SAINT AUGUSTINE
AND THE RENAISSANCE CONCEPT OF HONOUR

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Moral essayists of the XVIth and XVIIth centuries based their writings on two main sources, pagan authors (Aristotle and Cicero mainly) and the Fathers of the Church (Aquinas and Augustine), and showed a concern for bringing together this two antithetic currents of thought, which were eventually assimilated by the Renaissance and appear in literary works of the period. The Renaissance, then, from this view, constitutes, in different aspects, an impressive attempt to bring to a compromise two essentially different cultural traditions, with different origins and purposes, and, above all, different concepts of what Man's life should be. "The Renaissance—says C. B. Watson—reflects this pagan-humanist tradition of self-congratulation for one's good qualities side by side with the Christian ethics of humility and self-abasement." I will analyze a selected corpus of thoughts on honour by St. Augustine and compare it with both Renaissance moral treatises of relevance in England and also with the Shakespearean use of these ideas in one of his tragedies, Othello. I will try to prove that Christian precepts on honour and related issues (St. Augustine's in particular) were not, by any standard, predominant when compared with the importance acquired by ethical beliefs inherited from the classical antiquity and slightly reshaped by what I (together with others) have called pagan-humanism; this will have to be done not only on the theoretical grounds of the moral essays, whatever their influence may have been, but also having into account the use that such a Renaissance writer as Shakespeare makes of these concepts, putting them into practice in one of his most morally-concerned tragedies.

We will focus, then, on Christian thoughts, moralists of the period and Shakespeare, but, unfortunately, and for obvious reasons of space, we will have to leave out a detailed analyses of pagan authors, whose main assumptions will be seen through the treatment that our essayists, some one thousand and eight hundred years later, gave to the matter.
In the first book of *The City of God*, chapter viii, St. Augustine criticizes actions performed not by charity but by greed, and considers that it is the thirst of *fame* which produces this perversion of the true motives of a Christian's actions. In general terms, there is a constant condemnation of the search for *human glory*, of the concern for being praised by our equals, other men, while we should be contented with other kind of reward. Augustine explicitly parallels *honour*, or the desire for glory, with the many vices men are subjected to, and he does this either by including "honour" directly among these vices, or by suggesting that this aspiration is a way of separating Man from God. In the first place, honour is a way of eliminating other vices decidedly more pernicious. Thus, Augustine speaks of the Romans "[...] qui causa *honoris laudis et gloriae* consuluerunt patriae, in qua ipsam *gloriam* requirebant, saltemque eius saluti sue praeponeronon dubitauerunt, pro isto uno uitio, id est amore laudis, pecuniae cupiditatem et multa alia uitia conprimentes." However, Augustine considers that it is not enough to "hide" these "alia uitia", these "other vices", to accept honour as a legitimate Christian aspiration since we are not able to destroy them; only Faith or the Love of God can fight back Vice and those men "swollen by the love of glory". Secondly, he bitterly attacks honour as a spiritual obstacle to imitate God: "Tanto enim quisque est Deo similior, quanto et ab hac *inmunditia* mundior." ("The cleaner one is of this filth, the closer he is to God"). We have to be careful in order to differentiate the two types of glory that Christian teachings consider, both of them sharing an element of praise, but opposed in the way they direct it; only the Glory that the Lord gives should be looked for by Men, says Augustine. Glory *from* God and glory *to* God, within the Church of Jesus, are the two accepted forms of praise for Christian thinkers. Earthly honours, that "*inmunditia*" we mentioned above, is in direct opposition to the Sacred Promise of an eternal life in Heaven, because it discovers Man’s natural and inherent mistrust towards the heavenly assurance of an after-life: Man aspires to keep on living forever not through his spiritual salvation but through the ever-lasting echo of his earthly deeds, through his *reputation*. This places *honour* as a Vice of the most pernicious kind, at the same level of "*Uoluptas*", since it takes the place of the "*verae gloria*", of which only God, not man, is the true giver.

