Converging Polarities in Shakespeare's *Othello* — A Generic Approach to Othello and Iago

Caterina Pan
Paris-London-Universität Salzburg (Austria)

Scholarship has largely discussed the genre of *Othello*, a tragedy that challenges a simple definition because it creates a kind of singularity out of a range of different genres. Like many Renaissance and Elizabethan dramatic works, *Othello* is a synthesis of influences resulting from the adaptation of Roman drama, epic sources, non-fictional treatises like Machiavelli's *Il Principe,* and a dramatic tradition ranging from festive performance cultures to revenge tragedy.[1] This complex generative process has led to new generic definitions, such as "Satiric Comedy Ending in Tragedy" (Richard Whalen), "Comedy of Abjection" (Michael D. Bristol), and "Comedy of Judgement" (Jason Crawford), which might look like an antithesis to the classification of tragedy and call for a re-evaluation of the genre conventions present in the play.

Arguably, the greatest appeal of the play lies in the ability of the playwright to make opposites meet only to show at the end that principles such as truth and lie or comedy and tragedy are collapsible and comprehensive. The aim of this paper is to explore the major genres wrought into *Othello* to shape the antithetic and at the same time symbiotic relationship between Iago and Othello. Without making any claim to completeness, a few representative examples of generic hybridization will be discussed here using Northrop Frye's genre theory and Gérard Genette's concept of

Journal of the Wooden O. Vol 23, 33-50
© Southern Utah University Press
ISSN: 1539-5758

"transmodalization," a particular form of transposition of modes (i.e., genres).[2]

In the first part, the transposition from epic to drama ("intermodal transmodalization") is addressed by comparing the Italian source text, a romance of jealousy by G. B. Giraldi Cinthio, to *Othello*. This will reveal aspects common to these two genres and draw attention to the novelties added by Shakespeare in order to give more credibility to characters and plot; one relevant change is Iago's initial motive of envy. In the second part, "intramodal transmodalization" within drama comes into focus. I argue that Shakespeare fruitfully adapted elements of classical tragedy, updated as revenge tragedy, the morality play, and popular comedy to create an unconforming hybrid which resists the definition of tragedy because it produces an incomplete catharsis. Against this background, Othello and Iago function as case studies that provide insight into the process of dramatization (literally of turning other genres into drama) as a product of adaptation, transmodalization and redefinition of genre and character polarities.

Intermodal transmodalization: From romance to drama

In *Palimpsests*, Gérard Genette sets up a theory of transtextual relations, the most important of which is hypertextuality. Hypertextuality is literature "in the second degree," a text derived from a pre-existing text which it either transforms (directly) or imitates (indirectly).[3] Hypertextual transpositions comprise translations, quantitative transformations and "transmodalization," defined as "any kind of alteration in the mode of presentation characterising the hypotext." The latter can either be "intermodal transmodalization" which describes a shift from one mode (or genre) to another, or "intramodal transmodalization," a change of the internal functioning while still within the same mode, for instance from drama to drama.[4] Dramatization and narrativization are antithetical instances of Genette's "intermodal transmodalization" and essential to describing the first step in creating *Othello*, namely the transition from an epic to a dramatic genre ("intermodal transmodalization").

Shakespeare's *Othello* is notably based on an Italian source, the seventh novella of the third decade of G. B. Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*, published in Venice in 1566 and translated into French in 1584. Both plots are set in Venice and Cyprus and revolve

around a handkerchief stolen from Disdemona/Desdemona to give her husband "ocular proof" of her alleged infidelity. After making him exceedingly suspicious, Cinthio's Ensign, like Shakespeare's Iago, has the Moor witness a conversation but without hearing it and thus convinces him of his wife's guilt. In the novella, the Ensign's deluded love for Disdemona turns into jealousy and hate for the Corporal, a handsome soldier favoured by the Moor and therefore, following the Ensign's logic, also by Disdemona. In contrast, Shakespeare accentuates the conflict between protagonist and antagonist by transferring the Ensign's jealousy onto Othello, who ultimately turns against himself and the ones he loves. Iago's initial motive is not love but envy for Cassio's lieutenancy, a seemingly weaker reason to seek revenge but which nonetheless allows more interpersonal relations. In fact, the lustful element is shifted onto Roderigo, a rich and foolish suitor who allies himself with Iago in the hope of possessing Desdemona without realizing that he is just an instrument of revenge. Likewise, Iago "ensnares" Cassio in a platonic friendship with Desdemona to provoke Othello's jealousy and obtain the lieutenancy. The changed motive is crucial not only for the characters, their mind-set and relations, but also for the outcome: in Cinthio, the Moor consents to murder the Corporal, and Disdemona is beaten to death by the jealous Ensign. Repenting of his crimes, but still unaware of Disdemona's innocence, Cinthio's Moor is killed by Disdemona's family, while the Ensign is tortured to death for murder. Conversely, Shakespeare's Iago provokes such an intense jealousy in Othello that he chokes his innocent wife to death. Realizing his terrible mistake, he commits suicide and leaves Iago to the hands of justice. As Dennis Austin Britton sums up, Othello is not an outsider in Venice and his identity is legitimized by his Christianity and marriage to Desdemona, but Iago "re-turns" Othello from a romance hero to his real Muslim identity using a romance of jealousy,[5] a sort of tribute to epic within the play.

