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BIRTH, DEATH, REBIRTH IN THE SPLIT GEOGRAPHY OF OTHELLO

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to elevate the psycho geography of Venice, Cyprus and Barbary to discourse and mentality, to the characters' use and reception of language: that of denotation (of law, order and logic), that of connotation (of enchantment, storytelling and wild passions). It attempts to explain how the lack of connotative awareness in some characters, like Desdemona, Othello, Roderigo, Emilia, Cassio, leads to their undoing. Birth, death and rebirth refer to the way in which some characters' discourse (Iago's, Othello's) takes them to their destiny.*

Venice and the island of Cyprus are spaces in apparent opposition: an orderly one (Venice) and a wild one (Cyprus). Having reached its highly refined merchant society, architecture and Apollonian political organisation of Signoria by skilful, cunning politics, wars and commerce, riches looted or earned from the world, Venice has a hidden part of what Cyprus stands for in this play: bursting passion and violence and meandering discourse.

The Venetian leaders' rhetoric deals with denotation, law and order, the language of the literal word perceived as the only possible truth- unquestionable, undoubted in political decisions, matters of war, military strategies. Its argumentation contains logos and ethos: the masculine language of the power of the sword Othello is respected for and proud of. Il Doge, Iago, Roderigo, Cassio, senators know this language. That is why all men trust Iago's words, without realising that in the city, at court, there is another type of battlefield with a different war weapon: the connotative discourse, full of pathos, flattery, double meanings, cheating and enchanting words.

The Renaissance appreciated the power of rhetoric, more agile than the sword, able to tame and civilise, but with Iago, William Shakespeare warns about the dangerous side of rhetoric, its Cyprus violent manipulative damaging strategies of gaslighting, its Iagoism.

Ayanna Thomson, in the Introduction to The Arden Shakespeare *Othello*, says that Shakespeare sometimes makes use of a "split geography" (21) both in comedies and in tragedies: in comedies, the space of human law and patriarchal authority represented by Athens in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or by Oliver's house in *As You Like It* comes against the freedom and necessary hurly-burly of the forest, where characters get physically and emotionally lost in order to find themselves in the end and learn a lesson of love or one of authority.

In tragedies, spaces in opposition mark the tension between law/order and chaos, reason and passion, civilization and wild, unstable possibilities. The play *Titus Andronicus* starts the conflict in Rome before the Capitol and the Palace, the very centres of Roman authority which Shakespeare scrutinizes and questions in order to continue the plot in a forest near the great ancient city where murder, mutilation,

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sexual intercourse and rape throw the play even more deeply into irreversible tragedy. The labyrinthian wilderness of the forest works like Pandora's box, screaming out all evil and personal consequences of decisions taken by law-abiding Titus and careless Saturninus. In *King Lear*, the main character madly runs away from the court into the heath, into the outer stormy space of his inner geography landscaped by utmost despair and misery.

The aim of the present paper is to elevate the psycho geography of Venice, Cyprus and Barbary to discourse and mentality, to the characters' use and reception of language: that of denotation (of law, order and logic), that of connotation (of enchantment, storytelling) . And from here, to attempt to explain how the lack of connotative awareness in some characters, like Desdemona, Othello, Roderigo, Emilia, Cassio, leads to their undoing. Birth, death and rebirth refer to the way in which some characters' discourse (Othello's,) takes them to their destiny.

