2]

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[1] William O. Raymond: «Motivation And Character Portrayal in **Othello**,» **University of Toronto Quarterly**, vol. XVII, 1947 - 48, pp. 86 — 87.

[2] **Ibid**, p. 86.

Raymond, like several other writers, asserts that the marriage of Othello and Desdemona seems «a strange and unnatural one» as we can deduce from the contrast in colour between the two. «Stoll denies this, and asserts that only in the evil mind of Iago and in the embittered accusations of Brabantio are there any intimations of colour prejudice in connection with their union.» [1]

Among other critics, H.B. Charlton contends that Othello's colour is «black» and that Othello has Negroid characteristics:

> For Othello is incontestably black, black with the blackness of a negro, not merely tinted with the sun-tan of the Hollywood sheik. 'Black as mine own face,' he says himself; 'for that I am black', [2] he repeats; and Brabantio refers in disgust to his 'sooty bosom'. [3]

Charlton regrets that neither Coleridge nor Lamb could bring themselves to accept a negroid Othello. Moreover, he says, while Coleridge would grant him a sort of indeterminate blackness, but nothing more negroid, Lamb would not even retain the colour, but dissolves its momentary pictorial appearance into the poetic hues of Othello's moral brightness. Charlton concludes, «But Othello is in fact negroid — 'thick lips' he is called...» [4]

Robert Speaight notes both that Othello in Shakespeare is «black» and that there is a discrepancy between Shakespeare's use of Othello's colour and its historical nature. He says about Othello:

> He is a Moor, whom Shakespeare presents, no doubt for reasons of theatrical and psychological contrast, as blacker than he could ever actually have been. Shakespeare insists — and the emphasis is very marked — on everything that must have appeared shocking, because unnatural, in Desdemona's attraction to him. [5]

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[1] **Ibid.**

[2] The correct word of Othello are: Haply for I am black... (III, iii, 263).

[3] **Shakespeare's «Othello»**, reprinted from the «Bulletin of the John Rylands Lib. vol. 31, No. 1, January, 1948, p. 8.

[4] **Ibid.**

[5] Robert Speaight: **Nature in Shakespearian Tragedy**, London, 1955, pp. 70 — 71.

Speaight brings forward Brabantio's reference to Othello's «sooty bosom» as a proof of the unnaturalness of the marriage. For all this racial prejudice Speaight sees Othello as noble, though *naif*, and not servile.[1] Dwelling on the marriage again, he says:

> Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that Shakespeare meant us to feel that this marriage with Desdemona shocked the citizens of Venice much in the same way as the marriage between a negro and the daughter of a respected American Senator would today shock the people of the United States. [2]

Speaight is not strongly interested in the «blackness» of Othello. He leaves the choice of having Othello as «bronze» or «black» to the producer; he says, «The degree of Othello's blackness, then, is a matter of theatrical prudence, but he is clearly an exotic.» But Speaight still sees in Othello an alien person, a so to speak misplaced figure in the society he is depicted in:

> Nevertheless, he remains an African by birth and a moslem by heredity; possibly — for we do not know when he was baptized — by formation also. His nature, throughout this most natural of tragedies, does not change." [3]

The words of Speaight are subtle and loaded; on one hand, he is right about the alien nature of the Moor's figure although he is a Christian and fights for the Christians. I personally believe that racial prejudice, as entertained by the people of Venice in Shakespeare's play, is the explanation of this attitude towards the Moor. This racial prejudice is so strong that it makes the people affected unable to realize that Othello is really one of them, a Christian, and one that acts in their defence. The words of Brabantio mention «bondslaves and pagans» (I, ii, 99) in reference to Othello. These words, as Speaight shows, mean that Brabantio, and probably the others, considered Othello as a non-Christian, a Moslem, and, in the language of their bigotry, a «pagan», It seems plausible that Shakespeare was not speaking in fact about Venice itself but actually depicting mother England at that time. A reference to Harriss's «A Portrait of a Moor», already referred to,

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[1] **Ibid,** p. 71.
[2] **Ibid.**
[3] **Ibid.** p. 72.

will convince any reader that Elizabethan prejudice against coloured people was so strong and that it was permeated in religious intolerance. This is the direct impression one gets from reading *Othello*. Of course the Duke and the Senators speak in subdued tones and do not betray their prejudice, but they have not been angered like Brabantio, and, still, they are in great need of the Moor's services.

Robert R. Heilman thinks that Othello is meant to be black and states that his «blackness, of course, is always before us as a theatrical fact.» [1] He speaks about the symbolical meaning of Othello's blackness and the play of colour in expressing the thematic development of the play. This will be discussed in the last chapter when the plays in general are discussed.

