

On the hidden meaning of Shakespeare's tragedy `Othello` (Version II, in English)

Lev I. Verkhovsky

Shakespeare's tragedy "Othello" is considered by many to be the most perfect from the works of Shakespeare. Some people inclined to consider it even as the most perfect dramatic creation in the world.

A. Blok

Exactly a century ago, in October 1919, Alexander Blok gave a lecture to the actors of the Bolshoi Drama Theater “The secret meaning of the tragedy "Othello", which was published at the same time. In it, he tried to reveal the reasons why this work of art so deeply affects the viewer and reader.

We are going to reflect on the secret meaning of "Othello" from a completely different angle. Plays by Shakespeare (and also by Ben Jonson and other Elizabethans) often contained second, hidden plans. In them, playwrights portrayed famous people or their acquaintances, sorted out relationships, settled scores; only people of their circle could see and understand this. It is clear that such hidden information is always closely related to the personality of a particular author, therefore, its consideration in the case of `Othello`, in our opinion, is important for solving Shakespeare's question.

Chapter 1

`The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice` was first staged at the Globe Theater in November 1604, and was probably written not long before. It appeared in print only in 1622 in the form of a quarto, and a year later a slightly different, expanded version of it was presented in the First Folio; what is the relationship of these two texts is still not clear. Creating the play, Shakespeare based on the novella `The Moor of Venice` by the Italian Giraldi Chintio (1504--1573) from his collection `Ecatommiti` (A Hundred Tales, 1565), which contained stories of various insidious and cruel crimes. The Bard probably read them in a French translation published in 1584.

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In Chintio's short story, everything is quite clear: the adjutant fell passionately in love with the wife of the Moor (military leader) Dizdemona (that was her name -- with an emphasis on the second syllable) and thinks that she loves the lieutenant; hence the adjutant hated for both of them. Shakespeare complicated the collisions between the characters, made them emotionally saturated, changed many details. In addition, he gave names to all the characters -- Chintio had only one name, Dizdemona, while the rest of the persons are designated as the Moor-military leader, adjutant, adjutant's wife, etc. All of these differences serve as clues that can help reveal the author's secret ideas.

Among other tragedies of Shakespeare, "Othello" stands out for its intimacy, representing a domestic, family drama. It can be assumed that the author to some extent reflected in it the relationships of people from the circle close to him -- they made up the hidden layer of the narrated story.

Let us try to penetrate it on the assumption that the play was written by Roger Manners, the fifth Earl of Rutland. As you know, Earl of Rutland has been considered one of the main candidates for authorship of Shakespeare's writing for over a century.

In 1603, the new monarch Jacob I, who came to the throne, lifted the sanctions imposed on him (for participating in the 1601 Essex mutiny), and Roger was able to reunite with his wife Elizabeth Sidney. Perhaps at the same time jealousy began to poison his family life -- he felt on himself what a terrible, destructive force it was for both marriage and life itself.

In general terms, our version is as follows: Othello is the author himself, Earl of Rutland; Desdemona -- his wife Elizabeth; adjutant Iago -- Captain Alfonso Lanier; the adjutant's wife Emilia -- the wife of Alfonso, the well-known Emilia Bassano, that is, the name Emilia has not even been changed; Cassio seems has to be split in two persons that Rutland knew well, i.e. in it are "encoded" two men, and who is specifically, we will decipher a little later.

We will try to substantiate all this. When analyzing the text and citing, we will rely on the interlinear translation and comments of M.M. Morozov [1].

An important function in the play is performed by the names of the characters (there is the article about them by E. Barton [4]), helping to correctly identify their prototypes. It is known that Ben Jonson often used "speaking" names. This is less typical for the Bard, but he, as a rule, did not give them by accident.

