THE INEVITABLE DEATH OF DESDEMONA: SHAKESPEARE AND THE MEDITERRANEAN TRADITION

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Our endeavour in this paper is none other than examining the literary impact of an archaic preoccupation, honour and reputation. This preoccupation is almost omnipresent in many cultures but not every culture solves issues involving the injured honour of an individual, or that of family, or a clan, in an identical manner. Consequently it has been a motif that has given an ample number of writes the chance of creating stories with a single thematic nucleus: honour. There are many elements that could affect both honour and reputation, but in this paper we are concerned only with one specific type of honour: that which embraces the behaviour of a woman. This type of honour involves both a woman and man simply because the honour and good name of a man depends on the demeanour of his wife, or his mother, or even his own sister. To be a man whose honour has been stained by the sexual behaviour of a woman who is either related to him by blood ties, or by the bond of matrimony, is not a trivial matter. Society, not the law, does censure and ridicules him. So, for a man this type of aggression becomes an intolerable affront he must revenge if he wants to regain the respect of his society. The way in which a given community, or culture, regards this class of offense coerces the man to become the custodian of the honour of his family. Obviously to be this kind of keeper is difficult for it involves a great deal of voyeurism, since he must observe not only the sexual behaviour of his wife, is he has one, but that of the ladies of his family. As a consequence of this the man could be faced with the painful, traumatic and tacit obligation of killing a human being he loves because she has broken an implicit, and so unwritten code of behaviour

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dictated by society. To neglect this duty signifies running the risk of being labelled as a complacent husband, or as a man who accepts dishonour and shame, it being a attitude that certain societies decodify in a rather humiliating manner.

Bearing in mind the social demands cognate to this class of honour, we hope to examine the way in Shakespeare regards this problem with the purpose of briefly comparing his treatment with that of Calderón de la Barca. This consideration will show that in the case of *Othello* the death of Desdemona is not only inevitable, but a necessary ordeal Othello has to undergo in order to restore his good name, and that of his family. When Shakespeare wrote *Othello,* he had ample information about the Mediterranean code of honour, since *Othello* is a play which is not all that different from those written by Calderón, Lope de Vega, or Tirso de Molina. To assert that Shakespeare approaches the issue of honour exactly as Calderón does is a mistake, but when it comes to Othello's reasons for killing Desdemona, he has been very accurate. Othello is a man who, according to his cultural background, behaves correctly. He has proofs confirming his wife's unfaithfulness, and thus he must kill her.

Othello's utterances about justice show that he is a divided man: the *cause* is for him a sin that is far more unbearable than the savagery inherent in killing a wife. His words must not be taken as a fallacious piece of poetic justice, but as the verbal manifestation of the painful ordeal he must undergo in order to be a man, not a poor Cernunnos, as Iago suggests when he asks him: "How is it, General?/ Have you not hurt your head?".[1]

Othello's reaction and behaviour does not reflect a purely Anglo-Saxon attitude towards chastity, but a Mediterranean one. In his case there are many concurring facts which function as signs he deconstructs incorrectly, thus believing he must be the executioner of his own disaster. The nature of these facts imply that, sooner or later, with or without Iago, something would have inflamed Othello's mistrust simply because he is not a man who trusts a woman easily. This reality augurs the inevitability of Desdemona's death caused by an intellectual deficiency in Othello which gives rise to the enactment of a code that governs his understanding of honour.

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[1] Ridley, M.R. (1971: act, IV, sc, i, 58)) *Othello,* Arden Shakespeare Paperbacks, Methuen and Co., Ltd., London. All quotations from this ed.

The play's circular structure functions as an architectonic sign that forces the reader to return at the end of the play to its point of departure: Desdemona's wedding night. In the end she lies dead on the same bedding she uses on her wedding night. In addition to the semiotic corollaries intrinsic to concrete objects, such as those of bedding or kerchief, there is verbal information about the same issue: the unsuitability of the marriage, it being an information that achieves dramatic proportions not because of what Iago, or Brabantio, says, but due to what one sees, Desdemona's body, the ocular evidence of Brabantio's misgivings about Othello's worth as husband.

