

# Shaping Scepticism, Arousing Belief

## The Case of *Othello*

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**Abstract** The visceral responses of theatrical audiences to *Othello* across time and place clash oddly with the scepticism often ascribed to this play, and famously discussed in Stanley Cavell's seminal work, *Disowning Knowledge* (2003). The debate aroused by Cavell's sharply philosophical, and partly psychoanalytical inquiry into Othello's reasons for "disowning knowledge" has brought fuel to the issue of Othello's scepticism. After taking initial stock of Cavell's reading – and of the main objections raised against his subtle argument, this essay explores the textual and cultural reasons for the contradiction between the shapes of scepticism moulded in *Othello* and the extreme emotional responses of audiences recorded by Mason Vaughan (*Othello: A Contextual History*, 1994). What the essay aims to highlight are the ways scepticism was deflected into potential scandal. Section one addresses the socio-cultural aspects of the early modern sceptical gaze in topical passages of *Othello*, with an eye on issues that mark the epistemic shift underlying the early modern philosophy of scepticism. Reference is made mainly to the performative strategies of inwardness – as well as to the related issues of race/colour and of military/marital service. Section two shows how Desdemona's instability is a vehicle for deflecting extreme discursive and theatrical aspects of scepticism in Hamlet into potential scandal and radical improbability.

### 1

And a most instant tetter baked about | Most lazar - like with vile  
and loathsome crust | All my smooth body. (*Hamlet* 1.5.71-73)

Do but encave yourself | And mark the fleers, the gibes, and  
notable scorns | That dwell in every region of his face.  
(*Othello* 4.1.77-79)

Like the defacing bark that imprisons Hamlet's ghost, the self-encaved posture that befalls Othello stands out as a poignant image of a *corpus clausus*: a secluded body. The two pictures mark the sequential steps of a narrative that, from *Hamlet* to *Othello*, sheds light on the transformations undergone by the body severed from communion with the outer world. In *Othello*, the encrusted body that encapsulates Hamlet's melancholic solipsism hollows out into the cave of the Moor's hiding and voyeuristic spying upon otherness. Obstruction of the natural flow of knowledge lies at the core of both tragedies where it acts as a tegument that impedes the

incorporation of God and otherness into oneself, an obstacle that separates scepticism from belief.<sup>1</sup> In order to access what is now felt as the interior of the body, a leap of faith is demanded: belief requires that the boundaries between inward and outward be transcended rather than inquired.<sup>2</sup> And since it takes those boundaries as essential, scepticism requires that they be established by force, and that all layers that impede the probing of knowledge should be penetrated, in order for the truth to be known (Hillman 2007, pp. 29-32).

Whether bounded within a nutshell, like Hamlet's, or confined within the cave of his own self, like Othello's, the bodies staged by these two sceptical Shakespearean tragedies are driven by the same urge: they aim to access an unreachable kernel of truth by breaking through material or visual barriers forcibly. In the deflected form of a prying gaze, the violence of masculine knowledge is summoned to bridge the gap that has opened up in the integrity of corporeal, linguistic, religious and political bodies: the split that has severed words from meanings, seeming from truth, King from subjects, God from creatures, men from women. And the obscurity of the Scriptures marks a sharp symbolic divide, setting the plenitude of God's word far up against its profane interpretations (Eisaman Maus 1995, p. 9). Given the postlapsarian biblical scenario in which *Hamlet* locates the opening of the epistemological gap that fissures knowledge, it could be argued that Hamlet's drive into inwardness closely recalls the one of contemporary Biblical exegetes.<sup>3</sup> The post-lapsarian rift that Luther had vividly depicted (1955-1978, vol. 1, pp. 77-78)<sup>4</sup> and that reformed exegesis

1 My reading of scepticism is here indebted to Hillman 2007, pp. 1-59. On the questionability of porose, permeable bodies in humorous theory and Galenic physiology see also Paster 1993. For a discussion of *Hamlet* from the same angle see Marzola 2014.

2 In his monumental study on scepticism Richard Popkin clarifies the terms of the Post Reformation religious dispute within which the revival of Pyrronian scepticism helped to redefine belief or dogmatism. Far from opposing belief the Protestant informed shape of English scepticism «is raising doubts about the rational of evidential merits of the justifications given for a belief» (2003, pp. xxi). For more insights into the ways scepticism came to affect Shakespeare's work in particular see Bradshaw 1987 and Hamlin 2005.

3 As often noted (Belsey 2001) the Ghost's narration recalls the scriptural setting of the primeval sin committed in the Garden of Eden, superimposed unto the scene of the fratricide, which was the outcome of that sin. The Fall theme - a highly popular one at the time - was also widely translated and stringently reinterpreted by Reformed Protestant theologians. In their readings - informed by daily engagement with the Holy Book - salvation and redemption were overshadowed by a new emphasis on the trauma of guilt. Hamlet's painstaking search into the folds of a language that his father's narrative has shown to be fractured beyond salvation can thus be taken as the dramatic enactment of reformed theological inquiries. For an expanded treatment of this issue see Herschfeld 2003: pp. 424-448 and Marzola 2014: pp. 205-206.

