

## **Soldiers of Fortune: Othello, Iago, Cassio et al<sup>1</sup>**

In this paper we draw attention to some historical conditions both in England and abroad (the Mediterranean basin) which contributed to shape spectators' response to the tragedy at the turn of the century (1603–4) when it was performed, and nowadays when the Renaissance sense of "globalization" returns...with a difference.

Indeed, from the times the Europeans, in their drive towards Jerusalem, realized that the Mediterranean could be construed as part of their space, a vast scene of cross-cultural interaction opened up. And as this interaction intensified, identities of a local nature became somewhat blurred, as the institution of the mercenary exemplifies. In our own time the vast masses of people that migrate whether escaping from wars or famines, or in search of a better life, must constantly redefine their identity along similar lines, i.e. in terms of place, tradition, race, gender, etc. And this process is not without conflict or loss, as the media daily reports.

We have singled out for our study two features of the play that we consider relevant in our global age, the situation of the military profession at the time with the institution of the mercenary, and the issue of cultural identity.

The playtext offers different ways of filling places of indeterminacy but we find that in those pre-Freudian times the reasons offered by Iago to take revenge on the Moor are sound enough to be taken seriously by the audience. These reasons, the refusal to promote him, the choice of Cassio, refer to the transformation of the army from a band of mercenaries into a small highly

professionalized cohort, equipped with new weaponry more sophisticated than before and whose effective handling could be achieved only by those with a suitable training for the purpose. This decision sounds too familiar in our own time where labour-redundancy plays against the technologically illiterate.

The geopolitical position of Venice in the late XVI century was an ambiguous one: on the one hand she aligned herself with the League that featured prominently imperial Spain and the Papacy, achieving thus the famous victory of Lepanto in 1571, but on the other, she never ceased to attempt diplomatic agreements with the Turk, an attitude which earned her some scornful names such as "Venetians, the Christian Moors," or "Venice, the courtesan that sleeps with the Turk," a notion that will be used by Iago to refer to Desdemona in due time. Were contemporary spectators in Shakespeare's age aware of these facts? We think they were.

Venice was then heading towards her political sunset. Cyprus was her farthest frontier, the last Christian outpost in the Mediterranean basin that she was soon to lose for ever (1571). The traffic with the East demanded a safe sea, free from Turks and privateers. Venice was financially and politically strong, but poor in human resources: she lacked soldiers so she hired them. They came from all over the Mediterranean coasts: Dalmatians, Greeks, Albanians, Africans...and also slaves. Slavery in the Mediterranean, as we know, was a common occurrence and it must be emphasized that it was colour-blind. Muslims made Christians slaves and Christians reciprocated. They were needed to man the galleys. The slave trade to America had not yet been systematically developed. The black man had not been yet declared officially "inferior" for the

<sup>1</sup> The present text consists of the communication read and discussed during the proceedings of the last Shakespeare World Congress (Valencia, Spain, 2001).

purpose of economic exploitation. The figure of Othello cannot therefore be equated with that of a modern AfroAmerican or Caribbean man. Not without distorting the truth.

We find, in the definition of the time and space of the play, an ambiguity and a “criticality” (in the sense of crisis) that, although essentially artificial as the dramatic genre requires, stems from a very real sense of disorientation and anxiety. The characters move along a psychological frontier without knowing very well where they stand: while sensing all the time the advantages to be gained, they lack the perspective of the dangers incurred by their moves. Iago famously conveyed this lack of definition by his paradoxical “I am not what I am,” but we wonder whether we could not use the same line for Othello himself.

This psychological frontier has to do with the notion of the mercenary, which defines the role of the Moor in Venice, in the world of Desdemona. The idea of a soldier which belongs nowhere and fights for pay on behalf of a given power. What this meant for the centre of that world, i.e. the Italian Renaissance, and what it means to us nowadays. How the mercenaries functioned in the times that led to the formation of a national identity or conscience, and how they do today, in a process more or less reversed.

We should also consider what echoes this concept awakes in our own turn of century. From the *Beau Geste* idea of the mercenary in the Sahara, hiding his identity and his sense of loss under the uniform of the legendary French Foreign Legion, to the very real images of brutality transmitted all over the world from the dreadful wars of Africa.

What kind of mercenary were Othello, Iago, Cassio and the rest? It is evident that, for Desdemona at any rate, Othello qualified for the first kind, the romantic version. It is equally obvious that Cassio, the Florentine, was already that new kind of soldier, an officer trained in schools rather in the field, and would soon exemplify the sort that were to provide with able

leaders the national armies. The question remains open for Iago: he neither feels the beauty of the vocation like Othello nor has the know-how required by the new war technologies, artillery for example. He does not even understand—or tries to—the value of them. Much like some “oldies” today. But the malaise brought by the new situation, the feeling of being left out of things, is there all right. So Iago is and will remain forever an issue in the consideration of this play, whatever angle you take. In this case he seems to personify the tension between the new and the old.

