

Shakespearean Strategies of (Dis)Orientation in *Othello*, act I

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Let me start with an assertion with which we shall all probably agree: Othello is a Moor. Then let me follow with a comment that may perhaps seem surprising to some of you: his racial qualification was not a central issue in most of the critical appraisals of the character written until the nineteen eighties. From Coleridge to Hazlitt, from Bradley to Helen Gardner, Othello was “the Noble Hero” or “the Noble Moor”.

It is only recently that we find a significant shift in critical approaches to Othello. For Ania Loomba, the attitude of earlier critics should be understood as the result of “the simultaneous exclusion of both gender and race” from all critical evaluations of the play, in order to sustain a specific cultural (male-centred, euro-centred) construct (1992: 40); and for K. Newman, Othello becomes “both hero and outsider because he embodies not only the norms of male power and privilege represented by the white male hegemony which rules Venice ... but also the threatening power of the alien” (1991: 213). In the process, Othello’s racial blackness has been equated with evil, and this evil has been doubled by the equation of maleness with patriarchy, which is intrinsically evil as well; and, as a consequence, Othello’s behaviour has been “explained” as intrinsic to his nature as a blackamoor and a man.

Yet, as it is commonly acknowledged that he is not wholly to blame for his actions, some explanations have gone further and presented Othello as the colonised black man who has (mistakenly) tried to assimilate the values of euro-centric culture, only to be (unwittingly) used and eventually destroyed by the agents of that culture, namely by Iago (e.g. Newman 1991). It is therefore not surprising to find assertions like Jack D’Amico’s, where Othello becomes “the foolish husband in a city comedy that destroys him and Desdemona” (1991: 177; my italics).

I hope I am not misunderstood when I say that these recent approaches to *Othello* can distort our view of the text and the character, that they can eventually alienate them from us and our experiences, and can make the play lose its effectiveness in the expression of a specific message which, we should not forget, was intended by Shakespeare to be received under specific conditions of reception.

I have said “alienate the play ... from us and our experiences.” The next inevitable question should be, who is us? Or rather, since we should also assume that Shakespeare had a specific set of recipients in mind, who were “us” in Shakespeare’s time? And how did he want “us” to react to the story of Othello and to his racial features in 1603-4? These questions might seem irrelevant in a critical context in which we have learned to accept the idea that, once written, the text is open for us to read as we think more appropriate. But my point is that, as critical readers, we should, at least, try to find out whatever indications possible of an author’s *original* intention before we engage in any kind of reinterpretation or reevaluation of his message. Otherwise, we might find ourselves discussing (and creating) the text and its author according to values that were simply not functional at the time of the composition of that text.

Now, going back to my questions, it should be obvious that it is virtually impossible to know what Shakespeare’s intentions were when he submitted his play for performance; and that it is also quite difficult to draw an undisputable image of Shakespeare’s audiences in seventeenth-century

London. However, we might gather some valuable information from his deployment of specific narrative and dramatic strategies, especially from the ones that he had to use in the development of the principles of orientation (according to Labov's narrative pattern) and identification (according to the models described by Jauss, among others) in the process of reading or watching the play, i.e. while that process is in progress. These strategies can also help us disclose the receptive effects achieved in that process of reading. With this kind of analysis, we should be able to determine, first, the way in which Othello's image is presented to the audience; secondly, how Othello's race was used as the means to build up that image and then to undermine its foundations; and finally, how this seemingly contradictory process could be indicative of a rather flexible attitude regarding race for both Shakespeare and his audiences.

To do so, however, it should be necessary to strain our imagination and try to reconstruct the conditions in which the play was received by an audience of men and women who went to The Globe to attend the performance of a new play. This is certainly strenuous for the average reader of the late twentieth century, since it requires that we temporarily forget everything we know or have been told about the play and its characters and that we candidly place ourselves in the skin of a spectator who had never seen or read it before.

If we approach the play from this perspective, we would find that it opens with two characters, Iago and Roderigo, in conversation about another person who seems to have chosen one Cassio, a man without experience, as his officer instead of Iago (1.1. 1-7):

Rod. Tush, never tell me, I take it much unkindly
That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse,
As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this.

Iago. 'Sblood, but you will not hear me.
If ever I did dream of such a matter,
Abhor me.

