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The Semiography of Iago, the Merchant of Venice: Liminality, Abjection, and the Imagery of the Mediterranean in Othello, the Moor of Venice

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Abstract: This paper relies on the interpretive methodology of semiography. The findings of iconographic and iconologic research are recontextualized by semiography in the new theoretical framework of the postsemiotics of the subject, and they are analyzed within the semiotic world model of the historically specific social symbolic order, in relation to the status of the sign and the speaking subject. Semiography maps out the ideologically specific semiotic logic that governs the social circulation of symbols and images. The paper investigates the representational logic of liminality and abjection in The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice. It argues that the darama is grounded in a systematic imagery of mercantile transactions and abjection, and it employs the character of Iago as a merchant-like agent who observes the horizon of expectations of the audience and works to sell Othello as a dubious merchandise.

Keywords: Semiotics, Postsemiotics, Semiography, Iconology, Iconography, Early Modern, Postmodern, Shakespearean Drama, English Renaissance Theater, Othello, Iago, Abjection, Liminality

ONE OF THE most typical strategies of early modern English drama is the employment of a far-away, exotic land as a model for the contemporary social conditions – a strategy which is simultaneously a maneuver to bypass censorship and a theatrical device to make the play and the performance more attractive and sensational. Perhaps the most systematically recurring distant and mysterious world in the dramas of Shakespeare and his contemporaries is the Mediterranean, with its distinct and unique iconography. In what follows, I am going to rely on the methodology of semiography as a combination of semiotics, iconography and iconology in order to scrutinize the meaning-potentials of the sea and the Mediterranean in early modern drama in general, and in Shakespeare's *Othello* in particular.[1]

When investigating the representations of the Mediterranean in early modern and, more particularly, in Shakespearean drama, we should not be content with reference to the storehouse of stock characters and set images such as the Machiavellian Italian villain, the merchant, the frontier separating Europe from the threatening Ottoman Empire, or the exotic merchant cities of the Adriatic. We should note an element that must have been attached to these stereotypical images of the Mediterranean in the early modern consciousness, and this element is the sentiment of envy propelled by the pressure of rivalry.

Until the middle of the sixteenth century, commercial and cultural centers such as Cadiz, Seville, Venice, Naples or Florence were already everything London was only dreaming of becoming, and there were also farther very prosperous Adriatic cities that England scarcely had extensive knowledge of. Raguza, the present day Dubrovnik, entered its golden age under the supervision of the Hungarian crown, when it managed to separate from Venice after the Treaty of Zadar in the middle of the fourteenth century. Its sailors reached lands as far as Peru, its merchants ventured to import luxury items that Western Europeans had not even heard of to the aristocratic palaces within the fortified walls of the port, and exotic gardens boasted with unique selections of botanical rarities. The Eastern Mediterranean connotes, more than anything else, the idea of commerce, international trade and a lively but risky exchange of commodities. The Eastern Mediterranean was not only one of the cradles of European civilization but also the most elaborate system of commodity exchange until the late fifteen hundreds. Into the image of this Mediterranean world we find projected all the early modern English sentiments of enchantment, excitement, contempt, and envy. There is corruption in those cities, there is treachery on those merchant islands, but it is there because the riches

[1] The interpretive methodology of semiography has been worked out in the University of Szeged by the Cultural Iconography and Semiography Research Group. See Attila Kiss "Character as Subject-in-Process in the Semiography of Drama and Theater." *Semiotische Berichte* 1-4/2003. 187-196.

are also there. In this respect Shakespeare's "island plays" have much more to do with this "Adriatic or Mediterranean enchantment" than with the New World anxieties.