Within this framework we can focus now on the situation of women in the male closeted world of the garrison. Or rather in their perception of women in this context. It seems irrelevant to ascribe this situation to any particular historical or geographical circumstance: rather it appears that the peculiarly stuffy atmosphere of the twice claustrophobic setting of the garrison on the island exercises an influence on its inmates that matters more in the study of their attitudes and behaviour than any other motivational impulse. A world governed by few expectations except those of sentry duty, an alertness, a perpetual watching and decoding of signs which develops into an ability, in turn into a potential weapon. A situation very much the same today as it was then and which has been already made a topic for analysis in other famous literary works such as Dino Buzzati’s *The Desert of the Tartars* (1940) and Carson McCullers’ *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1950).

How is this situation borne in the domestic field? The garrison is the place where Desdemona, “the general’s general,” is alone on a sort of stage, watched, admired, envied, desired, despised for having married an outsider, and nobody to stand by her. This is made evident when Emilia’s attempts to persuade the Moor of her innocence fail, for she herself is not well-thought of, either. They are the military’s wives, inevitably a topic of malicious conversation at the barracks/mess, as when Iago talks to Cassio about Desdemona.

In this confined space called Cyprus, women, like men, have very few possibilities of being. We find for women three instances of synechdochic substitution: the bride, the wife and the whore. Their discourse is never relevant unless it is to fit into the male discourse's centrality which is the only one with power, the only one accorded hearing. We see that Othello never really questions Iago's statements on Desdemona or Bianca. Even Emilia's final speech is given some credit probably through her husband's act of murder on her. The whore, Bianca, is made fun of because she seems to be genuinely attached to Cassio, such "strange" behaviour, to feel love, in a prostitute is considered ludicrous. The wife, Emilia, is dealt with according to needs: flattered to obtain favours, mocked as soon as they have been obtained. The bride, Desdemona, keeps the honour of her man. As soon as suspected, anybody's testimony can undo her. The violent occurrence that shatters her love dream is nothing but a sordid little domestic affair of the kind we read about or see in scandalmongering media. What makes the play memorable, as we know, is to see how the characters run blindly on towards their loss without ever having so much as a hint of what is brewing around. Desdemona, the abusive husband's wife, refuses to hear Emilia when she, knowing perhaps Othello better, or men in general, or lacking in bride's self-confidence, warns her of the danger. "This man is jealous," she states. Desdemona's negative to take her husband's outlandish requirements seriously (the row over the handkerchief) and her insistence on having her own way in Cassio's affair betray her innocence or perhaps too the desire to test, as a young bride, her power over her husband.

The events take place during a lull in battle: the Turks have been routed by the storm. Again we might perhaps remember that contemporary records mention 1569–70 as one of the worst winters of the century in the Mediterranean; as we have commented earlier on, the occurrence

does not necessarily have to be historically accurate yet it provides the memory of the suffering, of the damage, in the play the symbolical separation of the lovers, in reality the terror that the Spanish Armada created in an England not yet sure of her power and possibilities (1588). So the Turks of the play become the Spaniards of the English memory: the anxiety is the same. The same storm that destroyed the Invincible Armada, in any case a miraculous Shakespearean tempest all right, designed to bring forth the best and the worst in human beings, leaves the Cyprus garrison with nothing to do but celebrate the ease with which they had got rid of danger, i.e. by whoring, drinking and gambling. The warriors, never at ease in times of peace, start wagging their tongues. Iago, at any rate, has found his opportunity to exercise himself in the art at which he excels, intrigue. And in Othello, his mind idle, an ideal dupe.

What secret fear, what secret hatred in Othello, does Iago prey on when he manages to hold Othello's attention with his offensive, totally unfounded allegations of adultery between his two closest, Desdemona and Cassio? Of course both represent the cornerstones on which a human being builds his life: affection and occupation, progeny and livelihood. One keeps the honour of the name, the other that of his job. Both depend on loyalty. So Othello the warrior knows that it is through them that he can be undone. The world of suspicions of the play is also our own world. The instability of the Venetian state mirrors the instability of our own world, and it was also the instability of England during the passage from Elizabethan to Jacobean, although the sources for it are never exactly the same. Behind Othello's quick disposition to lend Iago an ear, there lurks a darker, more elusive issue to grasp, the question of cultural identity.

Blackness, a matter of curiosity in England, was a common occurrence in the Mediterranean countries where the nearness to the north of Africa made race encounters possible. Mixed

marriages on the other hand, were viewed with suspicion both in fiction and in reality. In *The Tempest*, the king of Naples' daughter, had been married to the black lord of Tunis against her will, prior to the natural catastrophe that gives the name to the play. His courtiers mention that fact as a superstitious source for their present hardship, a kind of punishment. It remains ambiguous whether in their opinion the fault consisted of marrying her against her will, or against her will to a black person, or simply to a black person. Given the circumstances, we give the fact of the husband being black all the weight of the argument.

In Shakespeare's Italian source, Ghirardo Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*, published in Venice in 1566, the story reads like a warning to girls against falling too easily for men of other races, i.e. it rings the bell against mixed marriages. In the liberality of the Mediterranean world, this clash of cultures was not uncommon, but Desdemona's liberality in her dealings with her countrymen, characteristic of well-bred upper-class European women, was viewed by Othello, under Iago's mean tutoring, just the same way as nowadays by certain sections of Eastern societies, i.e. as a proof of disordered behaviour in women. To witness, the kidnapping of children today following traumatic divorces of this type of marriage. This cultural clash in the play is represented symbolically by the racial difference. Black and white do not seem to lead to any happy gray in this tragedy, but to the annihilation of both. Was Shakespeare suggesting the impossibility of miscegenation?