As far as "intermodal transmodalization" is concerned, the generic transposition of the novella onto a drama entails several adaptations while still maintaining structural similarities to the original and to the genre of romance. In the transition from Cinthio's epic to Shakespeare's drama, diegetic instances like the omniscient narrator are substituted by mimetic performance

(*mimesis*) and more lively forms of diegesis such as dialogues, though many instances of "storytelling" remain (for instance the story of the magical handkerchief).[6] Still, dramatization means more than just turning narration into dialogue and gesture. In updating Cinthio's novella, Shakespeare reworks structural elements common to drama, epic, and romance. Cinthio himself reflects on genre theory in *On Romances*, asserting that the principles of the Aristotelian tragedy—*peripeteia, anagnorisis*, and *catharsis*—need not be limited to tragedy; especially the recognition of "the terrible, of the pitiable, of the change from a happy to an unhappy state and vice versa, and of the marvellous [...] is no less excellent than tragedy."[7] Similarly, in *Anatomy of Criticism* Northrop Frye compares the three main stages of romance to the structure of an Aristotelian play in analogous terms: the perilous journey (*agon*), the death-struggle (*pathos*) and the discovery or recognition (*anagnorisis*) of the hero—even when he does not survive the conflict. As to the hero, he can be human in romance, or divine or semi-divine in myth, and usually confronts a demonic antagonist.[8] In both the novella and tragedy, there is the journey (*agon/peripeteia*) in the sense of a hero removed from his initial state due to manipulations and machinations, the struggle (*pathos*) between good and evil, and the final recognition (*anagnorisis*) of the evil plan, which should lead to *catharsis* (purification) for the audience. The main difference between the genres lies in the type of recognition. On the one hand, tragic recognition occurs when the hero correctly identifies the self and his predicament, as in Shakespeare. The tragic aspect is that it happens too late, making redemption or a tragicomic denouement impossible. On the other hand, romance recognition occurs when the hero discovers the truth just in time to avoid a catastrophe. The case of Cinthio's Moor shows another form of romantic conclusion, with no real recognition but a just punishment. Although in both cases the truth about someone's identity is reasserted after misunderstandings, the outcomes are diametrically opposed. A timely recognition of Iago's and Desdemona's true natures might have led to a happy ending. In dramatic terms, *Othello* could have been a comedy, but mischance or rather misrecognition turns Othello's romance into tragedy, albeit with an incomplete *catharsis*, as we shall see. In my view, the tragically late recognition gives the prose epic a dramatic

potential expanded in Shakespeare's play by the changed motive which heightens the conflict between the main characters.

Here we enter the realm of "intramodal transmodalization" to detect borrowings within the genre of drama and reflect on the effects of hybridization on Othello and Iago. Thomas Rymer was the first to observe that the spotless nobility of Othello virtually calls for a villain of supernatural powers:[9] an amoral Machiavel personifying "rationality, self-interest, hypocrisy, cunning, expediency, […] latent homosexuality and deep-rooted misogyny," as Norman Sanders suggests.[10] The juxtaposition of an almost divine protagonist and a demonic antagonist, already mentioned by Frye in relation to romance, was reworked in dramatic form by Shakespeare on the basis of other (dramatic) genres. For the perfect hero fighting a tragic fate the playwright could draw on classical tragedy, the direct model of Elizabethan revenge plays, and for the devilish manipulator he could rely on the morality play and the festive tradition surrounding it.