The deplorable confrontation of Othello and Brabantio shows that Othello's wedding is not flawless for it begins with a dark note of discord that foreshadows its brittleness. One learns during this dispute a great deal about Othello. He is a prince by birth, a point he emphasizes when he implicitly insinuates he has the right to marry her. Had Othello been in his own country, his royal blood would have given him the type of social status that would have empowered him to take Desdemona as he does. However he is in Venice, and in Venice he is just a paid warrior at the service of the state, it being a fact he perceives well enough even in spite of speaking not as a man who has lost the social authority native to his "birth", but as a man whose royalty could "out-tongue" [Brabantio's]. However and despite what Othello thinks, what "out-tongue" them all is not really what he says, but Desdemona's words.

The oriental poet endowed with both imagination and an unusual capacity to react to all types of stimulus comes to light when hearing how he won Desdemona's love. The tales he narrates are those of a poet writing about poetic justice based on suffering. He speaks about his unhappiness, sorrows, times of humilation, slavery, catastrophes, lethal situations, and horrors such as those of cannibalism. The style he uses shows he is truly Mediterranean: he emphasizes suffering at the expenses of happiness, he makes music, to use Wilson Knight's phrase, [1] out of misery, and this constitutes a mannerism that is typical of Mediterranean cultures. A Mediterranean sees his or her life in terms of a long, piercing and sad lament simply because life is perceived in terms of long and painful arrangements of dramatic musical notes transmuted into beautiful

[1] Wilson Knight, G. (1977: 97-119) *The Wheel of Fire*, Methuen and Co. Ltd., London.

metaphors of suffering and death. The problem cognate to this approach lies in the tendency that a Mediterranean has to give more credit to what is negative than to what is positive. There is a latent pessimism which prompts a Mediterranean to imagine what is negative in terms that seldom are applied to what is positive. The slightest provocation gives rise to drama merely because life is drama. It is no accident that Othello responds to Desdemona's hints with stories about woe and calamities, with creativity, self-pity and firmness, but to do this makes either for greatness or disaster, and in his case it makes for disaster.

The dignity, verbal charm, and directness of his self-defense is impressive. Yet, it shows he is a man who feels he has moral rights which Brabantio, and indirectly the Senate, do not wish to acknowledge. Whence it is the locution of a man who knows why he has acted thus: he has used the tactics of a poet to win Desdemona's love, and the strategy of a warrior to legalize his love. His marriage takes place because of the efficacy of his strategies which derive from his awareness of the nature of the obstacles he has to avoid. In short, Othello takes what otherwise may not have been given to him: Desdemona. However, the predicament he faces having to "most humbly" asks the Senate to take care of his wife, providing for her both a home and servants, is humiliating. His dilemma shows he has acted according to Will, not Reason, since he does not have a proper home for Desdemona to live in. The answer of the Duke is corrosive, "If you please, / Be't at her father's." *(Othello*, act I, sc, iii, 239). By comparing Cassio's advantages with those of Othello, it is hardly surprising that Othello reacts as he does when Iago suggests he is Desdemona's lover. Unawares, Othello sees in him an opponent that could win Desdemona's affection because he has what he lacks; a family, a home, youth, and a sure welcome in any Venetian home.

Brabantio's decision signifies that Desdemona cannot go back to his home. Yet, Desdemona's quick reaction solves the problem thus avoiding her husband further mortifications. Trying to explain to the Senators why he accepts Desdemona's proposal, he affirms a little too often that his motives have nothing to do with sex, thus revealing he feels not only vexed but concerned with what he does not have, a home. Albeit Desdemona manages to avoid an embarrassing situation, her reaction throws light onto Othello's situation as a married man. That no servant was with Desdemona when she went to the Sagittar is not all that implausible, after all Othello asks Iago to let his wife attend on her, *(Othello*, act, I, sc, iii, 296). The

point seems insignificant but is not because the elucidation of Othello's dilemma helps to perceive his marriage in the light of deficiencies, deficiencies which explain why Othello reacts so quickly against anybody who, like Cassio, has what he lacks.