It should be little surprise, then, to realize that the ideas of commercial mediation, sales and revenues, cost and risk analysis permeate the cosmos of the Mediterranean places in the drama of the English Renaissance. However, we should also immediately notice that these ideas of exchange, interconnection, interaction, and fluidity are markers that apply to the very nature and operational logic of the early modern theatrical institution in general. As Margareta de Grazia argues, "The London theater, then, emerges as a locus of double convertibility: where actors change into characters (who often change into other characters) and where money converts into spectacle. The theater thus seems the perfect site for observing the Renaissance as Early Modern: the fluidity of both identities and commodities."[2]

It is the concept of fluidity and liminality that will help us better see the analogies between the nature of the sea and the nature of the theater. I would like to connect two notions to demonstrate this: the topographical and cultural liminality of commercial centers on the one hand, and the liminality of the theater and the theatrical experience on the other. It will naturally follow that borderline persons of the sea, such as Othello, will represent in a condensed manner almost everything that the early modern theater experimented with. Othello will be in the focus of my attention in the ensuing analysis, in which I will endeavor to decipher the iconography of liminality and the mercantile discourse that inform the universe of *Othello* and turn it into a typically Mediterranean play. However, Othello as one of the most extensively debated Shakespearean characters and as an emblem of the theatrical mechanism challenges the interpreter with extraordinary complexities of iconography and theater semiotics.

An academic anecdote will introduce the problem of the representational logic and the symbolical encoding of Renaissance drama. One of the first lessons I got in the semiotics of theatrical symbolism and intercultural difference took place when I invited a Chinese theatrical specialist to lecture in the University of Szeged on the problems of adapting Shakespeare to the Eastern stage. "Obviously, Othello is a man of the seas, and that might impose certain difficulties upon the Chinese director", said my friend who worked in the Shanghai Opera. "But the real problems arise from the meeting of the horizons of symbolical codes", he continued. "Othello is an acclaimed general, and this must be represented by the color red on the Chinese stage. At the same time, he is a black person, but the color black very emphatically represents wickedness and evil spirits in Chinese symbolism. To further complicate the matter, if you venture to employ both markers on Othello, that is, the colors red and black, the creature you will represent in the most straightforward manner will be a eunuch, and nothing else."

I would like to elaborate on both of the Chinese scholar's comments, that is, the idea that Othello is a sea person, and that the representational logic of the specific theater determines the meaning-generating potentials of stage representations, according to the decoding dispositions and symbolical horizons of expectations of the audience. This semiotic characteristic is shared by all kinds of theaters, and it applies to the early modern emblematic theater just as well as the Chinese stage or the post-communist East Central European Hungarian experimental theater. When this paper attempts to concentrate on the interrelationship between the idea of the sea and the idea of the theater, it is going to scrutinize the character of Othello as a typically Shakespearean thematization of the sea-like qualities of the theater.

It might be so simple that we may forget to think of it, but for the English as an island nation, the idea of the Mediterranean as a maze of interconnected ports, islands, inlands and shores must have been something distant, exotic and culturally other, by its very topographical nature. England is encircled by water, while the Mediterranean is basically a vast territory of sea commerce encircled by land, and it has always been characterized by a quality of mediation. Already in various early modern writings it was pictured as a territory of interconnection between the West and the exotic, rich and threatening East. Ideally, it is a catalyst between different cultures and empires. In less ideal cases, it is a shield defending the values of Christianity against the barbarous herds of the uncivilized East.

The Italian cities, the Mediterranean loci and islands that so frequently inhabit Shakespearean and English Renaissance drama are doubly marked by this special in-betweenness. They are places in between two different universes, channel-like, culturally, intellectually and commercially canalizing the products of two civilizations; but they are also places in between value categories, simultaneously standing for the enchanted, the exotic, the wondrous, and the alien, the corrupt, the intruding.[3] In this respect, the

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[2] Margreta de Grazia "The Ideology of Superfluous Things: King Lear as Period Piece." In de Grazia - Quilligan - Stallybrass eds. *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996. 17-42. 19.