In *The Courtier’s Academie* (1598), Count Romei defines *honour* as an "ardent heate which enflameth the minde of man to glorious enterprises." This definition, certainly not pejorative, resembles Cicero’s definition of honour.
in *De Officiis*, and, in truth, it, together with many other definitions of the same concept in the XVIth century, contains the basic elements that Renaissance men ascribed to honour. This commonplace leads us to another, namely that of the importance of honour; for Romei himself, "wee will affirme that honour is the most precious of all goods externall" (p. 80). Although these are only two quotations on this topic, and they belong to one single source, it is significant that we cannot find any of St. Augustine’s Christian mistrust and despising of this "good externall"; quite on the contrary, we have a typical humanist recognition of the importance of purely human actions. Renaissance moralists give enormous importance to social relations between men as the only way to achieve a correctly hierarchized social order, and honour, then, stands as the universally accepted standard of behaviour for classifying men’s actions on earth.\(^6\) To validate honour or *reputation* as the factors introducing this hierarchy, means that the Renaissance man has to rely on his fellowmen’s opinions and forget that other kind of glory, the "true glory", that he will receive and contemplate in the other life.\(^7\) *Reputation*, then, as something gained by one’s own efforts, but only existing as long as it is sanctioned by the community’s consent, constitutes the key to the social structure built by XVIth and XVIIth century men behind the back of Christian religion. *Othello* (1602-4?) is probably the most honour-conscious tragedy ever written by Shakespeare, and as such, although seldom referring directly and explicitly to honour or reputation, offers an extremely interesting exposition of some of the assumptions and concerns on this topic which the moralists often dealt with in their writings.

Worthy Montano, you were wont to be civil:  
The gravity and stillness of your youth  
The world hath noted; and your name is great  
In mouths of wisest censure. What’s the matter  
That you unlace your reputation thus  
And spend your rich opinion for the name  
Of a night-brawler? Give me answer to it.\(^8\)  

(II. iii. 184-90).

Once again, as we will see in moralists as well, there is no Christian reference to any sin or misbehaviour, but rather concern for the pagan value
lost. This passage offers, in a few lines, the two basic elements of honour that we have mentioned up to now, vehemently repeated to stress its importance: personal qualities that make someone a praiseworthy person (civility, gravity and stillness in the case of Montano), and other people's recognition of these qualities. It is also relevant that Othello speaks of "mouths of wisest censure", since not everyone is competent to confer the dignity of a good name on other person; but no reference is made to the glory that will be acquired in Heaven, or to the fact that it is God who should bestow the "uerae gloria" on us. The Renaissance man trusts the opinion of other men, and is sensitive to honours and quick to resent an affront, since he makes social approval the key element of his life: (Men desire honour) "that we may behold the Testimonie which good men and wise have given of our vertue and be delighted therewith, as having not so much confidence in our selves herein as in the judgement of others." 9

And from here it is not difficult to establish the terrible consequences of being deprived of one's reputation, of other people's good opinion, the consequences of being dishonoured: "Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial." (II. iii. 255-8).

This reference to an eternal life is exactly what St. Augustine attacked in his De Cuitate Dei, more precisely in (v, xiii): a pagan aspiration to immortality on earth in direct opposition to the Christian injunction of this life as a transit, a negation of the medieval "contemptus mundi", overcome by the trust in Man and the joy of life of the Renaissance thinkers. In this compromise between pagan-humanism and Christian doctrine, the latter seems to be playing second fiddle in relation to the acceptance of honour and reputation as solid values.

