Honest Othello:
The Handkerchief Once More

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There are two accounts of the handkerchief in Othello. In the first, Othello warns
Desdemona that it is a love-charm with “magic in the web,” given to his mother by
an Egyptian; in the second, he tells Gratiano it was “an antique token/ My father
gave my mother.” Contrary to current opinion, the first version carries conviction. As
with Othello’s suicide speech, Shakespeare gives his protagonist such hypnotic elo-
quence that an actor would have great difficulty making the audience realize Othello
is not telling the truth. There is no indication that Othello is lying, nor is he else-
where characterized as an able dissembler. Unwillingness to believe that Shakespeare
could have conceived of Othello as genuinely superstitious may reflect the same racial
self-consciousness that has on occasion led to a denial of the importance of Othello’s
racial background. A close examination of the text suggests that Othello does indeed
impute magical properties to the handkerchief. The first version is not discredited by
the second; the differences may be explained on the basis of the dramatic context, or
as a careless error on the part of Shakespeare.

The fact that Othello gives two different ver-
sions of the history of the fatal handkerchief has, predictably,
not passed unnoticed.1 In his first and more elaborate account
(III.iv.53ff.), Othello tells Desdemona that the handkerchief is a
love-controloing talisman his mother received from an Egyptian
“charmer”:

    she told her, while she kept it
    ‘Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father
    Entirely to her love: but if she lost it,
    Or made a present of it, my father’s eye
    Should hold her loathly, and his spirits should hunt
    After new fancies: she dying, gave it me,
    And bid me, when my fate would have me wive

1See Variorum Othello, 2nd ed. (1886), p. 317. The interpretations offered here, and
those of subsequent writers, will be dealt with later in this paper.
To give it her; I did so, and take heed on't,
Make it a darling, like your precious eye,
To lose, or give't away, were such perdition
As nothing else could match.

(II.55-66)

Desdemona, shocked and at least momentarily incredulous, asks "Isn't possible?" Othello then continues:

'Tis true, there's magic in the web of it:
A sibyl, that had number'd in the world
The sun to make two hundred compasses,
In her prophetic fury sew'd the work;
The worms were hallow'd that did breed the silk,
And it was dyed in mummy, which the skilful
Conserve of maiden's hearts.

(II.67-73)

At the end of the play, however, when Othello is pathetically attempting to justify Desdemona's murder, he merely refers to the proof of guilt afforded by Cassio's possession of "the recognition and pledge of love,/ Which I first gave her; I saw it in his hand,/ It was a handkerchief; an antique token/ My father gave my mother" (V.ii.215-218).

Although critics have offered ingenious interpretations whereby the substitution of Othello's father for the "Egyptian" and the omission of any mention of the magical properties of the handkerchief become fraught with significance, it seems to me that all attempts to explain Othello's words to Desdemona as prevarication are liable to the same criticism Nevill Coghill so devastingly levels at T. S. Eliot's reading of Othello's suicide speech. To Eliot, of course, Othello's final speech is an "exposure of human weakness" rather than an expression of "the greatness in defeat of a noble but erring nature." After quoting

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2 All references are to the Arden Othello, ed. M. R. Ridley (1958, rpt. with minor corrections, 1962).
3 Desdemona asks a second time if the story is true; being assured that it is "most veritable" she declares: "Then would to God that I had never seen it!" (III.iv.75). After Othello departs in a jealous rage she appears perplexed but unconvinced: "Sure there's some wonder in this handkerchief..." (1.99).
4 There are other brief references to the handkerchief in the play, none mentioning magic. Too much, I think, has been made of this.
the speech (V.ii.339-357), Eliot offers his influential analysis:

What Othello seems to be doing in making this speech is *cheering himself up*. He is endeavouring to escape reality, he has ceased to think about Desdemona, and is thinking about himself... Othello succeeds in turning himself into a pathetic figure, by adopting an *aesthetic* rather than a moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment. He takes in the spectator, but the human motive is primarily to take in himself.