Peter Alexander believes that although Othello was depicted as black, he is just a Moor and not a Negro. He bringe forward some proofs that Shakespeare did differentiate between Moors and Negroes after all:

> Shakespeare followed Cinthio in making his protagonist a Moor, for he saw that this enabled him to make intelligible a blindness in Othello that would have seemed improbable in a Venetian. The notion, however, that Shakespeare did not understand the difference between a Moor and a Negro cannot be maintained. In **Titus Andronicus** Aaron the Moor is a Negro; in **Merchant of Venice** Morocco is a tawny Moor. The distinction was familiar: 'For they make the river Senega to divide and bound the Moors, so that on the South side they are black, on the other only tawny.' In 1600 a mission from the King of Barbary visited England. The portrait of the ambassador that headed the mission, Abd el-Ouaked, now hangs in the Shakespeare Institute at Stratford and the subject is clearly not a Negro. Like the painter the Londoners, many of whom must have seen the visitors from Barbary, for they remained some six months in England, would be familiar with the difference between a Negro and Shakespeare's Morocco. [2]

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[1] «More Fair Than Black: Light and Dark in **Othello**», **Essays in Criticism**, I, (1951), p. 321.

[2] **Shakespeare**, Home University Library of Modern Knowledge, No. 2521, London, 1964, pp. 226 — 227.

Eldred Jones also mentions the portrait of the Moor and says that «Londoners seem to have been able to see Moors both white and black in the streets.» But E. Jones mentions another interesting fact; he says:

> The presence of Negroes in England at about the same time is also clearly attested by Queen Elizabeth's edict in 1601 for the transportation of 'negars and blackmoores' out of the country, where their increased number was giving cause for alarm. [1]

E. Jones elaborates on the philosophical use of Othello as a character. His words indirectly exonerate Shakespeare of the feeling of racial prejudice:

> It was against this background of stage tradition and popular experience that Shakespeare's Moor appeared. The poet used this background very sensitively, exploiting its potentialities for suggestion, but at the same time moving away from the stereotypes, so that in the end Othello emerges, not as another manifestation of a type, but as a distinct individual who typified by his fall, not the weaknesses of Moors, but the weakness of human nature. [2]

Of course, this last point is a source of much controversy. It agrees well with Romantic criticism, especially with Coleridge's views on *Othello* where Iago is visualized as the greatest villain of all writing. But some modern critics seem to consider the traditional outlook of Iago as an exaggeration and that Othello's flaw resided in his mental weakness to differentiate between facts and illusions and his incapacity to stand a wily man like Iago. Peter Alexander has already been quoted as saying that Shakespeare chose his protagonist to be a Moor, not only as an imitation to Cinthio, but because it would be difficul for him to put a Venetian in his place. Many critics nowadays comment on the simplicity of the Moor and his intellectual inadequacy. Robert Speaight says:

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1 Op. Cit., p. 87.
2 E. Jones, Op. Cit., p. 87.

> Othello is more than simple: he is **simpliste**.
> Anything complex about him derives from his circumstances, not from his character. [1]

Speaight also calls him *naif*. Walter Raleigh says about him that «Once he begins to struggle with thought, he is in the labyrinth of the monster, and the day is lost.» [2] And later, he says «If Othello is simple as a hero, Desdemona is simple as a saint.» But many critics, too, agree that Shakespeare took much trouble to build up a noble character out of Othello, first because he is coloured (he had to counteract the racial prejudice of his audience) and secondly because he wanted him to be a simple man. Some critics have exaggerated his simplicity and linked it with his colour, a prejudice in itself, and called him «egregiously an ass.» [3]

Soberer critics do not consider *Othello* as representative of the fall of a simple man, but actually symbolic of the fall of a good man or of goodness itself. E.K. Chambers says «and the fall of Othello is not merely the fall of a good man, but the purposed and inevitable defeat of goodness itself.» [4]

The character of Othello has received different evaluations by different critics. Nowadays the emphasis on his «primitiveness» and «alien» nature is exaggerated. Colour is taken to mean more than it actually does, and many critics try to read their own thoughts into Shakespeare. Margaret Webster in her *Shakespeare Today* elaborates on Othello's character:

> He is more somber, profound and dangerous, primitive in simplicity, primitive also in violence, alien in blood. The gulf which divides him from Desdemona, once their first concord has been broken, is much more than a difference of pigmentation, though this is an essential part of it. It is a gulf between two races, one old and soft in the ways of civilization, the other close to the jungle and the burning,

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[1] Op. Cit., p. 70.

[2] **Shakespeare**, London, 1950, p. 205.