One of the Renaissance concepts logically ascribed to the idea of the honourable man is that of magnanimity or "greatness of heart". This involved so great a degree of human perfection that, per force, it stood against the Christian doctrines about the opposing concept, central to Christian theology, of humility. This excellence in virtue could not be accepted to exist in human beings without threatening the Christian ideological construction about human imperfection versus divine perfection; in other words, the concept of magnanimity, which brings about the notion of Man unmoved by circumstances outside himself, is irreconcilable with the Christian doctrine of Augustine -
utterly pessimistic- or Aquinas -relatively optimistic- on humility and the sense of dependence on God. If the magnanimous man rejects, implicitly or explicitly, external values such as wealth, health or even opinion: it is more a Stoic reminiscence than a Christian input, since there is not, in those few cases, a substitution of a spiritual reward in another life for those "material" values. St. Augustine preaches that Truth can only be achieved through the central virtue of Humility, since only the Humble and the Meek shall be illuminated by the Light of God (II. vii), which is antithetic to the idea of the magnanimous man, who is everything but humble; but Augustine also introduces his conditions for the man who, still being a Christian, shows the appropriate greatness of soul: lack of interest in wealth and temporal things and disdain for "stultam uulgi opinionem" (I. x & I. xxii). About the former, he stresses that it is important to be rich on the inside, and poor in our external appearances. However, this inner richness must not lead man to boast or "show off", but quite on the contrary, has to make evident man’s awareness of his inherently frail nature, bound to constant sins and imperfect repentances, despair and betrayal of his pact with God. In relation to the second condition pointed out by the Bishop of Hippo, Christian doctrine blatantly rejects the importance given in the past by the pagans - the Romans- or by the Renaissance moralists to the so-called life of fame, or the world’s opinion, since nothing that others think of us matters if we live only to please God (V. xx).

For the French moralist Hurault, magnanimity is "an ornament to all vertues", and to the eyes of the magnanimous man, nothing can be compared with his concept of himself; certainly then, we have in this type of man unconcern for worldly affairs, but as long as he prizes himself beyond measure and needs to see his value justly appreciated by the world, the divergence from Augustine’s Christian precepts is, again, enormous. The Spanish bishop Antonio de Guevara even points out the necessity for the magnanimous man to show, "by outwrase significations", his predominant position in society, since he will not be appreciated "if hee be not also sumptuously apparellled and well accompanied.

Not only in drama, but also in ordinary life, it is easy from our perspective to misinterpret this concept: our Christian background makes us analyse these behaviours and condemn them as excesses of self-dramatization or vanity. But a close reading of the situations where magnanimous men behave as such shows that as long as we keep our eyes open and are not prejudiced
against attitudes so distant from Christian concepts (as the ones we have seen directly expressed by Augustine), what we have behind such situations is, not vanity, but the appropriate degree of confidence in oneself that the Renaissance magnanimous man, directly from Aristotle, has learnt to express. And thus, in Othello's speech on his merits we do not have a braggart soldier merely showing off, but legitimate pride properly stated, a man conscious of his own merits. In his darkest hour, when he knows how terrible his crime has been (and probably has already conceived the idea of leaving this life), no Augustinian thoughts on humility make Othello curse his anger or his lack of insight; quite on the contrary, he reaffirms himself as the great man that once occupied a distinguished position in the Venetian army and society: we are before the magnanimous man -a pagan- and there is no trace of the humble man -the Christian." Soft you; a word or two before you go. / I have done the state some service and they know't: / No more of that. (V. ii. 334-6, my italics).

Suicide is the third point of our discussion logically related to the central idea of honour. Directly "imported" from Roman morals (Cato's suicide was a common topic in any discussion on ethics), suicide represented the answer of a man of honour to a very specific situation. But again it stands in clear opposition to the teachings of the church, particularly those of Augustine, and opposes to them those ethical values introduced from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Cicero's *De Officiis*, (especially the latter), which accepted suicide, as the only escape in some cases, for an honourable man.

For St. Augustine suicide is the most terrible of all crimes for two reasons: in the first place it is actually a homicide committed on ourselves, so the more innocent we are, the more damnable our murder will be; but secondly, and this for the Christian thinker is considerably more important, it is the only sin which implicitly denies the possibility of repentance and mercy (at least in a broad sense and without considering "last-minute" thoughts), and shows despair of finding God's help. In *De Ciuitate Dei* Augustine explains that the commandment "Non occides" includes ourselves since it doesn't add "proximum tuum", and that even if it did, we also have "Diliges proximum tuum tamquam te ipsum", which means that whatever we cannot do to our brothers, we cannot do to ourselves (I. xx). It is not allowed -says Augustine- to commit a crime to escape from our enemies, since Jesus never suggested this possibility to His disciples when they were persecuted by the enemies of the Faith, and it is also forbidden to kill oneself to avoid a future sin, because a future and uncertain
sin is better than a present and sure one, and, besides, suicide will always be worse than any other possible future action we may commit because, as we already saw, it leaves no possible redemption.

