

The Real Othello



Murder by Proxy—a New Perspective

By Richard Allan Wagner

Prologue

As Francis Bacon grew to maturity, his stranger than fiction life was split into three essential realms:

- (a) The intellectual realm—the world of ideas, knowledge and wisdom which governed his very essence.
- (b) The real world with which he dealt, as best he could, through his towering expertise in the legal profession.
- (c) The realm of fantasy in which, through his mastery of literature, he was able to secretly and vicariously act out his noblest ideals as well as his darkest thoughts.

It was Bacon's fantasy realm that was the driving force behind the creation of the Shakespearean works. There he would shake his muse's spear at every fallacy and ignoble foible that belies the better part of human understanding and behavior. On the personal level, he could right every wrong, heal every wound, settle every score, and transform every topsy-turvy aspect of his existence into a sense of order.

Virtually every Shakespearean tragedy reveals underlying facets of Bacon's life cathartically acted out through disguised characterizations of himself as with Hamlet, or the Merchant Antonio—or more covert characterizations as with Timon, and, as we shall see, Othello.

In most cases, Bacon's tortured soul subtly cries out to us through veiled words that bleed out his name onto the printed page. In some instances, we witness certain plays evolving over a span of time, changing, expanding and morphing in step with transformations in Bacon's views and feelings—such, I submit, was especially true with *Othello*.

The Moor of Venice-What's in a name?

The story upon which *Othello* is based originated with a 16th century Italian melodrama called *Un Capitano Moro* written by Cinthio Battista Giraldi (1504-1573). Cinthio's tale was never translated into English, however, Francis Bacon took notice of it and adapted it as one of his tragic Shakespearean revenge plays under the title of *The Moor of Venice*.

What's most unique about Cinthio's story is that all of its characters are referred to by their descriptive monikers and titles such as Moor, captain, ensign, etc. We don't know them by their personal names—all save one, Desdemona, the Moorish captain's wife.

As with many Shakespearean characters, Bacon had a real-life person in mind whom he felt served as a fitting match for the *Moor's* portrayal. That person was Bacon's friend, Sir Walter Raleigh. Mather Walker makes a highly compelling case for Raleigh as the original model for Bacon's interpretation of the hot-tempered Moorish captain (see *Shake-Speare's Other Side of Midnight* by Mather Walker @ www.sirbacon.org).

Although Bacon altered some minor aspects of the plot, the evidence suggests that, in the early development of the play, he kept most of the story's essential elements intact—

including his adopted title of *The Moor of Venice*. As we shall see, the glaring absence of the name Othello in the play's early title is crucial.

The earliest recorded mention of the play is in the King's Revels of 1604 which gives reference to a performance of "The Moor of Venis" [sic] for King James by the theatrical company known as "The King's Men."

The Blinding Power of Assumption

Aside from ignorance of or refusal to recognize specific facts having to do with the Shakespeare authorship, the great hurdle that tends to block one's understanding and comprehension of what's fact or fiction is the confusing and deceptive power of assumption. In the case of *The Moor of Venice*, there's a strong tendency to ASSUME that the principal character is ALREADY KNOWN by the name Othello. In fact, there is no evidence to support such a conclusion.

The vast majority of Shakespearean scholars and enthusiasts, including many of my Baconian friends, like to run with the following argument: "The role of Othello became so popular that the public came to know the play by the leading character as opposed to its formal title." Notice how they include the name Othello as if it's already been established as the character's actual name. That's the erroneous power of assumption at work. If such an argument rang true, we would see evidence of it in contemporary letters, reviews, diaries, books, etc. all commenting on a play or leading character by the name of *Othello*, and yet, until 1621, no such evidence ever surfaced. Moreover, in 1613 (nearly a

decade after the first recorded performance of the play) King James provided an extravagant and prolonged wedding for his daughter Elizabeth and Fredrick V, Count Palatine of the Rhine. Throughout the festivities, six Shakespearean plays were performed, however, the name Othello is no where to be found in the record—instead (as was the case in 1604) *The Moor of Venice* is the title given for one of the plays.

Another compelling piece of evidence in the search for the identity of the play's leading character (prior to 1621) lies on an obscure page in Philip Henslowe's diary. Henslowe was a prominent manager of several theatrical companies performing Shakespearean plays during the late 16th century into the early 17th century. He was an astute and meticulous record keeper who wrote down the details of all transactions and daily business of his stage productions. On one particular page having to do with wardrobe and costuming, the word "Moro" is written. Not only is this an obvious reference to the *Moor*, it's also the exact designation for the principal character as used in Cinthio's original version of the story. The significance here is that nothing appears to have changed with regard to the name or title of the chief character in Cinthio's tale or in Bacon's initial adaptation of it. Overall, the body of evidence speaks for itself. A crucial question about Bacon's adaptation has to do with when and why the name Othello finally made its way into *The Moor of Venice*. I submit that the absence of the peculiar name of Othello, prior to 1621, is due to the simple fact that it had not yet been invented.

