



**FROM FANTASY TO NIGHTMARE IN *OTHELLO*:
SELF-FASHIONING AND THE POLITICS OF
RECEPTION**

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Abstract

With Renaissance Self-Fashioning, Stephen Greenblatt opened the path for a substantial and long-lasting avenue of criticism on the forces that shaped identity in Renaissance England. The programme for what he termed his “poetics of culture” was based on interpretive practices focused on three basic aspects which, he assumed, could be reflected in- and therefore extracted from-a text: the manifestation of the author’s behaviour, the expression of specific codes of behaviour, and the critic’s reflection on those codes. This programme, however, leaves out an important element, namely, the impact that the text had, or was intended by the author to have, on the behaviour of its readers or spectators. The purpose of the present essay is to redraw Greenblatt’s programme by adding considerations on the interpretive practices undertaken by the intended recipients of a text. To do so, I will focus on the possible response of those who were part of the audience during the performance of Shakespeare’s Othello in Shakespeare’s own time, particularly on their response to the manner in which the question of self-identity is addressed in the play. My thesis is that Shakespeare’s play aimed to contain the widely circulating notion that social mobility is a desirable goal for the individual, and that he did so by reshaping the fantasy of the desire fulfilled into the nightmare of the self destroyed. The message thus transmitted to the audience would thus be construed as a warning against such desires. However, Shakespeare’s message could only succeed if the audiences were willing to agree with the principles underlying his warning; and this, in turn, is only possible if they saw themselves

represented in, and were capable of empathizing with, Othello. Additional goals of this essay are therefore to analyze the ways in which empathy and identification could have been triggered and the circumstances that could permit it, and to consider the consequences that such effect could have on the audience's final response to the play. Ultimately, this essay aims to show how Shakespeare's awareness of the conditions of reception could determine the nature of his own ideological proposals.

The publication of Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* in 1980 opened the path for a long-lasting avenue of criticism. His contribution had two remarkable achievements within the field of English Renaissance Studies: on the one hand, he gave new centrality in the analysis of Renaissance culture to the manner in which personal identity was shaped by the forces at work in Renaissance society; on the other, he provided a new critical methodology, which eventually came to be known as New Historicism but at the time was defined in more general terms as a "programme" for a "poetics of culture" (1980:5). The programme was based on a set of interpretive practices with their focus on three basic aspects which, he assumed, could be reflected in—and therefore extracted from—a text: the manifestation of the author's behaviour, the expression of specific codes shaping behaviour (including the poet's as well as that of other individuals), and the reflection upon those codes (1980:4). Critical interpretation, asserted Greenblatt, must consider all three aspects in order to provide as full a panorama as possible of the ways in which those codes actuated in a literary text. However, this approach is essentially text-centred—or to be more precise, essentially text-targeted, since it is based on the manner in which the text is shaped (targeted) by external forces in order to turn it into a vehicle for the expression of specific value systems. His programme leaves out what, in my opinion, is another important aspect of literary communication: namely, the ways in which these codes operate *from* the text and attempt to condition the behaviour of its readers or spectators (the text's targets). To be fair, Greenblatt does not ignore this aspect, and does devote some space to discuss it in his analysis of specific literary texts; but he, like many other critics of different schools, is satisfied with defining only a text's overt or implicit message and is only

circumstantially concerned with the way in which that message is digested by its potential—or rather, intended—recipients.

In my opinion, Greenblatt's poetics can provide a much better perspective by adding considerations on the interpretive practices undertaken by those recipients. The first goal of the present essay is therefore to redraw and implement Greenblatt's general programme by adding a fourth aspect to it. Hopefully, this essay will show how the introduction of the reader or spectator in the general pattern can help better understand the ways in which literary texts interacted within their social environment in the dissemination of specific codes of behaviour and (following Dollimore's assertion that "ideology exists in, and as, the social practices which constitute people's lives," 1989:9) of their corresponding ideological foundations. It must be noted, too, that the changes I propose are essentially methodological, and do not challenge the ideological principles of Greenblatt's criticism—or for that matter, of new historicism and its cousin-german school, cultural materialism.

A suitable case study for this kind of approach is Shakespeare's *Othello*. The second goal of this essay will be to focus on those who were part of the audience during its performance in Shakespeare's own time, in order to discuss their possible response to the manner in which the question of self-identity is addressed in the play. The starting ground for my analysis is not remarkably different from that posited by Greenblatt. My thesis is that Shakespeare aimed to contain the widely circulating notion that social mobility is a desirable goal for the individual, and that he did so by reshaping the fantasy of the desire fulfilled into the nightmare of the self destroyed. Therefore it must be concluded that Shakespeare cooperated with the aristocratic forces that saw social mobility, particularly in the kind that evaded control by the established institutions, as a challenge to their traditional rule and *status quo*. The message Shakespeare transmitted to his audience would thus be construed as a warning against such desires. However, Shakespeare's message could only succeed if the audiences were willing to agree with the principles underlying his warning; and this, in turn, is only possible if they saw themselves represented in, and were capable of empathizing with, *Othello*. I will therefore analyze the ways in which empathetic identification could have been triggered and the circumstances that could both permit and require it, and will also consider the consequences that such effect could have on the audience's final response to the play.

