



Judge me the world if 'tis not gross in sense  
That thou hast practised on her with *foul charms*,  
Abused her delicate youth with *drugs and minerals*  
That weakens motion. [...]  
I therefore apprehend and do attach thee  
For an abuser of the world, *a practiser*  
*Of arts inhibited* and out of warrant.  
(1.2.63-80; emphasis added)

Brabantio's reaction is not only one of immediate hysteria. He is repeatedly charging Othello of sorcery. When both the parties are brought in front of the government, Brabantio insists that his daughter has been "corrupted | By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks". His daughter could not have possibly behaved so "Sans witchcraft" (1.3.60-64). The Duke takes the charge seriously enough:

**Duke.** Whoe'er he be that in this foul proceeding  
Hath thus beguiled your daughter of herself  
And you of her, the bloody book of law  
You shall yourself read in the bitter letter  
After your own sense  
(1.3.65-69)

When Othello is given the word, his answer is symptomatic – eloquent. It is also interesting that he himself associates his practices with magic:

**Othello.** [...] That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter,  
It is most true, true I have married her:  
The very head and front of my offending  
Hath this extent, no more. *Rude am I in my speech,*  
*And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace,*  
For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith  
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used  
Their dearest action in the tented field,  
And little of this great world can I speak,  
More than pertains to feats of broil and battle.  
And therefore little shall I grace my cause  
In speaking for myself. Yet, by your gracious patience,  
*I will a round unvarnish'd tale deliver*  
*Of my whole course of love; what drugs, what charms,*  
*What conjuration and what mighty magic –*  
For such proceeding I am charged withal –  
*I won his daughter.*  
(1.3.78-94; italics added)

Othello's answer is far from straightforward. It raises subjective issues, his personal history, and uses the modesty trope, a rhetorical device (an *extenuatio* or *litotes*) to gain the listeners' favour. It may almost seem that he repeats Brabantio's charges of using "drugs" and "charms" with a certain irony. However, Brabantio argues against any rational explanation, advocating for "practices of cunning hell" (1.3.102).

Othello sends for Desdemona and repeats what he has won her by. His lengthy monologue is an account of his adventures, as if taken from a heroic narrative. It has – as most Shakespearean monologues do – an enchanting force, which even the theatrical audience must have acknowledged. The Venetian Duke himself does so: “I think this tale would win my daughter too” (1.3.170). Dramatically speaking, Othello’s monologue is a concrete example of what Brabantio calls *magic*: the web of tales and beliefs.

For a number of critics *Othello* is a play of superior poetry. G. Wilson Knight praisingly claims that the “dominant quality in this play is the exquisitely moulded language, the noble cadence and chiselled phrase, of Othello’s poetry”. Othello’s “music [is the] glamour of romantic adventure [...] an imaginative realism [...] a storied and romantic treasure-house of rich, colourful experiences” (1937: 117). It almost seems that Othello’s “music” would be some kind of absolute, harmless poetry without any impact on the listeners. In an abstract sense, there is a tendency to separate the vehicle (poetry, music) from the tenor. That, however, in this context is an impossible notion, as Shakespeare’s Brutus realizes:

O, that we then could come by Caesar’s spirit,  
And not dismember Caesar! But, alas,  
Caesar must bleed for it!

(*Julius Caesar* 2.1.169-171)

*Julius Caesar* as well as *Othello* show that the *tenor* always becomes contaminated by the vehicle. Brabantio identifies what for some is “music” with the “spells and medicines bought of mountebanks” (1.3.61). They are not *mere* stories but triggers of a process. They have an Orphic quality, bringing about a metamorphosis in the audience. It is in this sense that the play associates Othello’s power with occultism.

The narratives leave an impression *on* and *in* the audience; Desdemona becomes enchanted by them and falls a victim to them, as her father Brabantio realizes. Identifying herself with them, she sees Othello as their hero. And this is what causes her to fall in love with him. This is how Othello describes her falling in love:

She loved me for the dangers I had passed,  
And I loved her that she did pity them.

(1.3.166-167)

Carol Ginnis McKay, in her essay “Othello’s Need for Mirrors”, comments on the nature of the relationship between Othello and Desdemona:

“The basis for their love [...] is the grand romantic picture of Othello that they both admire and pity, the image of Othello that Desdemona reflects to him” (McKay 1983: 265).

Perhaps a more exact metaphor than the mirroring would be the metamorphosis, or rather – to get closer to the imagery of the play – enchantment, trance, magic.