[3] See A. Gerard, «Egregiously an Ass»: The Dark Side of the Moor: A view of Othello's mind. **Sh. S** X (1957) pp. 98 — 106.

[4] E.K. Chambers, **Shakespeare: A Survey**, Penguin Books, p. 170.

> desert sands. It divides him from his officers and men, from his Senatorial superiors, from the whole society by which he is surrounded, its religion, morals, conventions and habits of living. It is the vital point of weakness on which Iago fastens, knowing every twist and thrust of the knife which he can inflict upon the Moor because of his alien and "inferior" race. But even Iago does not reckon on the full, primitive passion which he arouses in Othello's soul.[1]

Such critics hold the view that the fall of a hero in Shakespeare entails that there is a serious flaw in his character, and they make «simplicity Othello's inherent defect. But the question of colour in *Othello* has been considered of double significance; first, it signifies to certain critics that Ohello is a simple fellow - as if all Moors and Negroes were simple, which is a *black and white* racial prejudice on part of these critics — and secondly that Othello is an alien and that his marriage with Desdemona was unnatural, another aspect of their racial prejudice which Shakespeare himself did not reciprocate — at least not to this degree.

Margaret Webster dwells on Othello's colour and finds it «black», a matter which makes Othello to her appear more and more as an alien:

> This question of racial division is of paramount importance to the play, to its credibility and to the validity of every character in it. There has been much controversy as to Shakespeare's precise intention with regard to Othello's race. It is improbable that he troubled himself greatly with ethnological exactness. The Moor, to an Elizabethan, was a blackamoor, an African, an Ethiopian. Shakespeare's other Moor, Aaron, in **Titus Andronicus,** is specifically black; he has thick lips and a fleece of woolly hair. The Prince of Morocco in **The Merchant of Venice** bears "the shadowed livery of the burnished sun," and even Portia recoils from his complexion which he himself is at great pains to excuse.[2]

Such recapitulation is harmless and even useful, but I cannot understand that Othello's colour has a significance to every character - at

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[1] London, 1957, p. 235.

[2] Op. Cit., p. 235.

least not to Cassio. Later on the same page and on the subsequent page, Miss Webster goes on to emphasize Othello's colour and its significance to the play. First she mentions that it is absolutely «black»:

> Othello is repeatedly described, both by himself and others, as black; not pale beige, but black; and for a century and a half after the play's first presentation he was so represented on the stage. But after this the close consideration of nice minds began to discern something not quite ladylike about Desdemona's marrying a black man with thick lips. They cannot have been more horrified than Brabantio, her father, who thought that only witchcraft could have caused "nature so preposterously to err," or more convinced of the disastrous outcome of such a match than Iago, who looked upon it as nothing but a "frail vow between an erring barbarian and a supersubtle Venetian" and declared, with his invincible cynicism, that "when she is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice: she must change; she must!" [1]

Miss Webster, however, mentions an interesting point on the production of Othello:

> Whether Othello came from the shores of the Mediterranean, the Atlantic ocean, or the Red Sea is not a matter of paramount importance; and it has been pointed out, with perfect justice, that an actor of any race can play Othello if he is good enough.[2]

Yet she warns that «the fundamental sense of racial difference must never be lost.» This, in fact, is important because even the imagery centres round colour, and Othello's complexion can be used as the means to understand the characters' thoughts and feelings more deeply and to see whether they are prejudiced or not. Their relations with the Moor can be more fully estimated in the light of «colour» connotations: Cassio is neutral and does not mention it, Iago and Roderigo are two low types because they indulge in vituperation against Othello's person, always referring to his colour; Brabantio is a prejudiced type, but he

[1] Op. Cit., p. 235—6.
[2] Op. Cit., p. 236.

only shows his prejudice when angered; the Duke and the Senators do not show any racial prejudice although they probably have it. Some critics have rightly taken certain words said by the Duke as denotative of this intolerance, although the Duke did not direcly express it because he also liked Othello and needed him. These words, quoted below, show that the Duke considers the marriage as unnatural:

> Let me speak like yourself, and lay a sentence,
> Which, as a grise or step, may help these lovers
> Into your favour.
> When remedies are past, the griefs are indeed
> By seeing the worst, which late on hopes depended.
> To mourn a mischief that is past and gone
> Is the next way to draw new mischief on.
> What cannot be reserved when fortune takes
> Patience, her injury a mockery makes.
> The robb'd that smiles steals something from the thief;
> He robs himself that spends a bootless grief.
>
> (I, iii, 199—209)

But, of course, one could argue that the Duke is only being kind to Brabantio and trying to persuade him to accept what has been done, thus speaking to him in his own language.

