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*lovely knights, blazon, and antique pen.*<sup>3</sup> In their context the total connotation of these words suggests both metrical romances and medieval history.

In addition to celebrated persons of the past a *figura* also employs prophecy. The third quatrain stresses the vatic powers of medieval authors:

So all their praises are but prophecies  
Of this our time, all you prefiguring; 10  
And, for they look'd but with divining eyes,  
They had not [skill] enough your worth to sing.

Here the predictive words are *prophecies, prefiguring, and divining*, while *our time* introduces the necessary historical continuity that joins the Renaissance and the Middle Ages. The use of *prefiguring* is especially significant because it clinches the point that Shakespeare patterned his sonnet according to a *figura*.

The concluding couplet is both a summation and a paradox:

For we, which now behold these present days,  
Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise.

The meaning is something like this: we see you (the friend) now (in these present days of the Renaissance), but cannot praise you. The meaning of the entire figural sonnet, consequently, is that medieval authors were able to praise you in their literature and history, but could not see you then as a contemporary. They saw you only as someone in the future—a Renaissance man—prefigured by their beautiful and lovely aristocratic contemporaries. We in the Renaissance now see you, not only as our contemporary, but prefigured in medieval history and literature. We, however, says Shakespeare, cannot praise you. But in spite of this pretty paradox (or perhaps because of it) Shakespeare does successfully eulogize his friend in this figural sonnet.

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## THE CLOWN IN *OTHELLO*

LEONARD PRAGER

It is not strange that few people remember the Clown in *Othello*. He appears twice, speaking a total of about a dozen lines, and is not especially humorous. Most critical discussions of the play simply ignore the Clown. When he is mentioned, his presence is justified as "comic relief". Granville-Barker in his fine analysis of the play as a work to be acted has little to say of the Clown's first appearance at the beginning of Act III: "For relaxation before the tense main business of the tragedy begins we next have Cassio in the early morning bringing musicians to play beneath Othello's window (a pleasant custom, and here what delicate amends!), to this being added the grosser, conventional japes

<sup>3</sup> The *OED* defines *blazon* as used in this sonnet to mean "a record of virtues or excellencies". The meaning of a record certainly falls within the historical-figural pattern that Shakespeare develops here. A secondary meaning of *blazon*—"armorial bearings"—also fits the aristocratic subject matter of the sonnet.

of the Clown."<sup>1</sup> What is the Clown's function in this scene? We are not told. Of the Clown's appearance in Scene iv of the same act, Granville-Barker can only say, "After the prolonged and close-knit tension some such unqualified relief as the Clown now brings with his antic chatter will be welcome" (p. 46). In other words, "comic relief".

Let us attempt another explanation of the Clown's function. The last lines of Act II show us the plotting Iago and end with the latter's "Dull not device by coldness and delay." With the opening of Act III we find that the unequivocally sinister is followed by the ambiguously jovial, by what seems a marked contrast in mood. The Clown is Othello's servant and has been instructed to send away the musicians. He quibbles in conventional clown fashion, but the tenor of his appearance is: Othello will not hear music, will not be soothed, brought back into harmony with himself. Othello's passions have already been stirred, thereby clouding that reason which he normally commands. He has himself told us in the previous act: "Now, by heaven,/ My blood begins my safer guides to rule,/ And passion, having my best judgement collied,/ Assays to lead the way. . ." (II. iii. 204-207). The delicate aubade offered by Cassio is rejected through the medium of the Clown, whose crude quibbles center on the theme of cacophony. G. Wilson Knight in *The Shakespearian Tempest* has shown how Shakespeare conceives of peace and agreement in terms of music played or sung in tune, and of disagreement and conflict in terms of music out of tune.

Even the stale humor of the Clown's labored misconstruction of Cassio's "Dost thou hear, my honest friend?" takes on added significance when understood in its context. The Clown replies, "No, I hear not your honest friend; I hear you." This perverse miscomprehension is comical, but that through which Othello is victimized is far from being so, a fact which we cannot forget, and which thereby lends a certain grimness to the Clown's jest even while we laugh at it. And surely the choice of adjective, "honest", is not accidental. If only Othello would not hear his "honest" friend, but rather the true Iago!