Intramodal transmodalization I: The classical hero within a revenge tragedy

In early modern drama, the generic concept of classical tragedy based on the translation of the works of Seneca developed numerous subgenres, such as the revenge tragedy or domestic tragedy, which are not primarily Aristotelian but reflect a national interpretation of the Greek concept. A fundamental trait is the classical hero as the centre of the plot. For Frye, tragic heroes "seem the inevitable conductors of the power about them, great trees more likely to be struck by lightning than a clump of grass. Conductors may of course be instruments as well as victims of the divine lightning."[11] The idea of heroes being "instruments as well as victims" of their own power is particularly fitting for Othello as he becomes Iago's instrument of revenge and in a certain sense a victim of his own impeccable nobility. Frye explains that in classical tragedy the hero cannot escape his fate and faces a tragic and insoluble conflict leading to catastrophe. The climax coincides with the moment the hero realizes that the available options are irreconcilable, even though he still has to take responsibility for his choice. Once the decision is made, the downfall is out of his control—as expressed by Othello himself: "Who can control his fate?" (5.2.263).[12]

In the beginning of the play, Brabantio's warning about

Desdemona sounds like a prophecy of Othello's fate of being deceived:

> *Brabantio:* Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:
> She [Desdemona] has deceived her father and may thee.
> *Othello:* My life upon her faith!
> (1.3.288–90)

Interestingly, the idea of fate is present even in Desdemona's name, which means "ill-fated" in Greek[13] and seems to be a premonition of Othello's inability to properly "look to her." Instead of remaining faithful to his oath, "my life upon her faith," Desdemona's life is immolated for *his* faith, turning Iago's thirst for revenge into a domestic tragedy. The villain Iago simply fuels a latent suspicion on the grounds that Desdemona deceived her father for love and might do so again with her husband.

> *Iago:* She did deceive her father, marrying you;
> And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks
> She loved them most.
> (3.3.208–10)

Considering Othello's estrangement from his wife in favour of Iago's "honest" friendship, Rebecca Ann Bach's definition of domestic tragedy as a genre that works to "praise men who value male-male alliances above relations with women" is particularly fitting.[14] The domestic tragedy being a subgenre of the revenge tragedy invites us to look at how the tragic hero was inserted in one of the most popular genres of Elizabethan theatre.

According to Fredson T. Bowers, in *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, the prime movers of revenge and murder are usually jealousy, pride and ambition, which can lead to murder and the subsequent revenge of this murder, or to murder as revenge for an unsatisfied desire, as in the case of *Othello*. *Nemesis* is achieved when order and balance are restored again, usually after the hero's death.[15] Throughout the tragedy, external fate and individual free will tear the hero in two and this conflict is emphasized in Shakespeare by giving Fate a personality with direct power over Othello—Iago. Resentful, sceptical and disillusioned, Iago orchestrates his own anti-romance to destroy Othello with a "dual revenge," as Lauren Cressler calls it: an outer political and military plot concerning the war against the Turks in Cyprus, where Othello chooses

Cassio as his lieutenant over Iago; and an embedded personal and domestic revenge out of envy, even after Iago obtained his wished-for position. In this sense, Cressler argues, although *Othello* is not a typical revenge tragedy, Iago comes close to the numerous Elizabethan Malcontent figures, who can never be satisfied because the genre of revenge tragedies requires it.[16]

This might be true for Iago, but Othello is not just a passive puppet in his hands like other protagonists of revenge tragedies or history plays because he possesses numerous attributes of the classical hero, as the following quote shows:

> *Lodovico:* [after Othello's public slandering of Desdemona]:
> Is this the *noble* Moor whom our full senate
> Call *all-in-all sufficient*? Is this the nature
> Whom *passion could not shake*? Whose *solid virtue*
> The shot of accident nor dart of chance
> Could neither seize nor pierce?
> *Iago:* He is much changed.
> (4.1.255–60, emphasis added)

Lodovico's description of the former Othello echoes that of the classical hero, whose nobility, power and importance place him above average humanity, even in the poetic language he uses. However, like most tragic heroes, Othello too must cope with an inner character trait that causes the fatal tragedy. Frye explains that Aristotle's *hamartia* "is not necessarily a wrongdoing, much less a moral weakness: it may be simply a matter of being a strong character in an exposed position" e.g., leadership.[17] Isolation in Cyprus, a constant state of alert and a misled interpretation of reality through Iago's "surmises," "inferences" and "close dilations" have, at that point, "much changed" noble Othello.

At first sight, Othello's most evident frailty or miscalculation (two possible translations of *hamartia*) seems to be jealousy, but this feeling is not a natural part of his character, as confirmed by Desdemona:

> *Desdemona:* […] my noble Moor
> Is true of mind and made of no such baseness
> As jealous creatures are.
> (3.4.21–3)

Jealousy alone would not have had the power to change his perception and personality, had not an external agent planted this seed on a fertile ground. Although Doctor Johnson diagnoses him

with excessive credulity,[18] Othello struggles (*agon*) and needs proof before he can give in to Iago's lies, for he senses that without love his life would end in chaos as it ultimately does: "[…] and when I love thee [Desdemona] not, / Chaos is come again" (3.3.91–2). As Samuel Taylor Coleridge asserts, Othello acts more out of disappointment than out of jealousy[19] and cannot overcome the terrible suspicion that disrupts everything he ever believes in, namely pride and honor. These virtues are so deeply rooted in his soul that they become fatal (*hamartia*) to Othello, who, trained as a soldier, cannot stand the shame of being a cuckold. His inflexible self-image leads him to say: "A honourable murderer, if you will; / For naught I did in hate, but all in honour" (5.2.291–2) even after committing a murder in order to protect his reputation (*pathos*). This profoundly disturbing confession for the audience is only atoned for by his suicide, which partly restores his humanity.