The characterization of Othello is an essential element in the development of the theme of the play of *Othello* and its significance. It is quite evident that Shakespeare wanted Othello to appear as noble and good. I have not read any opinion by Shakespeare critics to the contrary. But the point which they differ on is his simplicity. Although most critics think he is simple this does not necessarily mean that he is to be taken as a «stupid» person. Some critics, though, affirm that he is, linking this trait with his colour. I have already referred to such opinions. But there is something that is dependent on this quality of simplicity: some critics argue that Othello was in fact stricken with jealousy after Iago had worked on him. Lily B. Campbell analyses the meanings of jealousy both in modern times and in the Renaissance and classifies jealousy into many kinds that are strongly related to envy. At the outset of her

thirteenth chaper entitled «Othello: *A Tragedy of Jealousy*»[1], she says:

> **Othello** has suffered less in its modern interpretation than any other of Shakespeare's tragedies, it would seem. So insistently did Shakespeare keep this tragedy unified about the theme of jealousy and the central victims of the passion, so obviously did he mould his plot about the black Moor and the cunning Iago and the victims of their jealousy that no interpreter has been able to ignore the obvious intention of the author. Yet if we study the contemporary interpretations of the passion here portrayed, we find that Shakespeare was following in detail a broader and more significant analysis of the passion than has in modern days been understood. **The play is, however, clearly a study in jealousy and in jealousy as it affects those of different races.**

According to this critic, as it seems from the title of the book, the tragic heroes of Shakespeare are the slaves of one passion or another. I do not question the fact that Iago has a certain feeling of jealousy, but as most critics worthy of respect have argued, I believe that jealousy is essentially foreign to the nature of Othello. There is, of course, much mention of jealousy in the play, especially in Act III (iii, 147; iii, 165; iii, 176; iii, 177; iii, 192; iv, 156; iv, 159; iv, 185). And Iago talks about plotting to make the Moor jealous and perplexed. But the question that we should ask is: Isn't there in all our natures a liability to jealousy once we are moved effectively? Of course we should except a certain minority of people who have no sense of honour because they could succumb to a situation where a normal person tends to be extremely jealous and for good cause. We should also remember Othello's words that he did what he did in honour: «For nought I did in hate, but all in honour.» (V, ii, 295) It is regrettable that most Western critics do not differentiate between this sense of honour that Othello speaks about and the ordinary kind of jealousy that, for instance, Leontes fell into. Othello can be excused for having a villain that prods him very skilfully from outside, but Leontes has this villain inside his blood and imagi-

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[1] **Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes, Slaves of Passion**, UP 43, Methuen, London, p. 148.

nation. It is also regrettable that the Oriental point of view of honour is not well received by most Western critics. Lily Campbell sees a certain compatibility between the race and colour of Othello and his «jealousy»:

> Just as the grief-oppressed Hamlet was the inevitable choice for the subject of a play in which revenge was motivated by a ghost and inhibited by the very passion which at the same time made possible the perception of the ghost and the inability to persist in a purpose, so Othello is the perfect choice for a study of the passion of jealousy, since in him we can see the working of the passion in one of a race to whom it is natural to be jealous.[1]

According to Varchi, an Italian author writing about jealousy and whose work was translated by Robert Tofte in 1615 as *The Blazon of Jealousy*, there are four kinds of jealousy: (1) of pleasure, (2) of passion, (3) of property or right, and (4) of honour. Although Miss Campbell finds that Othello's «jealousy» is a jealousy of «pleasure», it is noteworthy to mention what Varchi says about the fourth kind of jealousy, that of honour, because it affects the «tribe» of Othello; Tofte says:

> Lastly, **Jealousie** commeth in respect of a mans Reputation and Honour, according as his nature is, or as his Breeding hath beene, or after the fashion and manner of the Country, in which hee is borne and liveth, because (in this point) divers are the opinions of men, and as contrary are the Customes of Countries, whereupon they say, that the Southerne Nations, and such as dwell in hot Regions are very Jealous; eyther because they are much given and enclined unto Love naturally: or else for that they hold it a great disparagement and scandall, to have their Wifes, or their Mistresses taynted with the foule blot of Unchastitie: which thing those that are of contrary Regions, and such as live under the North-Pole, take not so deepe at the heart...[2]

As for the definition of the jealousy of pleasure, Tofte says:

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[1] Op. Cit., p. 151.

[2] **The Blazon of Jealousie,** pp. 21—3.