It is noteworthy that St. Augustine devotes five whole chapters to deal with the possible motives and circumstances related to suicide, and eventually condemns it in every single case. It seems reasonably clear that suicide epitomizes the wish of individualism characteristic of the Renaissance, and so it is difficult not to see that Christian medieval doctrines on this topic, even then worrying for the clergy, were not able to triumph over the glorification of Man's rule over his destiny, that is, his voluntary death. Augustine tries to destroy every possible justification for suicide; a close reading of his work shows that he rejects those committed for love of glory, for fear of future suffering, to avoid another sin, for fear of dishonour, or as a way of showing our authority on ourselves or our greatness of soul, once our life is close to its natural end, all this possible causes for committing suicide are denied as inhuman and not Christian.

Aristotle—in his Nicomachean Ethics—doesn’t consider suicide unfair since one cannot be unfair to oneself (V, xi), and states that, in some cases, an honourable death is preferable to dishonour. These ideas, which were taken up by Cicero in De Officiis (45), appear in many of the most influential essays on morals of these two centuries (XVI and XVII), and clearly defy the Christian doctrines of Augustine and Aquinas.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, Sir Thomas Elyot, in The Gouernor, says that "all way dethe is to be preferred before servitude", and stresses the dishonour of surrendering or belonging to another man.\textsuperscript{15} Once we study the pagan and Christian connotations of suicide in Renaissance England, making some reference to the Stoics is inevitable, probably to the School of Philosophy that most often dealt with this form of violence. Seneca’s injunctions on the most honourable ways of behaviour included the committing of violence on oneself in order to avoid a dishonourable life. This, together with the other classic antecedents we have mentioned in passing, did not escape the attention of Renaissance men, so acutely sensitive to the consequences of a contumelious life, and shaped the most interesting statements of the age on this topic. Count Romei, referring to the Stoics and sharing their opinion, wrote:

\textit{[...]} a man of honour shuld alwaies preferre death, before infamous safetie. \textit{[...]} A valiant man ought much more to
feare infamy then death: [...] And upon this foundation the Stoikes in some cases permitted the violent killing of one's selfe to avoide a dishonourable life" (p. 101).

When we try to look for moral evaluations of suicide in Othello that may ascribe to the Christian or the pagan maxims, we find that there is no intellectual analysis of any importance in the play; but there certainly is an implicit acceptance of it since there is actually a suicide, and it is not condemned by any character in the play. The only reference to the act of suicide itself is made by someone who, ironically, is Othello's best friend, Cassio, and who identifies this action, far from Augustine's condemnation, with the condition of "magnus animi", greatness of heart. "This did I fear, but thought he had no weapon,/ For he was great of heart." (V. ii. 356-7).

Thus, Othello's killing by Othello implies two things: firstly, the victory of pagan morals over Augustinian Christian ethics; secondly, the completion of the half-drawn figure of a man concerned with honour and reputation, aware of his own value as a man of honour and a soldier (ie., magnanimous) and ready to choose death before a dishonourable life.