The play *Othello* starts Act 1 in Venice, the glamorous city of commerce, artful negotiations, art and refined political organisation to then unfold the next four acts in the island of Cyprus with the main characters skimming over the troubled waters of the Mediterranean sea into a deadly dangerous territory of confusion, instigation, deceit, jealousy, envy, where Iago plots Othello's undoing, Cassio's murder, Roderigo's destruction, Emilia's killing and where Othello strangles his wife, Desdemona. Venice and its conquered territory, the island of Cyprus, to be defended against the Turks, represent the geography of the play: two spaces, in apparent opposition: an orderly one (Venice) and "a wild, passionate one (Cyprus)...city and wilderness, civilization and anarchy, order and disorder", as Marjorie Garber puts it in her analysis of *Othello* (589). It may be only an apparent opposition, because Venice has reached its highly refined merchant society, architecture and Apollonian political organisation of Signoria (the ruling body in the Republic of Venice) together with their supreme leader, Il Doge, by skilful, cunning politics, wars and commerce, riches looted or earned from the worlds of Europe, Byzantium, the Levant and Northern Africa. Therefore, within the hidden part of Venice, there must have been an echo of what Cyprus stands for in this play, that is, of bursting passion and violence and of meandering discourse.

At the crossroads of sea and land, of different cultures and religions, continents and human races, of traditions and languages, the city comes out of sea water like the goddess Venus born of sea-foam. Venice has both the solidity and stability of the land it shares and the flow, the changing, flooding feature of its water canals. Safety and hidden danger, the perfect stage for Iago to start his play. Marjorie Garber plays with these names and their symbolism: in ancient mythology, Kypris is another name of the goddess Venus, because she was claimed to have been born on the island of Cyprus. Venus, the goddess of love, seduction and the pleasures of the flesh sounds like Venice (Garber 589), a city famous for its courtesans, such as Cassio's mistress, Bianca, who serves him. Surrounded by such a type of normality, it is not difficult for Iago to accuse Desdemona of having an affair with the Moor:

Iago addressing her father, Brabantio:

I am one, sir, that comes to tell you that your daughter

And the Moor are now making the beast with two backs. (Othello 1.1.113-115)

It may be that the two spaces complete each other: Cyprus-Kypris is the hidden part of Venice-Venus.

In addition to this, the space of Northern Africa is also brought about obliquely (as Barbary, the home of the Berbers or Moors), not as a setting, but as the stifled mentality of Othello, turned Christian and desperately struggling to fit and integrate into Venetian culture and society. It is the shadow of this very space which follows Othello everywhere, making Desdemona fall in love with its spicy, adventurous exoticism, but also, hindering Othello from understanding the Venetian mentality, from being accepted. It is not only the split geography that acquires a psychological dimension, light and darkness, day and night are elements Shakespeare plays with.

As in *Hamlet*, the play *Othello* starts in the darkness of the night. The first words in *Hamlet* exchanged between officer Bernardo and soldier Francisco on the nightshift guarding the royal castle, try to establish the identity of the two military defenders of Elsinore, the very centre of power, law and authority.

Bernardo: *Who's there?*

Francisco: *Nay, answer me, stand and unfold yourself!*

Bernardo: *Long live the king! (Hamlet 1.1.1-3)*

It is a play about the identity and righteousness of the king, of authority. Which king? The ghostly one about to show up, Claudius, his brother, the usurper, Hamlet himself, the heir, Fortinbras, the lucky winner? The play unfolds from the darkness of this question to some light of the final truth. With *Othello*, light and darkness become a little more shifting in significance, the same as with the symbolism of Venice and Cyprus: before Brabantio's house, at night, and every time from then on, Iago pretends to bring light (a torch to see or a dazzling explanation regarding a circumstance) in order to establish the truth, order and calmness, but the more he does it, the darker and more terrifying the situation becomes. "Iago brings light in order to enforce darkness" (Garber 592). The last scene unfolds in the bedchamber of Desdemona and Othello, again at night, with Othello bringing in a light before killing his wife: the light of the truth he is about to find out regarding the honesty of his wife in the darkness of his distorted mind. In spite of the solar but brief presence of Venetian authority, the Duke and Senators gathered in council in the middle of the night to rationally decide to act against the imminent attack of Cyprus by the Turks and in spite of the presence of officials (Othello, a general himself, Montano, the governor of Cyprus), the play focuses on a much more intimate outburst of private relationships which trigger extreme feelings of passion, wonder, love, rage, lust, jealousy, envy, hatred, guilt, all at the mercy of an explosive discourse in which pathos, not logos weighs heavily. In such murky waters, Iago stirs the dormant monsters of his victims. A brief example: Desdemona's father, Brabantio is told by Roderigo and Iago, hidden in the dark, that his daughter has been possessed by Othello. Othello, the most respected general of Venice who had won many battles and defended the Republic from enemies. Trusted, honoured by everyone, by Brabantio himself. And yet, the father, without checking