Despite being provided with the qualities of a classical hero, Othello's impeccable façade slowly begins to deteriorate once he is "struck by lightning" (quoting Frye). In Shakespeare, the downfall is aided by a counterpart actively drawing the hero to catastrophe and appealing to his "flaws": the villain Malcontent from revenge tragedies who reprises a demonic figure from an earlier dramatic genre—the morality play.

Intramodal transmodalization II: Everyman, Vice and the motive of jealousy

The fifteenth-century morality play presents an allegorical contest for the spiritual welfare (*psychomachia*) of a hero who represents mankind surrounded by allegorical characters that represent Virtues and Vices. With the development of Renaissance ideas of self-determination and individuality, this genre declined but was still well-known in Shakespeare's day. As Frye puts it, "Shakespeare is particularly fond of planting moral lightning-rods on both sides of his heroes to deflect pity and terror"[20]—two essential components of *catharsis*. In the case of Othello, he is "flanked" by Desdemona and Iago who cause mixed feelings of pity and terror in the audience and echo the inner conflict at the core of morality. Like Everyman, Othello is tempted by a demonic character similar to Vice, moved by "motiveless malignity," as Coleridge notes: "[Iago] is being next to the devil, only *not* quite

devil."[21] Othello calls him "that demi-devil / Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body" (5.2.298–9) in one of the frequent angel-devil metaphors which occur throughout the play and hark back to the religious background of morality plays.

By presenting himself as something he is not, Vice is the first character to consciously play a part in moralities and the same is true for Iago. The conspiracy of vice disguising itself as virtue is a stock episode of morality plays.[22] Similarly, Iago is both a hypocritical actor with a "fictional selfhood," as Daniel Derrin calls his "honesty," and a playwright staging an illusion.[23] Iago actively refers to theatrical metaphors and deliberately "turns virtue into pitch" to "enmesh" Othello and all the other characters gravitating around him.

> *Iago:* When devils will the blackest sins put on,
> They do suggest at first with heavenly shows
> As I do now. […]
> So will I turn virtue into pitch,
> And out of her own goodness make the net
> That shall enmesh them all.
> (2.3.318–29)

This conscious art of dissimulation ("IAGO: I am not what I am" 1.1.58–66) works both on a metatheatrical and on a stylistic level with different poetic registers. While Iago—like Vice—is the master of rhetoric and seductive language, Othello—like Everyman—is a more human and failing figure, too pompously eloquent and not sceptical enough, as Ken Jacobsen observes.[24] Next to these parallels between Iago-Vice[25] and Othello-Everyman, there are other typical features of the morality genre visible in Shakespeare's play: the formal confession and repentance of the protagonist, and the unmasking and punishment of Vice. In the final act, Emilia reveals the truth, and both Othello and Iago are punished—one by himself and the other by justice. Unfortunately, and that is the point that makes it a tragedy, this revelation occurs too late for salvation. A further departure from the morality play pattern is the fact that Iago's persuasive power over Othello is stronger than the force of Desdemona's virtue because Othello is so deceived by jealousy, the "green-eyed monster which does mock / The meat it feeds on" (3.3.168–9), that he mistakes Vice for Virtue. Jealousy is personified here, almost like an allegory which links Othello to Iago.