4 In his lectures Luther actually highlights passages in the Scriptures where sin is described as «a complete breakdown of the comprehensive process of communication» and as a turning away from God that is described as *incurvatio in se ipsum* (Bayer 2008, p. 182).

had been charting painstakingly in the records of Genesis, is actually the unhealed trauma which underpins the trajectory of scepticism from *Hamlet* to *Othello*.

While Hamlet's re-enactment of that trauma unveils the rank, material grossness that takes hold of a Lutheran world, Iago's 'post-traumatic stress disorders' casts the world's blackened contents onto the fabric of innocence. The legacy that victimises Prince Hamlet – the «cursed spite» (1.5.188) that dooms him to set a disjointed world right – has metamorphosed into Iago's victimising, retaliatory drive to curse otherness.

The offal of Elsinore's unweeded garden, confined inside Iago's sceptical body, eventually comes to monstrous seed in the groundless world of Othello's Venice. A disconcerting heir to the Danish Prince, the Venetian Ensign detects the fissures that undermine the whole structure of received knowledge only to open them up in order to hasten Othello's downfall into the dizzying vision of his own begrimed and begriming self. In *Othello*'s postscript to *Hamlet*'s lapsarian narrative the stake is no longer the questioning elicited by doubt, but, as Stanley Cavell has argued in his groundbreaking study (2003), the catastrophic effects which Pyrronian scepticism brings about once the idealizing construct of love communion succumbs to the threat of otherness which female separateness and openness embody. Within the Cartesian paradigm of knowledge this play prefigures, Othello's unremitting search for the ocular proof of the other's bedevilment is but a cover for his anguished loss of a fantasised integrity, a displaced drive to self-annihilation that the tragedy exposes and dooms to failure. The alabaster of dead Desdemona – the only ocular proof the play produces – is the monumental correlative of the consequences sceptical doubt has when engrafted into fantasies of absoluteness (Cavell 2003, p. 128).

And the fact that the play's shattering conclusion has been invariably resented by post-Cartesian recipients<sup>5</sup> proves that Cavell's reading touches raw nerves: it exposes Othello's catastrophe as the possible outcome of our own ingrained scepticism. Even less tolerable than the doomed fatality of the end, is the unwilling complicity with the 'monstrous engendering' of scepticism which is forced upon us by Shakespeare's rhetorical orchestration of Iago's role.<sup>6</sup> Not only do we become compellingly enmeshed in Othello's voyeuristic drive like actors on stage. We also feel quite baffled

5 I am using the term 'recipients' in order to refer to theatrical audiences as well as to professional and amateur readers across time. No matter how culturally determined, I believe such responses share the essential predicates that I have pointed to. For a comprehensive view of critical and theatrical reactions to *Othello* see Pechter 1999. Insightful reflections on the cultural determinants that have stirred such ripostes can be found in Mason Vaughan 1994.

6 An exhaustive survey of the critical contributions which highlight Iago's compelling ascendancy over on and off stage viewers is offered in Pechter 1999, pp. 26-29. For an emphasis on Iago as a «deceitful version of the 'nuntius'», see Neill 2006, p. 138.

and grow frustrated when, bolstered up by the knowledge Iago imparts on us in his asides, we suddenly find that our illusion is shattered since we are excluded from «the hidden realm of inwardness» (Eisaman Maus 1995, p. 126) that Iago's final vindication of flat roles ultimately reconfirms («Demand me nothing: what you know, you know», 5.2.301).<sup>7</sup> What justifies the arousal of empathic identifications with the parts on stage, and of visceral rebuttals of the plotline, what even stimulates the urge to rewrite the script altogether, is the simultaneous inducing and thwarting of the suspension of disbelief on which this play so heavily relies. It is ultimately our resistance to take in the sceptical legacy we have unwittingly subscribed that sparks beliefs and that lures our off-stage bodies to cross over the boundary of the scenic platform.

In the sections that follow I will attempt to retrace the ways such emotionality is being sparked: it is the play's projective re-enactment of Lutheran curses – I submit – that forcibly dramatises the devastating effects of scepticism *Othello* puts forward. On the other hand I believe that it is the failure of mediations that marks the breach of knowledge which brings about the relentless enclosing and emptying of masculine bodies and gazes. My final emphasis however will be on the ultimate challenge Desdemona's inclining posture sets up against the destructive pervasiveness of Cartesian scepticism: unlike the men in *Othello*, she leaves the way open for the reactive beliefs this play arouses.

