

**‘This is Venice: My house is not a grange’: Othello’s
landscapes of the mind**

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‘This is Venice: My house is not a grange’: Othello’s landscapes of the mind

It has been often noticed that many of Shakespeare’s comedies depend for their dénouement on retreat to a green world, a life-giving natural space which allows for personal growth and regeneration and a rebalancing of psyches unsettled by the pressures of urban living. It is rather less of a critical commonplace that several of his tragedies feature an inversion of this pattern,¹ generally in the form either of an image pattern playing on death, waste, and decay, or of an actual staging of a scene in a non-urban location marked as a wasteland rather than as a rural retreat. In *Macbeth*, for instance, the heath is withered, emblemizing the desolation of Macbeth’s Scotland, while the English soldiers who carry boughs to Dunsinane are clearly readable within traditions such as the May-lord and rites of renewal; in *Hamlet*, there is a developed motif of blighted pastorality and unweeded gardens; and in both *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*, there are again clear reference to country customs and fertility rites.

At first sight, it might seem that *Othello* deviates from this pattern of pastoral inversion. Just as it has the sketchiest counterpointing comic episode of any of the tragedies,² with the arguable exception of *Macbeth* (though people rarely forget the Porter, and rarely remember the Clown), so it seems to differ from the other tragedies also in having no pastoral element. Indeed the quotation I have chosen for my subtitle, “This is Venice: / My house is not a grange,”³ appears to confirm as much: what is Venetian cannot, by definition, be rural.

Shakespeare, however, had already played some very interesting games with offsetting the Venetian with the pastoral in *The Merchant of Venice*.⁴ In *Othello*, he does so again, and demonstrates that the veneer of urban sophistication cannot eradicate behavioral patterns and attitudes rooted in much older contexts: when Othello avers that “A horned man’s a monster, and a beast,” Iago assures him, “There’s many a beast then in a populous city, / And many a civil monster” (4.1.62-64).⁵ Brabantio may not live in a grange, but his daughter is figured as a sheep when Iago tells him that “an old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe!” (I.1.87-88). This farmyard imagery, which is almost immediately consolidated by Iago’s insult that “you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse” (I.1.109-10), ushers in a whole bevy of other imagined animals, prominent amongst which are Othello’s “Goats and monkeys!” (IV.1.263). Even supersubtle Venetians (and adopted Venetians) are, it seems, still configured by rural roots.

The imagery of sheep and goats has, though, also another resonance. In the microcosm of *Othello* as in the macrocosm of the early modern world as a whole, two religious systems jostle for pre-eminence. Again as in early seventeenth-century England, women tend to adhere to the older one: Desdemona pleads for Cassio “By’r lady” (3.3.74), and Emilia would “venture purgatory” (4.3.76). Against this clearly Catholic language, however, is set Cassio’s “there be souls must be saved, and there be souls must not be saved” (2.3.99-100). This sudden irruption of an unmistakably

Calvinist theology adds a suggestive new dimension to those metaphors of sheep and goats.

That this will be so has already been suggested by this play's very distinctive inflection of the frequent Shakespearean garden-motif. First Iago dismisses Cassio's passion for Desdemona: "Ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea-hen I would change my humanity with a baboon" (I.3.315-17). To Iago, then, love is debasing and animalistic, and Desdemona no more than a guinea-hen. While he can stay aloof from the passion, however, he does recognize an absolute division between humans and animals (the same assumption also configures his subsequent dismissal, "Come, be a man! drown thyself? drown cats and blind puppies" (I.3.336-7)). When Roderigo protests that he is incapable of remaining aloof, Iago goes on:

Virtue? a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners. So that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs, or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry - why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions. But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts; whereof I take this, that you call love, to be a sect or scion.