Rod. Thou told'st me, thou didst hold him in thy hate.

It should be noticed how Shakespeare seems to be deliberately vague as to the circumstances that have resulted in Iago's declaration of hate. Due to the indefiniteness of their "this" (1.1.3), "such a matter" (1.1.5), and "him" (1.1.7), we are forced to fill the information gaps and reconstruct the situation by picking up as many clues as possible from their conversation and adding up our guesses and inferences. As we engage in this activity, however, we must follow the lead provided by the speakers, especially by Iago; so that, as he explains why he should "hold *him* in his hate", we would probably assume that his explanation is adjusted to the truth, regardless of (or perhaps because of) his emotional state.¹ Iago's request for a conclusion in lines 38-40 ("be judge yourself, / Whether I in any just term am affin'd/ To love the Moor") could only lead to our declaration of acceptance of his reasons —not only because he says so, but because we have recreated the conditions that confirm those reasons. As a consequence, the Moor's identity would be reconstructed in terms of the injustice he has committed. And the omission of his name would stress our perception of him, not as an individual, but as a Moor, therefore according to whatever basic or schematic preconceptions would confirm the image of this Moor as unfair or unjust.

The second stage in the development of the Moor's image occurs when Iago and Roderigo wake Brabantio up to tell about a "her" ("Here is her father's house," 1.1.74) who has not been mentioned before onstage, and warn him about something —again— unspecified:

Iago. Awake! what ho, Brabantio! thieves, thieves, thieves!
Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags.

¹ There are critics that reach the opposite conclusions as they argue that Iago's reasons are not justified in the context of military customs. See Vaughan 1994: 44. However, they seem to focus on a rather specialised perspective, rather than on the responses of the common, non-military, people.

Thieves, thieves!

Brabantio at a window.

Bra. What is the reason of this terrible summons?

What is the matter there?

Rod. Signior, is all your family within?

Iago. Are all doors locked?

Bra. Why, wherefore ask you this?

Iago. Zounds, sir, you are robb'd, for shame put on your gown,

Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul;

Even now, very now, an old black ram

Is tupping your white ewe; arise, arise,

Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,

Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you,

Arise, I say.

Bra. What, have you lost your wits? (1.1.68-92)

The process followed in rousing Brabantio up would have its parallel in the audience's recreation of the events they wish Brabantio to know. What they say is that Brabantio has been robbed, though they do not specify the object of the theft—or, rather, they do, but only by inserting the reference to her between other references, in a way that is clearly misleading (see 1.1.79-81). Then, in very crude terms, they tell him about some sort of weird sheep mating which bears no clear connection with thefts (1.1.88-89). And finally, they hint out that the devil will make him a grandfather (1.1.91). As readers, we have plenty of time to elaborate on the inferences required to put the puzzle pieces together and understand what they are saying—and yet, without the knowledge acquired in previous and various kinds of acquaintance with the text, we would probably only gather that he has been robbed of her daughter (and that only because of Roderigo's initial reference to a "her" in 1.1.74) and that she is being sexually abused by "the devil". But as part of a less well-informed audience, our reaction would be closer to Brabantio's as he wonders if the two men have lost their wits (1.1.92). Brabantio may give us the impression that he is too literal-minded and a bit slow in getting the picture; but it should be remarked that the point of Iago and Roderigo's warning is not confirmed until the end of Iago's speech of 110-117 ("your daughter, and the Moor, are now making the beast with two backs," 1.1.115-7). With this, our reconstruction of the Moor (who is not yet mentioned by his name) is complemented with the addition of his animal, or rather beastly, lasciviousness, and his identification as a devilish creature, capable of reaching the extremities of abduction and rape.

So far, therefore, our construction of this character's image would seem to coincide with (and therefore confirm) conventional representations of the Moors (and by extension, of all African peoples) in Elizabethan and post-Elizabethan times. A London playgoer would indeed believe that this Moor is very much like his dramatic precedents (among others, Muly Hamet in *The Battle of Alcazar*, Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, even the conceited prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*; see D'Amico 1991, Cowhig 1985), perhaps even like some real black people or blackamoors he or she might have encountered or heard about (e.g., the Moorish ambassador whose customs and behaviour aroused much criticism during his visit in 1600; see Harris 1958), or like the peoples described in contemporary travel books (see Vaughan 1994: 55-6). So far, therefore, what we see and read would place us on the side of Iago, as we have no discernible reasons to suspect that he is distorting the real facts in a significant way.