## 2

'Tis the curse of service: | Preferment goes by letter and affection,  
| And not by old gradation, where each second | Stood heir to th' first. (1.1.34-37)

O curse of marriage, | That we can call these delicate creatures ours,  
| And not their appetites!(3.3.265-267)

Like the curse of service that Iago laments at the outset, the curse of marriage that enslaved Othello bemoans in act 3 resonates with echoes of a Biblical consignment to inexorable doom. Service and marriage are cast as unbending conditions, fixing in equal measure the corresponding curses recorded in the Book of Genesis: the curse of subjection that dooms Canaan «to be a servant of servants» (9.27) and the curse of enmity that forever sets man apart from woman: «I shall put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed» (3.14-15). The whole parable of Othello's scepticism is in fact fostered by Biblical curses – threatening

7 All quotations from *Othello* refer to Neill 2006.

speech acts that in their proleptic force pin down the future of mankind, forever arresting it into irreversible postures. A stunning example of such doomed immutability confronts us in the depersonalised tableaux that seal the play's conclusion: the white alabaster of dead Desdemona, the Turbaned Turk – the hostile, circumcised dog – Othello stabs as he performs his suicide (5.2.341-355), the very wedding bed – with its impersonally tragic burden – are like objects that give substance to Iago's pervasive monstrosity, as he engenders annihilating effigies of otherness. No matter how estheticised into the alabaster within which Othello's rhetoric has encrusted it, Desdemona's dead body, the casual victim of a prying masculine gaze, is eventually merged into the indistinct female loading of the wedding bed. And no matter how soaked with exoticism and eroticism, the body Othello exposes in his self-framing performance, is irretrievably split into fetishised fragments of alienness.

The unredeemed freeze of such a finale comes as the play's historicised enactment of underlying biblical curses: while enmity between man and woman has been recast into the alienation and annihilation of feminine and masculine bodies, the curse of service that dooms Canaan in Genesis has degenerated into the curse of Ham that contemporary writers were popularising as the punishment of and justification for black skin, as well as for slavery (Whitford 2009; Mason Vaughan 1994, pp. 51-70): the blackness of Othello, the whiteness of Desdemona, hardened into prototypes of racialised and gendered otherness, become the chromatic markers of differences that the ensnaring web of scepticism has construed and fatally entwined. The light *Othello* sheds on the accomplishment of the curse illuminates the fixed ways these two culturally loaded colours presuppose. They implicate each other in a knot that ties violent masculinity to victimised femininity.

The after-effects of Cartesian scepticism become thus sclerotised in this fatal entanglement wherein all the curses the play adumbrates – of marriage, of service and of Ham – come to accomplishment in a devastating conflation. Such entanglement is vividly recorded in the so-called temptation scene where the «forked plague» of marriage Othello laments (3.3.273-275) consists in disowning feminine appetites through expulsion: «[...] O curse of marriage, | That we can call these delicate creatures ours, | And not their appetites! [...]» (271-273). The rift between the delicacy men are entitled to own, and the appetites they are cursed to disown signals a failure of recognition that Othello re-enacts in his conflated begriming of himself and bedevilling of Desdemona. As Othello surrenders to temptation, he yields unconditionally to a coalescence of biblical curses that he is doomed to enact and perpetrate through words and deeds, so much so that he curses himself to perennial enslavement and Desdemona to bawdy whoredom.

In its biblical overtones, the style of Othello's bewhoring of Desdemona, performed within the enclosed precincts of the so-called brothel scene (4.2), mimics the fatal fury of a Lutheran God cursing the primal woman to

the fate a whorish and scheming Eve.<sup>8</sup> While the injunction Othello imparts to Emilia «Leave procreants alone and shut the door» (28) ushers us into a domestic and privy version of Hell, the abuses he hurls on her come as the stigmas of an unmentionable sin whose consequences deface and efface Desdemona at once. In fact, the demonised bedchamber sets up the stage where Othello, like a postlapsarian procreant, collides with the figure of Desdemona, as though she had already receded into the ‘whatness’ of a hellish and reified impersonality: «Why what art thou?» (4.2.33). Far from being ignored or silenced, Desdemona’s subsequent professions of identity will be instead received as disconcerting denials of the begrimed image of her that possesses Othello («Are you not a strumpet?», 83; «What, not a whore?», 86). And her protestations of innocence will be likewise sensed to belie the desecrating role she plays in the alienated version of their marriage overshadowing Othello’s mind: «I took you for that cunning whore of Venice | That married with Othello» (90-91). It is the unendurable coexistence of this bedevilled projection with the lasting image of «chaste Desdemona» that will drive Othello to «put out the light» twice («Put out the light, and then, put out the light -», 5.2.7) as if to extinguish, one after the other, the split parts of Desdemona: her delicacy and her appetites. These parts, eventually subsumed under Desdemona’s deadly alabaster, are forever doomed to a destiny of depersonalisation and fixity that is repeatedly evoked by the whole imagery of projections in this play. Projection – a psychic and visual externalisation of inward images onto the screen of outward otherness<sup>9</sup> – is the word that most aptly describes the ways *Othello*’s sceptically deformed knowledge translates the fixity of curses into fixations – «the fixèd figure for the time of scorn» (4.2.53) –. As famously instanced in 3.3, Iago’s reticence is what unveils the inwardness which drives Othello to visualise Iago’s projections: the Moor’s enchafed demands for Iago’s thought to be shown and made known marks the onset of a prying pursuit of knowledge. And Iago’s resistance to yield away the sealed contents of his mind turns such pursuit into a voyeuristic inquiry.<sup>10</sup> Announced as a set of instructions on how to «wear eyes» (3.3.201), the exhortations Iago keeps imparting throughout the whole scene come to shape