Although initially jealousy is alien to Othello, it reflects Iago's own jealousy and envy subsequently shifted onto the cause and victim of his revenge. As Peter N. Stearns explains, "jealousy is also close to envy. […] jealousy involves reaction to loss or threat of loss, and envy a desire to have what someone else has."[26] Werner Gundersheimer adds that the envious component in jealousy causes malevolence, desire, inferiority and vulnerability.[27] These attributes can be found in Iago whose initial motive of envy for Cassio's lieutenancy entails jealousy for Othello's relationship with Cassio or even with Emilia. Through this same jealousy he estranges Othello from himself and leads him to destroy his own happiness. Iago's opening statement: "Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago" (1.1.58) reveals that he exists merely in relation to the Moor, as his negative alter ego. In this role he resembles W. H. Auden's "practical joker" who "despises his victims, but at the same time he envies them […] there is always an element of malice, a projection of his self-hatred onto others."[28] In this ambit, Janet Adelman asserts that "Iago successfully attempts to rid himself of interior pain by replicating it in Othello."[29] In this alter ego reading, the two antithetic characters from classical drama and the morality play converge, driven by envy and jealousy, which are two facets of the same feeling. Iago splits Othello the way he is split himself and Othello readily responds to this affiliation by soon being as obsessed with Iago as Iago is with the Moor. The tragic irony is that Othello believes he is in the right and tries to justify his behaviour until the end. His testament is that "Of one that loved not wisely, but too well; / Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme" (5.2.340–2). In carrying out his revenge, Iago, like Vice, "wrought" the Everyman-hero Othello to such a degree that they became one and thus, by killing himself, Othello at once frees himself from Iago and symbolically "kills" him, too. After his *nemesis* is complete, Iago falls silent and inert because he has no purpose left: he killed Emilia and Roderigo and contributed to the killing of Desdemona and Othello. There is neither a sign of redemption, as in a morality play, nor a satisfying *catharsis* in the audience, as in classical tragedy. One reason could be that *catharsis* is impeded by genres far removed from tragedy which shine through in the play.

Contrasting Feelings / Convergent Genres: Comic and Festive Traditions

As we have seen, Vice is not a completely negative character although the Christian perspective would like to render him one. On stage, the demonic figure is fascinating, captivating, cynical, elusive, and witty—at times even in a ridiculous way, as Bernhard Spivack points out.[30] To a certain degree, the audience can sympathize with the clever plotter and laugh at his explicit language, which makes him appear more down-to-earth and human than the virtuous characters. Just as the classical hero Othello is humanized by *hamartia*, Iago's "malignity" is not utterly "motiveless" as the play provides enough background information to give him the self-assigned right to seek revenge. Once he obtains Cassio's lieutenancy, however, Iago continues to employ his versatile inventiveness to make Othello the instrument of his own revenge. In this context, Frye draws a parallel between Vice and the Machiavellian villain of Elizabethan drama who,

> like vice in comedy, is a convenient catalyser of the actions because he requires the minimum of motivation, being a self-starting principle of malevolence. Like the comic vice, too, he is something of an *architectus* or projection of the author's will. In this case for a tragic conclusion.[31]

The quotation seems to imply that with his minimally motivated (though not motiveless) malevolence Iago functions as a "projection of the author's will" towards a tragic conclusion. The conclusion is indeed tragic, but is that enough to make *Othello* a tragedy? A possible answer can be found by exploring the less evident genres inherent to the play, as in the following example.

The centrality of scene 3.3 marks Iago's control over Othello's mind/soul ("Let him [Iago] command" 3.3.468) in a dramatic climax. Convinced of Desdemona's affair with Cassio by means of a misleading "ocular proof" (a dumb show between Iago and Cassio only seen and not heard by Othello), Othello kneels down to summon "black vengeance" and seals a murderous pact with the Iago: "OTHELLO: […] Now art thou my lieutenant. IAGO: I am your own for ever" (3.3.476-9). In strong contrast with this "bloody business," which vaguely echoes the pact with the devil of cautionary tales, the scenes is followed by a clown joking with Desdemona and a short dialogue between Desdemona and Emilia

about the lost handkerchief, only moments before Othello enters to request that magical love token in a narrative monologue. Revenge tragedy, epic genres like romance and cautionary tales, and the clown's antics are just a few of the genres that coexist in a multilayered structure apt to present the oppositional and symbiotic relationship between Othello and Iago. In other words, the extremely mixed feelings on stage require mixed genres.

In terms of "intramodal transmodalization," I would like to draw attention to the comic traditions which pervade *Othello*. Susan Snyder defines it a "postcomic" play because it begins where most comedies end: with the romantic union of two lovers against one of their fathers' will.[32] However, in Shakespeare this plot is preliminary to tragedy, though with lingering signs of "almost-comedy." If evitability is the distinguishing principle between comedy and tragedy, as Snyder suggests,[33] Desdemona's death is the inevitable consequence of a wrong cause—"It is the cause," Othello says in 5.2.1. Caught in the dichotomy between love and (manipulated) reason, Othello turns away from Desdemona and is ultimately disjoined even from his alter ego, Iago. Interestingly, there is no comic subplot as in other tragedies like *Hamlet* and even the clown is a marginal figure soon eclipsed by Iago's obscene antics reminiscent of Vice and the festive tradition.