> Jealousie commeth of Pleasure, when wee estimate and prise the delight wee take in the Partie we love, at so high a rate, as we would engrosse it wholy unto our selves, and when wee thinke, or imagine, it will decrease and waxe lesse, if it should be communicated, or lent unto another.[1]

It might be relevant to think that Othello's «jealousy» is actually that of «pleasure» while he claims that it was of «honour». But the matter is not that easy to settle: Othello's idealization of Desdemona has a lot to do with it; Othello could not tolerate the idea of the fall of Desdemona from her angelic apex to the «unfaithful» and «black» creature she became. We could argue that Othello's jealousy becomes a fact in Act III by the wilful and diabolical workings of Iago and that from thence forward Othello's jealousy is a mixture of two kinds: that of pleasure and that of honour. Miss Campbell furthers her argument on page 164 by saying:

> As Othello is left alone, the workings of the monster in his heart are apparent. It is now the jealousy that through pleasure and passion felt in and for the loved one advances to jealousy that is the jealousy of property.[2]

The critic gives examples from Varchi and *Othello* to prove her argument.

Other critics doubted whether Othello was actually jealous. Walter Raleigh repeats what is generally said about Othello, namely that «jealousy and suspicion, as Desdemona knows, are foreign to his nature» [3] and goes on to say, «Othello is not a jealous man; he is a man carried off his feet, wave-drenched and blinded by the passion of love.»[4] In fact the Romantic school presupposes that it was Othello's idealization of Desdemona that made him kill her and not «jealousy». They also bring forward the fact that he smothered her with his own hands as an indication that Shakespeare deviated from his source for a purpose, namely, to show that Othello's mind was in the grip of a high passion. They also mention the words said by Othello before the murder. But

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1 **Ibid.** p. 16.
2 **Op. Cit.**, p. 164.
3 **Shakespeare**, p. 34.
4 **Ibid**, p. 197.

as Miss Campbell has shown «jealousy» must have stepped into the mind of Othello in a certain way after Iago worked on him. So, we should differentiate between a mind that is essentially jealous as Leontes' and a mind that is not essentially jealous but which became extremely perplexed, as Othello himself testifies in the end, after the demi-devil has contrived to hurl him into agony. We should also understand that Othello's feeling after the creation of his so-called «jealousy» is still different from Leontes'. While Leontes looks at his wife's «love» for the King of Bohemia as a betrayal to him and his revenge is simply selfish, Othello's murder of Desdemona is an act of justice or of honour merely meant to purify her again. To Othello, Desdemona is like a beautiful picture, chaste and noble, and his revenge is the revenge of «goodness» itself. Of course, unconsciously there is Othello's love for Desdemona and a feeling of disappointment, but we should understand that his love for her is an abstract form of love where the beloved is considered as an ideal. Here again, one would wonder if it is Othello's racial character that made him murder Desdemona. Some critics say that a Westerner, particularly a Venetian, would not have bothered about Desdemona's «faithlessness». But we should remember that this would not solve the problem because such a character would still be considered a cuckold even though Desdemona is actually free from the blot of adultery because in his mind he has accepted the case of adultery and connived at it. Shakespeare's Othello would be completely transformed were he to pardon the Desdemona whom he thinks guilty. The only weighty point is that brought forward by some that were Othello possessed of the same mind as that of Hamlet he would not be caught by the snares of Iago and so they stress his simplicity of mind. But we should not exaggerate his simplicity and argue that because he was a Moor or a Negro he was a gull. Research has found out that even Elizabethans used to think that Moors were too shrewd to deal with [1] and the fact that Negroes are socially backward does not mean they are not intelligent or even subtle. I have learnt from some Sudanese people that the intelligent species of African people are those who have a homogeneously black complexion with

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[1] **Studies of Some of Shakespeare's Plays,** London, 1889, p. 75. (By F. Walters)

smooth skin. In this respect, maybe Othello should be chosen as different from this description.

Frank Walters, speaking ahout the secret marriage of Othello and Desdemona, says, «The secret of the play is not an unsuitable marriage or a jealous husband, but the malice and cruelty of a bad man called Iago..» [1] He elaborates on this idea by reflecting on the play as a whole:

> I do not think we ought to lay too much stress upon the unsuitableness of Desdemona's marriage. Shakespeare wants to make us realize how a perfect marriage was sundered through the malignity of a wicked man. In every possible way he tries to make us regard Othello as worthy of Desdemona's love; and it detracts from the intense humanity of the play to regard the marriage as unnatural or abhorrent.[2]

This idea of the marriage, referred to earlier, is also a weighty argument in the evaluation of Othello's character and it bears on his colour. I believe that Shakespeare did his best to make his audience accept this marriage although, to some readers, he has failed in certain respects. Walters argues that «when the Senators hear of the marriage they express no repugnance; and we may notice how, in one of the minor characters, Shakespeare helps us to sympathise with Desdemona's choice of a husband.» [3]