(I.3.320-333)

The image of man in the garden is of course a common one - arguably, indeed, the fundamental underlying image of western culture. The image of man as a garden, however, is a rather different one. Man in the garden is a creature who is conditioned by his environment. His ability to assert a free and independent will may be a point of doctrine, but practically speaking - as every theologian knew, and as Milton found to his cost - it is more problematic. Even in the most rigorous view of things, man in the garden was at least influenced by woman. In Iago's view of things, however, woman is no better than an animal, and love for her is merely a 'scion' or plant; and man is not the limited denizen of a physical, material garden but the absolute ruler of a psychological one.

Such a view is at best arrogant, and at worst, in a religiously-oriented ideology, blasphemous. In such a schema, moreover, the pastoral becomes of necessity not a beneficent background or a configuring genre or mode, but an accessory, a metaphor, a psychological illusion with no material reality. Though it effectively denies the material reality of the pastoral backdrop, however, it is in itself a comprehensively, indeed ruthlessly, materialist view, denying the importance or influence of anything beyond the will of man. And at the same time, of course, Iago's assurance and perspective are subtly but steadily undercut by the audience's insistent awareness of the alternative scenario of the man in the garden. The whole passage thus reminds me of nothing so much as Faustus' denial to Mephostophilis of the existence of hell,

tempered with a disturbing dash of Shakespeare's own Edmund and his disdain for the stars. And it rings with especial irony in the light of the play's flirtation elsewhere with a Calvinist theology which would entirely disable the unaided operations of the human will.

Iago's view of human nature, then, is one which is both materialist and also predicated on an assumption that passionate emotion is animalistic and so dehumanising - lusts, for instance, he figures as "unbitted," as though they were properties belonging to horses rather than people. In some ways, perhaps this contempt for emotion takes us as close as we will ever get to understanding Iago's "motiveless" malignity towards those impassioned associates whom he so callously sends to their deaths, and certainly he can dismiss Othello's emotional commitment with "[t]hese Moors are changeable in their wills" (I.3.347), an assumption that he also makes about Desdemona: "she must have change, she must" (I.3.352). Presumably, he regards both of them as different from himself, whose own cause is "hearted" (I.3.367); he implicitly dismisses Othello as an ass (I.3.401) and even Roderigo, in his absence, as a "snipe" (I.3.383), leaving only Cassio - "a proper man" (I.3.390) - and himself defined as fully human. And later, as soon as Cassio shows courtesy to Desdemona, even he will degenerate to a "fly" being caught by a spider (2.1.169), while Iago's ability to manipulate the situation appears effectively to constitute the guarantee of his own humanity.

The animal qualities which Iago ascribes to his companions recur writ large in the subsequent scene. Observing the storm, the Second Gentleman remarks that “The wind-shaked surge, with high and monstrous mane, / Seems to cast water on the burning bear” (2.1.13-14). If a “mane” is attributed to the sea, and “the bear” refers to a constellation, humanity is envisaged as being hideously sandwiched between vast animal forces redolent of a pagan rather than a Christian eschatology. Shortly afterwards, Cassio too figures a world populated by anthropomorphizingly animated objects:

Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds,
The guttered rocks and congregated sands,
Traitors ensteeped to clog the guiltless keel,
As having sense of beauty, do omit
Their mortal natures, letting go safely by
The divine Desdemona.

(2.1.68-73)

Whereas Iago imagines a world in which nature and the powers of natural forces are minimised, and man’s will, sharply distinguished from animal impulses, reigns supreme, both the Second Gentleman and Cassio inhabit a mental landscape in which the wills of humans are significantly smaller than those of the powerful inhuman presences which dominate man’s all-important environment and are themselves governed solely by passion. It is little wonder that Cassio goes on to pray “Great Jove, Othello guard, / And swell his sail with thine own powerful breath” (2.1.77-78); both the belief in the supernatural and the image of the human environment casually

manipulated by an animated force are precisely of a tenor with what has gone before, as is his effective acceptance of a form of sympathetic magic in his assumption that the love-making of Desdemona and Othello will “bring all Cyprus comfort” (2.1.82). Similarly, when he greets Desdemona with “the grace of heaven, / Before, behind thee, and on every hand / Enwheel thee round!” (2.1.85-7), this could well be taken to represent a virtually literal version of how he sees humanity in the universe, surrounded by cosmic, all-enveloping, and conscious or quasi-conscious forces, just as he privileges divine agency over human when he tells Desdemona that “The great contention of the sea and skies / Parted our fellowship” (2.1.92-93).

