

DEFYING CONVENTION: THE VERBALIZATION OF
EROTICISM IN *W. SHAKESPEARE'S*
OTHELLO AND *J. DONNE'S* ELEGIE XIX

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Since eroticism represents one of the main components of human sexuality, it becomes virtually impossible for writers not to take into account the strange, elusive phenomenon which apparently has its origins in the phantasms that haunt the subconscious of the mind. In fact, poets singing the joys and pangs of love, novelists dissecting human relationships and dramatists giving life and substance to their characters are constantly reminded of the existence of that element which seems to be forever lurking in the shadows ready to demand its right to public recognition. But the erotic discourse is fraught with difficulties because it always finds a way of making most people feel uneasy. And writers are no exception. So, whatever they choose to do to give verbal expression to human eroticism depends on many things. Among them can be included the temperament they have been born with, how they were brought up and whether or not they feel bold enough to defy the prejudices of the epoch that fate has allotted them to live in. Although treading different paths, both Shakespeare and Donne found their own very special way to tackle this problem.

La relación entre erotismo y poesía es tal que puede decirse,
sin afectación, que el primero es una poética corporal
y que la segunda es una erótica verbal.

Octavio Paz, *La llama doble: Amor y erotismo*¹

Eroticism is one of the main features if not *the* main feature of human sexuality.

1. Since there was no way of getting hold of the English translation of Octavio Paz's book, I tried my hand at translating the paragraph with which I start my paper: Eroticism and poetry are so closely interrelated, that you might say without risking affectation, that the former is physical poetics and the latter verbal erotica (*The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism*).

Probably, it also forms one of the most important components of non-human sexual drive, as well, for zoologists have been stating in no uncertain terms, in the last decades, that at least some animal species experience the same impulse. Be it as it may, it is undisputable that human beings always feel uncomfortable whenever the subject is brought up in the open. Even experts in a wide range of fields who have tried to study the phenomenon in an unbiased, detached way, find it impossible to lay aside all their inhibitions and offer an objective coherent theory on this specific matter. On the one hand, the multifarious, disorderly nature of eroticism, a sometime sacred creature of Dionysus, Lord of Misrule, with a life and a will of its own, defies any attempt to encompass its complexity within well-defined boundaries. On the other, this elusive and unbridled urge is deeply ingrained in humanity's innermost self, that shadowy, secret place where figments of imagination, hidden fears, religious injunctions, taboos and the demands of living in a seemingly orderly society come together in endless warfare.

Eroticism is, thus, a factor to be reckoned with in any human community; all the more so as several elements should be taken into account: erotic changes throughout the times, progress or regression of mentalities, and the behaviour of different cultures and even of individuals. Therefore, new rules are constantly being devised to prevent excessive or overt licentiousness which might shock our so-called "civilized" everyday life, and to curb the verbalization of the same complex phenomenon.

However, somehow or other, poets have always found a way to evade the law. Some did it apparently conforming to every tenet in the book; others deliberately and openly transgressed convention and almost always paid a high price for such inordinate behaviour.

Shakespeare seems to fit in with the first group, if the tenor of his work can be judged by *Othello*. An attentive, detailed analysis of the tragedy will show that the poet uses at least two different registers to express eroticism, but that he skillfully (artfully?) always does so within the prescribed limits.

In fact, the "dramatis persona" who blatantly boasts foul language full of rude explicit words and/or gross graphic descriptions is Iago. And adequately so, since he portrays the archvillain, that is to say, the character in Elizabethan drama whose ancestry can be traced back to the fusion of three or four very important "forefathers," namely the Roman servant, the medieval devil Titivillus, the Vice of the moral play and a dash of what Shakespeare's contemporaries thought of as Machiavellism, for good measure. So, it may be considered a matter of *decorum*, to use the Aristotelian terminology, that he should speak as he does.

The first three instances occur in Act I, scene I when Iago and Roderigo try to inform Brabantio, Desdemona's father, that his daughter has eloped with the Moor:

Iago. Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe.

You'll have your daughter covered with a barbary horse; you'll have coursers for cousins and gennets for germans.

I am one, sir, that comes to tell you, your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs. (Shakespeare 1959: 944)

The common denominator in all these quotations resides in the fact that Iago resorts to vile animal imagery to describe both the lovers and whatever is presumably happening between them. It can, therefore, be argued that the language used by this character can no longer be considered erotic but rather overtly obscene. However, Iago is evil and, as such, in the best dramatic tradition, he is entitled to scatological discourse. Besides, given the characteristics of the archvillain, the erotic discourse (as perceived through his words) is certainly the only one he will ever understand and, most probably, the only one he will ever know.

The next two instances in which Iago insists on related subjects as a means of attaining his ultimate goal – to drive Othello insane with jealousy – occur in Act III scene III and Act IV scene I. In both, and contrary to what happens before, it is not the wording of the text itself but its pictorial quality that conjures up the erotic atmosphere.