Ultimately, this essay aims to show how Shakespeare's awareness of the conditions of reception could affect the nature of his own ideological proposals in a way which would, perhaps inevitably, force him to be carefully ambivalent and make room for resistant or dissident interpretations.

1. Defining *Othello's* audience

The main premise of this essay is that the full extent of Shakespeare's message in *Othello* can only be measured in terms of its acceptability by the audiences for whom it was intended. This leads to the question of who were the audience of Shakespeare's *Othello*, and to the seemingly inevitable acknowledgement that there is no certainty that can sustain an answer. Andrew Gurr's thorough study *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* attests to their complex heterogeneity. The elusiveness and scarcity of direct contemporary evidence about this topic can only make matters more difficult, particularly when it comes to defining playgoers not merely by class but above all by "mental composition," that is, by their response and their "mind-sets" (Gurr, 2004:96). But the question placed above presupposes a sociological approach that can only lead to a dead-end. In order to move forward, it would be necessary to focus not so much on who really were Shakespeare's audience but on who did Shakespeare have in mind as potential recipients. This is also highly elusive ground, and it brings us dangerously close to the much-derided concept of authorial intention (the intentional fallacy). However, I believe it is time to revive this concept, as reception theorists and literary pragmatists have done. This can be made possible if it is accepted that Shakespeare (like most if not all writers) was aware of two basic premises: in the first place, that his plays—*Othello* among them—were the vehicle for the transmission of a specific political or ideological message; and secondly, that in order to make his plays serve that purpose he had to consider his audiences believed in and what they could be willing to assimilate in their interaction with the play and its message. If so, a consequential third premise would be that he was also aware of the need to provide the means to make the message palatable in order to make it go through. This would especially be the case if he anticipated resistance to its acceptability. For critical purposes, the means or resources applied by a writer could be a suitable indicator to discern the

kind of response that the writer anticipated and therefore to identify the type of audience imagined.

These premises can be easily integrated within the perspective of new historicism. The idea of an audience interacting with a text and, through it, with its author might in principle not seem to be quite agreeable: as Greenblatt restricted his analysis of institutional influence in shaping modes of behaviour to its manifestation in the author's own behaviour and therefore in the modes of behaviour represented in his literary production, he gave the impression that those institutional forces operated hegemonically, and that there was no alternative for the recipients but to acquiesce. In this respect, the possibility of resistance or some other kind of initiative from the recipients would be futile as a critical argument.¹ This has led to criticism from people who could in principle sympathize with Greenblatt's postulates but found that new historicism theorized power as an unbreakable or monolithic system of containment (see Sinfield, 1992:35). To respond to these critics, Greenblatt has clarified that he views ideas flowing within society in a constant and ever-dynamic process of circulation and negotiation (1990:154-158). From the side of cultural materialism—which was also attacked for the same reasons— Sinfield has responded by putting forward the concept of dissidence to explain individual resistance to the ideas promoted by institutional power (1992:39-ff).

The problem with the concept of individual dissidence or resistance is that it may seem to lead again to a critical dead-end, especially if it presupposes the need to ascertain how an individual may react. Once it is accepted that an individual may respond on his or her own initiative, any kind of generalization is precluded. This, however, presupposes also that all individuals react—or may react—differently; and though this may largely be the case in the interaction of readers with their texts in our modern world, it may not necessarily be so in the case of spectators watching a play in the early-modern world.

In order to better understand how plays operated in Shakespeare's own time, it may be convenient to leave aside the image of the private reader and to bring to the fore terms such as "spectator" and "audience"—

¹ From this perspective, even the author's awareness of his role in the transmission of these modes may be put into question.