8 In his commentary on Genesis Luther repeatedly points to the ways God’s wrath, induced by the Fall, becomes manifest in his curses (Lehman, Pelikan eds., vol. 1, pp. 77-78, 310, 205. Cited in Stephenson, Power, Bratton 2010). For an insight into the ways Lutheran re-readings of Genesis depicted Eve as a scheming temptress see Crowther 2010. Biblical overtones in *Othello* are also mentioned in Hannibal Hamlin’s encompassing review of Biblical allusions and quotations in Shakespeare (Hamlin 2012).

9 Adelman (1997, pp. 125-145) offers a still valuable Kleinian insight into the plays’ projections and introjections.

10 For an in-depth exploration of the ways Iago engenders introspection and voyeurism in *Othello* in this scene see Neill 1998, pp. 151-159. See also Burke [1951] 1988, pp. 127-158.

both the 'I' and the 'eye' of Othello into the deformed gaze of a prurient beholder of secret obscenity: a post Cartesian researcher of ocular proofs. As Othello's broken certainty grows more and more fragmented, Iago successfully deflects his own recommendations to «observe» Desdemona (195) and to «look to» the matter (198) into the insinuations that the Moor might want to «grossly gape on» a prurient show: «Would you, the supervisor grossly gape on? | Behold her topped?» (393-394). To treat Othello's sceptical disease Iago prescribes a sort of homeopathic cure: Othello is urged to spy the hollowness of his own encaved self from within, onto the outward projection of incorporated abuses («Do but encave yourself, | And mark the fleers, the gibes, the notable scorns | That dwell in every region of his face.», 4.1.77-79). Yet Iago's prescription marks the final enhancement of Othello's sceptically deformed gaze. And it is this gaze that charges the projections of fixity and impersonality put forth in the play with the burden of a stinging curse that affects gender and race. A glaring example of this culturally loaded curse, the «black ram» and the «white ewe» conjured up in Iago's initial flash of Othello's coupling (1.1.87-90), set the tone of prediction, factuality, impersonality and defacement that haunts the visions of the mind in this play. Analepsis and prolepsis here converge into a psychic image of bestiality projected onto the screen of the Venetian imaginary. It is the first shot of a sequence that the play's conclusion will freeze into an irrevocable endorsement, and that each scene progressively deploys into a lustful phantasmagoria of erotic projections, all of which bear striking analogies with Iago's initial cursing. In all the moving images captured by Iago's fantasy and echoed in the hollow cave of Othello's newly discovered inwardness, emphasis on the masculine enactment of debased sex obfuscates the identity of the actors and consigns their adulterous deeds to impersonal invisibility. What stands out in Iago's phantasmal account of Cassio's lascivious dream (3.3.420-427) is neither Cassio nor Desdemona: rather, the kinetics of lecherous masculine bodies, and the clandestine secrecy of adultery: a whispering voice, warnings to hide, a wringing body that plucks kisses «by the roots» (424), a leg laid over a thigh. Superimposing Desdemona's, the body of Iago figures then as the casually misplaced object of lust, more than a homoerotic replacement. As they linger on voyeuristic details of private, unauthorised kisses and of nakedness in bed, Iago and Othello will actually freeze the dynamics of this phantasmal shot into the curttness of picture captions allusive to guilt-ridden morbidity: «Iago: What, To kiss in private? | Othello: An unauthorized kiss! | Iago. Or to be naked with her friend in bed | An hour or more, not meaning any harm? | Othello: Naked in bed, Iago, and not mean harm?» (4.1.2-5). What Iago has brought to light through his tempting is in fact an archetypal visual pattern, made of fixed clusters of images «for the time of scorn» (4.2.53), where horned men materialise bestial monstrosity: «A hornèd man's a monster and a beast» (4.1.58). That is the same type of pattern Othello will project

onto the show of Cassio's skirmish with Bianca, which Iago has set up for him. Observed from Othello's withdrawn, self-encaved posture, the bodies of the actors - Iago, Cassio and Bianca - become animations that mimic his own horned and enslaved condition.