Much has been made of Desdemona's desire to share with Othello the risks and hazards of his military life. Othello, as many people of our time, has chosen to live in a society other than his own. He has chosen a Christian European society; his love for Desdemona is symbolical of his acceptance of Western values, a way of inserting himself more effectively in Venice, the city which incarnates at the time power and culture at its

most refined. He does so, much as now some people choose to live in New York or Paris or Rome and adopt the language and manners of the place. Identity becomes thus an act of appropriation. His marriage whereby he legitimates his choice, is indeed a phenomenon of the postmodernity. We are not what we inherit, goes the premise, but what we choose to be; we have reclaimed the freedom to invent ourselves according to our wishes rather than accept the conditions imposed by nature and other circumstances of our existence. Society punishes that. Iago and Judas are examples of this: they accepted to become the sad instruments of social punishment. And they too must perish.

Hugh Quarshie, the British black actor and scholar, maintains that Shakespeare is endorsing a racist convention that was already in the source, and performance conventions have reinforced racist views so that "it may never be possible to avoid the conclusion that Othello behaves as he does because he is black"; he goes on to suggest that to correct the "flaw" there should be careful editing and a radical rereading of key passages. The Moor, he contends, should not be represented by a black actor to show thus the fallacy of the other characters about him, i.e. to show that a Moor is identical to any other man. Yet we found Mr. Willard White's black Othello to Sir Ian McKellen's Iago a very persuasive one;<sup>2</sup> not racist stereotyping in his acting but an eagerness to conform to the Venetian powerful society, of which Desdemona was a beautiful, wealthy and prestigious member, much like a

<sup>2</sup> In the 1985 RSC stage production, directed by Trevor Nunn. Other performances on video include the 1965 National Theatre production with Laurence Olivier; the 1952 film, directed by Orson Welles (Mogador Films), with Orson Welles (Othello), Micheál MacLiammóir (Iago), Suzanne Cloutier (Desdemona), and Fay Compton (Emilia); the 1995 film, directed by Oliver Parker (Castle Rock Films), with Laurence Fishburne (Othello), Kenneth Branagh (Iago), Irène Jacob (Desdemona), and Anna Patrick (Emilia); and the 1980 BBC version with Anthony Hopkins.

provincial would to the imperial metropolis' ways and manners today.

In the 1990 Trevor Nunn's production of the play we see Iago take the first place in the cast, leaving Othello in the background. The tragedy thus looks like a Beckettian game where the marginal, the secondary, has become very much the centre, and the centre, the tragedy of the Moor, holds no more. We might at this point wonder about power. It has been customary to portray Iago as the power figure of the play. In fact most of the characters are men of power in the conventional way: Brabantio the father, the Duke, head of State, Othello, the commander of the army, the members of the Council, Cassio himself seems to do very well with his sword, his wit, his knowledge, Rodrigo has money... Iago, on the other hand, has none. In his own absurd, irresponsible way he looks like a postmodern hero: he enjoys playing the puppet-master. It must be exhilarating for him to force the grandees of his time to stand in awe and amazement at the events on Cyprus and little reason to account for the harm inflicted. Thus has tragedy lost its meaning and the play can be turned into a problem play rather than a tragedy in the Greek sense of the word. Perhaps this dehumanization resulting from pushing Iago to the fore is demeaning to the work as a whole but it does represent a tendency in our time. What image is Shakespeare's tragic machine, the "mirror up to nature," exactly reflecting concerning *our* time? One answer could be the power of Iago, his art of manipulation and seduction: a *pretence* to power because it only works one way: towards destruction, senseless destruction. Even his own.

### Summing up:

The world of Othello, the fictional world of the play, is the Mediterranean. The sea had been the soul of Europe since times immemorial. In the course of this, the XVI century, its importance gradually thins out as the peoples turn to the ocean. The failure of Othello and Desdemona's

love to live up to its promise seems to say as much. Was Shakespeare depicting something of this decay in the personal tragedy of these two lovers?

The cultural context of the play's reception is an England in pangs over the uncertainty of succession tainted with a melancholy feeling of the passing of an age, the change of dynasty from the much mythified Merrie England of the Virgin Queen to the still suspected dynasty of the Stuarts, from a self-centred kingdom to a Europeanised-minded Prince who will seek to marry his son to a Spanish, then to a French princess. For Shakespeare, as for Cassio, the change will mean promotion!

We have worked with a concept of globalization as a recurrent phenomenon in Western culture, one of which the Mediterranean was its metaphor, characterized by the opening up of the traffic of people, ideas, goods, services, information, investments. We have been able to locate certain functions, such as that of the mercenary in the fast changing area of warfare; and the process of identity construction when the references of territory and family are found lacking. And we think that the reception to Othello within these parametres becomes more accessible, less of an enigma.

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