though, again, a further redefinition of their meaning is in order. Gurr laments that “there is no English term which acknowledges the full experience of both hearing and seeing the complete ‘action’ of a play” (2004:102) and that critics must therefore resort to two inadequate terms: “audience” implies a crowd of listening people, and “spectator” refers to an individual who watches. He argues that the former has prevailed due to the progressive stress on the aural elements in drama; but its inclusiveness of a plurality of individuals under one single collective entity must also be taken into consideration. If, as he explains, early-modern playwrights used the term “spectator” in a derogatory manner (2004:102-103), it was probably because they did not welcome the expression of individual response or, at least, not the kind which stood out among, or contrasted with, collective response. As Gurr acknowledges eventually, a “fundamental contrast” with present-day playgoers, who are “set up, by their physical and mental conditioning, to be solitary spectators,” is that “early modern playgoers were audiences, people gathered as crowds, forming what they called assemblies, gatherings, or companies” and clustered around the stage to better listen to—and I would add, to better interact with—the actors (2004:1). An even more fundamental difference between present-day “solitary spectators” and Shakespeare’s audiences is determined by one of the conditions of the Elizabethan and early Jacobean playhouses: while today’s spectators are concealed from the sight of both actors and fellow-spectators, Shakespeare’s were mostly visible. It is likely that this visibility did not only encourage a more dynamic interaction between actors and audiences: it also made the latter aware of the presence of other spectators, and in a manner of speaking forced them to suppress individuality and go together with the rest of the auditorium—or, in cases of disagreement, with one of the parties involved—in the explicitation of their responses to dramatic action. As Bridget Escolme argues, “the cracks and fissures in dominant thought that cultural materialism has sought in the early modern drama are to be found at moments when the illusion of a being face to face with fictional presences in the theatre is at its strongest, and that this illusion is produced ‘outwardly,’ in the encounter between performer and audience” (2005:11). A dramatist or an actor with sufficient knowledge of the situation could provide the means to ensure collective or, if necessary, groupal response to better fulfil his goals.

An audience could then be defined as a group of spectators who respond together to the events shown onstage, who were intended to be the direct recipients of a specific message and were expected to assimilate it and yet were capable of resisting the assimilation of certain ideas if the message contradicted their own set of values. An audience does not remain a passive recipient in the process of their relationship with the performance.² Reader- and audience-response criticism has remarked that their participation is essentially dynamic. Wolfgang Iser has asserted that readers and spectators are willing participants in a “game” that consists both in playing along and being played (1993:273-280); and Hans Robert Jauss has defined several modes of participation which depend on the particular ties or types of identification attached to specific characters. More recently, Kent Cartwright has applied two basic responsive concepts, engagement and detachment, to analyze audience response to Shakespearian tragedy. In his opinion, “the shifting pattern of spectatorial engagement and detachment—sometimes called ‘aesthetic distance’—constitutes dramatic response” (1991:10). Like most response-critics, Cartwright is interested in the analysis of the production of aesthetic effects; but their methodology can also serve to ascertain additional results. In fact, in my reading of Shakespeare’s plays, Cartwright’s “aesthetic distance” can, indeed must, be combined with “ideological distance” for a better understanding of the processes at work. In this respect, engagement can be defined as “the experience of being absorbed” in a communal “immediate, sympathetic response, physical and emotional” and, I would add, ideological, that audiences “make to character, acting, language or action” (1991:12). Detachment, on the other hand, involves a process of “liberation” (1991:15) or self-consciousness on the part of the spectators which is activated by “our sense of removal from the point of view of any single character, our contrasting of events or attitudes, our awareness of illusion, our moral or intellectual judgments as invited by the dramatic context, and even our hypotheses about ‘facts’” (1991:14). Remarkably, Cartwright adds that “new historicism, with its interest in whether or not Renaissance drama subverts dominant structures of social power, makes the investigation of detachment particularly timely” (1991:14). In my opinion, however,

² According to Gurr, at the time of the earliest productions of *Othello* a new theatrical mode fostered a “self-conscious” audience by “flaunting the artificiality of stage pretence with metatheatricality, and insisting that audiences became not spell-bound believers but sceptical judges” (2004:184).

engagement, and especially the balancing of engagement and detachment, play as important a part in the analysis of the manners in which subjects relate with power.

The question remains, however: what ideas could be shared by all, or at any rate by a majority of the people attending the performance of a play, if their ideological and social extraction was so heterogeneous? One answer is that there are indeed certain universally shared values and notions; for example, that virtue should prevail and evil should pay, that must be made operative in a play but are nevertheless not the core of any given message; and then, another answer is that an audience can be identified by certain specific *common ideological denominators*, and that these can be recognized by the issues raised in a play (or, even better, in a series of plays), and, more precisely, by the way in which these issues are presented, problematized, elaborated and resolved.

It stands as a more than reasonable assumption that one of the major topics in English Renaissance drama is the definition of the individual in terms of his or her relationship with the world. A traditional view of the Renaissance “new man” has fostered the image of the individual coming to terms with his own autonomous self-identity. Two essential principles were foregrounded: the right to individual agency and the right to seek personal improvement socially and economically as well as intellectually and morally. It is also reasonable to assume that a significant majority of Shakespeare’s spectators sympathized with these principles; an indication of his awareness is the recurrence with which they appear as topics in his plays—or for that matter, in many of the plays written in the Renaissance. However, the changes effected by this new *Weltanschauung* were regarded as deeply destabilizing for an already unstable society: the rise of a new class which defined itself by the adoption of these principles subverted the medieval *status quo* based on the coexistence of the three estates and a strongly hierarchical organization of society; their unrestrained application now threatened the fabric of the new society. It was therefore necessary to implement means that could allow the ruling institutions to channel in and control individual initiative. One of the means for control was the promotion of a need for a strong-ruling patriarchal hand, represented pre-eminently by the absolute monarch and by ideological postulates that survived since the Middle Ages. As Jonathan Dollimore asserts,