As it has long been noticed, the name Othello is a roll call with the name Thorello from Ben Jonson's comedy "Every Man in His Humour" (played in 1598, printed as a quarto in 1601). In it, the action took place in Florence, the names of the characters are Italian (then, in the Folio Jonson of 1616, another version was presented -- the action was transferred to London, the names were changed to English). A merchant named Thorello (almost a complete anagram of Othello, inside the word `hell` is a

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very jealous husband, and, as we argued in the article «Who's Who in Ben Jonson's play "Every Man in His Humour» [11], in Thorello, Rutland was reflected (we will see further that there are other connections between this comedy and the tragedy 'Othello').

The Moor has a rather simple, integral character. There are Iago's words about the general: `*The Moor is of a free and open nature*` (it is curious, Morozov notes that, recalling Shakespeare, Ben Jonson characterized him literally with the same words).

As noted by A.S. Pushkin, "*Othello is not naturally jealous -- on the contrary: he is trusting.*" This is supremely true of the Earl of Rutland. Othello described himself as "*not easily jealous, but, being wrought, Perplexed in the extreme*". Did Rutland have any real reason to be jealous? -- a separate issue, which we will touch on below. It is believed that the marriage of Roger and Elizabeth remained platonic, which could contribute to the appearance of jealousy in her husband; by the way, opinions were expressed that the marriage of Othello and Desdemona in Shakespeare also looks platonic [2].

It should be noted that the marriage union of Roger and Elizabeth was organized by her relatives -- the aunt Countess Mary Pembroke with her son (a friend of Rutland) and her stepfather, Earl of Essex (the idol of Rutland). They found a talented and wealthy groom for the poetically gifted, but limited means daughter of Philip Sidney. There is information that she wanted to break off the engagement. Perhaps this is the source of their family unhappiness.

Desdemona (name of Greek origin and means "unhappy") is depicted as a pure and naive girl. Does this mean that Rutland saw the source of evil not in the actions of his wife, but in the rumors discrediting her, which were spread by his enemies and ill-wishers? Yes, in the "open" text it is stated that way, however, there are disguised injections at Elizabeth.

Chapter 2

The central figure, the motor of the action is adjutant Iago, but reasons that were motivating him remain unclear, and this is one of the unsolved problems of Shakespearean studies. As Lev Tolstoy wrote, "... *Shakespeare's Iago is a continuous villain, a deceiver, a thief, a greedy man ... The motive of his villainy, according to Shakespeare, is, firstly, offense ... secondly ... thirdly ... There are many motives, but they are all unclear ... In the short story, the motive is one, simple, clear: passionate love for Desdemona...*" [3]. Samuel Coleridge called Iago the embodiment of "motiveless malignity", and here we can recall the words of another Shakespearean character -- the Duke of Gloucester from Richard III (I, 1):

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...since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.

We suspect Alfonso Lanier in Iago. What could have caused his irreconcilable hatred for Roger Manners? Recall that the main source of information about the Lanier spouses is the diary entries of the astrologer and healer Simon Forman, to whom Emilia has repeatedly turned. They are also depicted, in our opinion, in Ben Jonson's comedies "Epicene" (1609) and "The Alchemist" (1610) -- in the first as the spouses Otter, in the second as Face and Doll [11].

In 1593, Alfonso was married "for cover" to the expectant child Emilia Bassano, who at the time was the kept woman of Lord Chamberlain, Henry Carey, 1st Baron Hunsdon. The bride, who had a reputation as a courtesan ("honest courtesan" -- with the education and manners of a lady) received a large dowry from Hunsdon, that is, Alfonso married "for money". Probably, his humiliating dependence on his wife (this is shown in "Epicene") -- a woman who was available to many -- is the main reason for his general bitterness, and he could have dislike for her lovers.

We think that the Earl of Rutland was among them, and there is a reason why he could have become the object of Alfonso's particular enmity. The fact is that Roger reflected his carnal relationship with Emilia in sonnets that went from hand to hand, and some were even printed in the poetry collection (by many authors) `The Passionate Pilgrim` in 1599. The lady was not named in the verses by name, but was easily recognizable in their circle. It is likely that this infuriated her husband. At the same time, the marriage of the poet himself seemed to remain platonic (which they were probably talking about), which made Roger a good target for rude ridicule. It is possible that Alfonso spread rumors about Elizabeth's infidelity out of revenge.

