Nevertheless, the island is also a sanatorium and a place for a second chance, and the sea a purgatorial experience. Nobody actually dies in this shipwreck, everyone emerges changed but not immune to repetition compulsion, for the only imagination of which we are actually capable is that of going back to where we really belong. In the end, living in the tempest helps us recognize that we have made mistakes like any other native or acquired islander. The experience helps us to forgive others for their treachery and deceit, but above all to forgive ourselves and let go of what has gone wrong in our life and what we cannot redeem ourselves: theatre as a radical act of conversion.

Gian Pietro Leonardi


Like Shakespearean drama, this book by Alessandra Marzola on *Othello* addresses different audiences simultaneously: amateurs and specialists, theatregoers and scholars, students and teachers. It is, not coincidentally, the first volume in a new series, *Prismi – Classici nel tempo*, published by Mimesis, which aims at bringing together teaching and research: two domains – as the editors, Marzola herself and Caroline Patey, remark in their presentation of the series – which do not always live on friendly terms in the academic world. Seeking to avoid both the oversimplification that can occur in the classroom and the excessive complexities and jargon of the specialist essay, each ‘prism’ is meant to deal with a classic in English-language literatures conveying the plurality and polyphony that form their identity. In this light, the choice of *Othello* as the study-object of the first book in the series could not have been more fitting (while the second volume brought forth to date, Caroline Patey’s *Gita al faro. Circumnavigazioni*, 2016, is devoted to another highly prismatic text: Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*).

*Othello. Passioni* offers a comprehensive and articulate introduction to Shakespeare’s tragedy, including plot summaries, informative references to the history of its critical reception and cultural legacy, as well as very useful reading guides. What Marzola presents us with is a “tale” which, as she herself states, endeavours to show rather
than explain, a tale addressed to those who still don’t know but are willing to know: exactly as happens in a classroom (p. 13). At the same time, the book is much more than a didactic tool. It displays an overall fascinating design, a heuristic movement which is decidedly stimulating and inspiring not only for the lay reader, but also for the specialist: “a spiralling motion that tries to hold [the play’s] words in an increasingly intimate embrace” (p. 13). The three chapters that make up the book – “Mappe” (“Maps”), “Maledizioni” (“Curses”) and “Segreti (“Secrets”) – are indeed three increasingly close echoes of, or perspectives on, the text of _Othello_ that investigate and shed light on the infinite generative power of Shakespeare’s language.

A tragedy of extreme passions, the only Shakespearean tragedy that does not show facts but the fantasies they engender and whose real protagonists are the ghosts of imagination (p. 17), _Othello_ has always stirred visceral response and given rise to (often corrective) re-writings, antithetical interpretations, diverging ideological and political appropriations (p. 16). A thread that runs through the whole of Marzola’s book is indeed the investigation of _Othello_ as a text undergoing constant metamorphosis, a text that not only tolerates but seems to require endless betrayals, thus becoming a “matrix” of different genres, models and styles across the media (p. 37) – so much so that it can be viewed as a “hypertext” (p. 16). Thanks to the protean power of its language, _Othello_ incorporates previous history and literary models and, at the same time, projects itself into the future by activating the “creative memory” (p. 37) of its viewers and readers, revealing each time one of its myriad “prismatic faces” (pp. 47, 48, 81). It gathers, for example, the rich mediaeval and early modern tradition of tales about ‘the Orient’ and faraway lands and is, in its turn, a matrix of ‘orientalist’ tales – a process in which the character of the Moor plays an especially pivotal role as he not only suffers but interiorises and uses against himself an orientalist gaze, radicalizing it to the point of self-destruction (p. 39). Owing to its nuanced scrutiny of marriage – a foundational early modern institution aiming to regulate passions but, because of the unprecedented freedom of choice it entails, always liable to become the site of their uncontrollable explosion (pp. 81-84, 112) –, _Othello_ is also the matrix of numberless developments in the romance and novel forms. Its exploration of monstrosity – a monstrosity originating in the mind rather than discovered in the world outside the self – prefigures the gothic and...
horror traditions. And, although the debt is often unacknowledged, many iconic monsters of our culture – from Dr Frankenstein’s creature to Mr Hyde, from Dracula to the twentieth-century monsters of the unconscious – draw on aspects of Othello (p. 45).