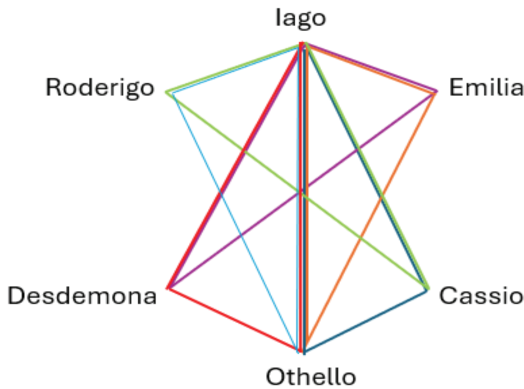
Next to the "postcomic" structure, there are numerous other references to comedy and tragicomedy, a "mixed genre" derived from the Pastoral so *en vogue* in Shakespeare's day.[34] Most notably, the use of character "types" with fixed attributes in *Othello* is not only inherited from Cinthio's nameless and rather flat characters, identified only by their appearance or position (apart from Disdemona), but is common to tragicomedy and social satires in general. Domestic and revenge tragedy feature similar stock characters—the revenger, the Malcontent, or the Machiavel—based on the Latin comedies of Plautus and the allegorical figures of the morality play. Other stereotypes of universal human foibles were influenced by citizen comedies and Italian Commedia dell'Arte, two popular genres which seeped in from the Continent. Referring to *Othello*, Richard Whalen points out that this "Satiric Comedy Ending in Tragedy," is a synthesis of the main characters of Commedia dell'Arte, all condensed in one play.[35] Indeed, Othello is not the only "flawed" character on stage: Iago is a villain, Cassio is a drunkard, Brabantio is a dupe, Desdemona is an undutiful

daughter, Bianca is a limpet, Emilia is a thief, and Roderigo is a fool. These traits render them life-like, but are too excessive to appear realistic, as in comedy. Moreover, the play takes up the generic pattern of the citizen comedy with socially heterogenous characters involved in morally ambiguous intrigues (minus the setting in the city of London, which is replaced by Venice and Cyprus). There are also mirroring scenes frequently found in these genres, for example the initial and final trial of Othello, and numerous moments of almost-denouement, chiefly connected to Emilia who repeatedly but vainly tries to avert tragedy and steer towards comedy.[36] She recalls the witty maidservant (*servetta*) of Commedia dell'Arte, but her part in the love intrigue does not contribute to a happy ending. Just like her role is turned on its head by Shakespeare, the whole tradition of comedies dealing with cuckolded husbands—from Greek New Comedy over Plautus to Commedia dell'Arte and citizen comedy inspired by epic jest literature and Boccaccio's novella—is redefined in tragic terms. As Sir Philip Sydney states in *An Apology to Poetry*, comedy "is an imitation of the common errors of our life, […] presented in the most ridiculous and scornful sort" for the amusement of the spectators.[37] A common laughingstock in comedy is the jealous husband unaware of his cuckoldry. If we adopt the perspective of the cuckold who painfully realizes or just suspects his shame, however, the comic potential immediately turns into a personal tragedy, even more so if his suspicions are ill-founded and lead to fatal consequences.

For this reason, it can be argued that *Othello* reassesses not only comic assumptions of love and reason but also generic conventions. This has led to various redefinitions of the genre of the play, depending on the influence of its hypotexts. For instance, Jason Crawford describes *Othello* as a "Comedy of Judgement" rooted in early modern cautionary tales about damnation but with a tragic ending due to the absence of Divine Providence.[38] Conversely, Michael D. Bristol calls *Othello* a "Comedy of Abjection" by which he means a dramatic adaptation of the early modern social custom of *charivari* ("ordeal of shame"), with the Lord of Misrule/Iago—a close relative of Vice—plotting a farce to derange and unmask a transgressive marriage. Although the first definition insists on the moral and religious heritage while the second refers to festive

rituals, both agree on the latently comic genres present in the tragedy, as do Whalen's "Satiric Comedy Ending in Tragedy" and Snyder's "postcomic" plot.

Satire, festive traditions, allegories, and laughable stock characters find their way into *Othello* and increase the central conflict between the Renaissance twin powers of *ratio* (rational thought) and *oratio* (persuasive language), as Jonathan Bateman sums up.[39] Through this inter- and intramodal combination of genres and the different development of the plot with more complex characters due to the changed motive of extrinsic jealousy, *Othello* surpasses its romance source by far. A jealousy caused by envy in Iago and transferred onto the cause of his own jealousy, Othello, enables a sophisticated interplay between the main characters. As the diagram shows, the constellation of contrasting personalities often involved in a three-sided relationship entails a certain symmetry or convergence along the Othello-Iago axis.