While Cassio talks about the overwhelming power of winds, however, Iago once again has a very different perspective. As Cassio and Desdemona talk aside, Iago says contemptuously, “Yet again, your fingers to your lips? would they were clyster-pipes for your sake!” (2.1.175-77), and immediately afterwards he adds “The Moor! I know his trumpet!” (2.1.178). The juxtaposition here leaves no room for doubt that the ‘lower bodily stratum’ is being evoked by “trumpet” as surely as it by “clyster-pipes” and, later on, by the clown’s fooling: Iago, in short, is talking not about winds but about wind. Once again Iago images his companions as grossly in thrall to their physical natures, and once again his emphasis is on human rather than on natural or divine power: “wind,” for Iago, is not some cosmic, capricious force, but an emanation of the human body.⁶

When Othello enters, he too talks about wind. He, however, introduces yet a third way of viewing it:

O my soul's joy,
If after every tempest come such calms
May the winds blow till they have wakened death,
And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas,
Olympus-high, and duck again as low
As hell's from heaven.

(2.1.182-87)

For Othello, as for Cassio, winds are fearsome, with great power over humans. The difference is that while Cassio thinks of them as governed solely by their own passions, Othello imagines them as acting in response to his will, and uses the third-person imperative forms “may” and “let.” This is at least as arrogant a misrecognition as Iago's, and arguably more so. With hindsight, we are perhaps unsurprised that of the three of them, only Cassio, who acknowledges both the independent reality of external forces and his own vulnerability to them, will survive.

Ironically, however, Othello's line is almost immediately changed for him by the implications of his own language:

OTHELLO...
I cannot speak enough of this content;
It stops me here, it is too much of joy.

And this, and this the greatest discords be They kiss.

That e'er our hearts shall make.

IAGO. [aside.]

O, you are well tuned now: but I'll set down

The pegs that make this music, as honest

As I am.

(2.1.194-200)

In a play that is much concerned with music, this is a characteristic exchange, but it is also a particularly interesting one. Othello complains that he is unable to speak because he is “stopped.” He thus casts himself as precisely that which Hamlet disdains and disclaims being, a wind instrument - and, by implication, one which is currently being played by somebody else in a way which prevents full and spontaneous self-expression. While Othello imagines the world in a similar way to Cassio when he urges the winds to do his bidding, therefore, he simultaneously offers a covert concurrence with Iago’s view of human manipulability. Perhaps one of the major roots of Othello’s tragedy lies in this dangerously volatile fluctuation between excessive and overly-restricted views of himself and his capabilities. This unholy combination makes him awkwardly self-conscious, as when he shortly afterwards tells Desdemona:

Honey, you shall be well desired in Cyprus,

I have found great love amongst them. O my sweet,

I prattle out of fashion, and I dote

In mine own comforts.

(2.1.203-206)

Once again, an apparently confident utterance of Othello's is immediately undercut by that which succeeds it. And from this distrust of himself, distrust of others will easily grow.

While Othello thus vacillates, Iago presses on with his plan, still confident that he can fit nature to the measure of man. Plotting to get Cassio drunk, he concludes, "If consequence do but approve my dream / My boat sails freely, both with wind and stream" (2.3.59-60). Here nature waits on his wish, and the same reduction of the natural to the scale of the human structures his metaphor of Cassio's temperament: "do but see his vice, / 'Tis to his virtue a just equinox, / The one as long as th'other" (2.3.119-121). The consequence of this, he assures Montano, could well "shake this island" (2.3.124). In Cassio's own fears about sea-voyages, humans were subject to the caprices of the natural environment; Iago, in a kind of humanism run mad, figures them rather as being able to "shake" that environment. Montano, noticeably, does not echo this magniloquence; his reference to Cassio's "ingraft infirmity" (2.3.136) posits Cassio as a plant, fundamentally the product of its breeding, rather than any earth-shaking force. Iago, however, is unabashed, and proceeds to protest that he would not reveal Cassio's drunkenness to Othello "for this fair island" (2.3.138), an assertion which slyly encodes the assumption that a word of his would be sufficient to procure him the lordship of his environment. Iago knows better than to use such language for public consumption, however. At the conclusion of his carefully-staged little playlet, he tells Othello that events have unfolded "As if some planet had unwitting men"