The ideology of the Elizabethan World Picture was built around the central tenet of teleological design: the divine plan in-formed the universe generally and society particularly, being manifested in both as Order and Degree [...] Critics who have rightly repudiated the claim that this world picture was unquestioned orthodoxy have tended also to give the misleading impression that it survived, if at all, only as a medieval anachronism clearly perceived as such by all Elizabethans. In fact, it survived in significant and complex ways—that is, as an amalgam of religious belief, aesthetic idealism and ideological myth. Thus at the same time that it was unthinkingly (and perhaps sincerely) invoked by the preacher it was being exploited by the state as a ‘creed of absolutism’.(1989:6)

One of the vehicles for the transmission of this message was drama. As Franco Moretti asserts,

The rebirth of the stage can take place only when the system of roles that constitutes [the medieval] status society begins to give way, and the solidity of political bonds come undone in the course of the long crisis of the fourteenth century. Absolutism [...] has its origin in the attempt to halt this process. The feudal hierarchy whose molecular organization was in a state of extreme disarray hoped to restore itself by concentrating power in the hands of the sovereign. (1982:20)

Absolutism required the formulation of power on the basis on the undisputable submission of individual agency to a higher power. And in order to achieve this submission, it was necessary to promote both the immanent sacredness of the monarch and the innate inadequacies of the individual to act righteously on his or her own initiative. The first concept is foregrounded in more overtly political drama, particularly in the history plays;³ the second is the more recurrent one in tragedies in which the problematization of individual self-identity is a major concern. Problematizing, however, is a very risky operation. It requires the explicit acknowledgement of the existence of more than one position regarding both the nature of the problem and its possible resolution; it therefore entails the verbalization of the voices which the ruling institutions want to repress or contain. It is particularly risky when these voices represent a numerical majority and they are to be replaced by ideas promoted by

³ For a thorough study of this topic, see Christopher Pye's *The Regal Phantasm* (1990).

a dominant minority. In order to be successful, this operation needs extreme subtlety and cunning. *Othello* is a very clear illustration.

2. *Othello*, from success to tragedy

There is abundant criticism on *Othello*, and much of it has been written from the perspective of new historicism and cultural materialism and other associate critical perspectives in the last two decades. But a rather neglected aspect of the play, and one that I would like to foreground, is that, before *Othello* starts, Othello's life is defined by success. He is an outsider, a man from the margins of civilization, who relinquishes his ties with his origins, becomes a Christian, and finds admission within the centre of the civilized world (Venice), where he reaches the topmost level of his fulfilling profession, is admitted within the close circles of the nobility, and is treated with respect if not with admiration. All of that, with no more than his military skills, as he has no education nor the manners of a courtier. He may have an added quality, which must be mentioned if only because it is hinted that it may have contributed to Desdemona's interest in him: a physique that sets him in contrast with the "wealthy curled darlings" (1.2.68) of Venice's palaces and marks him out as an attractive male.⁴ It must be noted that the colour of his skin is not a deterrent in this story of success; rather on the contrary, it is an inducement remarked by his exoticism. It would also signify how racial difference does not stand in the way and that the alien can be successfully integrated within Venetian society. Othello's story can thus illustrate paradigmatically how the dream of individual promotion can be fulfilled, under suitable conditions.

The confidence and trust placed by the Venetian Senate on him does, however, not run parallel with Othello's confidence in himself or his personal qualifications. The most obvious sign of fracture comes precisely with his marriage to Desdemona. It should have represented the culmination of his integration in the uppermost levels of Venetian society, as well as the sublimation of a personal dream: he is loved by a woman

⁴ This aspect must be taken into consideration from another perspective as well: the actor who played Othello in Shakespeare's time was Richard Burbage, and his imposing figure must have played an important part in shaping the audience's reactions to Othello's appearance on the stage, especially to his first appearance, in act 1 (see Prieto-Pablos 1997). For an in-depth analysis of the relationship between Shakespeare and Burbage, see Holmes 1978, esp. 170-172.

who is beautiful, intelligent and rich, and she is willing to have him as her husband. An adjective that should naturally come together with the others is “virtuous,” but this is in fact the one that triggers his personal insecurity. Before their marriage, the conditions of their relationship are closely evocative of the ones represented in Petrarchan verse, with him as the unworthy suitor and her as the female ideal. The picture drawn by Brabantio in 1.2. of her as a tender maid shunning all contact with potential suitors foregrounds this notion:

Damned 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 shunned
The wealthy curlèd darlings of our nation,
Would ever have, t'incur a general mock,
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
Of such a things as thou. (1.2.63-71)