However, this construction will be challenged at the beginning of scene 2, when we find Iago with a Moor and we notice (perhaps with surprise) that *this Moor* displays no evident signs of wickedness:

Iago. Though in the trade of war have slain men,

Yet do I hold it very stuff of conscience

To do no contriv'd murder; I lack iniquity

Sometimes to do me service: nine or ten times
I had thought to have yerked him here, under the ribs.

Oth. 'Tis better as it is.

Iago. Nay, but he prated,
And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms
Against your honour,
That with the little goodliness I have,
I did full hard forbear him; but I pray, sir,
Are you fast married? For be sure of this,
That the magnifico is much beloved,
And hath in his effect a voice potential
As double as the duke's; he will divorce you,
Or put upon you what restraint, and grievance,
That law (with all his might to enforce it on)
Will give him cable.

Oth. Let him do his spite;
My services, which I have done the signiory,
Shall out-tongue his complaints ... (1.2. 1-20)

While Iago seems to be angry and prone to violence against the man who dared speak against the Moor's honour (the "magnifico", we would infer, after we read line 12; who must be Brabantio, we infer again as we read on), he appears to be quite a peaceful and patient man, confident in the worth of his services to the town—and truly and respectfully in love with his wife (see 1.2.25). Once more, the lack of explicitness as to his identity is so remarkable, the contrast between what we see about this Moor and what we have hitherto assumed about him so clear, even Iago's attitude towards him is so diffident and respectful, that the audience might have been momentarily puzzled.

Moreover, we should bear in mind that the man impersonating the Moor was no less than Richard Burbage. It is known that he had an impressive physique and that, as the leading actor in Shakespeare's company the King's Men, his presence onstage could create quite an impact. Moreover, the effect of his appearance as the Moor could be intensified by his costume (if, as might be expected, he wore a military uniform: see Vaughan 1994: 97) and by the colour of his skin. He was indeed black; but it should be safe to assume that his blackness would emphasize the impressiveness of his physical appearance, perhaps even his projection as a desirable individual, due to the collusion of the soldier and the black as sexually attractive characters: as Tokson argues, "there is hardly a black character created for the stage whose sexuality is not made an important aspect of his relationships with others" (1982: 20); and we should add that this would especially be the case if he was presented as a warrior (see Vaughan 1994: 36).

The puzzle regarding the Moor's personality would be resolved eventually, as we gather up the clues that indicate that this man is indeed *the* Moor, and that it is only Iago's attitude that has shifted from one extreme to another, for reasons still undisclosed. I would argue that his presence would lead to a suspension of judgement concerning both the Moor's personality and the reliability of Iago's assertions. The audience's concern with the Moor's flawed nature could still be sustained, mostly on the basis of his latent sexuality. But, if so, it should be remarked that this quality has been subtly moved on to the audience's perception of the man: in other words, that it is the audience who would see him as a sexually attractive individual—and our eventual awareness of this fact would be a significant step in the recognition of the role we have been playing in building up a false image of the Moor.

The entrance of Brabantio on stage constitutes the third stage in the development of the Moor's image. It is significant that Shakespeare's strategy should now introduce a further argument against the Moor, once the previous ones have been undermined. So, Brabantio's accusations incorporate the notion of the theft, but also of the Moor's practice of black arts or

witchcraft, a perspective which could easily be accommodated in the conventional image of the Moor as a heathen or pagan, and could also serve to explain his adoption of a deceptive appearance, if, as he has “enchanted” Desdemona, he could also “enchant” us by looking like what he is not:

O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow'd my daughter?
 Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her,
 For I'll refer me to all things of sense
 (If she in chains of magic were not bound)
 Whether a maid, so tender, fair, and happy,
 So opposite to marriage, that she shunn'd
 The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,
 Would ever have (to incur a general mock)
 Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
 of such a thing as thou? to fear, not to delight. (1.2. 62-71)

Only when they all appear before the Duke and the Senators in scene 3 is the puzzle resolved—though not straight away. On the one hand, the Duke's welcome to Othello and the preference he gives him over Brabantio display his appreciation of the Moor as a much-needed general, but also as a worthy person. Here, at last, we find that his name is Othello, and we also find that he is qualified with the adjective “valiant” by seemingly respectable characters:

First Sen. Here comes Brabantio and the valiant Moor.