In `Othello`, adjutant Iago (= Alfonso) knew (or assumed) about his wife's adultery with Othello (= Rutland), as well as with Michele Cassio. Iago (II, 1):

I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof
Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards;
And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am even'd with him, wife for wife,
Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor
At least into a jealousy so strong
That judgment cannot cure.

The idea that Othello had a relationship with Emilia gnaws at her husband, according to him, "*like a poisonous potion*". This means that Iago is, first of all, a sufferer.

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There is a second possible reason for his hatred of Rutland. Already accustomed to an aristocratic environment and a luxurious life, Emilia Lanier passionately wanted to become a real lady and pinned high hopes on her husband's career success, that he would get the knighthood. When Emilia first turned to the astrologer Forman in 1597, she, in particular, asked him if this would happen and when. (Perhaps these character traits of Emilia Bassano-Lanier were later reflected by Shakespeare in Lady Macbeth.) Under her influence, Alfonso participated in military campaigns -- because if he distinguished himself, he would be made a knight and she would become a lady.

First, in 1597, he volunteered to join the naval expedition of the Earl of Essex to the Azores (Iago has many naval, nautical metaphors and comparisons -- more than any other Shakespearean character). Then, in the spring of 1599, he fought in Ireland under the leadership of the same Count -- there Alfonso spent more than two and a half years, but the title *sir* did not achieve. But Roger Manners participated in that Irish campaign for only a few months in 1599 (then he was recalled from there by the order of the queen) and was nevertheless knighted by Essex. And we see in "Othello": not the honored warrior Iago was nominated for the position of lieutenant, but the `accountant` (counter-caster) Michele Cassio.

Iago is a Spanish name (from the biblical Jacob), and the Spaniards have Saint Jacob - - the Santiago Matamoros (Saint James the Moor-slayer). According to legend, during the battle with the superior forces of the Moors in 844, a miracle happened -- one of the twelve apostles of Christ, Jacob Zebedee, appeared, who helped the Spaniards to defeat. The Apostle Jacob became the patron saint of their struggle against Muslims, his image became very common.

In "Othello" the adjutant fought with the Moor, so it was logical to name him in honor of Santiago by the name Iyago. At the same time, a hint was made about Alfonso (also a Spanish name) and, possibly, the relationship of the latter with the Jews, since Jago is associated with Yahweh, Jehovah (Jahve, Jehovah) -- Iago, when he first appears in the play, parodies the words of Yahweh `*I am that I am*`, when he says: I am not what I am. Alfonso Lanier really had a certain share of Jewish blood, since the Lanier family of musicians, having arrived in England from France (Rouen), became related to the musical dynasty of Bassano, which had Jewish roots. (The father of Emilia Baptista was from Venice, according to the researchers, Maran, whose ancestors moved to Italy from the Iberian Peninsula. Alfonso Lanier and Emilia Bassano were relatives: Alfonso's father married Baptista Bassano's niece.) It is said that the age of Iago is 28 years old, the years of the life of Alfonso Lanier (1672-1613), i.e. there is no contradiction.

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American actor Edwin Booth as Iago (1865)

(Source: Voltaire Combe. ART Box C730 no.1 (size S) [1911])

A. Lanier was a professional musician, and there is one phrase of Iago that may indicate his closeness to this area. He said (aside), «*O, you are well tuned now! But I'll set down the pegs that make this music, As honest as I am ...*» (tuning pegs are a detail in musical instruments that regulates the tension of the strings). Alfonso seems to have been busy with the menagerie for some time, the bear garden, and various animals are often mentioned in Iago's speeches; as M. Morozov noted, the theme of the menagerie (goats, monkeys, toads, vipers, wild bears, crocodiles ...) is generally dominant in the world of Iago's images.