In Act III, scene III, honest, honest Iago is happily indulging in what might be called a little creative story telling for the benefit of Othello's trusting, pliant ears. As the archvillain's devious imagination knows no boundaries, he has invented a dream during which Cassio allegedly incriminates himself and Desdemona by denouncing their foul dealings:

Iago. In sleep I heard him say, 'Sweet Desdemona,
Let us be wary, let us hide our loves!
And then, sir, woul he gripe and wring my hand,
Cry, 'O, sweet creature!' and then kiss me hard,
As if he pluck'd up kisses by the roots,
That grew upon my lips; then laid his leg
Over my thigh, and sigh'd, and kiss'd; and then
Cried, 'Cursed fate, that gave thee to the Moor. (Shakespeare 1959: 961)

A careful analysis of this excerpt proves beyond doubt that Iago has momentarily or permanently put aside his filthy vocabulary. However, the evocative power of his erotic images and his virtuosity in the choice of words remain unabated (the verb 'to pluck' applied to the act of kissing is brilliant). He, thus, succeeds in creating an aura of eroticism that captures everybody's fancy.

A similar commentary can be made about the general tenor of the dialogue between Othello and Iago at the beginning of Act IV. Once again, there are no vile, suggestive words, although the hypothetical occurrence under discussion is pervaded with an indisputable latent sensuousness which comes out the stronger when Iago seems to be denying what he is really stating:

Oth. What hath he said
Iago. Faith, that he did – I know not what he did.
Oth. What? what?
Iago. Lie –
Oth. With her?
Iago. With her, on her; what you will.

Oth. Lie with her ! lie on her ! We say, lie on
her, when they belie her. (Shakespeare 1959: 964-965)

However, Iago's rather crude eroticism is not the only one present in the text. A subtler, more conventional form, but no less intense, can be found in the code that presided over Othello and Desdemona's, courtship both before and after they were married, while Iago's schemes had not yet soiled the rapturous purity of their feelings.

The erotic character of their wooing derives from a multiplicity of circumstances in which the attraction of contraries and the need for secrecy play a very important role. Brabantio, himself, the deceived "father of the bride", is the first to bear witness to the strange, "unnatural" magnetism that drew his daughter and the Moor together:

Bra. A maiden never bold;
Of spirit so still and quiet, that her motion
Blush'd at herself; and she, in spite of nature,
Of years, of country, credit, every thing,
To fall in love with what she fear'd to look on. (Shakespeare 1959: 947)

On the other hand, Othello's account of how he won Desdemona's love is clear proof that it was the unusual nature of a mature man's life story (as told and most certainly embellished by him, for those were the rules of the game) that caught the fancy of a young and inexperienced Desdemona. Nonetheless, and once more observing the code precepts, it belonged to the woman to make known, using ambiguity as a weapon, whether she was interested in furthering the relationship. That is exactly what Desdemona does as Othello reveals to the Duke and his retinue:

Oth. She gave me for my pains a world of sighs:
She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange;
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful:
She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd
That heaven had made her such a man; she thank'd me,
And bade me, if I had a friend that lov'd her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story,
And that would woo her. (Shakespeare 1959: 948)

Although no rule has been broken in the text, there is still an undercurrent of eroticism in this process which is pursued later on in both Othello's and Desdemona's arguments in favour of the latter accompanying the former to Cyprus. Nonetheless, this undertone attains its highest point in the dialogue between man and wife in Act II, scene I, when Othello returns from the war:

Oth. It gives me wonder great as my content
To see you here before me. O my soul's joy !
If after every tempest come such calms,
May the winds blow till they have waken'd death !
And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas
Olympus-high, and duck again as low

As hell's from heaven ! If it were now to die,
 'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear
 My soul hath her content so absolute
 That not another comfort like to this
 Succeeds in unknown fate. (Shakespeare 1959: 952)

The feeling of pure bliss which drives Othello to yearn for eternity represents merely the sunny side of this very human and very strong sexual drive. However, eroticism possesses a dark angle which surfaces after Othello's jealousy begins to run riot in his mind.

Contrary to what might be expected, it is not the scene of the smothering of Desdemona that holds the deepest erotic trait. There is no denying that the occasion is permeated with an intense sensuality, since, at Desdemona's bidding, the bed is made with her wedding sheets and Desdemona herself has put on the same nightgown she was wearing at that important time of her life. It is also a fact that Othello cannot altogether resist temptation when he finds her asleep:

Oth. [*Kisses her.*]
 O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
 Justice to break her sword ! One more, one more.
 Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill the,
 And love thee after. (Shakespeare 1959: 972)

But, it is while he is torn between belief and disbelief in the enormities that Iago is badgering him with that eroticism pervades the text. It is as if doubt and ambivalence have triggered the acuteness of Othello's senses compelling him to love, to loath, to abhor and to desire passionately the former object of his undying veneration and unshakeable trust:

Des. I hope my noble lord esteems me honest.
Oth. O ! ay; as summer flies are in the shambles,
 That quicken even with blowing. O thou weed !
 Who art so lovely fair and smell'st so sweet
 That the sense aches at thee, would thou hadst
 ne'er been born. (Shakespeare 1959: 968)

