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**“What, In a Town of War... To Manage Private and Domestic Quarrel?": Othello and the Tragedy of Cyprus**

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## **“What, In a Town of War... To Manage Private and Domestic Quarrel?”: Othello and the Tragedy of Cyprus**

This essay reconsiders the significance of Cyprus as the location of Othello, arguing that awareness of the island's capture by Ottoman forces in 1571 will have been central to the play's early reception. This context broadens the significance of the tragedy beyond the original domestic focus of a plot borrowed by Shakespeare from an Italian novella by Cinthio - one that, significantly, plays out during a period of peace rather than war. Beginning with an analysis of the affective power of the alarm bells that ring out in the riot scene (2.3), it argues that through a combination of internal and external contextual signs, Shakespeare's original Jacobean audiences will have become united in perspective with the people of Cyprus. The significance of the loss of Othello as the island's most capable defender, combined with the inadequacy of Cassio as his replacement, is highlighted throughout the play. This enables the specific tragic potential of Cyprus as a location to be exploited by Shakespeare in a way that was simply unavailable to Cinthio, and that may not be automatically understood by later audiences.

Keywords: Cinthio, Ortelius, Turks, Mediterranean, bells, maps, sensory, affect, riot, reception, adaptation

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Othello:    What, in a town of war  
              Yet wild, the people's hearts brimful of fear,  
              To manage private and domestic quarrel  
              In night, and on the court and guard of safety!  
              'Tis monstrous. (2.3.206–10)

This quotation, from Act 2 Scene 3 of *Othello*, comes at a pivotal moment in the plot. The Venetian war party – including its general, Othello, his recently-appointed lieutenant, Michael Cassio, and his new wife, Desdemona – has arrived at the island of Cyprus only to find that the Turkish (or Ottoman) fleet whose threatening approach they had voyaged to oppose has been lost at sea.<sup>2</sup> In response, Othello declares a public celebration, during which Cassio is overcome by alcohol and, during a fight, wounds Montano, an important official in Cyprus. (This whole scene, needless to say, has been orchestrated by Iago, the engine of chaos in this play.) Still at Iago's direction, an alarm is raised, resulting in the town bell being rung and the chaotic effect spreading out beyond its immediate location.

When considered in its original early modern performance context, this is a moment whose echoes carried far beyond its immediate setting. This is literally true with regard to its sensory impact, which would have been far greater in performance

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to those of this journal's Readers, I am grateful for the questions and suggestions offered by delegates at the "Sheffield Hallam University Tragedy Symposium", Sheffield, UK, in January 2017, and at the "6<sup>th</sup> Annual Othello's Island Conference", Nicosia, Cyprus, in March 2018, where earlier versions of this paper were presented.

<sup>2</sup> While "Turkish" is used most often in this play (sixteen times, including shorter variants), "Ottoman" (once) and "Ottomites" (three times) also occur.

than may be immediately apparent on the page. It is also metaphorically true in terms of the way in which the play invokes recent historical events to transform a plot borrowed from a novella by the Italian writer Giambattista Giraldi, known as Cinthio, into the impactful stage tragedy presented by Shakespeare. These two factors of staging and context will have combined to create a far different impression for *Othello*'s audiences than for readers of Cinthio's novella "Un Capitano Moro", the seventh story in the third decade of his 1565 story collection *Gli Hecatommithi*.<sup>3</sup> Understanding the nature of this difference is essential for modern readers and practitioners seeking to recover the contemporary significance of Cyprus as the dramatic heart of Shakespeare's play.

The method of exploring Shakespeare's plays historically, with reference to their surrounding texts and contexts, is so well-established that even what was labelled "New Historicism" has now been around for over forty years. Critical methodologies that emphasise the sensory elements of early staging and reception have become prominent more recently, largely over the past two decades.<sup>4</sup> Yet, although the focus of the latter may seem, on its surface, more ephemeral, both approaches rely for their success on a

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<sup>3</sup> While the focus of this essay is on Shakespeare's transformation of his source material in response to recent events, I acknowledge Karina Feliciano Attar's defence of Cinthio's own originality in shaping a story of historical and literary specificity within an existing novella tradition (47–64).

<sup>4</sup> Foundational studies in this area include those by Bruce R. Smith, Kenneth Gross, and Katharine A. Craik. The recent essay collection *Shakespeare/Sense: Contemporary Readings in Sensory Culture*, edited by Simon Smith, contains a number of useful discussions and demonstrations of current directions in this field. The present essay is, I hope, one example of how "sensory approaches [can] become habitual tools across the various branches of Shakespeare studies," intersecting with and enriching other critical methodologies (13).

careful balancing of textual and contextual evidence. Contextual knowledge, earned through the study of other texts and archives, is made relevant by being matched with sustained and dramaturgically-aware reading of the play-texts themselves. This is equally true whether applied to questions concerning Shakespearean audiences' knowledge of contemporary political events, or to enquiries into early modern theatrical practice.

As Farah Karim Cooper and Tiffany Stern have argued concerning the interaction of performance effects and spoken language, "we need to understand both in order to comprehend dramatic meaning fully" (8). The essay that follows takes an inter-critical approach in this spirit, expanding it to examine how and what relevant knowledge of Cyprus's recent political history would have been available to early *Othello* audiences to carry with them into the playhouse, and how the play activates and exploits this knowledge to intensify its own dramatic effect, with particular emphasis on how Shakespeare's version of the Othello story emerges from and adapts its primary Italian source.<sup>5</sup> Discussing Marlowe's *Edward II*, Steven Mullaney detects a tension between the play's invitation to empathise with its title character in the moment of performance and its audience's foreknowledge of the play's terrible events. He suggests that the audience is made to feel complicit in "the spectacle of regicide that we have always known is coming, that in fact was one of the anticipated pleasures that drew us to the performance," an effect he describes as "the queasy underside of empathy" (84). Something similar occurs during *Othello*, with newly-Jacobean London theatregoers

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<sup>5</sup> Gurr describes a similar drive to expand both "our sense of what early modern audiences might have brought to the plays they experienced, and how extensive was the wealth of tacit information their authors laid on for them" ("Preface" xi).

being induced into futile empathy with the people of a Cyprus that had by that time already become subject to major political change. This is partly achieved through these audiences' likely sensory experiences during the performance, in particular the sequence of celebration followed by alarm in 2.2 and 2.3. It is partly transmitted through the play-text's consistent anticipation, from its opening through to its last scenes, of the weakened state in which Othello's personal downfall will leave the island's Venetian government. Partly, too, it emerges out of its audience's likely knowledge that Cyprus had indeed moved from Venetian to Ottoman control at a relatively recent point in history.

The island of Cyprus carried different associations in Shakespeare's time than it does today, particularly with regard to the partitioning of the Mediterranean world. Although it was not yet divided politically as it is today, providing the site for a physical border that also serves as a conceptual boundary for what has been termed "the Greater Middle East", the island's repeated susceptibility to conquering armies throughout its history gave it a different kind of liminal status. Due to its geographical location – in close proximity to Turkey and the Holy Land, but also easily accessible by sea from continental Europe and North Africa – the political situation of Cyprus was subject to radical change throughout its history. While the island's dimensions and spatial coordinates remained constant, its peoples' relationships to successive Greek, Arab, Venetian, Ottoman and even English rulers necessarily did not.