Robert Cecil, King James and Alice Barnham—the Plot thickens

All great people are surrounded by great enemies. It's no secret that Lord Burghley's son, Robert Cecil, was Bacon's greatest detractor and antagonist. Cecil, who was physically deformed and lacking in any virtuous skills or qualities, spent his life plotting, deceiving, and underhandedly manipulating his way into a position of immense power during the final years of Queen Elizabeth's reign. It's no wonder that many of the supreme villains in the Shakespeare canon are vicarious personifications of Robert Cecil.

Far beyond his physical shortcomings, Cecil's greatest defect was that of Envy, and the person he envied most was Francis Bacon. Quite remarkably, the treacherous ensign in *The Moor of Venice* is also consumed and driven by envy. Of all the "seven deadly sins", Bacon believed Envy to be the most vile. In his *Essay on Envy*, Bacon wrote:

"A man that hath no virtue in himself, ever envieth virtue in others. For men's minds will either feed upon their own good or upon others evil; and who wanteth the one will prey upon the other, and whoso is out of hope to attain to another's virtue, will seek to come at even hand by depressing another's fortune." As we shall see, Cecil and the envious ensign (later known as Iago) are one and the same.

Upon Queen Elizabeth's death in 1603, Robert Cecil, for the moment, was the most powerful man in England. However, his lust for power could only go so far. Claiming the throne for himself was clearly out of the question due to his lack of royal lineage as well as a lack of support from the nobility. Although Cecil was fully aware of the concealed fact that Bacon was the rightful heir to the Tudor throne, he deliberately sidestepped the

man he envied most, opting instead to place Elizabeth's closest cousin, James Stuart, onto the throne. With James as England's new monarch, Cecil was assured of a continuance of his own power and influence along with the title of 1st Earl of Salisbury.



Robert Cecil

In order to insure against Bacon posing a threat to James' accession, Cecil advised his new King to "set matters straight" with Bacon. And so, James and Cecil offered Bacon a promising career in politics in exchange for his guarantee that he would, in no way, challenge James' legitimacy to the throne nor produce any Tudor heirs. Bacon, who, in earlier years, had given up on the idea of succeeding to the Tudor throne, accepted the deal. The only thing left to seal the bargain was for Bacon to marry a commoner.

In 1606, at James' behest, the forty-five-year-old Francis Bacon married a common but lovely fourteen-year-old Scottish girl by the name of Alice Barnham. James kept his end

of the bargain by lavishing Bacon with titles, a knighthood and a series of high-ranking political promotions, arising, in 1618, to the highest office beneath the Throne—the Chancellorship of England.



Alice (Barnham) Bacon

Enter John Underhill

Upon becoming the highest-ranking politician in the land, Bacon regained residence at his childhood home at York House on the Strand. Soon, thereafter, he employed a young man named John Underhill as his gentleman usher. Two years later, Underhill became Lady Alice's Steward. As one thing led to another, Alice and Underhill drifted into a torrid and lasting love affair.

The Green-Eyed Monster Emerges

Of all the tragic roles of Bacon's real life, which he acted out through his Shakespearean fantasy world, the role of cuckold was brand new to him. Because of his political stature, everything was on the line. How would he discretely deal with Alice's infidelity without openly suffering the consequences of gossip and scandal? At the zenith of his political career, divorce or separation were not realistic options. And yet, somehow, he had to personally deal with Alice's betrayal and dishonor. Was his rage and lust for revenge any different than that of the *Moor*? Bacon was only too human. How could he NOT identify with the Shakespearean character with whom he had most prominently associated with cuckoldry?