Roderigo's words, without listening to Othello, madly attacks him verbally and then ready to draw his sword:

Brabantio: *O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter?
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...* (*Othello* 1.2.62-65)

Brabantio's only logical explanation to Desdemona's elopement is that Othello, the Moor must have used witchcraft.

Iago is the master of dark wordplay, multiple meanings, innuendoes. He is the master of wit. He provokes others by insinuation, skilful lies, planned sketches with actors not realising they are acting. He knows the vulnerabilities and frustrations of his victims and magnifies them in order to destroy. It is a play about many things: race, sexuality, outsiders, social classes, envy, a woman's courage in a world of men, wickedness, but it is also a play about storytelling and the extraordinary, luring, but also dangerous, devastating power of words (Thomson 2). Words of Venice, words of Cyprus, words from Africa, where the Moor comes from.

Iago to Roderigo:
*"Thou know'st we work by **wit** and not by **witchcraft**".* (*Othello*, 2.3.367)

By witchcraft, Iago continues Brabantio's accusation that Othello has devilish powers to cast a spell, to use outlandish African magic and do foul play. He feels he competes against Othello on the battlefield of rhetoric too, not only in status and achievements.

As with the Venetian leaders' rhetoric, denotation deals with law and order, thus, the language of the literal word perceived as the only possible truth-unquestionable, undoubted, unfaceted. It imposes respect and trust in political decisions, matters of war, military strategies on the battlefield or at sea. It is a discourse based on planned action. Its argumentation contains, thus, logos and ethos: the masculine language of the power of the sword Othello is so much respected for and extremely proud of. Iago, Roderigo, Cassio, senators and all the other officers and soldiers know this language. Most of them have been at war together, a certain loyalty in the name of camaraderie is expected to unite them. That is why all men trust Iago's words, without realising that in the city, at court, there is another type of battlefield with a different war whose weapon is the connotative discourse: full of flattery, double meanings, cheating, enchanting, killing with many more sharp blades than that of a sword. It is because of this confusion that Roderigo believes Iago works for him to get him closer to Desdemona, that Othello is convinced by Iago that Desdemona is unfaithful to him, that Lodovico and Gratiano never doubt a word uttered by Iago as to who injured Cassio. Emilia, Iago's wife, Desdemona and Cassio blindly, confidently allow themselves to be Iago's puppets on the strings of his own script. They do that in the name of the general recognition and appreciation of Iago's qualities as a soldier and officer on the battlefield. Othello, the General of the Venetian army and fleet, many many times, calls him "honest Iago", therefore, in times of peace, in society, every one trusts him, even when he tells Roderigo he is not the one others believe him to be.

Iago to Roderigo:
*But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am. (Othello 1.1.63-640)*

He discloses to Roderigo his strategy of deceit, and yet, his interlocutor never suspects Iago might and will behave the same towards him.