This liminality is strongly emphasised in the changes made during the adaptation of "Un Capitano Moro" into *Othello*, with a sudden, dramatic development in the real-life Ottoman-Venetian contest for Cyprus creating an opportunity for the extension of the plot's impact beyond the private sphere and into the public. The island's capture by the forces of Sultan Selim II in 1571, six years after the publication of *Gli*

*Hecatommithi*, meant that when Shakespeare came to borrow Cinthio's plot, it suddenly had scope for much further-reaching consequences than what Dympna Callaghan has described as the "embarrassingly domestic" melodrama of the original (35). Adopting what Tom McAlindon describes as a "Jacobean awareness that Cyprus will be savaged by the Turk in a very short time" allows us to better recognise that Othello's downfall is not his alone; with it comes the near-certainty of the loss of Cyprus to the Turks due to his absence as governor (129). As Jane Adamson observes, "Othello is at the centre of the play, but he is not the whole of it" (5). In this sensational moment of riotous bell-ringing, the specific anxieties invoked by the play's Cypriot setting are brought onstage forcefully, but not finally.

The urgency and consequence of Othello's loss as the island's best defence against the inevitable Ottoman invasion is clearly inscribed in the text. As Jason Lawrence notes, among his other adaptations Shakespeare has promoted the Moor in Cinthio's tale from a captain to a general. This elevated rank enables Othello to have the governorship of Cyprus bestowed on him, a position of responsibility that ensures that his fall and the island's become fundamentally intertwined (132). The critical debate surrounding his personal culpability – and whether the play's sympathies lie with the killer or his victim – therefore stands separate from the dramatic fact of his forfeited value to the Venetian state and the citizens of Cyprus. The drama concerns Othello and Desdemona but the tragedy is of Cyprus.<sup>6</sup> In a way that it was simply not necessary for Cinthio to consider in the context of his 1565 murder tale, the play's most unambiguous sympathies are ultimately with the people of Cyprus.

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<sup>6</sup> In emphasising the tragedy of Cyprus I do not mean to deny the other elements of tragedy present in *Othello*. In keeping with R.S. White and Ciara Rawnsley's discussion of "discrepant emotional awareness" both on- and off-stage, there is room for both.



## **“That Dreadful Bell”**

A great brass bell ringing today may seem like quite a comfortable sound, perhaps an anachronism from the pre-digital era. Aurally, we, as members of 21<sup>st</sup>-century society, might still notice it, but culturally we are no longer really attuned to the same meaning it will have carried in earlier centuries. In the Renaissance period, hearing a bell ringing at an unexpected hour would have been like hearing an air-raid warning today, or perhaps a fire alarm or ambulance siren. From childhood, we are trained to pay attention to these sounds, to notice them, and find out why they are happening, what danger they might indicate for us. We are taught to fear them, so that through fear we might be better able to protect ourselves.

As part of his study of urban soundscapes in Florence during what he calls “The Noisy Renaissance”, Niall Atkinson specifically explores the subject of wartime bells (157). He recounts the plot of a novella by the fourteenth-century Florentine author, Franco Sacchetti, in which a woman living in a besieged city discovers a flooded cellar in the middle of the night and calls for help. This simple event begins an ever-expanding sequence of misunderstood distress calls that ultimately leads to the city’s bells being rung and the arming of the city guard on full alert. As Sacchetti’s narrator observes at the end of the tale: “Thus is a populace often both ignorant and mad, especially in times of war; for if a measure of nuts be overthrown, or a cat break a jug, they think it is the enemy and immediately create an uproar” (110).

Iago’s consciousness of the people of Cyprus being in a comparable state of high alert against Ottoman invasion is emphasised in the moments leading up to the brawl, as he manages events so that, in addition to that of his dupe, Roderigo, Cassio will also attract the ire of three local citizens. “Three else of Cyprus – noble swelling spirits / That hold their honours in a wary distance, / The very elements of this warlike isle”

(2.3.51–3). Cyprus’s “warlike” status is doubly underlined here in a rhetorical construction in which the island is not merely personified verbally, but actually given distilled physical form in three of its citizens said to embody its “very elements”.<sup>7</sup> When Iago then directs Roderigo to “Go out and cry a mutiny”, the result is that a bell starts ringing furiously.<sup>8</sup> This will have created a visceral effect not just within the world of the play, but also for the real people in the audience, gathered in the theatre watching its first run.<sup>9</sup> The text is explicit on this point.

Iago:           Who’s that which rings the bell? Diablo, ho!  
                   The town will rise. God’s will, lieutenant, hold.  
                   You’ll be ashamed forever.

*Enter Othello and attendants, with weapons*

Othello:    What is the matter here?

Montano:    ’Swounds, I bleed still. I am hurt to th’ death.

*(Attacking Cassio) He dies.*

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<sup>7</sup> Cassio himself had previously used this exact phrase on first setting foot on the island. Typically, however, he does this in a manner that renders himself merely an appendix to Othello: “Thanks, you the valiant of this warlike isle / That so approve the Moor!” (2.1.44–5).

<sup>8</sup> Bruce R. Smith has discussed the range of theatrical “sound-making devices” recorded in Henslowe’s inventory of the Admiral’s Men’s properties for 1598 (218–20). These appear to have included three types of bell, including a “beacon” or alarm bell of the kind that will have been used in the riot scene in *Othello*. One of the less disturbing kinds of stage bell – “steeple” or clock bells – may also have been used during the Herald’s proclamation of the celebratory feast “from this present hour / of five till the bell have told eleven” (2.2.9–10).

<sup>9</sup> For an overview of the uses to which Shakespeare put bells in his plays, see Kinney (77–99). Although Kinney mentions the bells in *Othello* only briefly, he usefully foregrounds their direct effect on “neural pathways in the mind’s ear” and their capacity to create “defining moments” in Shakespeare’s plays (99). In addition, the onstage and offstage effects of a ringing bell in the longer example he discusses, from *Macbeth*, is directly comparable to the ringing bell here in *Othello*: “The sound of a bell, interrupting and destroying the silence Macbeth seeks, commands attention and demands a response, from Macbeth, from us, that can accommodate its noise and explain it if not finally explain it away” (80–1).

Othello: Hold, for your lives!

Iago: Hold, ho, lieutenant, sir, Montano, gentlemen!  
 Have you forgot all place of sense and duty?  
 Hold, the general speaks to you. Hold, hold for shame.

Othello: Why, how now, ho? From whence ariseth this?  
 Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that  
 Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?  
 For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl.  
 He that stirs next to carve for his own rage  
 Holds his soul light; he dies upon his motion.  
 Silence that dreadful bell – it frights the isle  
 From her propriety.