Engaging with Stanley Cavell’s seminal work (Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare [1987], Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, updated edition 2003), another thread that runs throughout Otello. Passioni, and is scrutinised from different angles in each chapter, is the issue of Othello’s scepticism: the way in which this text depicts the epistemological shift that led to the affirmation of scepticism as the episteme of modernity and, in so doing, obliges the audience to become aware of its catastrophic consequences, violence and discrimination (p. 103). Marzola emphasises, particularly in the second chapter, how the whole parable of Othello’s scepticism is fostered by the “curses” contained in the Book of Genesis which the text clearly evokes (the “curse of service”, I.i.34, and the “curse of marriage”, III.iii.271, referring respectively to the curse of subjection imposed by Noah upon Canaan, son of Ham, in Genesis 9.20-27, and to the curse of eternal enmity between man and woman pronounced by God on Adam in Genesis 3.14-15). In chapter three scepticism is connected to the rise of a culture of secrecy and of a new scientific paradigm, promoting a prying anatomical gaze, in early modern England. Reprising and further developing some considerations she already put forward in previous studies (cf. “Shaping Scepticism, Arousing Belief: The Case of Othello”, English Literature, 1:1, 2014, and “Hamlet and the Passion of Knowledge”, Memoria di Shakespeare, 1, 2014, an Italian version of which is included in Maria Del Sapio Garbero, ed., Shakespeare and the New Science in Early Modern Culture / Shakespeare e la nuova scienza nella cultura moderna, Pisa, Pacini, 2016), Marzola delves into the question of scepticism by comparing its different outcome in Hamlet and in Othello. Both tragedies stage bodies that have become closed (corpi clausi), an interiority that has been severed from the exteriority, a split between appearance and reality, words and meanings; both are haunted by the urge to rend the barriers that make the inner ‘truth’ unreachable. But while Hamlet interrogates this new, fissured world and the new perception of the human being as a separate entity, a distinct ‘subject’ endowed – but also cursed – with an invisible, secret self (“that within which passes show”, Hamlet, I.ii.85), Iago uses the sceptical doubt for his own
ends. Iago is not troubled by the “crisis in transparency” (p. 102) that plagues the modern world; rather, he exploits it to kindle the other’s predatory pursuit of knowledge and, simultaneously, to annihilate otherness. Moreover, by constantly involving us in his nefarious scheming through his soliloquies and asides, he compels us to an unwanted and disturbing complicity.

One last recurring theme in Otello. Passioni that I would like to highlight as especially fertile and thought-provoking is its reflection on Desdemona and her “posture”. This theme also runs like a thread throughout the study, particularly featuring in the final section, “Epiloghi e Inclinazioni” (“Epilogues and Inclinations”). Although in Othello Desdemona is a multifaceted, ever-changing figure – “a maiden never bold” (I.iii.94), a passionate lover, a “fair warrior” (II.i.176) –, what has remained in the cultural memory is the “monumental alabaster” (V.ii.5) of her body frozen in the stillness of death. However, Marzola contends, what truly characterises Desdemona, what sets her apart making her an eccentric and subverting presence, the real “extravagant and wheeling stranger” (I.i.137) in the play, is her “inclination”. Othello’s description of Desdemona’s inclination to listen to his tale in the first act (“This to hear / Would Desdemona seriously incline”, I.iii.144-45) is later echoed and transformed into a permanent attribute of the character in Iago’s phrase “the inclining Desdemona” (II.iii.325). Her leaning out of her own centre towards the other, in an incessant gesture of generosity and desire, threatens the Cartesian frame that governs Othello’s world. In this world, which is our own sceptical world, no position is allowed except for the vertical, ‘right’ one (cf. Adriana Cavarero’s insightful study, Inclinazioni. Critica della rettitudine, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2013) and the horizontal flatness of death. Desdemona’s outstretched ‘obliqueness’ arouses the annihilating fury of a world infected by scepticism. But, at the same time, it reveals the outline of another possible play and of another possible episteme. In a tragedy that closes on a particularly sombre note, that seems to deny any future and does not even promise future (perhaps explanatory) tales, Desdemona’s inclination presents us with an alternative outlook, a different epistemological stance that refuses any search for the ‘absolute’ truth and accepts uncertainty. In this light, Marzola intriguingly suggests, even Iago’s baffling last statement, “Demand me nothing; what you know, you know” (V.ii.300), could be seen as a secret celebration of enigmas,
an invitation to abandon the anatomical gaze which endeavours to pierce the surface of reality like a scalpel, and can prove as lethal. Owing to Desdemona’s pliant posture we can thus imagine different epilogues for the tragedy and for ourselves: a world which does not revolve around the vertical line of the ‘I’ but around a line bent towards the other (p. 154).

These remarks on ‘other’ epilogues coincide with the epilogue of Marzola’s book, an epilogue which does not intend to close the discussion on the prismatic text of Othello but, on the contrary, to open up new perspectives and trigger new questions. In keeping with its emphasis on inclination as a value and with the spirit of the whole Prismi series, thanks to the clarity of its orchestration and the wealth of critical suggestions and tools it generously offers its readers, Otello. Passioni is a study outstretched towards its diverse audience: an ‘inclining’ study.

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Shakespeare’s concern as a dramatist was to turn stories into successful plays. He understood the subtle procedures of stagecraft, needed to help create effective performances. But what exactly were his principles in matters of dramaturgy? The term ‘dramaturgy’ covers both the literary and directorial aspects of staging a play. It involves the ability to devise a text for performance, and consequently to adapt it for the company staging it. Therefore, it also consists in advising actors on possible readings of the play and how to better translate thoughts into actions, working with them till the opening night to see that intonation, gestures and movements follow the writer’s design accordingly. This is common knowledge in every theatre and for every company, and Shakespeare presents us with a vivid example of this practice when he parodies it in the rehearsals of Peter Quince and his fellow mechanicals.

Would exploring Shakespeare’s dramatic composition strategies therefore help us to better understand his plays? That is the question John C. Meagher attempts to answer in Shakespeare’s Shakespeare: How the Plays Were Made. First published in 1997 by