(2.3.178). As the audience is well aware, though, all that this aping of conventional pieties really does is to offer a covert equation of Iago himself with a planet.

Othello suffers from no such delusions. When Iago first suggests to him that Desdemona might be false, he feels himself cast psychologically adrift in a large and cruel world which he, like other humans, is powerless to control. He contemplates how

If I do prove her haggard,
Though that her jesses were my dear heart-strings,
I'd whistle her off and let her down the wind
To prey at fortune.

(3.3.264-267)

Desdemona would thus be at the mercy of fortune and the wind, while he himself stumbled through “the vale of years” (3.3.270), a prisoner in a physical state which seems to find no echo in his psyche. (Later, along similar lines, he will imagine himself in an infected house with a raven flying overhead, and his alienation from the surroundings in which he pictures himself is marked here too, this time by the fact that he figures his apprehension of the raven as the return of the memory of an unwelcome reality [4.1.20-22].)

However, Othello has not relinquished his earlier faith in the quasi-miraculous power of human agency. He warns Iago that if he is lying, he may as well compound his

crime by doing “deeds to make heaven weep, all earth amazed” (3.3.374). As before, Othello’s sense of humans as small and distressed runs in curious tandem with his sense of them as gigantic and virtually omnipotent. And the two come into an uneasy congruence as Othello imagines the unstoppable course of his vengeance:

Like to the Pontic sea
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne’er keeps retiring ebb but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont:
Even so my bloody thoughts with violent pace
Shall ne’er look back, ne’er ebb to humble love
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up.

(3.3.456-463)

Initially, what Othello imagines here conforms neither to Cassio’s characteristic perception of man in the landscape nor to Iago’s of man as the landscape. Instead, it offers a vision which in some ways combines the two, figuring man and nature acting in harmony and tandem. As the ominous mention of the Hellespont, with its encoded associations of death to lovers, might already have served to signal, however, the note of companionableness is abruptly reversed as imagery of drowning and engulfment obtrudes. And as before, Iago once again parrots similar language as token of his supposed loyalty, as he swears insincerely by “you ever-burning lights above, / You elements that clip us round about” (3.3.466-67). That Iago has by no means renounced his original opinion is, however, made quite clear when, preparing to talk

to Cassio, he speaks of “every region of his face” (4.1.84). Once more, man bulks larger than nature in Iago’s mind.

Though the characters experiment with such a wide variety of perspectives, the audience is not encouraged to share any of them, unless, perhaps, it is that of Cassio. The prominence of the strawberry motif on the handkerchief surely reminds us that the serpent proverbially hid under a strawberry leaf, and Emilia tells Othello, “If any wretch have put this in your head / Let heaven requite it with the serpent’s curse” (4.2.15-16). Beset thus by temptation, Othello is an Adam, making his choice in a garden of the mind. But, like the evil-minded lords let loose on the magical island of The Tempest, he cannot see his surroundings for what they are. He laments to Desdemona:

But there where I have garnered up my heart,
Where either I must live or bear no life,
The fountain from the which my current runs
Or else dries up - to be discarded thence!
Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads
To knot and gender in!

(4.2.58-63)

When she asks if he thinks her honest, he replies,

O, ay, as summer flies are in the shambles,
That quicken even with blowing. O thou weed

Who art so lovely fair and smell'st so sweet

That the sense aches at thee, would thou hadst ne'er been born!