A nominalistic analysis of the names show the inevitability of Desdemona's death. The word-play inherent in Othello does not derive from the story of Cinthio simply because the name of the Moor is not mentioned. To conjecture that Shakespeare worked out for himself this pun is not a very far fetched idea. Probably he did consider not only Italian, but Spanish and English. The way in which the pun functions in these languages should serve to give support to this possibility. Othello constitutes a clever pun with *o-jealousy:* a perfect pun in Spanish, and nearly perfect in Italian. When it comes to English the pun has a different semiotic connotation, that of an excessively zealous person, since it could derive from *zealot*, and from Zelos, the ancient Greek personification of zeal, or emulation. In Spanish it derives from *O/ celo,* in Italian from *geloso,* thus giving rise to *gelos[o].*

Since the idea of a case is present in English, Spanish and Italian, the pun inherent in Cassio is that of case. Cassio is a real *case*, perhaps a man who in spite of being presented as a very noble creature, he is not so noble. It is not for nothing that he does not dare approach Othello after his downfall. If Cassio is a real case, Iago is a maker, a promoter of both false and real cases. Nominatively speaking his name constitute a blatant word-play on *do*, that is *hacer* in Spanish. What he does and achieves is not always the product of a very ingenious mind, but the outcome of several concurring facts he knows how to exploit to his advantage. To perceive the layers of meaning concealed in Iago's name is not difficult for a Spanish or Italian reader, since the former only needs to remember that the present tense of *do* is *hago*, and the latter the meaning of *ago:* also the fact that the first personal pronoun in English is I, in Spanish *Yo,* and in Italian *Io.* The phonetic value of the present tense of *do* is very similar to that of *[I]ago.* The name suits Iago for he is a true artist, a demonic maker of a world of delusion, confusion, and equivocation. The interplay between languages is no accident. Shakespeare sets the play in Venice, and yet Iago sings an English song, and so does Desdemona who in spite of being a Venetian lady does not behave like one. A Spanish, or Venetian lady, married to a Moor would have been able to deconstruct Othello's wrathful language in a very different fashion than she does. In Italian the pun inherent in Iago's

name is more eloquent than in Spanish, but not unrelated, for *ago* means needle, or point of a goad. What Iago does is like pricking with a goad Othello's soft spot, his well controlled jealousy. He is the only one who achieves communication because by means of his ability to wound with his tongue sore spots, he is the maker, the creator of the likeness of communication. His communication is both negative and private, but it is the type of communication he wants to be able to control his victims. When he controls the thoughts, hidden fears, and wishes of his victims he can persuade them to ponder what he wants them to ponder, while they are unable to perceive that Iago is violating their minds since they cannot grasp what lies bellow his illocutions. In Iago's case both positive and perverse unilateral communication is achieved because Cassio is a real case with ladies; Othello a man corroded by a hidden jealousy that not even himself is aware of; Emilia a "fair and foolish" wife that loves well but not wisely, and Desdemona a lady who cannot decodify her husband's language correctly till it is too late.

When applying this method of analysis to Desdemona's name, one acquires more elucidating data about the shortcomings of the characters, and so about their motives for doing what they do.[1] By breaking Desdemona into units what comes to light is this; Des/ *demon* [a], it being a sign of the nature of Othello's mistake since *démone* in Italian means demon, or devil. He kills her in order to kill the demon he thinks lodges in her fair body, fully incognizant of the fact there is no "cause" and ergo no demon to kill. The prefix *des* shows that in Desdemona's death Othello sees some sort of exorcism. The inevitability of Desdemona's death is shown to the audience through the layers of meaning inherent in her name. To believe that a name reveals a great deal about a person is an old idea rooted in religious and mythical principles.[2] Othello does not believe this, but in

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[1] To perceive this is not all that difficult, and it does not require any special knowledge of foreign languages. The way Shakespeare plays with puns inherent in the names of his characters function into different directions: one, that of a private test of the readers or audience's knowledge and sagacity. Two, a sort of word-play directed to people who claimed to be well educated, since travelling abroad and foreign languages was part of the curriculum of those who claim to be well educated and sophisticated people.