John Middleton Murry, in his book *Shakespeare,* speaks about the gulf between Othello and some of his acts and dwells on the worse side of his nature:

> In **Othello** the discrepancy between the noble Moor and his acts is, as a matter of mere machinery, produced by the machinations of a human 'demi-devil', Iago.
> **But that is not the impression the drama makes upon us.**
> If it were, the criticism uttered by the woman who cried from the gallery, "You black fool, use your eyes!" would be unanswerable. The impression is rather that Othello is

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1 **Ibid.**
2 **Ibid,** 76.
3 **Ibid.** p. 77.

caught in the toils of a malign destiny; that he has fallen into the clutches of a dark power.[1]

It is such «dark power» on which some critics dwell and begin to argue that because Othello was a Moor or a Negro he retained in him a certain dark element which Christianity was not able to purify. They say that Iago was only the means to evoke that dark element in Othello and they confirm their view by quoting from Othello's words:

> Now, by heaven,
> My blood begins my safer guides to rule,
> And passion, having my best judgment collied,
> Assays to lead the way. (II, iii, 204—7)

They deduce from these lines that Othello's nature is essentially tinged with a propensity to violence and indiscrimination, something that he has inherited from his race and hot climate. But the point is that we should come to agree about the conception of «good man» and if a practically «good man» has or has not a dark element in his nature. To me, a good man, under normal conditions, is a man possessed of certain attributes and a balance between his spiritual and physical powers. Even the extreme Sufis who believe in the annihilation of «self» in the fire of God concede that a certain part of man remains indissoluble in that fire and retains the baseness of the «earth».

They consider that part is purified because it is kept under the control of their spiritual power. So, in a way, Othello could be good while still retaining that «dark» propensity in him, his flaw which is the flaw of all human beings. Maybe this control in Othello is more easily upset than in others, but the consensus of most critics is that his words:

> then must you speak
> Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
> **Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought**
> **Perplex'd in the extreme:**
> (V, ii, 343—6)

are true. Hazelton Spencer, commenting on «one not easily jealous», says that is «clearly the impression Shakespeare wishes to leave.»

[1] London, 1948, p. 323.

He adds that «Othello is a normal man, and the play is not a study of the passion of jealousy.» [1] Looking for a flaw in Othello in order to satisfy Aristotelian standards regarding the construction of a tragedy, Spencer finds it in «simplicity» and «humility» which Shakespeare attaches to Othello:

> He (Shakespeare) succeeds, in the first place, by emphasizing Othello's simplicity, his ignorance of city life, and his humility. He is a professional soldier, bred in the camp, unversed in Venetian subtleties. He is touchingly humble when he thinks of how he differs from Desdemona in age, in social background, and in race. He is older; though he claims royal descent, only his military prowess gives him his precarious standing in Venice; and, while he is not a Negro, he is a Moor and therefore "black" to the Venetians.[2]

Spencer does not mention whether Othello's simplicity has anything to do with his race or colour. But it seems that he does not hold any special relation between the two concepts; later, he says that not only Othello was duped by Iago. «Everyone, up to the very last, succumbs to his charm and his pose of bluff, outspoken soldierliness. Cassio and Roderigo are as easily led by the nose as the hero is.» [3] This idea softens the harsh tones of certain critics who allege that Othello was too simple not to be duped by Iago and that his race has something to do with this trait. I believe that the simplicity of Othello has been exaggerated by certain critics. If Othello is simple, he is no stupid: he argues with Iago and mistrusts him at first, but Iago follows a «psychological» path in bringing forth the ruin of Othello and the fact that he succeeds in his plots is due to the «heavenly» show he puts on and thereby deceives everybody, even his wife. If we try to exaggerate this flaw in Othello, namely, his simplicity, then the play loses much of its pathetic effect. I do not deny that certain readers have taken an almost contemptuous attitude towards Othello, but this does not mean that this is what Shakespeare wanted them to feel or what the play itself naturally tells. A deeper look into the stages of Iago's machinations and his «plausible»

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1 **Op. Cit.**, p. 321.
2 **Ibid.**, p. 322.
3 **Ibid.** p. 323.

scheming will convince anybody that Iago's villainy is, for the most part, to blame for Othello's fall. If compared with *Macbeth,* Iago even surpasses the witches because he is a man among men, and he is far from being a *deus ex machina* except from a very superficial point of view.