“I do not believe,” Eliot concludes, “that any writer has ever exposed this *bovarysme*, the human will to see things as they are not, more clearly than Shakespeare.” To this Professor Coghill replies, with I think unassailable logic, that Eliot’s interpretation is unworkable in the theater: “What tones of voice, what move or gesture, can an actor use to suggest a Bovarist cheering himself up?” And how is the audience supposed to determine “whether Othello is cheering himself up for being so gross a fool and a failure, or whether he is cheering his audience up by showing once again, and at the last moment, a true flash of that nobility for which they had first honoured him?” Moreover, as Professor Coghill points out, Eliot’s Shakespeare would have to be considered a remarkably clumsy dramatist:

For if Shakespeare had wished to convey the “terrible exposure of human weakness” that Eliot sees in Othello’s speech, he could very easily have made this single purpose plain, unless he was a bungler, or quite indifferent to the effect he was creating. For if Mr. Eliot is right, the better this speech is spoken and acted, the more it must deceive the audience; and this is, in effect,

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conceded by Mr. Eliot, who says Othello “takes in the spectator.”

The handkerchief speech seems to me an analogous instance. How are we to know that Othello is fictionalizing? For whether one says that Othello is speaking symbolically and is really “asking Desdemona to restore to him the sacredness of love,” or simply trying “to cover up the real reason for his disproportionate passion over such a trifle,” the lines are designed, in Eliot’s phrase, to take us in. To adopt Professor Coghill’s argument, “the better this speech is spoken and acted, the more it must deceive the audience,” the more, in short, we are willing to accept the handkerchief as an authentic element from Othello’s exotic and fabulous past.

To say that Othello is concocting a horrific primitive legend is symptomatic of modern skepticism with regard to the heroic, and is perhaps more revealing of our age than apposite.

7“O hardness to dissemble!” (Othello’s aside at III.iv. 30) calls attention to how difficult it is for Othello to pretend nothing is the matter. Indeed, his early responses show that he dissembles very badly. Nor—for reasons to be mentioned later—should Desdemona’s apparent skepticism be construed as Shakespeare’s way of alerting us to the “truth.”
8Winifred M. T. Nowottny, “Justice and Love in Othello,” UTQ, XXI (1951-1952), 337. Cf. Heilman, Magic in the Web, pp. 208-218. I have no quarrel with symbolic readings of the handkerchief; I merely wish such readings would begin with the literal meaning, and build outward, rather than treating it as pure metaphor.
10Coghill, p. xv. Professor Coghill’s conclusion is also relevant here: “It follows . . . that what begins as an attack on Othello’s character turns out as undermining Shakespeare’s craftsmanship.”
Once on this road, it is easy to push onward—to suggest, for example, that Othello is also lying when he assures the senate that physical desire plays no part in his eager support of Desdemona’s request that she be allowed to accompany him to Cyprus (I.iii). And this, of course, has happened. Othello, we are told, knows Moors are considered lustful, and consciously attempts to “side-step” such an imputation: “But the fact is that Othello is not nearly so indifferent to the physical aspects of love as he makes out. In Cyprus, where the strains of his position are more relaxed, his behaviour is perfectly natural and warm.”

This seductively plausible psychologizing is perhaps inevitable today, since we tend to forget that Shakespeare is neither a novelist nor, after all, our contemporary. From a less modern point of view it should be obvious that Shakespeare is effectively (if not “realistically”) emphasizing Othello’s lack of self-knowledge, later an essential aspect of the play. One thinks, for example, of the difference between Othello’s conception of Desdemona’s death as a “sacrifice” and his actual conduct in V.ii. Surely Othello is not lying to us when he speaks of the abstract justice of his “cause.” As a general principle of his dramaturgy, Shakespeare is at considerable pains to alert us to the deceptiveness of those who “lie like truth.”