[2] We have omitted the analysis of both Emilia's name and that of Brabantio because there is nothing in Emilia's name, and not all that much in Brabantio's. This stands to reason because she is the only character in the play who is not

the end he acts as if he would do so, for besides talking about his wounded honour he speaks of his need to sacrifice a creature who if not killed would deceive more men.In fact, he is so sure there is some sort of devil in her that he, in public, acknowledges her as a devil.

Othello sees in his wife something beyond the level of adultery, otherwise he would not transform what he believes to be his private shame into a public spectacle. Don Gutierre, unlike Othello, is not only very judicious but very private when faced with the conjuncture of killing his wife. For Don Gutierre her shame and his dishonour constitute a private drama, for Othello an issue that touches her family, the State and so her country. This dissimilitude begs an explanation that should be sought in ethnic backgrounds. Don Gutierre has to wife a woman of his own background, thus he has nothing to flaunt to the king or to her family: his is a communal tragedy that everybody acknowledges without words, pretending to ignore the cause, or what is more important making believe there is not cause, but a natural and deplorable death. Don Gutierre is no exception, or an idiosyncratic character in Spanish literature. The Othello of Cinthio acts as Don Gutierre does, killing his wife with a stoking full of sand in order to avoid a social scandal. Because he is a Moor and she a Venetian, Othello, unlike Don Gutierre, transforms his drama into a pageant. When he shows her body to her uncle he is implicitly saying; here I am, a Moor, the man who was not good enough for her, and there she is, your niece, a Venetian lady of good breeding, but a devil and a whore.

The archetypal hero of Spanish plays based on a conflict touching the hero's honour would have killed Desdemona having less evidence than

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emotionally involved, as the other characters are, with Desdemona, beyond the level of service. Emilia is a woman who wants little, she seems to take life as it comes. To serve her lady is all she seems to want. We never see her in the privacy of her room with Iago, thus we know very little about her, expect for the fact she does nothing when Desdemona is so worried about the handkerchief. She seems to have little faith in human beings but accepts human frailties and errors as an unavoidable part of life. It is only when it is too late that she acquires some tragic stature by means of a painful not to say shocking *anagnorisis*, that her husband is a devil. There is more to Brabantio's name than here is to Emilia's. The pun resides in *brave"*, it being an ironic pun since he is older than Othello and thus unable to fight him. Also there is another pun inherent in the verb *bravare* which means to challenge, a fit pun then for he tries to challenge Othello and loses the challenge.

that Othello has, thus leaving no room for the playwright to create villains of Iago's kind. In England the Mediterranean concept of honour connected to that of revenge based solely on the sexual behaviour of a wife seems to be closer to a literary convention than to a truly factual and so accepted social reality. In Spain it is a literary convention that reflects a social obsession, that of being almost anything but a *cornudo.* How and when this obsession began is difficult to say. Probably the concept of *cornudo* may have had its origins in religious ideas that should be sought in Crete, ideas which were not unrelated to a feminine principle and her renewal through the sacrifice of a male principle, which was probably impersonated in a bull. To be a *cornudo* may have been a religious privilege involving the death of a bull, but never that of the female principle. This conception of life implied the symbolic, or not so symbolic, substitution of one male for another. With the passing of time the concept attached to a *cornudo* was forgotten, and so it came to signify that a man other than the husband was enjoying the favours of a wife. What in former times was a religious ceremony in which a goddess, so to speak, took to husband the symbolic, or not so symbolic, killer of her former husband, came to be considered as an unacceptable exchange of partners.