Ultimately, Shakespeare follows the same trajectory of self-destructive jealousy found in Cinthio but gives a comic and farcical twist to his tragedy by playing with genre conventions and multilayered "extreme" characters. Thus, Iago appears as an appalling demi-devil and appealing tempter, while Othello's degraded pride and nobility make him at once pitiably pathetic and frighteningly pathological. In this sense, the convergence of polarities is a key factor to understanding Shakespeare's process of dramatization and his redefinition of genre conventions.

Transmodalization as convergence of polarities

Given the generic flexibility typical of the early modern stage and its favorite source of romance, which was neither wholly comic nor tragic, *Othello* presents a comprehensive and composite pattern in-between romance, classical drama, revenge tragedy, morality play, citizen comedy and other festive traditions. Instead of attempting a redefinition of *Othello*'s genre which takes into account all the influences that shaped it (a virtually impossible task), this analysis of the genres within the play is subdivided into three steps in order to shed light onto the creative potential of hybridization. Firstly, "intermodal transmodalization" from romance to drama with special attention to the revenge motive of jealousy; secondly, "intramodal transmodalization" of the main dramatic genres that give Othello and Iago their peculiar characteristics (classical drama, the morality play, revenge tragedies); and finally "intermodal transmodalization" of mixed comic genres which inhibit *catharsis*. This has led to the following considerations.

The most striking difference in the transition from the Italian novella to the dramatic adaptation ("intermodal transmodalization") is that unlike the Ensign, whose jealousy is motivated by his love for Disdemona, Iago is motivated by envy and jealousy caused by Othello who is punished with the same "poison." Although the common structural elements of epic and drama are maintained, the flat characters of Cinthio's romance come to life in Shakespeare thanks to personal traits hybridized from different dramatic genres ("intramodal transmodalization"). By projecting his own feelings of jealousy, envy and hate onto Othello, Iago becomes his alter ego and orchestrates a disproportioned revenge. With devilish cunning and rhetorical skill Iago, like Vice, exploits the classical hero's fatal misconception and parades as Virtue, i.e., "honest" Iago, to bring his excessively noble rival to fall. The result of the changed motive of jealousy instilled by the diabolic plotter in the imperfect hero is to denature Othello's initial romance into a domestic tragedy of revenge devoid of moralistic aims. In this sense, *Othello* resembles a perverted morality play with a self-determined classical hero who unknowingly becomes the agent of the villain's revenge. Another parallel to the morality play is the hero's inner conflict, which, according to Robert Watson, renders

Othello an “inclusive Everyman” figure, both “animal and angel, Christian and pagan, black and white, soldier and lover, foreigner and patriot”—a whole range of dichotomies.[40] Unlike the morality play, however, the tragedy in *Othello* does not imply any form of salvation for the protagonist since the final insight (*anagnorisis*) is obtained too late to produce either the Christian redemption of a morality play, the satisfactory cathartic restoration of classical drama, or the comic relief of a happy ending. At the same time, the coexistence of comedy and tragedy recalls the “mixed genre” of tragicomedy, albeit turned on its head. Considering that comic elements ultimately lead to tragedy and not the other way around like in tragicomedy, we might perhaps speak of a “comitragedy.” In line with this amalgamation of genres, the classical hero Othello and the Vice-like Iago are not opposed but complementary characters—as are the genres within this heterogenous play. Thus, Shakespeare creates a synthesis of antitheses in which numerous dramatic genres converge and offer a new perspective on the permeability of polarities in early modern drama.

Notes

1. See Anthony R. Guneratne, *Shakespeare and Genre: From Early Modern Inheritances to Postmodern Legacies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and Lawrence Danson, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Genres* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

2. The idea of applying Frye's genre theory to Othello owes to an essay by Sabine Coelsch-Foisner in which she defines the play as a hybrid between the Classical and Christian archetypes of tragedy apt to bring the protagonist closer to a Jacobean audience. However, she does not analyze influences of other genres as I do here. See Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, “Wenn Männer zu sehr lieben: Die Tragödie am Beispiel von Othello,” in *Leidenschaft und Laster*, eds. Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Michaela Schwarzbauer (Heidelberg: Winter, 2010), 19.

3. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Dobinsky (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1997 [1982]), 3–7.

4. Genette, *Palimpsests*, 213, 277, and 284.

5. Dennis A. Britton, “Re-‘turnin” Othello: Transformative and Restorative Romance,” *ELH* 78.1 (2011): 32.

6. Genette, *Palimpsests*, 304.

7. G.B. Giraldi Cinthio, *On Romances: Being a Translation of The Discorso Intorno Al Comporre Dei Romanzi with Introduction and Notes*, trans. Henry L. Snuggs (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968), 72.

8. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 187.