[3] Alexander Leggatt argues that plays such as *A Midsummer Night`s Dream* or *Timon of Athens* thematize the wall that is supposed to separate the city from the wirlderness, civilization from barbarism, and that this wall repeatedly turns out to be porous, establishing interconnection between the two worlds. Such porousity, however, can also be dangerous, and Othello, I believe, embodies this kind of danger

idea of the Mediterranean thematizes the nature of the theater itself, and it is employed as a metaphor of the liminal, border-line social positionality of the early modern theater, which was situated on the interactive margin of society, while it also ceaselessly experimented with the phenomenon of unstable and heterogeneous, in-between human identities. Early modern drama as a laboratory of identity endlessly stages the epistemologically thematized tension between original identity and assumed role, honesty and self-fashioning, this tension being employed as a general metaphor of the larger epistemological uncertainties of the period. When the early modern theater stages the Mediterranean together with the idea of travel, intermediacy, transition, catalyzation, it immediately becomes self-reflexive and provides itself with a theme to be used to stage its own socially catalytical nature. Set against the semiotically determined horizon of expectations of the audience, the figure of Othello is a condensation of all the above: an extraordinary amalgamation of the complexity of the Mediterranean, of the theater, and of the tension between role-playing and identity, outward sign and inner meaning.[4] I do not intend to dwell upon the truisms relating to the theme of surface and depth foregrounded in the tragedy of Othello, but I would like to rely on his figure as a representation of the ideas of liminality that create a meeting point for the phenomenon of the theater and the phenomenon of the Mediterranean.[5]

Liminality is the *conditio humana*, says Helmuth Plessner, and this idea has been applied to understandings of the theater which thematizes this transitionality as the human condition itself. The theatre, generally situated on the interactive borders of society, functions in epistemologically unstable periods both as a laboratory of the constitution of heterogeneous human subjectivity, and as a laboratory of the production of culture and the Other of culture. In the early modern period the theater performs an intensive anatomization of various forms and situations of liminality that are often extreme or intensified: different passages are scrutinized inside and among human beings, inside and among states, countries, lands. The sea and figures of the sea are thematic metaphors of this liminality, arousing or answering to the curiosity of the early modern spectator. In my reading of *Othello* I will employ semiography as an interpretive combination of iconography and postsemiotics in order to investigate the construction of the liminal figure of Othello as a Moor between black and white, between Christian and pagan, as well as a man of the sea between lands: a condensed figure of the contained culturally other, the in-between.[6]

After all the commercial discourse that dominates these plays, it is no little surprise to see that Shakespeare himself proves to be a very bad merchant at the beginning of *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*. He appears to be determined to sell the early modern audience a commodity that is almost impossible to sell. I do not need to quote the bulky critical literature on the symbolically determined iconography of the Moor to see that Othello's black figure was decoded by the English Renaissance audience in a way as determined and rigid as the symbolical codes of the Chinese theater, which might turn Othello into a eunuch if the director is not careful.[7] Shakespeare is coming out with a character that the spectators will not buy because it is in utter contradiction to everything they rely on in their horizon of expectations. Shakespeare certainly knew that an honest blackamoor, a heroic Ethiopian, a diligent and devotedly Christian black will not sell easily in London at the turn of the century. Nevertheless, he experiments with the paradox because, as we will witness in the long run, he provides us with a very Montaignean lesson in the marketplace where Othello is an ambiguous and fantastic merchandise.

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in Venice. See Alexander Leggatt "The Disappearing Wall*: A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Timon of Athens*." In Tom Clayton, Susan Brock, Vicente Forés (eds.) *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean* . (The Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress, Valencia, 2001) Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003. 194-205.

[4] Jonathan Bates argues that the audience members were well prepared and conditioned to interpret the figure of the moor on the English Renaissance stage according to a set rule of symbolism: "The Jew of Malta fulfills the expectations set up by its title. […] An audience member going along to a new play called The Moor of Venice would therefore have had a similar expectation." (291). According to Bate "Shakespeare's Venice […] will serve as a paradigm of global capitalism." (305) See his "Shakespeare's Islands." In *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean*, 289-305.

[5] Bates also notes the analogy between islands and Shakespearean drama: "[Shakespeare] was interested in islands because they constitute a special enclosed space within the larger environment of politics, perhaps a little like the enclosed space of the theater within the larger environment of the city." (290) If the theater is an island, it is one which is a point of connection between lands, countries, nations, and routes of commercial, intellectual, political trade.