When examining literary conventions such as those of Courtly Love, one perceives that nobody considers Arthur a dishonourable man because his wife is sleeping with Lancelot. Granted, Guinevere is condemned to death, but it has nothing to do with Arthur's wounded honour, but with the law. Had Guinevere been the wife a Mediterranean the issue would have been a little different, her husband would have killed her before having the chance of facing a legal trial.

When contrasting Othello's tragedy with that of Don Gutierre in *El Médico de su Honra* it becomes evident that Othello is not an exceptional case in regard to his demeanour towards his wife. Not only that, when bearing in mind Don Gutierre's obsession with honour, Othello is no longer a complex character but a rather simple one, faced with an equally commonplace dilemma: his name and his honour.

Othello is an outsider, a man who knows little about his officers, including Cassio, and to know little causes both anxiety and insecurity. To

say, as critics do, that Othello is within the "crust"[1] of the Venetian society is an error because he is not. Iago mentions that Cassio is not a Venetian, but a Florentine as if to be a Florentine would mean to be less than a Venetian. What Iago says should not be considered as an oddity since he makes a virtue of saying what others do not dare to say, or would like to say. If to be a Florentine is enough to arose a negative attitude in Iago, to be Moor would be more than enough to awake a malicious disposition in others, so, sooner or later, another of Iago's type would have been insidious about Othello's marriage, thus involuntarily generating an unforeseen drama.

When considering the hero of *El Médico de su Honra,* Don Gutierre, one becomes aware of the fact that Othello's emotions were not easily aroused. Don Gutierre does not take Doña Leonor to wife merely because he saw a man, Don Arias, leaving her house through a balcony. He is not sure if he was visiting her and yet even if she were innocent, he would not take risks marrying her. He does not need much to abandon the woman he loves, only "apprehension". The motives for breaking the engagement place into question Leonor's chastity wherefore she becomes as obsessed as Don Gutierre is with the issue of her honour. To show her moral worth to her community becomes an ethical obligation: her only duty and moral obligation is none other than proving her chastity with the purpose of regaining the fame that used to be attached to her name.

A woman's honour is a serious an issue, yet it is not a question of the behaviour of a man, but always that of a woman. Never a woman feels dishonoured because her husband has a lover, but humiliated, offended, or what you will. Leonor demands compensation from the king Pedro Primero el Cruel, or el Justiciero, but there is no evidence to prove it was another lady who has been visited by Don Arias. The king intuits that Don Gutierre has acted foolishly, and yet Leonor's plead does not go beyond the level of appealing.

Because both men have the Mediterranean capacity to imagine the unimaginable, they cannot avoid creating a vivid and fatalistic picture of love, thus causing themselves much pain and suffering, incognizant of the fact they are just sketching a picture that projects within the pale of their

[1] French, M. (1981: 207) *Shakespeare's Division of Experience,* Summit Books, New York.

own society their unconscious not to say primeval fears. They are transforming an obsessive, a collective preoccupation, into a fallacious concrete reality that is bound to come to the surface at the slightest provocation, for which reason a woman's role is both dangerous and bitter.

Don Gutierre's wife, Doña Mencia de Acuña, grieved her fate, but her complaint proved to be as futile as that of Desdemona. Both ladies say they are chaste, but both are killed by men who speak in terms of sacrifice and ask them to pray in order to save their souls. The insistence on giving them time to repent is suggestive in the sense that it confers to this type of revenger a moral stature that other types of avengers do not have. From the Christian point of view this avenger is very concerned with the soul of his wife, it being a fact that shows he does not see himself as common killer, but as some sort of sacred minister whose duty is that of saving the soul of his erring wife. In his mind he seems to believe that leaving to chance the death of his wife is like living her soul in the hands of Satan for she is in mortal sin. Death may come when less expected depriving her of the opportunity to repent. By rescuing his wife from eternal damnation this avenger defeats death. At first sight Othello's concern with Desdemona's soul may sound almost like an intolerable irony but it is not: he is acting according to the norms, and so is Don Gutierre who gives her more time than Othello does to prepare for death as a good Christian should do.