Othello is an able storyteller and speaker. He makes use of the power that his stories give him over other people. His understanding of this power is, however, rather intuitive. He almost seems to be surprised what effect his adventures had on Desdemona when he told them to her. As a narrator, he is almost passive in retelling the stories – without the imagination to reshape them or invent new and more powerful ones. That is what makes him vulnerable and susceptible to a more cunning and imaginative story-teller. And Iago turns out to be the one. His stories, though pure fabrications, are much more realistic and are founded

upon everyday life, which gives them plausibility and power. Iago, in telling them, is also more ingenious; he is cryptic, fragmentary, insinuating, thus engaging and compelling to the listener. Othello's stories are spoken of as *magic*, *spells* and *medicines*; Iago himself refers to his stratagems as *poison*. He himself says to Roderigo "Thou know'st we work by wit, and not by witchcraft" (2.3.361), as if knowing Othello was the magic man.

The changes that Shakespeare makes to his source, Cinthio's novella, are rather surprising. One of the additions is the symbolism of names. Although interpreting names may be somewhat speculative, in this case, it is in keeping with the above mentioned notion of obliterating the dividing line between the vehicle and the tenor.

Laurie E. Maguire, in a lecture at Oxford in 2001, reflected on the Elizabethan tradition of appropriate and inappropriate names. *Helen* would be a bad name as it was used as synonym for a loose woman, as in "His grace is gone, and hath left | his *Hellen* with me, I'm no pander for him" (*The Woman-Hater* 2.1.306-307) or "He and his *Hellen* have prepar'd a banquet" (*The City Madam* 4.1.25).

Elizabethans would care about a name. To Juliet's question "What's in a name?" (2.1.85), an ordinary Elizabethan would claim that *much*. As late as 1760, Tristram Shandy's father takes great pains in selecting an appropriate name for his son:

His opinion, in this matter, was, That there was a strange kind of magick bias, which good or bad names, as he called them, irresistibly impressed upon our characters and conduct. (Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, Book I Chapter XIX)

It may be argued that Sterne might also have been hinting at the surviving popular beliefs that Shandy Senior, just like some of his contemporaries, shared with the Elizabethans. Sterne is likely to have been inspired by Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (Chapter 1.VII in particular) and his persiflage of the naming process. *Tristram Shandy* would be combining classical literary inspiration with the satire of the surviving popular superstition. (I am grateful to Prof. Martin Procházka for pointing out to me the connection with Rabelais.)

A number of Shakespeare's plays care about naming. Not only that; names *are* characteristics. This is true with Claudius in *Hamlet*, who is never called so in the play, apart from in stage directions. Harold Jenkins claims the name "was evidently suggested by that of the Roman emperor who married Agrippina, his niece and the mother of Nero" (1997 [1982]: 163n.). Maguire has observed that Desdemona – a name retained from Cinthio (Disdemona) – would be easily recognizable as a bad name. It has *demon* as its root. Surprisingly, Shakespeare's addition to the source, the name of Othello, is another case in point – which Maguire has failed to note. It may be a coincidence; still, Shakespeare adds to the marked name of Desdemona a character whose name contains *hell* in itself. Some critics have claimed the jealous husband *Thorello* in the 1598 version of Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour* for the model. Although the acoustic quality may have inspired Shakespeare (who was in the cast), the name of Othello alone is marked. (And interestingly enough, the word *hell* appears a number of times throughout the play too.) Elizabethans would recognize this symbolism in the name.

Iago is evasive when it comes to names:

**Brabantio.** What profane wretch art thou?

**Iago.** I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.

**Brabantio.** Thou art a villain.

**Iago.** You are a senator.  
(1.1.116-120)

Iago escapes even the understanding of others. For Othello, when he realizes his fault, Iago finally becomes identifiable as a persona of a fiction, of his private history:

**Othello.** I look down towards his feet; but *that’s a fable*.  
If that thou best a devil, I cannot kill thee.  
(5.2.283-284; emphasis added)

It is as another fictional character, a piece of Othello’s narratives, that Iago in the end becomes intelligible. Whether a coincidence or not, it is interesting that Iago was a name that Shakespeare could have found, for instance, in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*.

Othello’s world of stories reappears several times in the play, always in the context of a crucial situation. When Desdemona fails to produce the handkerchief that Othello has given her, he tells her:

**Othello.** That’s a fault. That handkerchief  
Did an Egyptian to my mother give.  
She was a charmer, and could almost read  
The thoughts of people. [...]  
Make it a darling, like your precious eye.  
To lose’t or give’t away were such perdition  
As nothing else could match.