Iago's comments on women are usually full of bitter cynicism, and yet he makes an exception for Desdemona, mentioning her virtue. Iago's wife, as we said, has the same name as Alfonso's wife. She is shown as a completely ordinary Venetian woman who is not averse to cheating on her husband and even giving this, in a conversation with Desdemona (IV, 3), an explanation: women, like men, are characterized by hobbies and weaknesses; besides, sin is not so terrible if it remains unknown to others. Among the reasons that can push a woman to commit adultery, she names material factors -- for example, if the husband wastes his wife's inheritance (Emilia Lanier complained to Forman that Alfonso squandered her fortune).

She adheres to the view of the relativity of moral norms -- a person can set them for himself, and not accept those that the environment imposes on him. And yet, in the final scene, she shows herself from her best side -- having witnessed the innocent

death of Desdemona, fearlessly exposes the intrigues of her husband. Perhaps this was somehow reflected in Rutland's attitude towards Emilia Lanier in those years.

Chapter 3

Now let's turn to Cassio. The lieutenant's name and surname -- Michele Cassio (Michael Cassio) -- are first encountered at the very beginning of the play, in Iago's words about him:

...a great arithmetician,
One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,
A fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife;
That never set a squadron in the field, Nor the division of a battle knows
More than a spinster; unless the bookish theorist, ... without practice...

In short, «*An arithmetic-literate, book-theorist...*»

As Barton noted [4, p. 64], "this character is an interesting exception in the play: he is the only one who has a given name and surname, at least until the middle of Act III. Iago's words (III, 3): "*For Michael Cassio, I dare be sworn I think that he is honest*" -- 11th in a row and the last mention of the lieutenant's name (in combination with or without a surname). Further in the text, only Cassio is found, and the surname mysteriously replaces the name, as can be seen from the words of Bianca (V,I): «*O my dear Cassio! My sweet Cassio! O, Cassio, Cassio, Cassio*». Others refer to him in the same way.

In our opinion, all this is not accidental: Michael Cassio and just Cassio portrayed two different people -- the two characters of «Othello. To recognize them, one must take into account that several representatives of the Cassian family are known in the history of Ancient Rome, and the play, in our opinion, contains allusions to two of them.

The first is Gaius Cassius Longinus (85--42 BC) -- an ancient Roman statesman who went down in history primarily as one of the organizers of the conspiracy (together with Brutus) and the assassination of Caesar (in 44 BC). Celebrating his services in the fight against the dictator and the defense of the republic, Cassius was called "the last Roman"; he featured in Shakespeare's «Julius Caesar» (staged in 1599). The Earl of Southampton was an active participant in the insurrection, or conspiracy, of Essex, so we think that by giving the character the name Cassio, Rutland meant him.

The second is the Roman (of Greek origin) consul and historian Lucius Claudius Cassius Dio Cocceanus, better known as Dion Cassius (Lucius Claudius Cassius Dio Cocceianus; c. 160--230s) -- the author of the well-known "Roman history" in 80 books (a significant part of them have survived). Moreover, it was he who described

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in detail the history of Sejanus -- the greatest figure of the era of the emperor Tiberius, omitted by other historians (Suetonius and Tacitus). It remains to remember that Ben Jonson, after an extraordinary success on the stage of Shakespeare's «Julius Caesar», decided to compose his own play on the theme of ancient history, and it was the tragedy «Sejanus His Fall» (played in 1603).

So, both Dion Cassius and Ben Jonson told about Sejanus. Therefore, it is natural to see a hint of Jonson in the character of Cassio. And in order to distinguish between the two persons who received the name Cassio, one of them was added the name Michael (by the way, an extremely rare name for Shakespeare -- there is only an insignificant character Michael in "Henry IV"). We think that here is a reference to another author who knew Latin and ancient authors perfectly, and who wrote a lot about the history of civil wars in Ancient Rome -- Michel Montaigne. That is, it indicates a community with Jonson.