St. Augustine rejected the pagan desire for human glory for the same motive as Aquinas: this occupation distracted men from their main concern, namely the search for piety and saintliness. In the City of God St. Augustine refutes each and every argument in favour of the love of glory that seemed to proceed from the philosophies of Aristotle and Cicero. Such was the effort of one of the Fathers of the Western Church, but, as St. Augustine himself probably understood, the pagan inheritance was too strong to be ignored in this respect: most of the Renaissance books on moral philosophy use Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and Cicero's De Officiis as a source, explicitly recognized as such or not; and Cicero's work, based on Aristotle's ethical writings to the extent of almost being a continuation of them, was the grammar school textbook on morals in the age of Shakespeare. As we have seen, as regards honour and all the related ideas that we have dealt with here, the Renaissance moralist can hardly be said to adhere to St. Augustine, and Shakespeare's most honour-conscious tragedy, Othello, follows this pattern. Regardless of the importance that Christianism may have had in later years or centuries, morals in Renaissance England cannot be, in any case, explained through Christian doctrines alone: only through the consideration in common of pagan-humanism
and Christianism we will be able to understand the moral standards that ruled this period. And, more interesting because often ignored, Shakespeare’s tragedies contain the same ambivalence. Certainly, Othello is, in this respect, no exception, and offers the reader a meaningful dichotomy of opposed values which, in many senses and for only half-known reasons, are still waiting to be deambiguated.

NOTES


2.- For an analysis of the classical origins of honour, ranging from Homer to Marcus Aurelius, see my essay *Classical Origins of the English Renaissance Honour*, sent to the Revista of SEDERI.


4.- Ibid. V; xiii (My translation).


6.- This stems, as Werner Jaeger explained in his *Paideia* (New York, 1945), from the Homerian aristocratic society, where aretè constituted a major value with, among other things, a clearly social function.

7.- It is almost impossible to distinguish here the different connotations existing in the semantically related words "honour", "fame", "glory", "reputation", "name", "honesty" etc... For the sake of clarity, we will consider here what they have in common, and, except when otherwise stated, they will be taken as near-synonymous. In *Classical Origins of the English Renaissance Honour* I have tried to separate the different connotations existing in these words. C. L. Barber’s *The Idea of Honour in the English Drama 1591-1700* (Goteborg, 1957) presents an interesting deambiguation of meanings within this concept.


10.- Granville-Barker, and some other critics such as Eliot, misinterprets this speech, considering it a pose of Cassio, who would be pretending to be more affected that he really is; only a close reading of moral essays of the period may help us to understand to what extent the loss of reputation, dishonour, could affect a nobleman, and how tragically Cassio is desperate here after having lost "the immortal part of myself".

11.- i. e., Aristotle’s "megalopsychôs".


14. As we said above, it is not our purpose here to discuss in any detail the influence of these two sources -Aristotle and Cicero- on English Renaissance ethical questions, but some reference to them has been inevitable. Some deep studies on the presence in English Renaissance moral treatises of these two authors, and Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus and Plutarch, with its literary implications, are still missing.


16. In this respect, I cannot but disagree with the Spanish version of the tragedy made by the Instituto Shakespeare for Catedra. The Instituto directed by M. A. Conejero in his, otherwise excellent translation of these lines, misinterprets the meaning of "For he was great of heart", assuming that it functions as a *reason clause* of reason and consequence, expressing a direct reason relationship with what they consider the *matrix clause*, "thought he had no weapon" (Quirk, Randolph *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* Longman, London & New York, 1988 (1985) pp. 1103-4. The problem is that, although the analyses of the reason (subordinate clause) is correct, the matrix clause -in my opinion- is not *that* clause, but "This did I fear"; in a nutshell, "This did I fear because I thought he was great of heart but I thought he had no weapon" (my interpretation) instead of "I couldn't imagine this since I thought he had no weapon because he was great of heart" (the Instituto’s: "¿Cómo imaginar algo así? ¿Que tenía una daga, un hombre con tanta nobleza de corazón?" (V. ii. 357-8-). The difference is enormous, since in my interpretation Cassio makes the positive allusion to suicide, in the line of Renaissance moralists, that I have pointed out above, while with the Instituto’s translation there is no moral judgement on suicide, but a criticism on the ethics of keeping a sword (?). Some editions try to deambiguate the problem by putting a semi-colon after "weapon", implying that the "great of heart" allusion cannot be attributed to "but thought he had no weapon". (For instance William Shakespeare *The Complete Works*, ed. G. Lyman Kittredge, Boston, 1936).