The reductio ad absurdum of skepticism concerning the credibility of Othello is easy enough to imagine, and is in fact to be found in that John the Baptist of the debunking critics, Bernard Shaw, whose Hesione Hushabye is not only confident Othello fabricated a portion of his romantic past, but suspects that he killed Desdemona to prevent her discovering that some of his fine-sounding stories were lies.

It is interesting how few critics have attempted to argue that Othello’s first account of the handkerchief should be taken as the literal truth. There is some piquancy in the fact that,

12 Jones, p. 96. Cf. his assertion that Othello, in the murder scene, “shows an enthusiasm for Desdemona’s body which he had deliberately concealed from the senate” (p. 97).
13 Heartbreak House, Act I.
14 Critics giving their reasons for accepting this speech include G. R. Elliott, Flaming Minister (Durham, N.C., 1953), pp. 145-148; John Wain, The Living World of Shakespeare (Pelican Books, 1966), p. 147; and Fernand Baldensperger, “Was Othello an Ethiopian?,” Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature, XX (1938), 3-14. Baldensperger who provides an invaluable fund of information concerning Elizabethan attitudes towards amulets, considers the handkerchief “one of
starting from opposite directions, modern skeptics and idealizing traditionalists back into each other, and find themselves in agreement. The traditional view, as expressed in the Variorum, is presumably based on the assumption that Othello simply cannot harbor such primitive notions: he must remain a civilized European gentleman if he is to be worthy of our regard. One thinks of the artless confession of the immortal Miss Preston: “In studying the play of Othello, I have always imagined its hero a white man. It is true the dramatist paints him black, but this shade does not suit the man... Othello was a white man.”15 On a somewhat higher level, the Prestonian refusal to accept what the play gives us is still to be encountered. We see Othello’s visage in our minds, and if it is not white it is (despite Roderigo’s “thick lips” I.i.66) at least un-Negroid. Discussing what he calls the “confusion of colour and contour,” M. R. Ridley speaks of the kind of black man the role requires:

One of the finest heads I have ever seen on any human being was that of a negro conductor of an American Pullman car. He had lips slightly thicker than an ordinary European’s, and he had somewhat curly hair; for the rest he had a long head, a magnificent forehead, a keenly chiselled nose, rather sunken cheeks, and his expression was grave, dignified, and a trifle melancholy. He was coal-black, but he might have sat to a sculptor for a statue of Caesar, or, so far as appearance went, have played a superb Othello. (p. li)

Ridley is correcting Miss Preston, so the unconscious irony of this passage is particularly delightful: one is especially grateful for the “keenly chiselled nose.” Surely the contrast between Othello’s appearance (by the standards of the play, not only unlikely to inspire love but even frightening) and his inner worth is one of Shakespeare’s basic points. Appearance belies

... which any specialist in superstitions ranks to-day among the most efficient of all the magic helpers of a credulous humanity” (p. 13). R. B. Heilman does not mention Baldensperger’s essay, but quotes from a personal letter: Othello is “an inborn fetishist,” for whom the handkerchief is “an amulet without equal” (Magic in the Web, p. 283, n. 83). See also James A. S. McPeek, “The Arts Inhibited’ and the Meaning of Othello,” BUSE, I. (1955), 129-147; and W. H. Auden, n. 22 below.

15 Variorum, p. 395; quoted by Ridley, Arden Othello, p. 11.
reality: Iago, after all, is the sort of man who inspires confidence. I do not go so far as Laurence Lerner, who infers that "Shakespeare suffered from colour prejudice," and sums up the play as "the story of a barbarian who (the pity of it) re-lapses." But I am certain that Othello's personal and racial background are vital to the play. Paul Robeson insists that Othello's "color is essentially secondary—except as it emphasizes the difference in culture." But this is only partially true. Iago's temptation of Othello depends upon the kind of naiveté Robeson has in mind; but his impassioned behavior when Iago's "medicine" works (e.g., his speech at IV.i.31ff. and passion-induced trance) reflects Shakespeare's acceptance of the popular notion that blacks are more passionately emotional than whites. This does not seem to me to be the same thing as prejudice, provided that the view is not dramatized with prejudicial intent. In Othello it is not; and the protagonist's more than European capacity for violent emotion once his defenses are down is an example of the same attention to decorum—to cite an opposite extreme—which led Shakespeare to characterize Brutus as a Stoic. Othello is a type; he is also an individual, whose terrible suffering Shakespeare presents with imaginative sympathy and absolutely no condescension.