Enter BRABANTIO, OTHELLO, CASSIO, IAGO,
 RODERIGO,
and Officers.

Duke. Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you,
 Against the general enemy Ottoman;
 [To Brabantio] I did not see you; welcome, gentle signior,
 We lack'd your counsel and your help to-night. (1.3. 47-51)

On the other hand, when Othello is asked to respond to Brabantio's accusations, he produces a speech whose point is to explain precisely with “what drugs, what charms, / What conjuration, and what mighty magic” (91-92) he won Brabantio's daughter. And although it might be possible to understand that Othello is responding figuratively, it should nevertheless be noticed that Shakespeare still suspends Othello's explanation for some time (until his speech of line 128), and still the definitive evidence of his truth will not be given until Desdemona appears onstage to confirm that she is in full possession of her wits and that she is under the effects of no magic charm—in lines 180-189.

The Duke's attitude has too often been disregarded or misinterpreted (arguing, for example, that he is being carried away by his need of a military leader), but we should not ignore the implications of his comments of lines 171 (“I think this tale would win my daughter too”) and 289-90 (“If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black”) in terms of the revaluation of Othello's image. It should be obvious that, by the end of act 1, Shakespeare wanted him to have our sympathies and our admiration; and it should be assumed too that this effect could be intensified by the sense of injustice committed in our earlier evaluations of his character.

The result of this process of orientation and dis-orientation should also include the audiences' awareness of the way in which they have been so easily induced to apply specific severely biased racial and moral preconceptions in their evaluation of Othello. But if this awareness has been reached, it is only because, on the other hand, the audiences would not be unwilling to leave aside these preconceptions and admit that a blackamoor could feature positive, even admirable qualities.

If we accept that Shakespeare did develop a careful strategy to make his audiences change their views of Othello throughout act 1, and if we accept that these audiences did comply with

Shakespeare's strategy, then we also ought to assume that their latent racist preconceptions were not strong enough, and that they were in some way predisposed to discard them, provided that there was enough evidence to support that change of mind. The question of whether, in the process, Shakespeare wanted also "to disturb their settled notions of black people" (Cowhig 1985: 12), and reconsider the strength (or the weaknesses) of their racial prejudices and eventually leave them aside, loses its relevance, once we assume that they were potentially predisposed to accept a Moor as the hero of a play.

Furthermore, we should also bear in mind that this change entails a revaluation of the original instigator of our racial prejudices (Iago) and a readjustment of our ties with the characters and our expectations concerning the sources of the crisis that must come. Iago's soliloquy at the end of act 1 will confirm that he is the real villain in this story, that he has been misleading us as he has misled other characters, and that he is the one we should have been warned about from the very beginning of the play: in other words, if blackness stands for evil at all, Iago is really the one black character in the play—and the real expression of otherness. If, in the process development of emotional and ideological ties with the characters, we ought to dissociate ourselves from any one, it would undoubtedly be from Iago, the one with whom we would have nothing in common.

It may be argued that, as Shakespeare disoriented and then reoriented us in a different way, he might as well give a further turn of the screw and force us to reconsider our attitude once again, since, after all, Othello *is* a murderer. But my point of view is that Shakespeare's purpose was to present Othello first as the hero, then as the tragic victim of Iago's practices (as Desdemona is the tragic victim of Othello's behaviour); and that, by intensifying the pathetic ties between him and us, he wanted us to find ourselves reflected in him. This, however, would not be possible if we, white men and hopefully not cruel, saw him as a cruel blackamoor or as the projection of socially or morally inadmissible values. Rather, I believe, Shakespeare's audiences must have perceived him as an intensely vulnerable person (as Leavis says, a man "cruelly and tragically wronged") who happened to display this vulnerability in his blackness—but also in his age, his illiteracy, and his social marginality, and in a number of additional features which they might have shared with him. If we read or watch the play and do not conclude that Othello is like us (or the other way round: that we are in some way represented by Othello) we may miss the point Shakespeare wanted to make.

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