So, we assume that Cassio without a name is Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, and Michael Cassio, the "*literate arithmetician*" from Florence, is Ben Jonson. Why a literate arithmetician? A hint of Ben's bookish, scholastic learning: he inserted translations of large chunks from ancient authors into his Roman tragedies, was carried away by minor details, but could not create whole and vivid characters [6, p. 199]. Why a Florentine? -- probably an allusion to his play "Every Man in His Humour" (in Florence), with which "Othello" has important echoes.

Michele Cassio is said to be a trusted officer, a good herald of the arrival of the Moor's wife in Cyprus after the storm. But his weaknesses are also noted: he gets drunk easily, after which he does not control himself and is ready to get into a fight (a hint that Ben Jonson often participated in clashes, in 1598, during one of them, he killed actor Gabriel Spencer). At first, Iago says about Michele that he is «*almost damn'd in a fair wife*» (usually translated as “*damned in love with one pretty woman*”); but here is a poorly understood expression, and Boris Pasternak in his translation called Cassio "*a woman's tail*" [1, p. 467].

Who means a good wife? -- not known. It can be assumed that Desdemona. Michele Cassio said of her (II,1):

Most fortunately: he hath achieved a maid
That paragons description and wild fame;
One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,
And in the essential vesture of creation
Does tire the ingener.

All this seems to correspond to the attitude of Ben Jonson to Elizabeth Rutland: he appreciated her poetic talent, he himself dedicated poetry to her, perhaps even was in love with her. Michele tried to use his warm relationship with Desdemona to help him reconcile with Othello. Likewise, Jonson, probably through Elizabeth, settled his

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conflicts with her husband; he often talked to her, which even caused Rutland's displeasure -- recall the story of his remark to his wife that she takes poets at the table («*kept table to poets*»).

In general, Shakespeare shows his affection for Ben Jonson. Perhaps during the "war of theaters" in previous years, when both on stage and in real life there were sharp skirmishes, their relationship deteriorated, and Rutland is taking a step towards reconciliation.

What about the other Cassio (no name)? It appears at the end of Act III, and Bianca also appears there -- in the Folio she is represented as a courtesan, and in later editions as Cassio's mistress. Emilia called her a prostitute (strumpet), then Iago said about her: "*A housewife that by selling her desires Buys herself bread and clothes*". When Iago asked Cassio if he would marry Bianca, he replied: `*I marry her! what? a customer`!*

Once again, we recall Jonson's "Every Man in His Humour" -- there the wife of the jealous Torello (Rutland) was called Bianca (Elizabeth). It seems to us that in the love relationship between Cassio and Bianca there is a hint of Elizabeth's betrayal with Southampton; the opinion that there was something between them maybe even before Roger's wedding (and this fact is reflected in some of Shakespeare's sonnets) is held by M.D. Litvinova [9, p. 185]. And then in "Othello" Rutland, portraying "*the prostitute Bianca*", settled with his half for that betrayal.

After that, Southampton and Rutland took part in the mutiny, and in the subsequent trial Rutland allegedly testified against his former friend; subsequently, their relationship never recovered. And at the end of the play there are phrases:

Cassio. Dear General, I never gave you a reason.

Othello. I believe and ask your forgiveness ...

Perhaps there was an attempt to make peace.

* * *

Shakespeare scholar A. Bradley wrote [10]: «*Of all Shakespeare's tragedies, not excluding 'King Lear', 'Othello' makes the most difficult impression. This is the most terrible tragedy*». It must have been very painful in Rutland's soul.

As we have tried to show, the keys that open the way to understanding the hidden meaning of `Othello` are the overlaps between the plays of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. The two playwrights closely followed each other's works, and mutually understood allusions and implications. And everyone in their midst knew how to read between the lines and behind the lines.

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