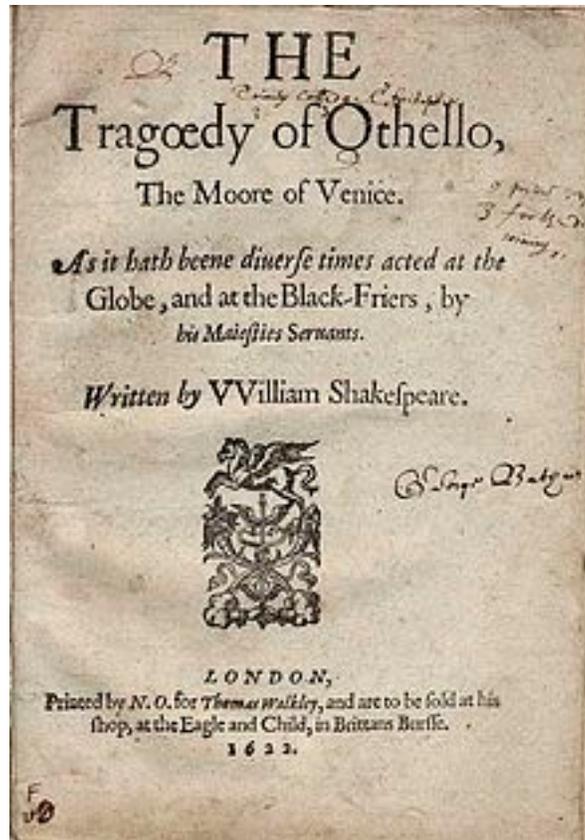
The Moor Finally Receives a Name

In the real world, a violent resolution towards Alice's infidelity was entirely out of the question, but in his Shakespearean fantasy realm, Bacon could dispense justice any way he liked—no matter how gruesome. And, most certainly, the *Moor's* murder of his “unfaithful” wife ranks as one of the most violent and hideous killings in the entire Shakespeare canon. But who is the real murderer, the *Moor* or Bacon? Ultimately Bacon gives us the answer by consolidating the *Moor's* identity with his own through the cipher name of **OTHELLO** (see the Pythagorean Cipher Table given at the end of this article). Thus, the names **Bacon** and **Othello** are interchangeable, i.e. **Bacon** = **33** (Simple Cipher) and **Othello** = **33** (Pythagorean Cipher). In a brilliant stroke, **Alice Bacon** has been cast as **Desdemona's** proxy—grotesquely murdered by **OTHELLO**, the personification of Bacon's dark side.



Sir Francis Bacon

One year after the onset of Alice Bacon's affair with John Underhill, the name *Othello* appeared for the first time—recorded in the London Stationer's Register under the title of *The Tragoedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*. The following year (1622) saw the play's initial publication in quarto. Then, with the 1623 publication of the Shakespeare Folio, *Othello* underwent further alterations. In fact, the Folio version of *Othello* is the most heavily revised of all the Shakespearean plays. Bacon's view of the lead character as well as the dynamics of the story had clearly taken on a new perspective.



Cover page for the 1622 quarto publication of the newly named Version of the play titled *The Tragoedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*

Furthermore, not only did the Moorish captain receive a code name, so did his malicious ensign. Thus, the names *Iago* and *Cecil* are interchangeable, each adding up to the number **23** (Pythagorean Cipher).

Appropriately, the name of the Moor's wife, all along, had been *Desdemona* signifying "wretched", "unfortunate" or "ill fated". And, although the *Desdemona* of the story is innocent, her real-life counterpart, *Alice*, is not. However, Bacon realized that turning the fictional *Desdemona* into a contemptuous whore would have ruined the story.

By assuming the identity of the Moor through *Othello*, Bacon effectively and cathartically played out his feelings of revenge toward Alice. In real life, he separated from her and then wrote her entirely out of his Will with the following words:

“What so ever I have given, granted, conferred, or appointed to my wife in the former part of this my Will, I do now *for just and great causes, utterly revoke, and make void, and leave her to her right only.*”

Alice’s betrayal was the ultimate bitter pill Bacon had to swallow in the series of betrayals that had plagued him in his final years. Yet, he saw fit to allow her the luxury of retaining the title of Viscountess St. Alban. Despite all the wrong inflicted on him, Bacon refused to be consumed by a bitter ending. Perhaps his words to Alice in Shakespeare *Sonnet 36* provides a glimpse into his truest feelings for her:

Sonnet 36

Let me confess that we two must be twain,
Although our undivided loves are one:
So shall those blots that do with me remain,
Without thy help, by me be bourne alone.
In our two loves there is but one respect,
Though in our lives a separable spite,
Which though it alter not love’s sole effect,
Yet doth it steal sweet hours from love’s delight.
I may not evermore acknowledge thee,

Lest my bewailed guilt should do thee shame,
Nor thou with public kindness honour me,
Unless thou take that honour from thy name:
But do not so, I love thee in such sort,
As thou being mine, mine is thy good report.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R
S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	

The Pythagorean Cipher Table

Special thanks to my friend James Loren!