In this context, requited love is practically impossible due to the social and moral differences that separate lover and beloved. Othello's conquest would therefore come as an extraordinary achievement. However, to him this is beyond his own expectations, and almost incomprehensible, unless there is some hidden flaw in Desdemona; hence his own meditations on his personal shortcomings (due to his race, his education and even his age) to explain the suspicions aroused by Iago in 3.3:

Haply for I am black,
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declined
Into the vale of years—yet that's not much—
She's gone, I am abused, and my relief
Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures ours
and not their appetites! (3.3.265-272)

He should construe their marriage as representing the full recognition of his merits; yet at the same time he fears that Desdemona may have overstepped the limits of female decency and married him to satisfy her sexual needs. “Othello,” declares Novy, “cannot completely free himself from the conventional assumption that Desdemona's marriage to him is unnatural” (1984:126). Her own acknowledgement

of her desires only serves to encourage in him the suspicion that she is not virtuous. As Dympna Callaghan observes,

[Desdemona's] wish to accompany him to Cyprus for the consummation of their marriage, "The rites for why I love him" (I.iii.257), [...] might well be read as demonstrating all the 'venery' to be expected in a young woman. Such a display of apparently insatiable female sexual appetite severely problematises Desdemona's characterisation as a virtuous woman. (141)

Sexual appetite is—or rather, progressively becomes—an important aspect of their relationship, and one that does indeed become a problem. Greenblatt refers to Christian orthodoxy to explain how desire ought to be avoided even within marriage, as it would turn the lovers into adulterers even within the bounds of matrimony (1980:247-250). Having assimilated this notion as a new-born Christian, Othello can only suspect desire and, if necessary, destroy its source. As Valerie Traub states, the play *Othello* shows how "male anxiety toward female erotic power is channelled into a strategy of containment" which entails the dramatic transformation of Desdemona's body into a corpse (1992:26). Othello's desire would thus echo the kind of love evinced by the male lover in Petrarchan verse, and confirm his own unworthiness; but at the same time, his assumption of Desdemona's impurity would show to what extent she is not like the idealized women of Petrarchan tradition. An obvious echo of the development of their relationship can in fact be found in Shakespeare's own Dark-Lady sonnets, in which Shakespeare distorts the typical Petrarchan pattern by presenting a love relationship marked by the male lover's intense suspicion of his lover's unfaithfulness. In the play, Othello's consideration of Desdemona as suspect of adultery with other men as well as with him, and therefore as someone deserving due punishment, leads tragically to a double execution—hers ("yet she must die, else she will betray more men," 5.2.6) and his own.

Othello's attitude has also been analyzed as evidence of the effects of ideological assimilation. As Edward Said declares, "the conversion of the outsider to the service of dominant culture is a crucial feature of the European encounter with other peoples" (1980:71). Accordingly, Othello's immersion in Venetian society has led him to discard his original self, determined by the manners and values of the land of his birth, and to adopt new ones. But among these new values is the notion that differences are graded hierarchically, so that, even if he has found

accommodation in Venice, he is still a foreigner at the service of the State and also naturally inferior to those who were born in the elite and rule hegemonically. As Potter comments, “Othello may serve Venice and be devoted to it, but he is not ‘of’ it” (1988:193). Given his condition, he assumes that by marrying Desdemona he has abused the confidence of those who welcomed him. His speech before the Senate in 1.3, to respond to the accusations proffered by Brabantio, attests to the extent of his ideological contamination, as he does in fact agree with Brabantio that he has “enchanted” her even if he seems to be willing to undermine his accusations:

I will a round unvarnished tale deliver
Of my whole course of love: what drugs, what charms,
What conjuration and what mighty magic—
For such proceedings I am charged withal—
I won his daughter. (1.3.88-94)

The conclusion of his “tale” also insinuates that the feelings he aroused in her could evince perhaps a kind of sympathetic attachment, which is derived from her pity (1.3.166-169) but not true love.

All of this might have come to no evil, however, if Iago had not stepped in. Iago manages to increase the fracture in Othello’s confidence and becomes the catalyst for the tragic dénouement. Greenblatt defines Iago’s attitude toward Othello as “colonial”, in that the former regards the latter as “a fertile field for exploitation” (1980:233). It must be remarked, however, that Iago is an outsider too, and one whose ambition and envy is unfettered by any moral or social restraints. Unlike Othello, he has not found the recognition he believes he deserves; and this offers him sufficient motivation to exact his revenge against Othello, the person who should have granted him a better position. But Iago’s revenge also affects Venetian society, as he uses Othello to kill Desdemona, the figure who symbolically represents that society. In the end, all the destruction caused in the play comes from two people who share the same condition, being born outside the world which adopted them. The main difference between them is that Othello assimilates his own blame, to the extent that, in a final act of service to Venice, he becomes his own executor.