Another instance, of how eroticism runs high by the standards of the Elizabethan period, hardly so by those of the twentieth century, and which belongs to the same span of time in Othello's fictional life, takes place in Act III scene IV. It involves touching the the palms of the hands, since such physical contact between two people was then considered to be the height of public and/or private sexual intimacy. Bearing these and other similar considerations in mind, Othello comments on the "properties" of Desdemona's hand:

Oth. Give me your hand. This hand is moist, my lady.
 ...
 This argues fruitfulness and liberal heart;
 Hot, hot, and moist; this hand of yours requires
 A sequester from liberty, fasting and prayer,
 Much castigation, exercise devout;

For here's a young and sweating devil here,
That commonly rebels. (Shakespeare 1959: 962)

This is hardly the first time that the subject has cropped up in the text. To be precise it had appeared once before in a passage where Iago tries to persuade Roderigo that Cassio is indulging in intimate behaviour with Desdemona when he is just performing a mere courtly gesture.

Although *Othello, the Moor of Venice* is pervaded with eroticism, Shakespeare skillfully always succeeds in giving the impression that he was conforming to the precepts that ruled the expression of the sexual drive in his epoch. The same cannot be said about Donne who, in more ways than one, seems to have chosen to defy openly the decrees of convention. In fact, he rejected Petrarchian tradition in favour of the innovative procedures that affected the choice of subjects, style, language and structure of Elizabethan lyrical poetry. He also chose to follow in Ovid's footsteps and, spurred on by his own disposition and his interest in sexual matters, he felt bold enough to write overt erotic poems, a discourse endowed with its own private code of values. This set of rules unfettered by time or fashion has been accepted throughout the millennia by some chosen few, a privileged minority who belonged to what might be called the inner circle.

Among Donne's "Erotica", *Elegy XIX* stands out as the one in which eroticism is the everpresent prevalent feature. Nevertheless, the language and style are elegant and the play on words is all done in good taste. Even the many suggestive allusions are never improper or rude and there is definitely no intention to shock.

Of the 48 lines that make up the poem, written in rhymed couplets, the first four may be considered a "primum mobile", since they proclaim in no uncertain terms, the impatient desire of the lover confronted with the coy hesitation of his beloved:

Come, Madam, come, all rest my powers defie,
Until I labour, I in labour lie.
The foe oft-times having the foe in sight,
Is tir'd with standing though he never fight. (Donne 1991: 106)

As an interesting detail, it should be noticed that the two lines which introduce the lyrical composition seem to preserve in them some far-off echo of the language of one of the most famous Chaucer's characters – the Wife of Bath-, since both in *Elegy XIX* and in *The Canterbury Tales* the verbs "to labour" and "to work" are used with sexual innuendo.

All along the next 22 verses, the author presents the reader (or hearer) with a vivid picture of a breathtaking "striptease" (at least, that would be the twentieth century term), presumably performed by his mistress at his command. The flurry of the various articles of clothing which are systematically taken off, the poet's comments on a woman's body progressively unveiling, the disclosure of some of his own feelings while watching the process, all contribute to create one big dazzling erotic scene:

Off with that happy busk, which I envie,

That still can be, and still can stand so nigh.
 Your gown going off, such beautiful state reveals,
 As when from flowry meads th'hills shadow steales. (Donne 1991: 107)

Up to this section, the poem might be defined by its marked visual streak: sight is the overpowering privileged sense. However, a change lies in store, since from verse 25 to 32 touch becomes all important. And rightly so, too, for tactile sensations are fundamental in the foreplay that leads to the climax of physical love. These 8 verses seem, therefore, to represent the zenith of the sexual drive, a notion which is emphasized by the triumphant exclamatory tone of the text:

O my America! my new-found-land,
 My kingdom, safest when with one man man'd,
 My Mine of precious stones, My Emperie,
 How blest am I in discovering thee ! (Donne 1991: 107)

Although in the last part of the poem, the author exalts the merits of “full nakedness” as much of the body as of the soul as a means to experience every joy in life, it seems that his mistress is still a bit unwilling to comply totally with his wishes. Therefore, he tries to reach some sort of compromise: he offers her an apparel fit for a goddess, one that no woman worth her womanhood can refuse: “To teach thee, I am naked first; why than / What needst thou have more covering than a man” (Donne 1991: 108).

When William Shakespeare and John Donne decided not to banish from their work the expression of eroticism, they both knew that they were trespassing on dangerous ground through transgression of the most elementary rules of community life in a given place and time. However, the risk they were running brought with it its own compensation. In fact, they may have defied convention, but they certainly kept well within the limits of mankind's oldest and most cherished tradition – the erotic text which, for reasons best explained by Celia R. Daileader in *Eroticism on the Renaissance Stage*, holds humanity under a powerful, unwavering magic spell:

For before we made books, we made pictures, and before we made pictures, we made speech, and before we made pictures or speech, we made love. Before we made God, we made love. (Daileader 1998: 142)

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