[6] "The findings of iconographic and iconologic research are recontextualized by semiography in the new theoretical framework of the postsemiotics of the subject, and they are located within the semiotic world model of the historically specific social symbolic order, in relation to the status of the sign and the speaking subject. At the same time, semiographic research sheds light on the metamorphoses and survival of the tropes and modes of symbolization and visual representation in the postmodern. It maps out the ideologically specific semiotic logic that governs the social circulation of symbols and images." Attila Kiss "The Semiography of Representational Techniques in Early Modern and Postmodern Drama." In Sabine Coelsch-Foisner – György E. Szőnyi (eds.) *"Not of an Age, but for All Time": Shakespeare across Lands and Ages.* Wien: Braumüller, 2004. 123-136. 123.

[7] For the iconography of blackness and black characters ont he stage, see, for example, Anthony Gerard Barthelemy *Black Face Maligned Race. The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne.* Baton Rouge-London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987.

The fantastication of subjectivities and bodies is a frequent representational technique in Shakespearean drama, and I think the character of Othello as such definitely falls within this category. The double nature of the fantastic is especially manifest in Othello's fantastic character: it appears as a potentially subversive element in Venetian society and as the embodiment of the threats and dangers that England had to face at a time of colonizing expansion, but this subversiveness is contained within the cosmos of the play and does not become operational and effective in relation to the actual reality of the audience. In any case, the hybridity and liminality of the abject, fantasticated image of the black is itself an example of the representational power of the early modern theater.

From Arnold van Gennep through Victor Turner to Helmuth Plessner and Erika Fischer-Lichte, liminality has been conceptualized as the condition of in-betweenness, border-crossing, as the rite of passage that is constitutive of the human condition, the ability of the human being to develop self-reflexivity.[8] Since the crossing or violation of identity categories, roles and subjectivity patterns is also at the heart of the theatrical operation, Erika Fischer-Lichte rightly argues that Plessner defines the anthropological condition of the human being as a theatrical situation. The theater symbolizes and thematizes the *conditio humana* because everything in the theater is focused around the idea of identity change and transition. My contention is that the early modern theater as a market-place of identity patterns and fantastic modes of entertainment, as a commodity exchange of the cultural imagination, functioned in a way very similar to the role of the sea as a complex arena of interconnecting routes between cultures, lands, identities and anxieties. The passage between islands and shorelines, continents and empires of radically different natures is comparable to the shifts between identities and roles in the theater, where the specific culture sees its own image reflected and problematized in the mirror of theatrical border-crossings.

Theatrical representations of the culturally Other function perhaps the most intensively through their iconography as agents thematizing these rites of passage and liminalities. Othello's case is so special because he falls within the category of the contained Other who, nevertheless, remains an incessant threat, a potential danger that looms within the structure of the society. He functions within Venetian society as an emblem of the suppressed, dark colony of the collective consciousness of the culture, as the unconscious in the psychoanalytical paradigm of the constitution of the subject. His character represents and condenses various types of passages, and as such he can be surely defined through Kristeva's category of the abject: that which is in-between, borderline, ambiguous, the element which violates the limits and categories of the structure. "Abjection is, above all, ambiguity", says Kristeva, and, to say the least, Othello is ambiguous.[9]

The ambiguity results from the tension between the extremely rigid negative iconographic determination of the Moor as non-Christian, Other, dangerous and barbarous, and the positive moral-cultural attributes Othello is endowed with in the beginning of the play.[10] We are told that, as a faithful servant to Venice, Othello is hosted and contained within the body of Venetian society, but we are also immediately exposed to all the negative markers that were almost automatically assigned to the figure of the Moor in the code system of early modern England.[11] The shower of pejorative labels Brabantio casts upon Othello perfectly sum up the prejudices and general assumptions of the theatrical audience. Even if, by the time of *Othello*, the audience of the London theaters had already been witness to positive images of the converted and "domesticated" Moor, the automatism of Christian religious iconography was probably much stronger that the memory of those few instances. As Jonathan Bate argues, Othello is a converted blackamoor and the play is the process of his re-conversion.[12] Nevertheless, the image of the converted Other does not put suspicion to sleep, as is the case in Venice as well. Othello is tolerated, appreciated and honored only as long as he is reliable

[8] Erika Fischer-Lichte *History of European Drama and Theatre.* London and New York: Routledge, 2002; Arnold van Gennep *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1961; Victor Turner *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine Transaction, 1995; Helmuth Plessner *Gesammelte Schriften 8. Conditio humana*. Suhrkamp, 2003.