(2.3.154–69)

Iago swears “Diablo, ho! / The town will rise”, an invocation of chaos that Othello confirms at his arrival on the scene: “Silence that dreadful bell – it frights the isle / From her propriety.” In-between, the adrenaline shot of the alarm bell is continually reinforced by a staccato of shouts – the majority of these, typically, emanating from Iago: “Ho ... Hold... ’Swounds ... Hold ... Hold, Ho ... Hold ... Hold, hold ... Why, how now, ho?”<sup>10</sup>

Picture this scene from a Cypriot perspective. The island has been on high alert for an invasion. A defence force has been sent out from Venice. There is a huge storm at sea, due to which the defenders might not make it over safely. Instead, however, news arrives that the enemy has been wiped out by the storm. As Othello puts it, “Our wars are done, the Turks are drowned” (2.1.203). Everyone relaxes.<sup>11</sup> Festivities begin. Then,

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<sup>10</sup> David Houston Wood catalogues “the sheer number of ‘rousings’ Iago imparts to various entities in the play”, including “Cyprus itself” (84). To these I would add an entity that exists, at least partly, outside the play: the audience.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Bate compares the relief of the Cypriots in this moment to that of the witnesses to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 (294–5).

in the middle of all this, the one sound that everyone has been fearing: the ringing of the bell that means the invasion has arrived! The emotional jolt created here for the people of Cyprus is enormous, and its physiological manifestations – increased heartrate, momentary stoppage of breath – will have similarly affected the theatrical audience.<sup>12</sup> It is, of course, difficult to capture for posterity something as instantaneous as a frightened jump, though Andrew Gurr recalls a comparable moment of an audience having the intense energy of its concentration on a performance of *Doctor Faustus* transformed into genuine fear by an unexpectedly loud noise, when “the olde Theatre crackt and frightened the Audience”.<sup>13</sup>

So when Othello arrives it is to a scene of panic and discord. He demands an explanation, but Iago pleads ignorance, Cassio is too drunk or too ashamed to speak, and Montano is too badly wounded. Othello, up until now calm, controlled, the epitome of a professional soldier, starts to lose his composure, and the reason he gives for this is the speech with which this essay began. In this perilous situation, when people are already so afraid, you disturb the peace for something so petty, so stupid as a private quarrel? “’Tis Monstrous.”

### **“The people’s hearts brimful of fear”**

Kent Cartwright has discussed the difficulty for *Othello*’s theatrical audiences in locating a character to “stand in” with completely on an empathetic level. “We seldom surrender wholly to a character’s point of view” (141). I would suggest that rather than

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<sup>12</sup> Tiffany Stern describes a similar effect occurring at the end of *Hamlet*, where Horatio’s harmonious benediction, “Goodnight, sweet Prince / and flights of Angels sing thee to thy rest” suddenly “yields to the harsh intrusion of a martial drum” (112).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in (Gurr, *Playgoing* 169). For other examples of intense audience engagement, see (Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage* 279).

a single character, the audience is provided with both contextual knowledge and sensory experiences in such a way as to bring its point of view in line with the population of Cyprus, watching helplessly as the newly-arrived Venetian protection force self-destructs, heedless of the ever-present potential for the next Ottoman attempt on the island.

G.R. Hibbard, taking his cue from A.C. Bradley, argues that Othello's invocation of the fear inhabiting "the people's hearts" is a one-off, momentary glance at a population that is then immediately forgotten: "[T]his is the first and the last that we ever hear about the people of Cyprus and their state of mind. They appear only once; they say nothing; they do not matter" (42). Factually, this is at best uncertain, with characters appearing outside this scene, including Montano and Bianca, who could at least potentially be categorised as "people of Cyprus". As Roger Christofides properly notes, it is far from clear at which point those "who come to Cyprus, who fight for Cyprus, who die in Cyprus" become "more Cypriot than anything else" (65). Even less tenable is Hibbard's earlier assertion that "The last echo of the initial political situation is heard in II, iii" (42). The opposite is true. The spectre of this fearful population once raised – and raised violently through the ringing of the stage bell – is never settled and proceeds instead to haunt the rest of the play's action.

As Lisa Hopkins has explored in detail, even when the characters in *Othello* are not actually near the sea, "this is a play in which they always imagine themselves as surrounded and configured by water" (94). This is equally true for the citizens of Cyprus whose unspeaking presence is conjured in the riot scene, their alarm ventriloquised by Iago's percussive cries. The hearts of the "people" are "brimful of fear" precisely because the waters surrounding their island can at any moment give passage to invading Ottomans. Even when the enemy is not actually present, its threat is

always imminent. Their town does not need to be at war to be “of war”.

For a Jacobean audience familiar with recent events on Cyprus, the ringing of the stage bell during Cassio’s riot will have been a crucial moment of what Michael Mooney has described as “dramatic transaction”, during which the audience is united in perspective with the people of Cyprus (16).<sup>14</sup> The sensation of this alarm bell will have been as direct an example of theatrical affect as could exist, with the effect of hearing the wildly ringing bell in the theatre far exceeding the merely mimetic. Rather, the affective power of this alarm signal collapses the distance between the English audience and the citizens of Cyprus. In this moment, all are placed once more on the alert for imminent danger, and this time no signal of relief is ever given. Although news has previously reached the island that the Turkish forces have been scattered by the storm, the potential defectiveness of such information has already been demonstrated by the arrival of a sequence of messengers in the Senate scene, on top of the existing written reports, each bearing contradictory accounts of the fleet’s destination (1.3.1–43). Is it certain that the whole fleet is lost? Might some surviving part of it be continuing with the planned invasion? In the heightened emotional atmosphere of ringing alarm bells, neither citizens nor audience members can return to a relaxed state with complete certainty.

The degree to which the personal fortunes of Othello and the political fate of Cyprus are intertwined is given voice in the proclamation of the triumphal feast. This is a formal, ceremonial moment and, as Alison Findlay has argued, such moments can have powerful, transformative effects on theatrical audiences.

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<sup>14</sup> Allison Hobgood’s exploration of “contagious” emotion infecting audiences of *Macbeth* is also relevant here (34–63).

The performance of a ceremony exerts significant emotional and political influence over individuals by virtue of its boundary condition... When, after levelling and reformation, the “new” subject is reincorporated into society, the public sphere or group of witnesses is itself transformed (27).

When the Herald formally invites each citizen of Cyprus to “put himself into triumph”, the play’s audience is likewise invited to share in the island’s joy (2.2.4). When he both begins and ends by invoking the name of “Othello... our noble and valiant / general”, and concludes with a conjoined petition that “Heaven bless the / isle of Cyprus and our noble general, Othello” (2.2.1–2, 10–11), Shakespeare’s audience is itself being positioned to believe in Othello’s valour and to invest themselves in his wellbeing. So when, shortly following this ceremonial transformation of the English audience members into temporary Cypriots, the alarm sounds, their response cannot be expected to be completely distant or disengaged. And when Othello subsequently spirals into his ultimate catastrophe, his loss to the island is at least partly felt as their own loss.

Within the play, the result of this uproar, as Iago had planned, is Cassio’s disgrace in the eyes of Othello, his demotion from the rank of lieutenant, and the possible opening of that vacancy for Iago himself. In terms of Othello’s own later fate, Cassio’s banishment creates the need for his reinstatement, which Desdemona is persuaded to plead for, partly confirming the suspicions laid on her by Iago. This is also the first sign of the anger that will contribute to Othello’s later rash decisions.

Othello loses his temper in the riot scene not just because Cassio is drunk and making a fool of himself. He hardly seems bothered either by Montano’s injury. What Othello explicitly takes issue with is the place and time of their row: “a town of war / Yet wild, the people’s hearts brimful of fear”. This is the context that makes Cassio’s offence so severe, so punishable. It is also what makes Othello’s downfall of such consequence. This is one of the points on which the course of Othello’s personal

tragedy pivots and, with it, the wider tragedy in the play. The pursuit of his “private and domestic quarrel” removes him from his responsibilities “on the court and guard of safety” at the moment of the island’s greatest need. This additional degree of consequence significantly separates *Othello* from its source, and is an essential part of the plot’s transformation from prose novella into dramatic tragedy.