(4.2.67-70)

Two radically different scenarios are outlined here. In the first, it is summer; there are beautiful, sweet-smelling flowers, and there is running water nearby. Othello, however, cannot perceive that world. His is stinking and fly-blown, and he is not allowed near the water. The audience's double knowledge both of Desdemona's innocence and of the means that have been used to make Othello disbelieve in it makes them sharply aware here of the way that the apprehension of external reality is conditioned by internal perceptions. There is no longer a relatively simple contrast between man-in-the-landscape and man-as-landscape, but a complex exploration of how any sense of one's relationship to an external landscape is mediated through an internal one. And Emilia makes much the same point:

Why, the wrong is but a wrong i'th' world; and having the world for your labour, 'tis a wrong in your own world, and you might quickly make it right.

(4.3.79-81)

Even the world itself is here envisaged as subject to perception.

This interrelationship between external and internal landscapes recurs in two interestingly parallel passages close to the end of the play. Surveying the body of Desdemona, Othello muses:

Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse

Of sun and moon, and that th'affrighted globe
Should yawn at alteration.

(5.2.98-100)

Here, he again imagines the will, or at any rate the emotions, of man, effecting a particularly vivid manifestation of the pathetic fallacy and forcing natural phenomena to imitate their mood. Only a few lines later, however, he tells Emilia,

It is the very error of the moon,
She comes more nearer earth than she was wont
And makes men mad.

(5.2.108-10)

Here, it is not men's behaviour which influences the moon, but hers which causes theirs. We are thus back to the whole question of causation, and the linked issue of predestination versus free will, but it seems impossible for us confidently to give the preference to either side.

As the play hastens to its conclusion, the wind which has so often been mentioned begins to blow with renewed urgency. Emilia uses it as an image of sweeping away lies and impediments:

No, I will speak as liberal as the north.
Let heaven, and men, and devils, let them all,
All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak.

(5.2.218-20)

'The north' is, as Q's reading of 'air' makes clear, a synecdoche for the north wind. For Emilia, the north wind carries all (even heaven) before it in a right cause. Othello, on the other hand, is now completely abject, but even in his self-abnegation he both retains the tone of command and expects the larger world to endorse his personal sense of justice. He cries, "Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur, / Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!" (5.2.277-78), and wonders the devilish Iago is not struck down and why his feet are not visibly cloven (5.2.283-84 and 5.2.232-33). And with a final irony, Lodovico accords the silent Iago the tribute which he might have wished when he terms him "More fell than anguish, hunger, or the sea" (5.2.360), thus for one final time endorsing Iago's own hierarchy of human superiority to nature. But the very prevalence of so many elements reminds us, of course, that as with the debate between Catholicism and Protestantism, we simply cannot be sure which is right. Just as the imagery of the choice of Hercules haunts a Hamlet afraid of being led the wrong way up a literal and metaphorical garden path, so the imagery of Othello emblematises for us a world in which humans are tragically uncertain whether their wills are paramount or puny.

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Notes

¹ Though see for instance Naomi Conn Liebler, ed., *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 1995), and Richard Wilson, 'Against the grain: Representing the market in Coriolanus', in his *Will Power: Essays on Shakespearean Authority* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 88-125.

² Pace Rhymer, and see Michael Bristol's brilliant essay 'Race and the comedy of abjection in Othello', in his *Big-time Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 175-202.

³ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, edited by E.A.J. Hongimann (London: Thomas Nelson, 1997), I.1.104-5. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

⁴ See for instance James Shapiro, *Rival Playwrights: Marlowe, Jonson, Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p.105, Peter J. Smith, *Social Shakespeare* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p.175, and my own *The Shakespearean Marriage: Merry Wives and Heavy Husbands* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 47.

⁵ For a very interesting discussion of the language of nature in the play, see Michael Long, *The Unnatural Scene: a study in Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1976), pp. 46-9. I am grateful to Ian Baker for drawing this to my attention, and also

to Ian Baker and Matthew Steggle for commenting on an earlier draft of my own essay.

⁶ For comment on the rôle of wind in the play, see also Philippa Berry, *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 29.