9. Nigel Alexander, "Thomas Rymer and Othello," *Shakespeare Survey* 21 (1968): 69.

10. Norman Sanders, ed., *The New Cambridge Shakespeare: Othello* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 25.

11. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 207.

12. All quotations from *Othello* are taken from Sanders, ed., *The New Cambridge Shakespeare: Othello*.

13. From the Greek δυσδαιμων (dysdaimon). Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, vol. 7*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 208.

14. Rebecca A. Bach, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Literature before Heterosexuality* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 108.

15. Fredson T. Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642* (Princeton: Princeton University P, 1940), 21; and Wendy Griswold, *Renaissance Revival: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theater, 1576-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

16. Loren Cressler, "Malcontented Iago and Revenge Tragedy Conventions in Othello," *Studies in Philology* 116.1 (2019): 75.

17. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 38.

18. W. K. Wimsatt, ed., *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare* (New York: Hill & Wang 1960), 114.

19. Terence Hawkes and Alfred Harbage, eds., *Coleridge on Shakespeare: A Selection of the Essays, Notes and Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge on the Poems and Plays of Shakespeare* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 165.

20. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 211.

21. Hawkes and Harbage, eds., *Coleridge on Shakespeare*, 180.

22. Robert Potter, *The English Morality Play: Origins, History and Influence of a Dramatic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1975), 124.

23. Daniel Derrin, "Rethinking Iago's Jests in *Othello* II.i: Honestas, Imports and Laughable Deformity," *Renaissance Studies: Journal of the Society for Renaissance Studies* 31.3 (2017): 368.

24. Ken Jacobsen, "Iago's Art of War: The 'Machiavellian Moment' in Othello," *Modern Philology* 106.3 (2009): 502.

25. For a comparison of Iago and Vice see Anne Barton, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1962), 96 and 184; A. P. Rossiter, *English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans: Its Background, Origins and Developments* (London: Hutchinson, 1950), 92; and David M. Bevington, *From 'Mankind' to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 227.

26. Peter N. Stearns, "Jealousy," *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior* (San Diego: Academic Press, 2012), 480.

27. Werner Gundersheimer, "'The Green-Eyed Monster': Renaissance Conceptions of Jealousy," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 137.3 (1993): 321.

28. W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1962), 257.

29. Janet Adelman, "Iago's alter ego: Race as projection in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.2 (1997): 127. The idea of the alter ego is indebted to her essay though not used to discuss racism.

30. Bernhard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to his Major Villains* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 421.

31. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 217.

32. Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 74.

33. Susan Snyder "The Genres of Shakespeare's Plays," in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, eds. Margareta De Grazia and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 85.

34. Giambattista Guarini, author of the tragicomedy *Il Pastor Fido* ("The Faithful Shepherd," 1590) describes the genre thus: "A tragi-comedy is not so called in respect of mirth and killing, but in respect of its want of deaths, which is enough to make it no tragedy, yet brings some near it, which is enough to make it no comedy." Quoted from Fredson T. Bowers, ed., *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 250.

35. "Among the principal stock characters in Commedia dell'Arte were the Zanni [Iago], the secondary Zanni [Othello], Pantalone [Othello/Brabantio], the Capitano [Cassio], Pedrolino [Roderigo], the innocent woman [Desdemona], and her lady-in-waiting or maid [Emilia]. These seven stock characters are mirrored in the seven principal characters in *Othello*." Richard Whalen, "Commedia dell'Arte in Othello: A Satiric Comedy Ending in Tragedy," *Brief Chronicles* 3 (2011): 115. For further parallels between Shakespeare and Commedia dell'Arte see Caterina Pan, *Popular Theatre in Early Modern England, Germany and Italy (1570-1640): A Study in Intercultural Theatricality with an Analysis of "Engelische Comedien und Tragedien" (1620)* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2023).

36. Emilia unknowingly provides the proof of Desdemona's supposed unfaithfulness, i.e., the handkerchief (3.3), warns Desdemona of Othello's jealousy (3.4), suspects an intrigue against Desdemona (4.2), and finally exposes Iago (5.2) before he kills her. For the genre of the citizen comedy see Alexander Leggatt, *Citizen Comedy in the Age of Shakespeare* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1973).

37. Sir Philip Sydney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Peter C. Herman (Glen Allen, Va.: College Publishing, 2001), 89.

38. See Jason Crawford, "Shakespeare's Comedy of Judgement," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 52.3 (2022): 503–31.

39. Jonathan Bate, "Introduction to *The Tragedy of Othello*," in *The RCS Shakespeare: William Shakespeare Complete Works*, eds. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen, 2nd ed. (London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 2060.

40. Robert Watson "Tragedy," in A. R. Braunmuller and Michael Hattaway, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 338.