[9] Julia Kristeva *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection.* New York: Columbia U. P., 1982. 17.

[10] Stephen Orgel says "Shylock touches upon profoundly ambivalent attitudes in all of us." I believe a similar kind of ambivalence also characterizes the audience's initial reaction to Othello. See Stephen Orgel "Shylock's Tribe." In *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean*, 38-53. 53.

[11] As Michael Neill says, Othello is "anomalous," and his "story of capture […] belongs not to the industrialized human marketplace of the Atlantic triangle, but to the same Mediterranean theater of war as the Turkish invasion of Cyprus." "'His master's ass': Slavery, Service and Subordination in Othello." In *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean*, 215-229. 217.

[12] Bate, ibid. 305.

and immaculate to the maximum degree. As soon as something is amiss around him, he is instantly just a black ram wreaking havoc in the stables of God's white Christian civilization.[13]

Thus, Othello, as the contained and domesticated Other surely takes the contemporary audience by surprise, since the representation deprives the audience of the possibility to satisfy the expectations they have on the basis of their cultural repertoire, their horizon of expectations. However, even if Shakespeare appears to be a bad merchant in the beginning, he invents his servant, his commercial aid in selling the dubious commodity of the whitened Moor. On the surface dramaturgical level, *The Tragedy of Othello* is largely about the sophisticated process through which Iago reshapes Othello as a trade item into a form which is marketable for the general public, an image of the Moor which meets their expectations, which sells easily. This trading in Othello is typically commercial and befits the Mediterranean atmosphere of Venice where everything depends on the successful maintenance of transactions and proportions.

R. Chris Hassell notes how the central merit – grace issue of the reformation informs the tragic universe of Othello through the constitutive imagery of *psychostasis*, the weighing of souls, a key element in the iconography of justice and the Last Judgement.[14] I think this element of Christian theology and iconography is what goes through a profound commercialization, and the end result is a *mercantile psychostasis* through which Iago profanes the originally moral – ethical idea.

The procedure is two-sided: Iago engages in a long process of working on Othello in order to sell him his own merchandise, his version of reality, which reality happens to be a woman, an exchange commodity that functions as one of the most powerful tokens of the patriarchal establishment. Surveillance of marriage contracts solidifies and maintains the feudal, patriarchal order.[15] At the same time, Iago is gradually turning the character of Othello into a version which will be more readily purchased by the early modern English audience, as if he was commissioned by Shakespeare, the director if this imaginary commodity exchange. The play, apparently, is about the production of an Othello that will finally legitimate the biased expectations of the spectator. Iago successfully employs the art of conviction and persuasion, a rhetorical technique most typically employed in the marketplace in acts of bargaining. And bargaining of a special sort we have right at the beginning of the play, which introduces us into a detailed description of weighing, measurements, proportions. It is all about justice, one could safely say, but, in the world of Venice and in the highly commercialized region of the Mediterranean, justice translates into exchange value, market value and measurements. "Put money in thy purse!" – Iago's commandment, repeated eleven times at the end of I.iii. can be read as a slogan that applies to the entire world of Venice.

The mercantile imagery of *Othello* is manifest from the very first lines of the play, and the old argument that the initial sentences of a Shakespearean drama encapsulate the essence of the entire play also applies to *Othello*, since the very first object named in the tragedy is nothing else but a purse:

> Roderigo
> "[Tush,] never tell me! I take it much unkindly
> That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse
> As if the strings were thine, shoudst know of this."