A few scenes after this one, Desdemona, in dialogue with Emilia, gives voice to the apparent unlikelihood – and, by implication, inappropriateness – of Othello’s mood being altered by a private matter:

Desdemona:    Something sure of state,  
    Either from Venice or some unhatched practice  
    Made demonstrable here in Cyprus to him,  
    Hath puddled his clear spirit; and in such cases  
    Men’s natures wrangle with inferior things,  
    Though great ones are their object.

(3.4.138–43)

Desdemona declares that only a “great” matter of state could be of sufficient importance to shift her husband’s previously eloquent and loving nature toward the increasingly blunt and obsessive manners with which he had just demanded she produce the fatal handkerchief. Petty jealousy – a “private and domestic quarrel” – would be too “inferior” a cause to have influence over a man of his stature. Emilia’s response, “Pray heaven it be state matters, as you think”, epitomises the inversion that takes place in the play’s later Acts, in which the urgent threat of violence provoked by a dispute over supposed adultery grows in importance to outweigh the characters’ proportional sense of the consequences for the people of Cyprus of depriving the island of Othello’s military expertise.



The reversal of state and private priorities begins to move beyond hope of redemption following the moment in which Othello receives from Lodovico his notice to return to Venice. Bradley argues that Othello has “already been superseded at Cyprus when his fate is consummated” and therefore “his deed and his death have not that influence on the interests of a nation or an empire which serves to idealise” (146). However, Othello’s recall is in fact only temporary, and his importance as the defender of Cyprus “idealised” throughout the play. Cassio is called on only to “Deput[e]” for Othello rather than to permanently displace him, a term that indicates a temporary transfer of responsibility with ongoing authority ultimately remaining with the general (4.1.233–4). However in the immediate moment it echoes too powerfully in Othello’s mind his belief in his erstwhile Lieutenant’s already “hav[ing] my place” in the home (4.1.263). Othello had first been provoked to anger by Cassio’s failure to exercise “that honourable stop” and to regulate his behaviour while on guard, instead becoming involved in a drunken riot (2.3.2). Here, in turn, Othello fails to regulate himself and strikes Desdemona publically while in the middle of official business. Before exiting, Othello gives voice to this inversion in his juxtaposition of formal civic greeting and untethered exclamation: “You are welcome, sir, to Cyprus. Goats and monkeys!” (4.1.265). The separation of state and private business, in which Desdemona and Emilia had earlier placed their hopes, here collapses. Othello never returns to command over the defence of Cyprus and, upon his death, Cassio’s temporary appointment becomes permanent. As a result the island is left in greater peril than it would otherwise have been.

### **“The importancy of Cyprus”**

Abraham Ortelius’s landmark atlas, the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, significantly shaped how many early modern Europeans will have viewed the geography of the world in

their time. First issued in 1570 with accompanying commentary in Latin, it went through an extraordinary 25 editions by the end of the century, including versions with the text in Dutch, French and German. Using the island's appearance on Ortelius's map of the Ottoman Empire as a point of reference (Figure 1), Daniel Vitkus suggests that "English audiences watching a play set in Cyprus under Venetian rule could have interpreted this setting as a vulnerable outpost destined to be swallowed up by the Turks and converted to Islamic rule" (168). However a different map in Ortelius's *Theatrum* offers a contrary view of Cyprus's logical affiliation, one that complicates this perception that Cyprus can only be regarded as vulnerable, in one way or another.

Figure 1: "Turkish Empire", in Abraham Ortelius, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, (1570). (Source: Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division)

Figure 2: "Europe", in Abraham Ortelius, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, (1570). (Source: Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division)

Each of Ortelius's maps presents a continent, country, empire or state in a way that creates separation from its neighbouring areas, even when these are contiguous. One way in which he achieves this apparent separation is to differentiate between his main subject and these neighbouring areas by only including inland information for the main area. This targeted density of ink creates a kind of highlighting effect that surrounding territories then lack. In his map of the Ottoman Empire, Ortelius's labels display an area covering modern-day Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Western Iran, Israel/Palestine, Egypt, and the whole Arabian Peninsula, as well as reflecting Istanbul's influence over much of Greece and the Balkans, along with stretches of North and Northeast Africa.

On the map of Europe (Figure 2), the area surrounding the island of Cyprus does not feature much infilling. This blankness serves to emphasise Cyprus's lack of natural

or geographical continuity with what might be called Christian Europe, and could give support to Virginia Mason Vaughan's sense that "Cyprus is the frontier, the uttermost edge of western civilization, simultaneously vulnerable to attack from without and subversion from within" ("Supersubtle Venetians" 22). However, contrastingly, in Ortelius's map of the Ottoman Empire, Cyprus is central, not marginal. On this map it is Europe, with Italy in the top left corner, which is left blank. Venice ("Venetia") is the sole city on the Upper Adriatic to be named. As with Cyprus in the map of Europe, this cartographically-produced isolation serves rather to emphasise than diminish the apparent remoteness of this mercantile city and its one-time island colony. Venice is remote from Cyprus, not the reverse.

One of Shakespeare's key non-literary sources for *Othello*, Richard Knolles's *The Generall Historie of the Turkes*, describes the island of Cyprus in a way which orients it entirely through the use of Ottoman possessions. "This island lieth in the farthest of the Cilician sea: it hath on the East SIRIA, on the West PAMPHILIA, Southward it regardeth ÆGIPT, and Northward CILICIA, now called CARRAMANIA" (843). This description also recalls the situation of Cyprus in the ancient world, when the flat-bottomed vessels used in Eastern Mediterranean trade navigated primarily along coastal sea-lanes (Rauh 22-26). This is the period of *Antony and Cleopatra*, the play in which occurs Shakespeare's only other direct mention of Cyprus outside of *Othello*. Prior to coming under Roman control in 58 BCE, Cyprus was for several centuries ruled by the Ptolomaic dynasty of Egypt, an important link in a naval empire centred on Alexandria (Rauh 11). Shakespeare, drawing on a detail in North's 1576 translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, has Caesar bemoan the infatuated Mark Anthony's re-gifting to Cleopatra many of the former possessions of that dynasty to which she is heir (986). "Unto her / He gave the stablishment of Egypt; made her / Of lower Syria, Cyprus,

Lydia, Absolute queen” (3.6.8–10) This sequence, with the island of Cyprus forming a bridge between two separate mainlands to its East and North, cements its image as belonging to a regional geography that long predates any Venetian claim to ownership.

Vitkus imagines an Anglo- or Euro-centric audience viewing Cyprus as the last outpost of Europe, isolated and exposed at its southeast corner. However, Ortelius’s map and Knolles’s text permit instead something approaching an Ottoman perspective, in which Cyprus is naturally within that Empire’s sphere of influence, tucked into the heart of its eastern Mediterranean possessions. From this point of view, rather than appearing vulnerable, just waiting to be gobbled up, a Venetian/European/Christian Cyprus is instead threatening, providing the perfect launching pad for an aggressor. Historically, Crusaders including the English King Richard I – or Richard the Lionheart – had used Cyprus for precisely this purpose on their way to make war for control of Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup> More recently, Cypriot ports had provided havens for corsairs in the eastern Mediterranean, who not only harassed the economically vital Ottoman shipping route between Istanbul and Cairo, but also threatened the security of pilgrims shipping towards Arabia to take part in the Hajj (Malcolm 100–4).