And just as Cassio's derisive remarks on Bianca harden into the arrogant pose of a Roman conqueror triumphing over a vanquished slave («Do you triumph, Roman? Do you triumph?» 4.1.115), the handkerchief in Bianca's hands becomes the ocular proof of the bawdiness that has bewhored Desdemona and made Othello horned. The charmed piece of cloth woven by the Sybils, degraded by a chain of improper offerings, glows as the iconic correlative of Othello's lost property and barbarised self: in this visual projection of the curse of enmity, Desdemona's guilty deed, her adultery, is unsurprisingly erased. Here and elsewhere the pale of the curse is not what Desdemona has done, but what Othello has lost: his property, her alienation from the garner of his heart (4.2.57). What emerges here is less Desdemona's bedevilled image than Othello's mournful leave from her delicacy, lavishly redeployed in a typified gallery of multifaceted feminine virtues. Lost whiteness, the pitied thing of the past Othello bemoans, stands out in stark opposition to the blackness of present whoredom, the «iniquity» (4.1.191) Iago unremittingly calls to mind. As they turn Othello's heart to stone, making it impervious to pity, the black and white Desdemonas conjured up in these contrasting set of attributions signal the reifying of her person into a double thing of clarity and darkness. Not only will the sceptical curse that befalls Othello doom him to suppress this divided object that eludes projection: in his last theatrical projection of himself Othello will also encircle the sense of his murderous deed within the chiasmic fixity of a kissing and killing («I kissed thee ere I killed thee - no way but this: I Killing myself, to die upon a kiss», 5. 2.356-357). The results of these two acts are self-annihilating, but at the same time they ultimately convey the fatal compulsion of the Moor's divisive thrust.

The two separate and yet identical absolute causes Othello invokes - «It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul» (5.2.1) - stand as abstract figurations of the killed and of the kissed Desdemona, the split parts of her that his mind has been impelled to construe, to project and to suppress, in order to ward off the threat posed by the difference of her sexual body, by her separateness and finitude.

The sight of Desdemona's otherness, the inward secrecy of femininity, pursued by the play's pruriently scopophilic gaze, remains occluded. We are left instead with a gallery of projected images whose archetypal fixity reminds us that the poison of scepticism is made with the stuff of curses.

But he - as loving his own pride and purposes - | Evades them with a bombast circumstance, | Horribly stuffed with epithets of war; | And in conclusion | Non suits my mediators [...]. (1.1.11-15)

Iago: I did not think he had been acquainted with her. | Othello: O yes, and went between us very oft. | Iago: Indeed! (3.3. 101-102)

By sanctioning a split, curses stigmatise divorce beyond mediation. The enmity between man and woman, between whiteness and blackness settled at the end of the play is in fact the outcome of the failed mediations unravelled from its outset, evidences of an original breach in the plentitude of language and of service, whose consequences Iago exposes as the inflicting of a narcissistic wound on his own self.<sup>11</sup> As he denounces Othello's 'non suiting' of his mediators Iago points to the rift that has required intercession: the interruption of the body of hierarchy, where «old gradation» granted the fluidity of succession: «Preferment goes by letter and affection, | And not by old gradation, where each second | Stood heir to th' first. [...]», 1.1.35-37). On the other hand, Iago's Othello utters his appointment of Cassio in the fashion of an elective verdict whose finality precludes interposition: «But he, sir, had, the election» (1.1.26), as if the infringement of the set rules of service were authorised by a Lutheran God. Instead of being replete with the awesome prerogatives of Protestant divinity, the language of this Othello, however, rings with empty and evasive magniloquence. A flash forward of the Moor's hyperbolic style, Iago's vivid prolepsis also yields the image of stuffed emptiness: «But he - as loving as his own pride and purposes - evades them with a bombast circumstance, horribly stuffed with epithets of war; | And in conclusion | Non suits my mediators» (1.1.11-13). Othello's denials of mediations then come across as hollow utterances filled with the rhetorical paraphernalia of military service, while his «bombast circumstance» combined with proud self-love and evasions betray the precariousness of his extroverted posture: Othello's spiteful non-suiting of mediations appears then to blindly deny and defy the split in the body of language that its own stuffing decries. This is a fissure that Iago has instead fully introjected within his tightly shut self: Othello's appointment of Cassio is to him the effect of lost plentitude and stability, the «curse of service» that befalls the fallen. As he professes his enforced subordination to the Moor («Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago: | In following him I follow but myself», 1.1.57-58) and as he proudly claims not to be what he is («I am not what I am», 1.1.65) in mocking defiance of

<sup>11</sup> The play's emphasis on the need for mediations and on mediators sheds light on the contentiousness of diplomacy, mediation and transmission in Early Modern England. For a discussion of these issues see Charry, Shahani 2009.

God's profession of identity in the Bible,<sup>12</sup> he announces a displacement of service and self that mirrors the cleavage inherent in language, the already accomplished discovery that «language is open to the repudiation of itself» (Cavell 2003, p. 16). Although not referred to *Othello*, Stanley Cavell's definition of the constitutive fissures of language is a glowing metaphor of what happens in this play. It is in fact the openness of male selves and languages to self-repudiation that Iago intercepts and grasps in order to expose and to revengefully revive the curses they have been unaware of.