This purse, Jan Kott could perhaps say, will never disappear from the stage of *Othello*. What we have in the initial dialogues of the play is a discourse of trade, accounting, finance. Iago accuses Othello of unjust market behavior, non-compliance with the rules of trade. I only quote some expressions from Iago's list of grievances: "I know my price, I am worth no worse a place." (11) "I…must be belee'd and calm'd / By debitor and creditor…" (31) The disappearance of Desdemona is also communicated to Brabantio with commercial terms, as theft, robbery, as a loss in the inventory.

It is ironic how the metatheatrical perspective of the play establishes a link between Iago and Othello. The famous self-proclamation of Iago as a pretender, a selfish and conceited actor and simulator actually applies to Othello as well. Iago's "I am not what I am" could also be announced by Othello, meaning that he is not what his looks suggest. Othello repeatedly proclaims that he wants to avoid role-playing, pretence, self-fashioning. He declares himself a straightforward soldier, but, ironically, he constantly has to fight the role, the category, the symbolical garment in which his context dresses him. Iago,

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[13] "If not a victoriuos warrior, then Othello is nothing." Charles Marowitz "Shakespeare's Outsiders." In *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean* , 206-214. 210. Marowitz is indeed right to ask at the very beginning of his essay: "If Shylock is the black sheep of the Venetian community, what are we to call Othello, that other great misfit from the same city?" (210) If Othello's "power-to-deliver-the-goods" is questioned, his market value disappears and he falls back into his original category of the fantastic abject. Note that Marowitz is also employing mercantile terminology.

[14] R. Chris Hassel Jr. "Intercession, Detraction and Just Judgment in Othello." *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 35, 2001.

[15] "What matters is less the issue of Othello's blackness in itself than the undoing of patriarchal authority and succession threatened by his unlicensed liaison." Neill, ibid. 218.

on the other hand, wears no visible mark of his dark intents, he displays signs of loyalty and attachment, but these are "indeed but sign" (I.i.157), and they function as an elaborate masquerade of roles. Othello wears a mask of stigmatization, no matter how much he tries to avoid role-playing. Iago is seemingly white and devoid of false pretence, while in reality he is but a multiplicity of masks.

Thus, in the mercantile world of Venice, Iago might think he has successfully demonstrated that we can never be sure about the inner threats posed by the contained abject. The danger emanating from the culturally Other will always be there, liminal characters will forever remain liminal, no matter how much the alien gets assimilated. This is indeed a xenophobic lesson that would, alas, sell very easily in many parts of our present day Europe as well, the Mediterranean not excluded. However, this is the very point where *The Tragedy of Othello* goes beyond the mercantilism of Iago; the xenophobic standpoint is what Shakespeare surpasses and deconstructs exactly by employing Iago as his merchant. Iago might be a very good retailer, an ingenious gossip, but he is a very poor reader of Montaigne. Through his own sophisticated, painstaking and psychologically masterminded work, it is not Othello's originary, innermost, naturally given corruption and bestiality that Iago proves in the end, no matter how much the audience, on the surface level, might indulge in seeing proof which might legitimate that prejudiced expectation. After first shock, the spectator will realize a different moral. What the play really demonstrates is the Montaignean idea that the self, our innermost subjectivity is a flux, in constant metamorphosis, context-dependant, fabricated. Robert Elrodt argues that in his early writings, Montaigne's exploration of the self seemed to result in its dissolution, as if the self-identity of the subject was grounded in a great big vacuum (a very postmodern realization which Francis Bacon in his *The Tremulous Private Body* sees manifest in the character of Hamlet as the prototypical early modern subject). However, Elrodt also finds that later Montaigne appears to emphasize the possibility of some inner core, which is nothing else but the growing self-consistency one might attain through reflecting upon his or her own different social selves.[16] I believe Shakespeare, establishing a borderline world of liminalities through the theatrical representation of a Mediterranean Other, first cheats the audience into a comfortable position of reinforced xenophobia, and then dislocates and deconstructs that position in order to provide us with an exercise in the self-reflexivity of the sort Montaigne called for.

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[16] Robert Ellrodt "Self-Consistency in Montaigne and Shakespeare." *In Shakespeare and the Mediterranean*, 135-155. 143.

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