François de Belleforest’s *La cosmographie Universelle de tout le monde* (1575) reflects this alternative perspective when describing the underlying origins of the Ottoman desire to possess the island of Cyprus:<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In John Foxe’s account of Richard’s crusade, printed in the same volume of Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations* as the report of the Siege of Famagusta discussed below, Cyprus is used as an embarkation point for the short crossings to the established crusader beachheads at Tyre and Acre (II, i, 25). These events are also described twice in Knolles (68–9, 843).

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Thomas and Tydeman (308). For Shakespeare’s familiarity with Belleforest as a source for *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* see Bullough (10–15).

The Sultan's father being dead, Micques fomented his ill-will towards the Venetian Signoria. This born-again wretch set before the circumcised Turk how important for him the isle of Cyprus was, and how greatly it dishonoured his name that the Venetians should retain such a handsome possession right in the heart of his empire. This incited the tyrant to demand it back, and to declare war on the citizens of St Mark if they refused to abandon the island. (II, col.785)

In Belleforest's account, the Portuguese-born Sephardic Jew, João Micques, adopts (or exploits) the Ottoman perspective, as reflected in Ortelius's two maps, by locating Cyprus "right in the heart of his empire" ("au milieu de son Empire").<sup>17</sup>

In *Othello*, Shakespeare acknowledges the issue of Cyprus's proximity to the Turkish mainland when he has the First Senator reject the possibility of the Ottoman fleet being headed for Rhodes:

First Senator:	When we consider The importancy of Cyprus to the Turk, And let ourselves again but understand That, as it more concerns the Turk than Rhodes, So may he with more facile question bear it
	(1.3.20–24)

Cyprus "more concerns the Turk than Rhodes" precisely because its geographical location made it the nearest location of both the Turkish threat to Venice and the Venetian threat to the Ottoman Empire. Appreciating early modern audiences' understanding of this "importancy of Cyprus to the Turk", whether from external sources such as Ortelius or Knowles or from the play-text's own explicit statements to this effect, enhances the ability of modern readers of the play to access the degree of

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<sup>17</sup> Miques, also known as Joseph Nasi, is described a few lines earlier as "a wicked Marrano... a Jew and a Spaniard, or else a descendent of the Jews whom Ferdinand formerly harried from Spain".

peril which this understanding will have lent to their experience, not least in terms of their reaction to sensory events such as the ringing of the alarm bells in 2.3.

### **“The Cyprus Wars”**

Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Venice was a powerful, independent state and a key centre for east-west commerce – a situation reflected in Shakespeare’s earlier Venetian play, *The Merchant of Venice*. Writing not long after, in 1611, the English traveller Thomas Coryate said of the Piazza San Marco in Venice: “a man may very properly call it rather *Orbis* [than] *Urbis forum*, that is, a market place of the world, not of the citie” (170). From this economic base, Venice “developed the doctrine that the entire Adriatic – what it called ‘the Gulf’ – was a Venetian lake, into which the armed vessels of other powers should not enter without its permission” (Malcolm 18). From there, much as Ptolemaic Egypt previously had from the south, Venice proceeded to establish control over islands and coastal fortifications throughout the region, with Cyprus ultimately forming the eastern end of a continuous chain of interests stretching down through the Adriatic, up into the Aegean, and across the far eastern Mediterranean. Fernand Braudel writes deprecatingly about this “scattered and sprawling empire, a mere string of coastal stations” (1078). However Venetian possessions and shipping nonetheless formed a somewhat solid band around Turkey’s southern coast, surrounding it in almost the same way that the Ottoman Empire could be seen to surround Cyprus in Ortelius’s maps. Due to their pursuing competing ambitions in this region, between 1463 and 1573 the Venetians and the Ottomans fought four major wars. During the fourth of these, in 1571, Venice finally lost control of Cyprus for good.

As Vitkus describes: “As the Ottomans began to dominate the eastern Mediterranean, the traditional notion of a marriage between Venice and the sea led to

jokes about the Turk cuckolding the impotent Venetian patriarchs or raping the Venetian virgin” (163). It was in this vein that the English traveller, James Howell, wrote in a letter dated 1621 that Venice, though still an unconquered “Maiden Citie”, suffered a significant loss in 1571:

The gran Turk hath bin often at her, and though he could not have his will of her, yet he took away the richest Jewell she wore in her Cornet, and put it in his Turban, I mean the Kingdom of Cypres the onely Royall Gem she had (57).

The Ottoman conquest of Cyprus was completed with the taking of the last remaining fortified city on the island, Famagusta, following a long siege. An account of the failed defence was composed by one of the city’s defenders, Count Nestore Martinengo, and submitted to the Doge of Venice on his return to the city that year. This account was swiftly translated into English by William Malim, and published the following year with a dedication to the Earl of Leicester ensuring both its profile and protection. Malim had personally travelled in the Eastern Mediterranean not long before the events described in his book, and (partly channelling his source Martinengo – who was on the losing side at Famagusta) he adopts a baldly anti-Turkish, anti-Islamic tone in his text. Adopting stereotypes that had been current in Western Europe since the Crusades, he refers to “those Hellish Turks, Horseleeches of Christian Blood”, and “those cruel Turks, ancient professed enemies to Christian Religion” (Sigs. A4r–v). Malim also places the Ottoman capture of Cyprus into a longer historical narrative, in which it is just the latest in a sequence of Turkish conquests of Mediterranean islands that had formerly been under Christian rule: Rhodes in 1522, Chios in 1566, and then Cyprus in 1571.

Malim’s book was published in 1572, but was given renewed currency three decades later, close to the time when *Othello* was being written and performed, through re-publication as part of the most important work of travel writing produced in England

during this period, Richard Hakluyt's monumental collection of *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1598–1600). Hakluyt's version further emphasises the pattern Malim described of Turkish victories in Rhodes, Chios (or Scio) and Cyprus, by creating a marginal note comprising just these three names, so that anyone who is otherwise just skim reading is much more likely to absorb this key sequence of information (II, ii, 119).

In the dedicatory epistle to Volume II of *Principal Navigations*, addressed to Robert Cecil, Hakluyt characterises this account as: “the cruell inuasion of Nicosia and Famagusta, and the whole Ile of Cyprus by his lieutenant Generall Mustapha Basha. Which lamentable Tragedie I haue here againe reuiued, that the posteritie may neuer forget what trust may bee giuen to the oath of a Mahumetan, when hee hath aduantage and is in his choler” (II, Sig.\*3). Without entering into the long critical debate concerning the extent to which Othello might be viewed as “a Mahumetan... in his choler”, what is striking here is Hakluyt's characterisation of the capture of Cyprus as a “lamentable Tragedie”.

Finally, a substantial account of the capture of Cyprus, based on Malim's translation of Martinengo, was included in an important history of the Ottoman Empire printed in 1603 – right at the time that Othello seems to have been written. This was Knolles's *Generall Historie of the Turkes*, dedicated to King James I, newly-crowned King of England following the death of Queen Elizabeth I that year. Vaughan (*Othello: A Contextual History*) has shown in her careful reading that, overall, Knolles presented a somewhat nuanced account of the Ottoman rulers. Nonetheless, his account of the capture of Cyprus ends starkly: “This was the fatal ruin of CYPRUS, one of the most fruitful and beautiful islands of the Mediterranean: the loss whereof not without cause



grieved many Christian princes, as sometime a kingdom of itself, and now a province of the Turkish empire...” (867–8).