According to Catherine Bates, Iago's strategy of make-belief is to use "the force...of probability and plausibility" (204), to speak about what is evident in a certain circumstance, what most likely, what his interlocutor intimately thinks may be going on. And, I would add, what the interlocutor wants or fears so very much to hear. In everyday speech, for a locutor to be successful and convince, persuade, manipulate his interlocutor to share his views, he has to appeal to three elements of rhetoric that should be kept in balance: the logic or *logos* of his premises and data for his claim to be valid, *pathos* ("experience" or "suffering" in Greek), which refers to the speaker's choice of words to induce empathy in the listener so that he can be moved, and *ethos* ("character" in Greek) which points to the speaker's credibility, trust and sincerity. "There are times when the credibility of a speaker has no connection with the message conveyed before an audience or written on the printed page, but it has the power to influence the listener due to the speaker's/writer's reputation, proved professionalism or moral integrity" (Ramage and Bean). To conquer the audience, Iago magnifies the intensity of *pathos* and *ethos* by triggering deep emotion in the listener, using polysemy, innuendoes, roundabout words dressed up in thick layers of soldierly credibility and trust. The Cyprus-Kypris language of wit, stifling down directness and logic, which is the language of the Signoria and of the Duke. In Act 3, scene 3, Iago induces in Othello a terrible feeling of insecurity regarding Desdemona's relationship with noble and rich and young and handsome Cassio.

Iago
*O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger,
But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects yet strongly loves!
Othello
O misery! (Othello 3.3.167-173)*

These words fall when Cassio is seen leaving Desdemona after he very respectfully asks her to talk to Othello to get his post back. Iago mentions no names, the topic of jealousy hovers above the personal, innocently, but Othello takes it personally. He completely trusts the man, his companion in battles, therefore, he is hooked to believe the innuendo. "The cuckold" word is offensive and humiliating, and it strikes the listener to the core. The last line describes Othello's suffering because of doubting and loving his wife at the same time. Words of *pathos* are Iago hissing into Othello's ears.

The Moor himself is very much in the know of both types of discourse: the straightforward, logical one, the rhetoric of military strategy and loyal camaraderie, but, at the same time, he wonderfully controls the enchanting music of conquering words and themes. Unlike Theseus (in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he did not woo Desdemona with his sword, but with his agitated life story: with words of adventures in breath-taking situations, frightening descriptions of far-off lands, deserts, caves, floods, battles, slavery, cannibals, victories, sorrows, bloodshed, in a commotion of excitement and fascination that mesmerized Desdemona's imagination. The Duke admits his own daughter would have fallen for this story too. Brabantio accuses Othello of witchcraft and Iago perpetuates this idea, but Othello's guilt is that he is a story crafter too. And yet, the great master of words is deceived by "honest" Iago. I quote from Ayanna Thomson: "He who controls the storytelling, controls the world in *Othello*" (3). And Iago does, because he takes advantage of Othello's weaknesses: his terrible feeling of insecurity in a society, in a culture and near a woman he does not fully understand. His Moorish mentality keeps him an outsider, his looks, even more. He sees in Cassio the man he would have liked to be: refined, easy-going, cultivated, gracious, handsome, younger. Othello is respected in Venice, but not allowed to get closer. And, in spite of Desdemona's deep love for him and dedication to him, Othello does not know how to talk to her intimately, in fact, he talks to her less and less, which is the beginning of the end. Her direct way of addressing him about sexuality puzzles him, she behaves as his equal, a strange thing for a man originating in the lands of the Moors.

Here are his birth and his doom: the chance to be the defender of a world he admires, the chance to be so profoundly loved by an extraordinary lady, the paragon of beauty and chastity, and yet, to be eaten from within by his own insecurities, his wish to control Desdemona, his pride, his inability to adjust from the battlefield to the subtleties of court life, his naive trust in Iago. "He who controls the storytelling, controls the world in *Othello*" (Thomson 3). The Renaissance highly appreciated the power of rhetoric, more agile than the sword, able to tame and civilise, but with Iago, William Shakespeare shows and warns about the dangerous side of rhetoric, its Cyprus violent adventure and meandering connotations, turning the values of civilization into chaos and destruction. Probably, breathing in this play, we should ponder over what is to be reborn nowadays, taught and discussed : namely, the terribly important awareness of manipulative language, its ill-intended and sickeningly damaging strategies of gaslighting which, I believe, we can also call Iagoism.

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