I see, then, no reason to doubt that Shakespeare intended Othello to have some beliefs in keeping with his background. But I also see no reason why belief in the efficacy of magic should, in itself, render Othello any the less noble or imposing as a tragic hero. But we still do not fancy a supersitious Othello—superstition being for us (though not for Shakespeare's audience) far less acceptable than untruthfulness—and the tendency is to give credence to the speech without taking account of its implications, or to reject it and avail ourselves of whatever

16"The Machiavel and the Moor," pp. 359, 360. Lerner is effectively answered by Eldred Jones, EIC. X (1960), 238: "Othello is a complex story of how a noble and upright man is subjected to temptation in the area of his being where he is most vulnerable—his difference in race." See also G. K. Hunter, "Othello and Colour Prejudice," PBA, LIII (1967), 139-63; K. W. Evans, "The Racial Factor in Othello," Shaks., V(1969), 124-140.
evidence this debunking furnishes that Othello is really "one of us." 19

The speech cannot mean what it appears to mean; therefore it must mean something else. But must it? Setting aside the matters of dramatic representation and dramatic convention, one may attempt to answer the skeptical critics on their own grounds. What evidence does a close reading of the text provide that Othello really regards the handkerchief as a potent love-charm?

The first phase of the temptation scene (III.iii) ends when Desdemona’s appearance momentarily counteracts the poison of Iago’s words: “If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself,/ I’ll not believe it” (II.282-283). Almost immediately after this Desdemona drops the handkerchief; Emilia, remarking that Othello “conjur’d [Desdemona] she should ever keep it,” gives it to Iago. (At this point Othello’s great concern that his wife keep the handkerchief with her strikes one as surprising: first gifts have their sentimental value, but Othello seems to be overdoing it.) The next phase—which is decisive—follows. Othello’s occupation’s gone—but he still demands “the occular proof” (1.366). Iago promises to lead him to “the door of truth”; Cassio’s dream, and the handkerchief, are his two means of clinching his case. To the dream (in which Cassio is said to have embraced Iago, bemoaning “Cursed fate, that gave thee to the Moor!”) Othello reacts with untrammeled ferocity: “I’ll tear her all to pieces” (1.438). But it is the gift of the handkerchief that is directly associated, in Othello’s mind, with the perdition of love:

19 E.g., Jones, Othello’s Countrymen, pp. 101-103. Jones retains the belief that Othello is essentially noble; one imagines what someone less charitable—say Dr. Leavis—would have done with this reading of the speech. A third possibility remains: to take the passage, as Elliott does, as “an indirect confession that from the very beginning Othello was predisposed to mistrust his wife and, far more fatefully, to hide that mistrust” (Flaming Minister, p. 145). McPeek argues for a more sinister variation of this position, finding Othello guilty of necromancy, “the original sin of his mother”—though he raises the possibility that Othello is dissembling (“The ‘Arts Inhibited’ and the Meaning of Othello,” pp. 143-144). Both Elliott and McPeek proceed on the assumption that the handkerchief is supposed to keep Desdemona faithful; see n. 21 below.
Iago. Nay, but be wise, yet we see nothing done, 
She may be honest yet; tell me but this, 
Have you not sometimes seen a handkerchief, 
Spotted with strawberries,20 in your wife’s hand?

Oth. I gave her such a one, ’twas my first gift.