Openness, an invariant attribution of the Moor until he falls prey to Iago's enclosing and encaving in 3.3, marks Othello's blind confidence in his own fluid communion with the world, witnessed by his compulsion to be found. In stark contrast with Iago's retentive style, the style of Othello lavishly releases unblemished narratives of self-fashioning, drenched in string of reminiscences that are both exotic and audacious. Paradoxically, Othello's openness takes the defensive shape of an armour of expostulating tropes (Altman 2010), intended to uphold and guard the General's reputation in Venice, the credibility of his service, the laborious redemption from his past enslavement, and the legitimacy of his marriage to Desdemona. In contrast to that, the cramped body of Othello, seized by epileptic contortions in 4.1, materialises the crushing effects of his self-disarming, the 'dispossession' that Iago has sparked by exploiting the aptness of his self-construing fortress to the point of self-repudiation. As his stentorian style deflates into broken language, Othello is stripped of the discursive carapace that supported him: he is no longer himself.

The phantasmal communion with the world Othello sheds as he is disrobed of self-fashioning tropes, is actually described early in the play as a fantasy of osmotic love, a replacement of the Holy Communion with God. The narrative of mutual enamouring Othello deploys builds up a story of entwined identifications and projections aptly phrased in the symmetry of his conclusive rhetorical remark: «She loved me for the dangers I had passed, | And I loved her that I did pity them», 1.3.167-168. This idealising construct, reinforced in Desdemona's parallel profession of idealising love («I saw Othello's visage in his mind», 250) adumbrates a Platonic marriage of true minds: bodies – including the colour of their skin – are transcended and erased by intoxicating tales that, as suggested by the Desdemona of Othello's report, might work as a screen for indiscriminating love fantasies: «[...] She thanked me, | And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her, | I should but teach him how to tell my story | And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake» (164-166). Othello's idealising and incorporating vision of love is blind to the potential threat posed by Desdemona's hint to a third party. It is no chance that Othello should claim Desdemona's allusion as

12 «And God said unto Moses: I am that I am» (Exodus, 3.14).

a proof of his entitlement to love her. It is no chance either that a chink in Othello's verbal shield should open up for Iago's prying, just as Desdemona's undefined wooer materialises in the person of Cassio, a postulator of intercessions. Much like Iago's failed mediations at the outset, the ones Cassio demands of Desdemona unveil obstructions in the natural flow of allegiances and services and disclose a breach in the normal sequence of appointments.

Innocent Desdemona, however, ignores the threat announced by mediations, let alone the prospect they might fail. Unlike Othello's, her idealising thrust is disarming and disarmed, her free and fruitful nature (2.3.326-327) impervious to the thought of interrupted flows. Like Othello's narrative, Cassio's suit woes her into communion with his grief,<sup>13</sup> arouses unconditional pity and drives her to unremitting pleas. Unaware of breaches, Desdemona behaves as if the split in the chain of service Cassio has disclosed were a trifling misconduct, a negligible private matter: «[...] 'tis not almost a fault | t'incur a private check» (3.2.67-68). Her resolve to «intermingle» Othello's life with perorations (3.3.25-26) presupposes her interblending with the Moor, a fusion that requires no mediations. In this couple Cassio would never figure like the unwanted third party. What Desdemona remembers of him is actually his exemplary male bond with Othello, his coming «a-wooing» (3.3.72) and siding with him against her occasional disparagements. It is precisely the questionability of this transparent male bond and of its intermingling with Desdemona, that Iago promptly exposes as he pries open the slits of Othello's discursive armour in the inception of his temptation: «Iago: I did not think he had been acquainted with her. | Othello: O yes, and went between us very oft. | Iago: Indeed? | Othello: Ay, indeed. Discern'st thou aught in this? | Is he not honest?» (3.3.101-105). Iago's prying bar is, quite tellingly, «the going between» Othello mentions as the prerogative of Cassio's acquaintance with Desdemona and himself. With its split implications of communion and division this is in fact a phrase emblematically open to self-repudiation: it points both to the easy overriding of thresholds inside a communal body, and to the disruptive interposing of an unwanted self between two separate entities. Like a crack in the mirror of Othello's words Iago's «Indeed?» (104) brings the menace of intervention out of the safety of the «going between». At the same time it twists Desdemona's intercession into a mediation doomed to fail, just like the one of Iago's emissaries.

Henceforth, Iago's penetration and hollowing of Othello's discursive plenitude will be a smooth task. As they echo the vacuity of Othello's words, Iago's interpellations echo the emptiness of the Moor's self. And as he

13 «Othello: Went he hence now? || Desdemona: Yes, faith: so humbled | That he hath left part of his grief with me | To suffer with him» (3.3.52-55).

mourns the loss of the tropes that have shielded him, the Moor himself will put on a boastful display of the paraphernalia of military service Iago had scornfully exposed as the horrible stuff of his emptiness (3.3.349-359). The epitaph that seals Othello's impersonal narrative of self-destitution – «Othello's occupation gone» (359) – epitomises the full import of Othello's destituteness and foregrounds the demise of a self made of a 'stuff' that was both occupying and occupied. While pointing to the inflated pomp of military accoutrements («pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war», 356), «occupation» unveils the flat brutality of a colonising self, who is nonetheless utterly possessed by his own violent impetus. More dramatically, it ushers into the exposure of his blending with Desdemona in terms of a dispossessing possession, a discarding from the very fountain of his life (4.2.59-60). In the sceptical gaze Othello has introjected, an unbridgeable split, beyond mediations, has opened up between the 'garner' he has incorporated, the godlike fountain of his life, and the otherness of Desdemona's desire. What is left in the place of the garner «is a cistern for foul toads | To knot and gender in!» (4.2.61-62), the offal of infected scepticism.