The way in which Don Gutierre kills Doña Mencia is repulsive: he forces a doctor, Ludovico, to bleed her to death. Doing it this way he achieves two things: one, nobody will question his wife's chastity; two, he cures his wounded honour. In this Don Gutierre is closer to Iago than to Othello. We must bear in mind however that the Moor of Cinthio acts like Don Gutierre in order to avert what Gutierre avoids. To see Othello planning, thinking about ways of killing Desdemona, as Don Gutierre does, is not possible because Othello must not be placed at Iago's level, acting like him, calculating without feelings how to feign a natural death. There is no Iago in Don Gutierre's tragedy and therefore no one to compare the hero with. Granted there is an Iago in Cinthio's tragedy, but the Moor of Cinthio lacks the Aristotelian stature of Othello. To see Othello doing what the Moor of Cinthio does would have been rather unpalatable, and Shakespeare new this well enough. Othello has a name, he is a real human being, but the Moor of Cinthio is a nameless creature whose function seems to be that of embodying received ideas and unwritten concepts.

When it comes to the killing of their wives, the symbol of light achieves the same meaning in both plays. Othello and Don Gutierre put out the light while speaking of the disappearance of light in terms of what is going to disappear from their lives: their wives. A woman is light and a symbol of life, so that the exact nature of this light must be conveyed through a binary system of oppositeness, that of light versus darkness. The light must also be put out in order to avoid what they fear, the power inherent not in their souls but in their images, since the light is a vehicle of images.[1] According to them, once their wives break the rules, their light loses its worth because it is not a real light but a deceitful imitation of it: their light must become what it really is, darkness, in order to restore the needed light in their lives. The fact that both use the imagery of light and darkness is an identical manner cannot be a coincidence, especially when bearing in mind that both use this imagery when they are about to kill their wives. The light must be put out, both physically and symbolically, since only this can bring the required restoration. Consequently this symbolism must be understood in terms of the recognition of sin, since to recognize a sin is the same thing as to seeing the light, so that sin and darkness must be equated.

Watching Othello's incapacity to believe Desdemona generates not only disgust but anger mixed with pity. Othello cannot perceive that he, unlike Don Gutierre, can banish his wife because in Venice it is a socially acceptable act. When trying however to understand Don Gutierre's behaviour, worse than that of Othello and applauded by the king, one can perceive the pain, and the suffering of Othello. When trying to visualize Don Gutierre bleeding his wife to death, as if she were a pig, forcing a doctor to do so, because he thinks "Que el honor/ con sangre, Señor se lava", [2] one perceives there is nothing very extraordinary about Othello's deed, because there is not.

The obsession of Othello, like that of Don Gutierre, arises from the workings of a social machinery they do not dare to oppose: they are trapped in a situation which brings nothing but chaos and madness; they are confronting a conflict that offers only one choice: an alternative that

[1] Giordano Bruno. (1987: 347-50) *Mundo, Magia, Memoria: Selección de Textos,* Taurus, Madrid. Ed. Ignacio Gómez de Liaño.

[2] Calderón de la Barca. (4th ed.: Jornada Tercera, Escena XIX, p. 231), *El Médico de su Honra,* Espasa Calpe, S.A. Madrid.

proffers them a rather peculiar relief, to act according to a code that forces them to commit what Othello defines in terms of "an honourable murder" *(Othello,* Act.V, II, 295). Nothing can really justify their crimes: at least Shakespeare tries to make the reader comprehend why Othello does what he does. An Anglo-Saxon may be able to understand Othello, but one ponders if an Anglo-Saxon would feel much sympathy for a man who bleeds his wife to death as Don Gutierre does.

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