*Othello*'s first English audiences will therefore have known that Cyprus's ultimate fate was to fall to the Ottoman Empire and, based on Malim's, Hakluyt's and Knolles's anti-Turk rhetoric, this event will have carried tragic meaning.<sup>18</sup> For the rest of this essay, I want to show in detail how this knowledge is invoked in the text, ensuring that *Othello*'s “domestic quarrel” takes on an imperial significance that is absent in Cinthio's novella, but which is ideal for enhancing the play's affective power in performance.

### **“Another of His Fathom have they None”**

As Christofides notes, “Before *Othello* even arrives on stage, Cyprus has become a major concern” (17). Complaining to Roderigo about Cassio's appointment as *Othello*'s lieutenant, Iago compares their relative qualifications (1.1.17–30). Cassio's knowledge of battle is all theoretical: he “never set a squadron in the field”; and “Mere prattle without practice / Is all his soldiership”. Iago, in contrast, has gained his experience on-the-ground, or at least so he claims. (“I – of whom his eyes had seen the proof / At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds / Christened and heathen”). The places he names – Cyprus and Rhodes – were both synonymous for trying (and failing) to resist

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<sup>18</sup> This argument, that *Othello*'s early audiences will have had sufficient access to recent events in the Mediterranean to fully appreciate the play's dramatic stakes, widens the geographical scope of Bradley's sense that “When the subject comes from English history... some knowledge may be assumed” (31).

the Ottoman advance.<sup>19</sup> They are each, in a curious way, therefore both “Christened and heathen”, Christian spaces before their captures and non-Christian (heathen) after.

However they are neither definitively, since the history of successive empires waxing and waning in influence in this region suggests that any such status is likely to be temporary. Still, from the play’s very opening, the audience is not simply being given details of the plot mechanics. They are also being given a context in which to begin to worry about the consequences of what may follow, fuelling in particular the sensory jolt of the wildly-ringing bells during 2.3.

Later in the opening scene, the text reveals that the security of Cyprus matters greatly to Venice, more than parental rights, racial prejudice, or political influence. Iago wakes and riles up Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, against Othello, but dips away from Roderigo before Brabantio (who is a Senator) comes down. Iago excuses himself on the basis that however much Othello’s behaviour with Desdemona may displease Brabantio personally, he will not be totally ruined. His military expertise is irreplaceable.

Iago: [F]or I do know the state,  
However this may gall him with some check,  
Cannot with safety cast him, for he’s embarked  
With such loud reason to the Cyprus Wars,  
Which even now stand in act, that, for their souls,  
Another of his fathom have they none  
To lead their business.

(1.1.149–55)

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<sup>19</sup> Narratives of the siege and conquest of both islands are included in Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations*, providing an arresting counterpoint to the surrounding reports and documents chronicling successive English attempts to establish trade within the Ottoman realm. (II, i, 72–95, 117–31).

On the one hand, this is very convenient. Iago has had the lion's share in stirring up Brabantio's rage, speaking with a fluency and pointedness that Roderigo lacks. However there is also a deep truth in what he says. The context of Venice being at war is something that frames the whole action of the play, and Iago is proven to be correct. Although Brabantio arranges a midnight summons for Othello to the senate chamber, his complaint is dismissed as relatively insignificant, in spite of his confident prediction that "my brothers of the state, / Cannot but feel this wrong as 'twere their own" (1.2.97–8). As the Duke and senators receive successive reports, first raising doubts about, then confirming, the approach toward Cyprus of a mighty Ottoman fleet of war galleys, Brabantio's "domestic quarrel" is easily dismissed. Though he and Othello enter the council room together, the Duke immediately greets and instructs his general first, with the senator a mere afterthought (1.3.48–51). The priority is clearly Cyprus. As Othello says to Cassio upon his initial summons to the council, anything concerning Cyprus "is a business of some heat" (1.2.40).

Brabantio eventually gains his hearing. However the Duke's initial determination to punish the transgressor severely quickly melts away once his identity is revealed to be Othello. At first, the Duke promises rigid justice (1.3.65–70). Yet once his general is accused, the Duke's tone quickly changes to conciliation and forgiveness, and so Othello's personal status as defender of the Venetian Empire in Cyprus grows (1.3.170–4). As the Duke awards him his commission, his unique value to the state is reaffirmed:

Duke:       The Turk with a most mighty preparation makes  
              for Cyprus. Othello, the fortitude of the place is best  
              known to you, and though we have there a substitute  
              of most allowed sufficiency, yet opinion, a more  
              sovereign mistress of effects, throws a more safer voice

on you.

(1.3.220–25)

Othello is unique, irreplaceable, the sole guarantor of Venetian security. Therefore, when he dies, what size of a vacuum must he leave? If Cassio succeeds Othello as general, Iago's condemnation of his inexperience still looms large.<sup>20</sup> All theory, no practice equals no hope for Cyprus. The Turkish fleet whose threat brought Othello and his party to the island in the first place was only prevented from landing by the force of the storm. This would have been understood as an uncontrollable Act of God by Shakespeare's audience, many of whom would remember the similar scattering of the Spanish Armada in 1588 being celebrated in precisely those terms.

#### **“The Moor himself at sea”**

Geoffrey Bullough notes of Cinthio's Cyprus: “The island is at peace. The tragedy is purely *à quatre*, with no political implications” (200). However, by the time Shakespeare came to write his tragedy some decades later, the capture of Cyprus by Ottoman forces in 1571 had utterly changed the context of using this island setting. This emerges in many ways, but perhaps most clearly in the contrast between the smooth, routine sea crossing of Cinthio's “Disdemona” and her Moorish Captain, with no mention made of Turks, with the corresponding voyage in Shakespeare's play, necessitated by rumours of an approaching Ottoman armada, and dramatically heightened by the huge storm that threatens the Venetian fleet and that ultimately

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<sup>20</sup> Raphael Falco observes that Cassio's apparently habitual weakness for alcohol is itself a lingering cause for audience concern about his suitability for overall command (151). Or as Charles Marowitz memorably put it, “How ironic that after his downfall it should be the crapulous and unstable Cassio who should rule in Othello's place in Cyprus” (210).

scatters the Ottoman ships.

Ned B. Allen has observed that “while the latter part of the play is close to Cinthio”, “Acts I and II owe [him] comparatively little” (13–14). However there are nonetheless some seeds in *Un Capitano Moro* that germinate in the early stages of Shakespeare’s play. The opening of Cinthio’s story articulates in passing the extensiveness of the Venetian Empire, with Cyprus its most extreme outpost. Moreover Disdemona and her Moorish captain are described at the outset of the story as a genuine love match.

It happened that a virtuous lady called Disdemona, a great beauty, fell in love with the Moor. This was due, not to an impulse of womanly desire, but to a just appreciation of his worth. And he, vanquished by her beauty and by the nobility of her mind, was likewise enamoured of her.

(197)

In spite of family opposition – a feature retained by Shakespeare – they wed. However, just as in Shakespeare’s play, the soldier’s duties soon threaten to place a distance between them.

It happened that the Signoria of Venice made changes in the armed forces with which they garrisoned Cyprus; and they elected the Moor as commander of the soldiers they were sending there. He was delighted at the honour which was bestowed on him... Nevertheless his happiness was lessened when he considered the length and difficulty of the journey, supposing that Disdemona would be distressed at it.