Iago. I know not that, but such a handkerchief— 
I am sure it was your wife’s—did I to-day 
See Cassio wipe his beard with.

Oth. If’t be that—

Now do I see ’tis true; look here, Iago, 
All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven, . . . 
’Tis gone. 
Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell, 
Yield up, O love, thy crown, and hearted throne, 
To tyrannous hate.

(ll.339-346; 451-456)

The sacred vow of vengeance follows.

It is in this context, then, that Othello speaks, revealing for the first time (and too late) the full significance of the handkerchief, whose loss directly symbolizes the loss of love.21 He is addressing Desdemona, by whom the amulet must be guarded. For him to have given her such a charm does not mean that Brabantio was right in suspecting that Othello won his daughter through witchcraft; it is plain enough that Othello regards the handkerchief as ensuring the continuance of his love for Desde-

20See Laurence J. Ross, “The Meaning of Strawberries in Shakespeare,” SRen, VII (1960), 225-240. David Kaula, to whom I am indebted for this reference, notes that the two iconographic meanings of the strawberry—righteousness and hypocrisy—are deftly exploited: “The former meaning is appropriate to Desdemona as she really is, the latter to Desdemona as Iago is making her appear . . .”. “Othello Possessed: Notes on Shakespeare’s Use of Magic and Superstition.” ShaKs. II (1966). 123. See also P. G. Mudford, “Othello and the ‘Tragedy of Situation,’” English, XX (1971), 4-5. Mudford, whose study appeared after my own essay had been completed, views the handkerchief as Othello’s “sacred” love-charm; he notes that “Thy bed, lust-stain’d, shall with lust’s blood be spotted” (V.i.36) echoes the description of the handkerchief.

21Cf. Evans, pp. 134-136. Evans is uncertain whether to accept or reject Othello’s account of the handkerchief, but argues that Othello’s “mind reverts . . . to a magical world in which he has always faintly believed, despite his professed Christianity. He comes to accept that only magic made his extraordinary marriage possible. . .” (p. 134).
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mona, not hers for him. 22 His first gift to Desdemona, it was
given after the inception of love in order to render it perpetual.
Till this instant, perhaps, neither Desdemona nor the audience is
aware how remote Othello is from the world in which he is a
sojourner. 23 He comes from the ancient places of the earth;
prophetic sibyls and magic in the web need not be alien to one
who has traveled among the Anthropophagi. Desdemona, who
seems convinced for one horrified moment (“Then would to
God that I had never seen it!”), soon pushes this knowledge
from her. Her unwillingness to accept the story indicates her
rejection of an aspect of Othello’s character that is real enough
to us, and is no less naive than her failure to detect jealousy; for
the handkerchief is in harmony with what we know of
Othello. It was given, he tells Desdemona, when his fate would
have him wive; even at the end of the play he retains this sense
of fated action: “O vain boast,/ Who can control his fate?”
(V.ii.265-266). 24 Human resolve matters little. Like Oedipus, he
sees his terrible error as forced upon him from the outside, not
simply his own responsibility; and he justly punishes himself for
the act he committed in ignorance. It would not be in accord
with Othello’s character to emphasize his own role. He is
“wrought” by Iago; this too is part of his fate.

At the end of the play, Othello is speaking in a public rather
than an intimate context, and is on the defensive (“I know this
act shows horrible and grim” [V.ii.203]). He speaks of the
handkerchief to Gratiano, Desdemona’s uncle. We should
scarcely exhibit anything but a natural reluctance to allude to
the handkerchief’s magical powers before an audience for whom
his belief in such a talisman would be further evidence of his
barbarism. 25 And if it is not simply a careless error on Shake-

22 Cf. Elliott, pp. 145-146; Lerner, “The Machiavel and the Moor,” p. 358. In addi-
tion to what Othello says in III.iv, see II.iii.91-93: “Excellent wretch, perdition
catch my soul,/ But I do love thee, and when I love thee not,/ Chaos is come
again.” It is hard to see that Othello’s “That handkerchief which I so lov’d, and
gave thee./ Thou gavest to Cassio” (V.ii.48-49) is designed to contradict the mean-
ing established here.