#### 4

For 'tis most easy | Th' inclining Desdemona to subdue | In any honest suit. She's framed as fruitful | As the free elements.  
(2.3.324-327)

The story of cursing projections and failed mediations I have retraced so far along the lines of Cavell's essay bears little mention of the women in the play. This should come as no surprise if we consider that in the world of *Othello* women seem alien to the parable of sceptical knowledge that victimises them. They are not the agents, but the pawns of a game, which is entirely played in the arena of a proprietary and grasping masculine gaze (Burke [1951] 1988, p. 247). Unsurprisingly, the devastating consequences of the patriarchal regime *Othello* visualises has heightened the emotionality of responses over time as if, faced with the inevitability of feminine collapse, the urge to resist the enforced Iago-like perspective had become compelling. But in the case of Desdemona, this impulse has become coercive, since the connivance we sense with the strategy that leads to her murder is both forbidding and constraining. Not only do we wish Othello were different: we also and especially want Desdemona to be more knowing and less innocent. Desdemona's part – so frequently rewritten in the late twentieth-century versions of *Othello's* (Hodgdon 1991, pp. 232-238) – has been invariably disturbing to scholars and amateurs alike: whether dismissed as aesthetically irrelevant and incongruous, censored as politically unbearable, or rehabilitated in its feminist sparks,

Desdemona has been an unnerving hindrance to the comprehension and apprehension of this play. Even more puzzling than her self-sacrificing disclaim of Othello's guilt is the range of her contradictory subjectivities. Defying coalescence into one subject, Desdemona's subjective personas come through as separate discursive tropes intended to uphold the contested constructs of early modern femininity, as the transition from filial obedience to marital choice was turning into an object of dispute. A meek and yet defiant daughter, a faithful spouse, and yet a querulous wife, a martial Amazon and a subdued virgin, Desdemona can be lewd and imperious, worldly and shy, plaintive and bold: the only unified essence she is endowed with is her humorous Galenic body where «the Minds inclination follows the Bodies Temperature» (Selden 1614, sig. b4, cit. in Paster 2004, p. 13). No matter how tempting, the effort to retrace a progress in the deployment of such exemplary Erasmian attributes of femininity is hopelessly thwarted by her inconsistent shifting from the one to the other. Even when the conjugal empowerment that has heated her depressive virginal coldness regresses to child-like meekness and «half asleep» (4.2.98) inertia, she is unexpectedly pervaded by an incongruous arousal of appetite for Ludovico's eloquence («This Ludovico is a proper man», 4.3.34; «He speaks well», 36), a timid resurgence of the 'devouring greed' which would make her incline towards Othello's exotic narratives.<sup>14</sup> Nor does Othello's murderous jealousy or the proximity of her death in the least inhibit her most ill-timed outstretching towards Cassio: «Alas, he is betrayed, and I undone» (5.2. 78). Until the very end - when her inanimate body unexpectedly throbs in a last spasm of life and of words (5.2.118-125) - Desdemona commands attention to her unpredictable mutability. Her swinging however is never coterminous with the flickering volubility ascribed to bawdiness. No matter how begrimed by Othello's infamous bewhoring, or by Iago's pornographic shots, Desdemona retains to the end the resolute innocence of a pre-lapsarian Eve. So unknowing is she, that she balks in dismay at the prospect of embodying the role of a whore that has been ascribed to her, as if the words uttered to define her were, because of their remoteness from her experience, less insulting than stupefying: «Am I that name, Iago?» (4.2.118); «[...] I cannot say 'whore' | It does abhor me now I speak the word | To do the act that might th' addition earn | Nor the world's mass vanity could make me» (4.2.161-164). Unknowingness, the predicate that makes her disturbingly deaf to the fracas of Othello's jealousy and embarrassingly obtuse to his emotional trajectory, is also the distinctive feature of her pied virtues, which Iago promptly seizes. No matter how perceived as instrumental to his scheming, the attributes Iago pins down