It stands as a significant element in the play that Venetian society is free from any blame in the events. This is, in fact, a key element in the definition of the play’s dominant message. To its audiences, it is a

parable of the dangers inherent to excessive ambition in those individuals who have not been marked by birth for a privileged position within society. Like Othello and Iago, those who choose to change their status without the supervision of those above are bound to fail and bring destruction to themselves and to those around them.

3. Audience response and political engagement

In *Othello*, the question of individual agency is tightly bound with the question of individual mobility. All three central characters behave as if conditioned by an innate need to take action in order to change their status, each of them in their own particular world and in their own way. Of all three, Othello, the uncivilized alien, is the most remarkable example, since through his service for the Venetian State he has earned social recognition. In this respect, throughout much of the play Othello's story shows how success is possible and therefore illustrates how a man may find a suitable path for self promotion with the only merit of his own personal skills. In an audience seeking the fulfilment of similar hopes, Othello's success must have prompted admiration. As a matter of fact, Shakespeare seems to have aimed to have the audience engage with the Othello of acts 1 and 2, at the same time as they would detach themselves from a Iago whose behaviour gives sufficient evidence to understand why he has not merited promotion. In the process of assimilation of the manners and principles encouraged by society, Othello has proven to be a good learner, whereas Iago has merely concealed his unsocial manners behind his disguise of honesty. Othello would represent an inspiration for those who feel themselves outside the privileged circles of society; Iago, on the other hand, would be the negative model of behaviour. Othello's marriage to—and previous acceptance by—Desdemona would therefore represent the culmination of a shared fantasy in which social promotion blends with sexual fulfilment despite the obvious differences between both partners.

Considering the similarities and differences between Iago and Othello, it is an apparent paradox that Othello alone should be branded by his race and colour. His race marks him out as different from all others, and yet as someone successfully integrated within the privileged society of pre-eminently white people. In the context of Renaissance England, his blackness would not necessarily alienate him from the

spectators, either. The presence of people of colour was so minimal and their impact on daily matters so limited, that English people would not see blacks as immediately threatening, despite their common presuppositions about black people's wild nature and about the negative connotations attached to the word "black". Moreover, to Shakespeare's audience, Othello's difference could symbolically represent their own difference, as they too would regard themselves as outsiders with respect to the privileged world to which they aspired to belong.

However, as is often the case in tragedy, engagement and detachment do not stand as absolutely separate concepts but blend together, or alternatively come to the surface, in the construction of a character's identity. As Cartwright asserts, "Shakespearean tragedy can systematically appropriate this detachment from the fictional persona and engagement with the actor so as to heighten the emotional power and complicate the meaning of the play" (1991:1). So, even in the first half of the play, Othello's image is not absolutely positive. This is due mostly to Iago's insidious yet ultimately accurate comments about him; but the pervasiveness of Iago's picture of "the Moor" must also be regarded as the evidence of the audience's predisposition against Othello. In my analysis of act 1 of the play (Prieto-Pablos, 1997), I tried to show how the audience's racial prejudices are deliberately placed by Shakespeare in a continuous flux between confirmation and destabilization and how Shakespeare made his audiences aware of a dark side in Othello that lies lurking in the first half of the play and will come to the surface and dramatically shatter his positive image in the second half. But, at the same time, Shakespeare also wanted his audience to realize the extent of their own ideological contradictions: even if they would empathize with a successful Othello, they would still be prejudiced against someone like him. The impact of the audience's awareness of their ideological preconceptions would be further intensified by their realization that even if they try to detach themselves from Iago, they must find themselves reflected in his racial prejudices. Therefore, as Iago is the bringer of Othello's personal undoing, so they are also the vicarious agents of his destruction.

This is in fact the first step in a process which has as its goal the production of the audience's awareness of their own shortcomings. If they see themselves reflected in Iago, then an important part of the plan is brought to a successful end; but the main objective will be achieved

through their identification with Othello. Having assimilated what Othello stands for, the alien whose violent nature comes to the surface when moral or social restraints disappear, then the final dénouement must be regarded as the inevitable outcome. Yet, because of the particular combination of engagement and detachment, inevitability does not entail passive acceptance. David Farley-Hills argues that “the feeling of detachment [is not] sufficient to prompt the clarity of moral judgement that is characteristic of the kind of satirical alienation that we find in Jonson’s plays. At the end of the play no clear moral judgement of the hero emerges; this is largely because he is presented so much more as a victim than as an instigator of the tragedy” (1990:120).⁵ Therefore, as Nicholas Potter confesses, “the point of the plays is that we must see Othello as hopelessly wrong, yet wish he were right. It is not that the one might or ought to displace the other. Our pleasure in understanding consists in holding the two positions at once” (1988:201). In fact, Cartwright points out, Shakespeare seems to have taken care that the audience respond in this manner by deliberately delaying the confirmation of Desdemona’s death:

Following his murder of Desdemona, Othello’s focus darts away from and then back to her body four distinct times, wrenching the spectator’s gaze and feelings with him. The breaks in the audience’s attention intensify its anxiety for her [...]. The scene’s structure (Emilia’s interruptions, Othello’s repeated doubts) insists, to the spectator, on the possibility that Desdemona lives, an agonizing uncertainty. (1991:1-2)

The spectators really hope she is not dead because her survival would entail the possibility that Othello and Desdemona’s relationship may be restored to its wished-for order and then Othello may be exempted from responsibility in her murder. And this would also entail the spectators’ own exemption from responsibility, dramatically motivated by their identification with Othello.