The more imaginative critics, like Edith Sitwell, acknowledge both Othello's greatness and simplicity without exaggerating the latter. To them, as rightly it is, Othello's simplicity is something musical and poetical. In fact, this simplicity promotes the concepion of «goodness» that we get about the hero, evoking in us a strange feeling of pity that would have been uncalled for had we condemned Othello of too much gullibilty. We should always remember that his credulity does not develop into stupidity. We should also remember that in Shakespeare's time the audience were prepared to accept any exaggerated form of a villain in a play, and hence, Iago's influence on a normal person like Othello was not disputed. If we read *Othello* in terms of a modern play or novel, then our hopes will hardly be vindicated. Not to be able to find a real motive for Iago's malignity is not in itself a sign that either the play is a failure or that we should rather look into Othello himself for the reason of his fall and consider that as the sole factor in his ruin. The Elizabethans were used to seeing villains of every kind in the drama without wishing to investigate the reasons of their villainy.[1] Of course, this general attitude of the Elizabethans demands research, and it can be analysed psychologically, but we can also regard it as a matter of fact and stop our straying analyses. Aaron in *Titus Andronicus,* with whom Iago is compared by some critics, furnishes a glaring example of this category of villains. Though he has been termed as "flat" by certain critics, he is considered by others as the only "lively" character in the play. As for Othello, many established critics argue that he represents humanity in his fall and that any other sensible man would have fallen if he had been subjugated to the villainy of a Iago. To Edith Sitwell, Othello's greatness - here she uses a Shakespearian image - is like the sun which is hidden by an intruding cloud, "But this noble nature must be brought to ruin for no reason but that his grandeur offended the

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[1] see infra p. 232 et passim.

baseness of a cloud born from foul vapours".[1] This image is recurrent in Shakespeare himself: we see it illustrated in Sonnets XXVIII, XXXIII, XXXIV, XXXV, and in *Venus and Adonis,* 533, and in *Lucrece,* 371, 547, and 777, as well as in the plays; in The *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (I, iii, 87), *All's Well* (V, iii, 35), *Richard II* (I, i, 42, III, iii, 65), *Henry IV* (I, ii ,222), *Titus Andronicus* (III, i, 213), and other examples. Yet, to me, the simplest and at the same time the most vigorous expression of this idea is to be seen in this line: «Thus sometimes hath the brightest day a cloud« (2 Henry VI, II, iv, 1). This applies to Othello's case most brilliantly. Othello's greatness should be looked at - still in Shakespearian terms and images - as the beautiful flower which is ruined by the malignant work of the canker; this weakness in the rose or the flower does not detract from the glory of beauty in it but it shows how the hand of fate destroys beautiful things in nature. The same idea can apply to *Othello* where the hero is compared to the rose and Iago, the villain, is compared to the canker. After all, the tragedy is the tragedy of Othello himself and not that of Desdemona. The murder of Desdemona makes Othello the tragic figure he is. Edith Sitwell says :

> The greatness and simplicity of Othello are those of Nature before it was altered by civilization, and his utterances have in them, sometimes the noble heat of the sun under which he was born, sometimes a grave and planetary splendour, sometimes a sonorous and oceanic strength of harmony.[2]

Miss Sitwell's impression is the opposite of that of other critics who hold that Othello, by murdering Desdemona, removed the thin veneer of civilization which had tarnished his behaviour. Miss Sitwell also stresses that there is no treatment of jealousy in the play.[3] She refes to the dialogue between Desdemona and Emilia: Emilia asks:

> Is he not jealous?

Desdemona replies:

> Who? he? I think the Sun where he was born
> Drew all such humours from him. (III, iv, 31)

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[1] **A Notebook on William Shakespeare,** London, Macmillan, 1948, p. 96.
[2] **Ibid.**
[3] **Ibid,** p. 97.

This dialogue should remind us that whereas the racial qualities of Othello are taken to suggest his inferiority as regarded by his opposers, Desdemona makes use of these very qualities in reading his noble heart. Such an attitude by Desdemona is undoubtedly meant by Shakespeare to strengthen our impression about the hero's nobility and the improbability of his «jealousy.» But we should also remember that the audience may not have been convinced, at least not completely.

