

SHAKESPEARE; Othello & King Lear - A comparison

If Shakespeare was alive today it is certain that there would be a lot written about him. We would read reviews of his new plays in newspapers, articles about his poetry in the literary papers, and gossip about his love life and his taste in clothes splashed across the glossy magazines. His views about everything under the sun, from the government to kitchen furniture, would probably appear regularly in the colour supplements. His face would be familiar on television talk shows, his voice well-known from radio broadcasts. There would be so much recorded evidence about his life and his opinions that it would not be hard to write about him.

Shakespeare, however, lived some four hundred years ago in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, when there was no television or radio, nor even any newspapers as we know them today. Although he was respected as an important person in his own lifetime, nobody ever thought of writing about him until well after his death. And Shakespeare did apparently not believe in keeping a diary either. So it is largely by luck that the little evidence we have, such as the entry of his birth in the parish register, has survived at all.

And yet, by looking carefully at contemporary pictures, by reading contemporary accounts, it is possible to get a good idea of how the boy whose birth is recorded in the Stratford register of 1654 grew up into the man who wrote such famous plays still known all over the world, as we type.

Imagery used in Othello and King Lear.

In Othello and King Lear Shakespeare uses a lot of imagery. The main image in Othello is that of animals in action, preying upon one another, mischievous, lascivious, cruel or suffering, and through these, the general sense of pain and unpleasantness is much increased and kept constantly before us.

More than half the animal images used in the play Othello are of Iago, and all those are contemptuous or repellent: a plague of flies, a quarrelsome dog, the recurrent image of bird-snaring, leading asses by the nose, a spider catching a fly, beating an offenceless dog, wild cats, wolves, goats and monkeys.

To these, Othello adds his pictures of foul toads breathing in a cistern, summer flies in the shambles, the ill-boding raven over the infected house, a toad in a dungeon, the monster

'to hideous to be shown', Othello Act III, Sc iii  
line 107

bird-snaring again, aspics' tongues, crocodiles' tears and his reiteration of

`goats and monkeys'. Othello act III, Sc iii  
Act IV, Sc i  
line 403

In addition, Lodovico very suitably calls Iago

`that viper', Othello Act III, Sc iii  
line 265

and the green-eyed monster

`begot upon itself, born on itself',  
Othello Act III,  
Sc iv  
line 161, 163

is described or referred to by Iago, Emilia and Desdemona.

It is interesting to compare the animal imagery in Othello with that in King Lear. The plays have certain similarities; they were written near together (Othello

probably in 1604, King Lear about 1605), they are the most painful of the great tragedies, and they are both studies of torture. But the torture in King Lear is on so vast and on so inhuman a scale, the cruelty of child to parent in the doubly repeated plot is so relentless and ferocious, that the jealous and petty malignity of Iago shrinks beside it.

This difference in scale is expressed in the animal imagery. In Othello we see a low type of life, insects and reptiles, swarming and preying on each other, not out of special ferocity, but just in accordance with their natural instincts, mischievous and irresponsible wild cats, goats and monkeys, or the harmless, innocent animal trapped. This reflects and repeats the spectacle of the wanton torture of one human being by another, which we witness in the tragedy, the human spider and his fly; whereas as in King Lear our imagination is filled with the accumulated pictures of active ferocity, of tiger, wolf, wild boar, vulture, serpent and sea-monster, all animals of a certain dignity and grandeur, though seen here only when their desires

Are wolfish, bloody, starved and ravenous.  
Merchant of Venice Act IV  
Sc i  
line 137

This represents the terrific scale of the suffering in King Lear, which makes us feel, as we never do in Othello, that the vileness of humanity is so great, so unchecked and universal that if the gods do not intervene, the end of such horrors must come and

Humanity must perforce prey on itself,  
Like monsters of the deep. King Lear Act IV  
Sc ii

line 49

But the gods, who `keep this dreadful pother', do not

intervene, and the most terrible lines in Shakespeare are those breathed by Gloucester in his agony, when he attributes to the gods themselves in their dealings with men, not only indifference and callousness, but the sheer wanton delight in torture, which, in Othello, we see exercised only by one human being on another.

If animal in action symbolise the main motive in Othello, there is another recurrent image which gives atmosphere and background. As is fitting, with a setting of two seaports, play an important part throughout.

Iago, as the soldier of a city which owed its dominance to sea-power, uses sea imagery easily; when complaining that Othello had passed him over for Cassio, he describes himself as

`be-lee'd and calm'd; Othello Act I, Sc i  
line 30

he knows the state has not another of Othello's

`fathom'; Othello Act I, Sc i  
line 153

he says he must

`show out a flag and sign of love'; Othello Act I, Sc i  
line 157

that Brabantio will take action against Othello to whatever extent the law

`will give him cable'; Othello Act I, Sc ii  
line 17

later, he coarsely describes his general's marriage in the terms of a pirate taking a prize galleon; he declares to Roderigo he is knit to his deserving

`with cables of perdurable toughness';  
Othello Act I  
Sc iii  
line 343

and when he sees his plots shaping well, he murmurs with satisfaction,

My boat sails freely, both with wind and stream.

Othello Act III  
Sc iii  
line 63

The opening of Act II, when those in Cyprus are anxiously awaiting the arrival of Desdemona and of Othello, is full of sea pictures and personifications, 'the ruffian wind upon the sea', the `chidden billow', and the `wind-shaked surge', so that it is well in keeping with the setting and atmosphere when Cassio, in high rhetorical terms, pictures the seas and rocks as traitors concealed to waylay the ship, who, on

catching sight of the beauty of Desdemona, 'do omit their mortal natures', and let her go safely by.

Othello's use of sea images is noteworthy; 'they come naturally, for on each occasion they mark a moment of intense emotion. The first, at the height of his happiness, when he rejoins Desdemona, is an exclamation which to us, who know what lies before them, is, in its opening, one of the most poignant and moving in the play:

O my soul's joy!  
If after every tempest come such calms,  
May the winds blow till they have waken'd death!  
Othello Act II,  
Sc i  
line 186

The next is at the height of torture, when, having been shown the handkerchief, suspicion become certainty and he vows vengeance. To clinch this, Iago urges patience, and suggests that perhaps his mind may change; to which Othello

instantly reacts as his torturer intends, and affirms the unalterable quality of his resolve by comparing it to the

'icy current and compulsive course' Othello act III,  
Sc iii  
line 453

of the ebbless Pontic Sea.

And at the end, when he has carried out his resolve, and has suffered and realised all, again it is in sea language that he expresses his equally set determination to follow Desdemona:

Here is my journey's end, here is my butt  
And very sea-mark of my utmost sail. Othello Act V,  
Sc ii  
line 267

Literatuur: Shakespeare, His Life, His Language, His Theatre  
S. Schoenbaum

Shakespeare's Imagery, and what it tells us  
Caroline Spurgeon

Shakespeare and his theatre  
Phillipa Stewart