14 For an articulate description of Desdemona's Galenic humoral body see Paster 2004, pp. 117-118.

as characteristic of Desdemona still yield a picture which is poignantly faithful to her composite parts: like the fertile matrix of unwilled and unchecked proclivities, Desdemona – Iago purposely proclaims – is «framed as fruitful | as the free elements» (2.3.326-327). It is the smooth naturalness of her virtues, untouched by the uncouthness of temptation that, set against Othello's enfeathered soul, empowers the freedom of her appetite: «His soul is so enfeathered to her love, | That she may make, unmake, do what she list, | Even as her appetite shall play the god, | With his weak function [...]» (2.3.335-338). Unlike the «the free and open nature» Iago pinpoints as the attribute of Othello's credulousness (1.3.388), Desdemona's freedom, reminiscent of the one of free elements, combines with pliant malleability and with over-zealous propensity towards the needy: «She is of so free, so kind, so apt a disposition, she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested» (2.3.307-309). What I find compelling, however, is the way these attributions converge into «the inclining Desdemona», a phrase where Iago crystallizes Othello's description of her «inclination» to hear his own tale («[...] This to hear | Would Desdemona seriously incline», 1.3.145-146) into the permanent and ungovernable motion of an outstretched subject: «[...] For 'tis most easy | Th' inclining Desdemona to subdue | In any honest suit.» (2.3.324-325).<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of Iago's opportunistic uses of his «inclining Desdemona», the posture he conjures up to visualise her elusive open-handedness posits a radical challenge to the very sceptical knowledge his scheming is eliciting. The mobility of the multidirectional pose captured in the adjective «inclining» actually highlights the threat posed by the ethical connotations of 'inclinations', a graphic word that became charged with highly contested symbolism when it ceased to be synonymous with the aptness to preserve oneself which God had imprinted (see Sloan 1971, p. 11). Outlining the troubled path of this disputed concept, philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2013) has traced the history of inclinations from the time they became a threat against the righteousness of God set in the Bible: when associated with unseemly deviation from the mainstream of life, inclinations are shown to be related to feminine obliqueness, until they are fixed into the acceptable bent of the nurturing and subjected femininity sanctified by Marian iconology. Desdemona would rightly feature in this chart as a major challenge. For, while her inclinations towards the tales of the Moor foreshadow the threats of her empowered desire, her «inclining» casts her restlessness into the fixed unruliness of a subject that ultimately resists reduction to

15 The adjectival use of 'inclining' – a unique occurrence in Shakespeare's corpus and in the linguistic repertoire of the age – actually belies the relational sense of the verb 'incline' and of its popular forms with 'to' or 'towards' to mark the direction of propensity. There is in fact no entry for this adjectival occurrence in reference books on Shakespeare until 2002. See Crystal 2002.

the model of subdued femininity of stereotyped Marian iconology. Quite to the contrary, and in accordance with the post-reformation humanising and fracturing of Virgin Mary's maternity (Espinosa 2012, pp. 114-137), the motion suppressed in the inclined postures of those Marian paintings seems to resurface in the permanently inclining body of Desdemona, a body whose wifely and maternal capability is truncated by the curse of a Lutheran God and of a sceptical mind.

It is in the light of these postural and geometrical scenarios that Shakespeare's «inclining» Desdemona, a visual synecdoche of the diverse styles the play bestows on her, can be seen to counter the horizontal flatness of death that scepticism dooms her to, as well as the sceptical aloofness of her audience. In contrast with the «declined» age Othello puts forward as one of the reasons for his loss of Desdemona («[...] 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 [...]», 3.3.266-268), Desdemona's inclining defies the laws of linear time and of Cartesian geometry even as it provocatively evokes them, on account of its oxymoronic coexistence of motion and stillness, mutability and permanence.<sup>16</sup> Albeit evocative of her obedient bending to the service of fathers and husbands, Desdemona's steadily inclining posture also subsumes the whole threatening potential posed by feminine inclinations to the vertical paradigm of sceptical masculinity: her unconditional outstretching towards the needy merges with the driving energy of erotic appetite, with sanguine imperiousness and martial rebellion. A woman in becoming and a matrix of multiple feminine roles, Desdemona does more than thwart the expectations of knowingness that would allow her to sense and ward off the violence that befalls her. What she ultimately mystifies is the very Cartesian frame forced upon viewers, on and off stage: the frame whereby we are made to resent her annihilation, the very frame that arouses the audience's faith in the possibility of a different Desdemona. For the urge either to rewrite her part entirely or to adjust the elusiveness of her subjectivities into one coherent subject is in fact no different in kind from the masculine grasp of knowledge, whose fatal trajectory the play illuminates.

What Desdemona defies, however, is precisely the absoluteness of that grasp. Even when frozen in the monumental contour of ice-cold alabaster, her theatrical body preserves the glowing, fluid profile of a wavering silhouette. Provided it is left beyond the reaching grasp of male interpretation and appropriation, Desdemona's pliant versatility – which the play puts for-

16 The most telling instantiation of how threatening such attributes can become in the sceptical world of the play is offered by Othello himself as he frantically expounds on Desdemona's «well-painted passion» (4.1.249) in terms that evoke an endlessly repetitious spiralling motion, that defies linearity: «Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on | And turn again; and she can weep, sir, weep» (4.1. 245-257).

ward as the anthropomorphic precipitate of stage language – ignites sparks of utopian belief in other worlds: worlds not yet trapped in the snares of a cursing knowledge, worlds where Desdemona's 'inclining' might not be fatal and Desdemona's unknowingness unpredictably knowing.

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