Other critics, stressing the «jealousy» of Othello have gone to far lengths in analysing it. Peter Quennel thinks that Othello's jealousy arises from a comparison between the pleasures of love he has enjoyed and the new torment he has fallen into:

> It is Othello's voluptuous hyper-sensitiveness, and the tormenting memory of the pleasures he has once enjoyed, that at length goad him into desperate action. But, among Shakespeare's contemporaries and dramatic descendants, a delight in the sensuous world often co-existed with a fear and hatred of the flesh. They dreaded lust as much as they adored love; **and for Othello, during the final crisis of his jealousy, the love he had known is merely lust disguised.** Hence his masochistic impulse to reduce his remembered passion to the proper level.[1]

As for Othello's colour and its effect on his character, Quennel thinks that the Venetians' attitude towards Othello is not that of racial prejudice because they do not hesitate to employ him.[2] Quennel forgets that they must have done so because of their need and not because they are not prejudiced against the Moor, for at least Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio show symptoms of prejudice. Further, Quennel thinks that Othello himself is conscious of his race and strangeness especially as Iago impells him to think of the super-subtlety of the Venetian ladies. But I should like to say that it is in Cinthio, the source of Shakespeare, rather than in Shakespeare himself that Iago mentions to Othello that he is black and hence undesirable. In Shakespeare, it is Othello himself who ruminates on his own darkness.[3] Moreover, Quennel does not in

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[1] **Shakespeare, the poet and his background, London** 1963, p. 286.
[2] **Ibid,** p. 284.
[3] **Infra,** p. 242

his analysis of Othello's racial entity dwell on the relation between his colour and his simplicity. Nor does he negate the idea that his racial identity dictates his jealous mind. He leaves this point untouched.

Although Professor A.C. Bradley has had many opponents in Shakespeare criticism in general, I find his views on Othello's colour and race as well as the related topics of his character more comprehensive and logical than those of any other critic. This is why I have defferred my reference to him till now, in order to conclude my study of colour in Othello. Bradley says unequivocally that «it was no sign of *stupidity* in Othello» for trusting Iago «For his opinion of Iago was the opinion of practically everyone who knew him: and that opinion was that Iago was before all things 'honest', his very faults being those of excess in honesty.» [1] Bradley clinches the matter about Othello's degree of simplicity by saying:

> This being so, even if Othello had not been trustful and simple, it would have been quite unnatural in him to be unmoved by the warnings of so honest a friend, warnings offered with extreme reluctance and manifestly from a sense of a friend's duty. **Any** husband would have been troubled by them.[2]

Professor Bradley illustrates in three points the real reasons for Iago's success and explains his diabolical artfulness.[3] Under the third heading, Bradley emphasizes the «alien» nature of Othello rather than his race and colour. He is a stranger among the Venetians and is «totally ignorant of the thoughts and the customary morality of Venetian women.» So, no doubt, he had only Iago to supply him with this information, and Iago used his time well by giving him the worst impression possible about Venetian women. Under the second heading, Bradley mentions an important fact, namely, that Othello had known Iago for a long time while he knew Desdemona only recently. This is a good answer to those who argue that Othello depended on his friendship more than he depended on his love. He simply didn't have time enough to know his wife better.

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1 **Shakespearean Tragedy**, p. 156.
2 **Ibid.**
3 **Ibid.** p. 157.

In this way we dispose of the thesis that Othello's colour has anything to do with his simplicity or «gullibility.» What remains is that rather his alien nature is important to note both in the way his enemies look at him and the way he considers himself in the Venetian context. To conclude this chapter, a summing up is necessary. Shakespeare used his villains with little motivation because his audience were prepared to accept them as they were. In those times «there was the Devil of the medieval mystery plays; there was Judas, most incomprehensible of villains; there were the bad angels of the morality plays» — no motivation was needed for them; and «there was the Vice of the later moralities and interludes, the mischiefmaking mainspring of every plot» and «there were the sinister Italian scoundrels of more recent drama... Like Lorenzo in *The Spanish Tragedie,* whose wicked designs are scarcely motivated at all.» [1] Aaron belonged to such a category, though, as for other considerations, it is bad taste to call him «flat». Iago's motivation is not saisfactory either, and this draws attention to the words of certain critics who are intent on discovering a «flaw» in Othello which is often linked to his colour. Othello is simple, but he is not too simple. He is an ordinary man, credulous, but not gullible. His fall is symbolical of the fall of «goodness» just as the beautiful rose is ruined by the canker. His weakness is the weakness of humanity in general.

Finally, I tend to believe that essentially Shakespeare is not racially prejudiced although he portrays certain symptoms of bigotry in his society. The fact that he himself fell in love with a dark lady tells against the probability of such intolerance in him. Yet, it is quite stimulaing to see the change in his outlook between his composition of *Titus Andronicus* and his writing of *Othello.* But even in *Titus,* Aaron's colour does not go undefended; Shakespeare allows Aaron to say:

> Coal-black is better than another hue;
> In that it scorns to bear another hue;
> For all the water in the ocean
> Can never turn the swan's black legs to white,
> Although she lave them hourly in the flood.
>
> (IV, ii, 99—103)

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[1] Hazelton Spencer: **The Art And Life of William Shakespeare,** p. 322.