Desdemona’s death brings all hopes down, and confirms what emblematic and proverbial tradition had asserted: an Ethiop cannot be

⁵ Farley-Hills contends also that “in Othello we sympathize with a man who is different from ourselves” and that this is “partly because the play presents Othello as an outsider and misunderstandings caused by his status as an outsider are a crucial element in his downfall” (1990:119). But this is true only to a certain extent, and only at the end of the play, when the audience must seek means to detach themselves from him.

washed white, and natural differences can only be disguised.⁶ The audience's recognition and acceptance of this maxim in order to understand both Othello's nature and their own should work as the trigger for tragic catharsis. Othello's death is the symbolic representation of the audience's own punishment; but he is the sacrificial scapegoat which allows the audience to cleanse themselves and leave the playhouse purified, having acknowledged their own flaws. As Cartwright declares, "[e]ngagement with acting translates into exactly enough detachment from the hero at the end to afford the spectator a contemplative and valorising distance, with the blemishes of the hero's personality submerged in virtuosic portrayal. The audience needs this transference, for it must loosen its emotional ties to the dying hero enough to leave the play and the theater psychologically whole and at rest" (1991:6).

The tragic ending can therefore be construed as the evidence that successful mobility and full integration are not possible—not in the dramatic world, nor in the real one, be it Venice or England. In many of Shakespeare's plays, a central premise is that there is an undefined force, a sort of semi-divine providence, that restores all to their natural order and punishes those who seek to move beyond their place.⁷ As Dollimore puts it, "establishment providentialism [...] aimed to provide a metaphysical ratification of the existing social order" (1989:87). This applies to *Othello*, and through him to all those in the real world who share Othello's hopes, so that tragic catharsis would entail the "purification" of the audience's hopes of unsupervised mobility. The audience's involvement (through Iago) and identification (with Iago and above all with Othello) is therefore the necessary means to better express Shakespeare's final message.

Only a caveat is introduced in this premise: that successful mobility is not possible—unless properly channelled and controlled by the suitable hands of those who rule the movements within society. What the play insinuates in this respect is that while Othello remained at the service of the Venetian State and obeyed their orders all was well, and rewards

⁶ For an analysis of this topic, see Gómez-Lara 1997.

⁷ This was particularly so in the history plays and in some of the tragedies, as providentialism was used as "an ideological underpinning for ideas of absolute monarchy and divine right" (Dollimore 1989:89). In Shakespeare, providentialism also took the shape of Natural Law (1989: 42). For a discussion on natural law and order, providentialism and anti-providentialism in Jacobean drama, see Dollimore 1989:36-40, 42-44, and 83-108.

were granted by those above him. When he took the initiative and sought the fulfilment of his personal goals, his own wild natural self, suddenly unfettered, took over and all started to go wrong. Othello's primary cause of his fall was to assume the initiative in his marriage to Desdemona; in so doing, he did not incur in any legal fault, but he stepped over the traditional principles that state that it is the right of the father to decide how the marriage of a daughter must proceed, and that it is the duty of a servant to await the master's orders. The same applies to Desdemona, as she chose to marry without her father's consent. And to Iago as well, as he sought his way upward as a soldier by dispatching away those who stood in his path. The providential force which restores order was clearly helped by their natural inadequacies to take control of their self-initiative.

4. Problematizing containment

With this message, *Othello* did no doubt become an instrument for the containment of social mobility, and Shakespeare placed himself at the service of his own masters. A significant part of his intended audience, even if it was scarce in number and perhaps hardly ever attended the performance of his plays, were the people representing the institutions that regulated social mobility and who had an interest in restricting the circulation of ideas which could subvert social order: namely, his patrons and, through them, those with influence at the Court of Elizabeth I or James I. These people would be satisfied with the message transmitted by *Othello*. But Shakespeare must also have taken into consideration his larger audiences, and among these he must have expected a considerable number (according to Gurr, drawn from the gentry and the Inns of Court) who could as a matter of principle object to a message which undermines their expectations of a better future, if not their own personal experiences. It is for them in particular that he developed strategies of engagement that prompted them to an empathy with Othello which could facilitate the assimilation of the message. However, even then he must have been aware that still some his spectators could have rejected the premises on which the message was based. Among them, there would be those who had attended the performance of Marlowe's plays, where he proposed a "subversive identification with the alien" (Greenblatt 1980:203). In fact, it may not suffice with stating that Marlowe was defined by his radical and Shakespeare by his conservative ideology.