**Desdemona.** Is’t possible?

**Othello.** ’Tis true. *There’s magic in the web of it*.  
A sibyl that had numbered in the world  
The sun to course two hundred compasses  
In her prophetic fury sewed the work.  
The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,  
And it was dyed in mummy, which the skilful  
Conserved of maidens’ hearts.

**Desdemona.** I’ faith, is’t true?

**Othello.** Most veritable. Therefore look to’t well.

**Desdemona.** Then would to God that I had never seen’t!  
(3.4.51-77; italics added)

Shakespeare – with his “little Latin” – perhaps intentionally makes narratives (or texts) coincide with textiles, as if playing on the Latin root of *text*, “to weave”. “Spinning the yarns” of tales, Othello also spins the web to entrap.

What transpires from the critical moments of the play is Othello’s superstitiousness. The stories coincide with popular magic. John Middleton Murry has tried to see Othello as a much more sophisticated character. For him, and for Desdemona, he has claimed, Othello’s “marvellous tales [are] only a fairy tale; it is a trick to put her from her suit for Cassio” (Murry 1936: 312). However, for Othello, the lost handkerchief is a substantial breach in the integrity of their marriage; he identifies this moment with the Egyptian prophecy. Desdemona, whose speeches towards the end of the play are more and more enigmatic, may well be acknowledging the realization of Othello’s superstitiousness. In this way may be read her reaction to Othello’s declaration that all of what he has said is “Most veritable”. Her

“Then would to God that I had never seen’t!” could be understood either as a mere regret for the fatal handkerchief, or as her regret that she has ever seen into what Othello thinks of it.

As Desdemona nears her end, she seems to be aware of the causes of her downfall. Here and there she lets out sentences that make her character rather complex.

**Desdemona.** [... *singing*] Let nobody blame him; his scorn I approve, –  
(4.3.49)

Even on her deathbed, until the very last moment she could be seen as defending Othello. An alternative reading, though, is that she lays the blame on herself; at this point, she is likely to have sobered from the dreams of the adventure narratives she has fallen for during her courtship. She may see herself as the one responsible:

**Emilia.** O, who hath done this deed?

**Desdemona.** Nobody; I myself. Farewell

Commend me to my kind lord: O, farewell!                      *Dies.*  
(5.2.124-126)

Interestingly, Othello’s purposes to his final moment are to cater for what is going to be told about him. He is still the man of the oral culture. Lodovico asks him:

**Lodovico.** O thou Othello, thou wert once so good,  
Fall’n in the practise of a damned slave,  
What shall be said *to* thee?

Othello seems to take it for “What shall be said *of* thee?” It is in the latter sense that he replies:

**Othello.**                      Why, any thing:  
An honourable murderer, if you will;  
For nought I did in hate, but all in honour.  
(5.2.288-292; emphasis added)

He cares about the role he is going to play in the narratives of Venice, and he is trying to qualify the inevitable interpretation. In his last speech, his last narrative *tour de force*, he once again embarks upon his world of adventurous tales. And once again, he makes attempts at *pre*-interpreting. He starts off invoking his desert; then again, by means of a rhetorical *litotes*, he jumps to the point:

**Othello.** Soft you; a word or two before you go.  
I have done the state some service, and they know’t.  
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,  
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak  
Of one that loved...

It is again the notion of communal memory that Othello cares about. He entreats them that they would retain his memory objective, without private malice, and starts to dictate what the interpretation of himself should read.

...then must you speak  
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;  
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought  
Perplex’d in the extreme; of one whose hand,  
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,  
Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
Their medicinal gum.

He wishes for an interpretation that would match with his adventurous tales that his life has consisted of so far. In his final moment, he sets out to fictionalize himself right away. By now, however, he fails to captivate his audience:

Set you down this;  
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and a turban’d Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,  
And smote him, thus. *Stabs himself.*  
**Lodovico.** O bloody period!  
**Gratiano.** All that’s spoke is marr’d.  
(5.2.334-353)

Lodovico’s and Gratiano’s epilogue to Othello’s self-fictionalizing has an ironic undertone. For the Christian Venetians, Othello has denied what he has said by what he has done. In the Venetian culture, suicide is not a hero’s death. In other words, by killing himself the storyteller has spoilt the authority of his stories. Seen from this perspective, the tragedy of Othello is also a conflict of his cultural background (superstition, beliefs in magic, prophecies) and that of his host country. Othello’s last attempt at enchanting his audience fails. For Gratiano, it is no more *magic* but mere speaking.

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