Again, in the Clown's second appearance in Act III, Scene iv, something more than "comic relief" is at work. Here we find the Clown in the company of Desdemona and Emilia, and he perpetrates one of the tritest of Elizabethan puns, one which Shakespeare himself used about a dozen times, namely the pun on *lie*. I do not believe it has ever been observed that the Clown's pun on *lie* ("to fabricate" and "to dwell") introduces a rash of lying on the part of *all* the major characters. Desdemona asks Emilia where she could have lost her handkerchief, and the latter replies falsely that she does not know (III. iv. 24). Othello enters and Desdemona greets him, "How is't with you, my lord?" Othello answers, "Well, my good lady," adding, pain-stricken, the aside, "O, hardness to dissemble!" (III. iv. 34). Shortly afterwards, testing Desdemona, attempting to force her to produce the lost handkerchief, Othello feigns a cold—"I have a salt and sorry rheum offends me;/ Lend me thy handkerchief" (III. iv. 51). Desdemona does not have the handkerchief and Othello proceeds to invent a monstrous falsehood about its origin, saying an Egyptian gave the charmed and magical piece of cloth to his mother. But in the play's final scene we learn the truth from Othello himself—"It was a handkerchief, an antique

<sup>1</sup> H. Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (Princeton, 1947), II, 23.

token/ My father gave my mother" (V.ii.216-217). Desdemona finds Othello's fantastic account of the handkerchief's dark powers difficult to believe and asks, "Is't possible?" Othello unhesitatingly lies, "'Tis *true*: there's magic in the web of it. . . ." And again Desdemona, "Indeed! is't *true*?" Othello answers, "Most *veritable*. . . ." The terrified Desdemona is herself forced to dissemble, denying loss of the handkerchief—"I say, it is not lost" (III.iv.169f.). All of this lying helps to further what we may call the internal movement of the play. Most of the lying occurs within the main action. The Clown is but loosely connected to any action in the play, and he is essentially a choral figure who prepares the audience to interpret the play's progress rightly. Thus his pun on *lie* is a pointer directing the audience to the significant action which follows the quibbling. His quibbling has a jarring effect; it is labored and must be noticed. But what it means, what significance it has, is not immediately spelled out: Desdemona asks, "Can anything be made of this?" (III.iv.10).

To Desdemona the Clown appears to be talking in riddles. Unless we know that he is punning, his utterances are mystifying. The significance of his punning on *lie* becomes manifest when the seemingly jocular word-play *is* regarded as a riddle, a Sphinx-like pronouncement. The Clown, who in his first appearance was linked to Othello, tells Desdemona he cannot say where Cassio *lies*: "He's a soldier; and for one to say a soldier lies is stabbing" (III.iv.5-6). Early in the scene following that in which the Clown quibbles on *lie*, Iago, carrying forward his demonic plan, tells Othello that Cassio has lain with Desdemona. The word *lie* becomes matter for tragic quibbling in Othello's dazed response. Falsehood or fornication? Ironically, Othello at first seems to make the correct choice, only to fall back upon the worst suspicions of an already possessed mind. More than one stabbing follows Othello's plunge into false knowledge of "where Lieutenant Cassio lies":

*Othello*. Hath he said anything?

*Iago*. He hath, my lord; but be you well assur'd,  
No more than he'll unswear.

*Othello*. What hath he said?

*Iago*. Faith, that he did—I know not what he did.

*Othello*. What? what?

*Iago*. Lie—

*Othello*. With her?

*Iago*. With her, on her; what you will.

*Othello*. Lie with her? lie on her?—We say lie on her when they  
belie her.—Lie with her! Zounds, that's fulsome.—

Handkerchief—confessions—handkerchief. . . . (IV. i. 28-38)

It is Othello's inability to question the counsel of "honest Iago" which assures his tragic fall. Shakespeare wishes us to see Othello not only as the tragic victim of his own jealousy, fears, and doubts, but also as the victim of external evil. The rash of lying on the part of virtuous characters in Act II, Scene iv, is a ramification of this evil; the lie is one of the more subtle snares of the Devil. The moral chaos which engulfs Othello is largely effected through lying; the quibble on *lie* itself becomes a symbol of moral uncertainty.

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