(197)

This sense of “length and difficulty” reflects an aspect of imperial service that most audiences in England would only come to appreciate later, when its own empire would develop beyond the tentative grip that it held on nearby Ireland. Effective possession of colonial territories requires some degree of physical presence on the ground, which in

turns necessitates that colonial forces be absent from the possessing centre, or home state.

When Disdemona sees that her husband is troubled in spite of his noteworthy appointment, she asks him why. He responds:

Ah, Disdemona... what disturbs my happiness at the honour I have received is the love I bear you. For I see that, of necessity, one of two things must happen: either I take you with me to face the perils of the sea; or, to save you from this hardship, I leave you in Venice. The first could not be other than difficult for me to bear, Disdemona because every trouble you endured and every peril that befell us would cause me very great pain. The second – having to leave you behind – would make me intolerable to myself; for parting from you would be like parting from my very life.

(198)

The specific detail of the Moorish captain's dilemma outlined here brings into focus the difference between the historical moment in which Cinthio was writing, and the later perspective that Shakespeare brought to bear on his version of the story. In 1565, when Cinthio's collection of stories was printed, the Venetian and Ottoman Empires had enjoyed what Emrys Jones calls a "time of peace" for a generation (50). The Third War between these two powers had been concluded in 1540, and the Fourth would not begin until 1570. In this context, the re-garrisoning of Cyprus was a relatively routine business, a state of affairs that enables all of the Moorish Captain's anxieties concerning travel to be focused on the natural perils of the sea, rather than the dangers of possible military engagement with Ottoman forces. Disdemona is able to content his mind on this point by contrasting the conventional nature of the crossing to Cyprus against a more dramatic kind of challenge: "Wherever you go, I wish to go with you – though it were to pass through fire, as it is now to go with you over the water in a safe and well-equipped ship" (198). This elemental opposition between fire and water serves to

diminish her husband’s apprehension of risk. The narration itself later adopts a similar strategy in presenting the couple’s sea-voyage as something wholly anti-climactic, relative to (or as a result of) the scale of preparations involved in it:

[D]onning his armour and getting himself all in order for the journey, he embarked on the galley with his lady and all his company; and, hoisting sail, he set forth on the voyage, and with a completely calm sea reached Cyprus.

(198)

Narratively, the description of the crossing is as close as it could possibly be to a non-event. A mere six words (“and with a completely calm sea”) separate the moment of departure at Venice from the moment of arrival at Cyprus, and even these are emotionally and visually flat. Contrast this with the crossing that Shakespeare creates for Othello and Desdemona. Firstly, the decision to send Othello to Cyprus is not inspired by a merely routine changing of the island’s garrison, but is taken instead during a dramatic midnight council meeting, where Senators are shown reacting to a series of written reports of an ever-increasing Ottoman naval force apparently making for the island:

First Senator: My letters say a hundred and seven galleys.

Duke:             And mine, a hundred-forty.

Second Senator:                                     And mine, two hundred.

But though they jump not on a just account –  
As, in these cases, where the aim reports  
'Tis oft with difference – yet do they all confirm  
A Turkish fleet, and bearing up to Cyprus.

(1.3.3–8)

To the increasing sense of threat contained within these written documents is added the dynamic force of two oral reports delivered by messengers arriving onstage, first to apparently relieve, and then to dreadfully reinforce the fear that Cyprus is to be the

target of the Ottoman threat. The first of these indicates that the Turkish fleet is in fact headed for Rhodes rather than Cyprus, a suggestion greeted with scepticism in the Venetian council, and confirmed by the second messenger to indeed be unduly optimistic: the fleet had steered towards Rhodes only to use it as a rendezvous point where their force could be enlarged by a further 30 vessels.

On arriving at the council meeting, Othello is commissioned to lead the Venetian defence of its Cypriot colony, and ordered to leave with immediate haste. Like Cinthio's Disdemona, Shakespeare's Desdemona insists on joining him in this voyage. However the urgency of the approaching Ottoman threat (as opposed to the routine nature of a simple garrison rotation) is matched for dramatic effect in the play by the substitution of a raging, threatening tempest for Cinthio's "completely calm sea":

Montano: What from the cape can you discern at sea?

First Gentleman: Nothing at all. It is a high-wrought flood.

I cannot 'twixt the heaven and the main  
Descry a sail.

Montano: Methinks the wind hath spoke aloud at land.

A fuller blast ne'er shook our battlements.  
If it ha' ruffianed so upon the sea,  
What ribs of oak, when mountains melt on them,  
Can hold the mortise? What shall we hear of this?

Second Gentleman: A segregation of the Turkish fleet;

For do but stand upon the foaming shore,  
The chidden billow seems to pelt the clouds,  
The wind-shaked surge, with high and monstrous mane,  
Seems to cast water on the burning Bear  
And quench the guards of th'ever-fixèd Pole.  
I never did like molestation view  
On the enchafèd flood.

(2.1.1–17)

As it happens, these rough conditions ultimately serve the interests of the Venetians,



resulting in the dispersal and overthrow of the Ottoman invasion fleet, without comparable loss to the defenders. Yet Shakespeare's audience will still have known that Venice's days of controlling Cyprus were numbered, meaning that it was inevitable that even this cause for celebration would eventually be superseded by a cause for woe. Exploiting this knowledge, the play consistently conjures an anxiety within its audience that the possible loss of Othello due to his own "domestic quarrel" will be the trigger or catalyst for this final downfall.

### **"And Cassio rules in Cyprus"**

While Jones does important work in correcting the common critical assumption that "The early Venetian scenes" are merely "a prelude to the main Cyprus action", he does not pursue the significance of his own observation to its full extent. Because his argument is that the play ultimately disappoints its early Jacobean audience's expectations of a naval clash between Christian and Ottoman forces – playing to the recently-crowned King James's interest in the Battle of Lepanto, about which he had published a heroic poem some years earlier – Jones prematurely declares that "the war theme is allowed to die with the Herald's proclamation" and "the Turkish threat to Cyprus is allowed to be forgotten" (50). On the contrary, this threat and, in particular, Othello's singular capacity to resist it, remains an important dramatic element right through to the end of the play.

Reminders of Othello's prowess, and of his relative superiority to Cassio in this, recur throughout the play including – forcefully – in its final scene. Cassio's proclamation upon his arrival on the island that Othello will "bring all Cyprus comfort" makes no similar claim for himself (2.1.83). Yet it accurately reflects the earlier moment when Montano received word that the first of the Venetian ships had arrived on

the island. The fact that Cassio is aboard this vessel is made to appear ancillary in every way to the news that Othello has been given command over the island.

Third Gentleman: The ship is here put in,  
A Veronessa. Michael Cassio,  
Lieutenant to the warlike Moor Othello,  
Is come on shore; the Moor himself at sea,  
And is in full commission here for Cyprus.  
Montano: I am glad on't; 'tis a worthy governor.

(2.1.26–31)

Syntactically, Cassio's real presence is made as subordinate to the promise of Othello's arrival as is his military rank. Othello alone is granted the epithet "warlike", and Montano expends no words reacting to Cassio's arrival, while expressing his pleasure at Othello's commission. His certainty that Othello will be "a worthy governor" is reflected in Montano's anticipating his arrival so strongly that he uses the present tense, "'Tis". A few lines later, this confidence is further explained by Montano's testifying that it comes from personal experience: "For I have served him, and the man commands / Like a full soldier" (1.1.36–7). This is in stark contrast to Iago's earlier scornful description of Cassio having "never set a squadron in the field" (1.1.21).