23 Cf. W. H. Auden on Desdemona’s refusal to admit she has lost the handkerchief:
“she is frightened because she is suddenly confronted with a man whose sensibility
and superstitions are alien to her” (Encounter, August, 1961, p. 13).

24 Cf. “this forked plague is fated to us/ When we do quicken” (III.iii.280-281).

speare’s part, the same thing may be said of the substitution Othello’s father for the Egyptian “charmer” of the first version. 

Certainly it is hard to believe that Shakespeare intended this one half-line (“My father gave my mother” [V.ii.218]), virtually always overlooked by readers and spectators alike, to serve as a dramatic revelation of the truth. And it would have been a serious (and most un-Shakespearian) error to have attempted anything of the sort: the less Shakespeare he. More is involved here than the question of Othello’s earlier honesty: our minds should not be deflected from the main business at hand, Othello’s tragic realization of the meaning of what he has done. For the truth is that the talismanic significance of the handkerchief is no longer relevant. The idea does not require repetition now. Desdemona is dead.

The handkerchief, then, is a crucial element in interpreting Othello. My reading seems to me in accord with the impression conveyed by the play as a whole, before it has been subjected to the sort of too-curious scrutiny that reverses a powerful initial response—one that in this case, as Helen Gardner argues, “contradicts that immediate and overwhelming first impression to which it is a prime rule of literary criticism that all further analysis must conform.” 

Much recent criticism, in assiduously striving to save us from being duped by Othello’s grandiose image of himself, exhibits, from this point of view, what Edward Hubler has called “the triumph of sophistication over sense.” We do not, in fact, see Othello precisely as he sees himself; but this does not mean that Iago’s angle of vision is closer to the truth, or that we should confidently proclaim that

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26Kittredge unconvincingly reationalizes the discrepancy by arguing that “the enchantress gave [the handkerchief] at the request of Othello’s father, so that it was in effect a gift from him” (Sixteen Plays, p. 1309). McPeek, who quotes this explanation, is uncertain whether Othello is now telling the truth; but “if Othello wished to stress to Gratiano the importance of the gift he would represent it as a gift from the father to the mother” (“The ‘Arts Inhibited’ and the Meaning of Othello, p. 146).

See also David Kaula, “Othello Possessed, p. 127, who finds that “the magical associations of the handkerchief . . . are symptoms of the delusion which grips the hero in the middle phase of the tragic action.” At the end of the play Othello “is beginning to see [love and marriage] no longer as the province of exotic and barbaric female superstition but as civilized activities in which both sexes are equally and voluntarily engaged.”

the play's deceptiveness is such that the most rigorous study is necessary to counteract our initial sense of Othello's nobility.28

The dangers of criticism divorced from both the practical realities of theatrical presentation and historical perspective are evident enough, but nowhere more than with Othello. In the case of handkerchief, historical scholarship may provide a vital service by placing the play in the context of Shakespeare's time. At the end of his learned but strangely neglected essay, Fernand Baldensperger concludes that "Rymer was right: Desdemona had to die because of a handkerchief; but a token of supernatural powers is not a mere trifle, as Shakespeare seems to have understood it—in spite of the trend of post-Baconian times, more and more adverse to beliefs which have now to be reconstructed in their proper connotations" (p. 14). I do not have any notion what Shakespeare himself believed. But the relevant question is Othello's view of the handkerchief, and the audience's understanding of that view. The handkerchief must be reckoned with; it earns a place in the story.

28 Cf. Heilman, Magic in the Web, p. 137: "I began my study holding the orthodox view of Othello's 'nobility' but found the impression gradually modified by repeated readings of the lines" (emphasis added).