This would constitute excessive reductionism and would require ignoring a prevailing force in the general policy of drama: to make a play as successful as possible it must be made attractive to as many people as possible. Excluding resistant spectators would mean that Shakespeare (and the King's Company) would conform only with those people who were predisposed to agree with, or to accept, certain ideological postulates.

Greenblatt himself had to acknowledge, after concluding that Shakespeare advocates for the submission of the individual to the institutional ideology that holds society together (1980:253), that "it will sound forced and unconvincing" to present "Shakespeare as an unwavering, unquestioning apologist for Tudor ideology" (1980:254). In fact, he suggests,

If there are intimations in Shakespeare of a release from the complex narrative orders in which everyone is inscribed, these intimations do not arise from bristling resistance or strident denunciation. [...] They arise paradoxically from a peculiarly intense submission whose downright violence undermines everything it was meant to shore up. (1980:254)

The possibility of dissident reading cannot be discarded at all; not only because a person may individually decide to disagree, but also because the play itself may have suggested such a possibility. This would indeed be facilitated by a subtle reevaluation of the play's events and of the participants involved in them. Two possible options are suggested here, both of them based on the permanence of the audience's engagement with *Othello*.

One of the keys for these alternative interpretations would be Iago and a "what-if" question: what if Iago did not meddle in the lives of the other characters? The answer must remain as a mere hypothesis, but it does help to place most, if not all, the responsibility for the fates of *Othello* and *Desdemona* on Iago's actions. In this respect, *Othello* becomes the relatively innocent victim, and while Iago still remains a paradigmatic example of the evil inherent in the nature of common people, *Othello* could stand as the example of what could have been a successful integration and would be a suitable model for those spectators still willing to hold to their dreams of a better social position.

Another alternative view, one which Greenblatt would define as "Marlovian" and would satisfy the more radical spectators, would have

society itself as the key. As Nicholas Potter asserts, Venice “was regarded as prodigious, in its way” (1998:201). To many people it would probably represent an ideal: it was a self-made city built from virtually nothing by enterprising self-made men who started as plain sailors, became wealthy tradesmen and ended up creating a new nobility which could compete in sophistication and respectability with any other contemporary society. That Venetian society should prove capable of integrating outsiders must have been regarded as exemplary and probably as enviable. But behind its façade, Venetian openness to the outsider conceals a deeply elitist society. It provides no real means for the successful integration of outsiders or aliens; in fact, it uses them and places them at its service, having them do what their restrictive moral codes forbid the Venetian elite to do. In this respect, Othello and Iago evince the situation of the outsider adopted by Venice: they are mercenaries, and are employed to protect Venice from other outsiders and to kill them if that prove necessary for the well-being of Venice. Alternatively, if their role as mercenaries is not needed, they may be used for entertainment, to provide excitement to the parties organized by the Venetian elite. But, being soldiers, they are relinquished to the margins of society and can find no real accommodation within it. According to Potter, “Venice’s ‘pragmatism,’ ‘diplomatic’ or ‘negotiated relationships’ between sets of discourses, does not permit the growth of a fully intercurative relationship in which the possibilities of discussion and translation may be developed, but works actively to keep separate the differences it defines” (1998:197). One of those possibilities would have been represented by the successful marriage of Othello and Desdemona. Moreover, by restricting mobility among those who wish for it, Venice engenders, and consents to the existence of, disruptive forces like those represented by Iago. What Shakespeare’s play would insinuate for those predisposed to agree with him would be that damage Iago provokes is luckily restricted to the domestic world of Othello and Desdemona and its close environs; but that restriction is merely accidental, as the characters are placed in the secluded world of Cyprus and its Venetian fortress. In a less secluded world, the effects would be more far-reaching. And this would be Shakespeare’s implicit warning against restrictive ideological practices, if the “tension between the ‘idealists’ and the ‘real’ world of law and commerce and political expediency” (1998:204) is not resolved.

It is unfortunate that we lack evidence of the response elicited by *Othello* among the spectators of Shakespeare's time. Inevitably, we must base our reconstruction of those audiences on our own responses in the present, under different ideological conditions, and these responses prove to be multiple and contradictory. However, it can also be assumed that it is necessary to avoid "reductive generalizations," as Greenblatt asserts, and that this multiplicity evinces the subtlety with which Shakespeare encoded his ideological proposals. In this respect, it can be argued that Othello's fate attests to the need to ensure control of individual agency and to the submission of the individual to specific codes of behaviour; but at the same time it would be necessary to acknowledge the existence of ideological fractures that could justify resistance to these fashioning strategies.

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