From the play's opening dialogue between Iago and Roderigo, Cassio's capacity to lead the Venetian forces against those of the Ottoman Empire is undermined, while Othello's superiority is emphasised. Completing this discourse, the audience is reminded again throughout the final scene just how significant of a loss Othello's soldiership is going to be for Cyprus. In the first instance, the previously disarmed Othello demonstrates resourcefulness and resilience by quickly re-equipping himself

with a new weapon. Describing his new sword to his would-be gaoler, Gratiano, Othello reminds the listening audience of his personal aptitude on the battlefield.

Othello: Behold, I have a weapon;  
A better never did itself sustain  
Upon a soldier's thigh. I have seen the day  
That, with this little arm and this good sword,  
I have made my way through more impediments  
Than twenty times your stop.

(5.2.266–71)

Othello identifies himself as “a soldier” in both word and deed, able to defeat twenty enemies in hand-to-hand combat. This image of physical dominance stands in sharp contrast with the spectacle of the man who will be his successor as Cyprus’s protector, Cassio, who arrives shortly afterwards carried in a chair, having been “maimed for ever” by Iago during Roderigo’s ambush in the previous scene (5.1.27).

Even at the moment in which Othello confesses to having consented to Cassio’s murder, the latter’s habituated deference to Othello remains. His only response, “Dear general, I never gave you cause,” lacks any degree of self-assertion, while reminding the play’s audience of Othello’s rank and status (5.2.305). Shortly afterwards, Lodovico formally strips Othello of his generalship, appointing Cassio in his place. However the effect created is not encouraging for Cyprus.

Lodovico: Your power and your command is taken off,  
And Cassio rules in Cyprus.

(5.2.340–1)

Cassio may formally “rule”, but it is of Othello’s now-unavailable “power” and “command” that the audience is reminded.

Even after this transfer of power, there is a final reminder of the protection Cyprus has lost through the events of the play. In his last long speech, Othello asserts what the audience has already witnessed during his appointment to the command of the Cyprus garrison: “I have done the state some service, and they know’t” (5.2.348). Although he himself dismisses this as a possible route to mitigation, this recollection, especially following those other references to Othello’s soldiership in this scene, nonetheless infuses the personal tale that follows it with the force of allegory.

Othello:    And say besides that in Aleppo once,  
                  Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk  
                  Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
                  I took by th’ throat the circumcisèd dog,  
                  And smote him thus.

(5.2.361–5)

Contained within this tale of an individual violent encounter in which Othello was the victor is a reminder of what is to come for this island, at least partly in consequence of Othello’s fall. Not in Aleppo, but rather in Cyprus, the “malignant” and “turbanned Turk” will “beat” Venice and “traduce” that state. With no Othello available to take the enemy “by th’ throat” and smite it, who will? Certainly not the weakened Cassio who is replacing him.

Othello’s oblique prophecy has previously been foreshadowed by his only true rival for Desdemona’s love in this play; not Cassio, who he imagines supplanting him, but rather her father, Brabantio, whom he supplants. This symmetry is articulated by Brabantio himself in his final words in the play, the proleptic warning to “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3.292–3). Following his assertion of parental rights before the Senate, and the rejection of his plea in favour of Othello’s more urgent utility in the defence of Cyprus, Brabantio inverts the

Duke's privileging of national- over self-interest. "So let the Turk of Cyprus us beguile, / We lose it not so long as we can smile" (1.3.209–10). Within the context of the Venetian Senate having been assembled in the middle of the night specifically to address the approaching Ottoman threat to its most easterly possession, Brabantio's parodically jangling response to the Duke's formal "sentence" is self-evidently disproportionate and absurd. What is it, in fact, if not a perfect example of "manag[ing] private and domestic quarrel" in "a town of war"? Yet the inverted priorities that the wounded father merely vents briefly before acceding to a return to "th' affairs of state", the insecure husband later proceeds to give full reign to (1.3.219). By failing to set aside his "domestic quarrel", at least for the duration of his posting in defence of this "town of war", Othello deprives Cyprus of his service and of that very martial expertise that shielded him from more disinterested scrutiny of his marital campaign. In consequence, as Shakespeare's audience will have known, and as the play itself suggests, the Venetians ultimately will be "beguiled" of Cyprus by "the Turk".

Othello's final anecdote serves to violently refocus the play's attention on the greater stakes that his actions have placed at risk – Venetian sovereignty over Cyprus itself. While by the time of Othello's intervention into Cassio's drunken brawl in 2.3 there had been nineteen mentions in the text of either Turks or Ottoman forces, from that point until the end of the play there is only one: here. The setting and its political situation having been established without doubt in the play's first two acts, the audience is permitted to join Othello in losing sight of this imminent external threat while he attends instead to his "domestic quarrel". However, those fatal events having occurred, the audience is suddenly jerked out of the narrower scenes of marital melodrama and reminded of Othello's status not as a private citizen, but rather as the state-appointed champion of Cyprus's defence against the ever-present threat of Ottoman invasion. Like

Lear, in his precipitous decision to redraw the settlement of his realm following Cordelia's failure to satisfy the demands of his love test, Othello is here confirmed to be prioritising personal affront over any consideration of national consequences. As in Hamlet, where the death of the old king leaves the state "disjoint and out of frame" and thus vulnerable to external threat, the death of Othello leaves Cyprus open to the Fortinbras-like encroachment of the Ottomans (1.2.20). In all three plays, while the drama may concentrate in the main on the progress of their title characters' various passions, in each case it is the national political situation in which these are framed, and to which these contribute, that provides their tragic gravitas. The presence or absence of references to the Turkish threat epitomises the shift in focus from the politically-charged Acts 1 and 2 to the more domestic focus of Acts 3 to 5. However the re-emergence of this discourse in the final scene serves to solidify the play's sense of unity, by re-emphasising the geopolitical cost of Othello's elimination as a military asset.

Writing in 1530 within the context of a wider humanist discussion responding to Martin Luther's suggestion that the Ottoman advances into Europe should be interpreted as God's punishment for Christians' sins, Erasmus of Rotterdam emphasised a more terrestrial cause, arguing that the Turks' successes were substantively a product of Christendom leaving itself exposed through infighting.<sup>21</sup> As McAlindon notes, by the time Knolles came to publish his *Generall Historie of the Turkes*, this view had become "one of the great commonplaces of the time" (127). By pursuing their individual jealousies and perceived injuries even in this theatre of war, this is also precisely what

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<sup>21</sup> See Pugliatti (47–52).

the Venetians who had been charged with securing Cyprus against the threat of invasion have achieved by the conclusion of *Othello*.

Unpleasant as its consequences are, the falling out between Cinthio's version of the Moor and his Venetian wife is indeed on the scale of "a private and domestic quarrel". Shakespeare's version of this story, on the other hand, is not. By setting it in "a town of war" under constant threat of an inevitable and calamitous invasion, Shakespeare exploits the dramatic potential of Cyprus's geographical location in a way that Cinthio simply had no context to do. By bringing the sensation of a town on high alert onstage through the ringing of bells, and then gradually realising the worst fears of the island's citizens by eliminating their greatest hope of succour, what *Othello* presents to its audience is something truly "monstrous".

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