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IMPROVISING FEMININITY

“All things fit not only with their places, but also with their times”
Augustinus, *Confessions*, VII 15

INTRODUCTION

In my understanding of the play *Othello* it is essential that this play, together with other dramas of the period, was written at a point where theatrical traditions merge, allowing interpretations that point in two ways. On the one hand “backwards”, emphasising the residual elements of an earlier theatrical tradition, which may be termed “morality mode”. This allows us to understand some characters of the drama, first of all Iago and Desdemona, not as flesh-and-blood, psychologically complex characters, but rather allegories. The other tradition, the emerging psychological drama as another context of the play gives us the opportunity to regard the characters, including Desdemona, as psychologically motivated, complex characters¹. Therefore, potentially it would have not been far from my approach to accept her being an allegory. Still, as it will turn out from my paper, my vision of her is – as the famous *Monty Python* line goes – “something completely different”.

In this paper I would like to create a perspective which I imagine to be Desdemona's, in which she resists being appropriated by other points of view – first of all that of Iago who, according to Greenblatt appropriates the other characters into his narrative control, and potentially the one that wants to make her into an allegory. I would like to argue that Iago is not necessarily and completely successful in his appropriation. I see a potential in Desdemona with which she may resist or at least problematize some narratives about her appropriation, such as her being lamentable, or dangerous to Othello's identity, or completely dependent on Iago's machinations. To unlock this potential in her is the aim of my paper. I do not claim that thus I will finally deliver her “true story” – after all the betrayals of her by the other characters of the drama as well as “her rejection and marginalization by male critics of Shakespeare” (French on Ophelia, 1992, 281). But I do claim that we have to maintain our responsibility in the ways we deal with her and the implications and consequences that follow from such practices.

IS IT THE REAL DESDEMONA WE ARE TALKING ABOUT?

In his introduction to the new Arden Shakespeare, E.A.J. Honigmann questions some interpretations of Desdemona he finds inappropriate and points out: “Such misjudgements tell us more about the speakers than about Desdemona” (Honigmann 2003, 4). Which Desdemona? Is it Shakespeare's? Or Desdemona's own self? Or perhaps the one of the New Arden Shakespeare edition? When talking about Desdemona at the Iconography and Gender conference I found it essential not only to talk about how a woman character was represented in a particular drama in early modern England, but at least as importantly to point out some issues that betray

¹ For the discussions of this double nature of Elizabethan drama, the interplay of two different theatrical traditions see e.g. Felperin, who claims that in a given Shakespearean play there is an archaic or received sign-system (of a miracle play, revenge play, historical morality), but that same play insists on its own difference from that older sign-system and its departure from prior art in the direction of present life (1977, 8).

us, critics, when we discuss the ways female characters were represented. When we are addressing our images of Shakespeare's drama, and the ways we see the contemporary society depicted at work, we are positioning ourselves not only in the discourse that we may call "the Shakespeare Universe", but we are also redefining ourselves in our own society, in our own universe, within which for some of us the former is appealingly offering itself, as an ever changing riddle, for happy explorations.

I will explore Desdemona's attitude towards her life, and based on the examination of her acts and her speeches I will try to detect something that we may call a pattern of behaviour that defines her, and defines the ways she participates in the events of the drama. I will call this pattern by the term improvisation, and I will contrast it with the definition of improvisation Greenblatt gives in his chapter on *Othello* entitled "The improvisation of power" (Greenblatt 1980). According to Greenblatt (the main issues of his argument will be outlined later on in the paper) this improvisation is characteristic of Iago and his intrigues. Although my understanding of the term "improvisation" is not the same as Greenblatt's, I will use the same term in order to characterise Desdemona because it will allow me to contrast her improvisation with the one of Iago or rather, my understanding of the term with Greenblatt's, and arrive at a new definition of the term. I feel that this comparison is the more interesting because although Iago and Desdemona are embodying opposing principles from several points of view, the most obvious ones being Iago's devilish and Desdemona's angelic epithets in the text, there are actually some surprising similarities between the way these two characters act, the way they experience the events and the play, and it is because some sense of improvisation does apply to both.

In scholarly literature we can find a wide spectrum of examples of Desdemona's characterisation ranging from those who consider her to be a morally impeccable, saintly creature to those who question her moral purity or even her being a convincing character at all. Although it is not my aim here to question the validity of any of these arguments, I find it important to point out that I agree with scholars who see her as a complex character, someone who has a special aura in the world of treason and private horror, someone whose state can be characterised by the term "grace" (Adamson's notion quoted by Grennan 1987, 286). I think that it is solely on us, readers and audiences, to decide what are the reader/ audience roles we are ready to take on when we approach the play. It is left up to us to decide whether we are willing to assume a continuity and a character behind the prefix Des, or a series of speeches in a dramatic fiction that may or may not lend themselves to a homogenous character.

DESDEMONA'S IMPROVISATION

The title of my paper, improvising femininity draws on Greenblatt's title "The improvisation of power", but not because I would like to argue that his interpretation of Iago features a rather male improvisation as opposed to my understanding of Desdemona, which would stand for the female type of it. I rather try to show that there is an alternative viewpoint for approaching the idea of improvisation, and it is exactly in the female characters, and first of all Desdemona, in whom I see this possible alternative embodied. This may be an alternative to the improvising power of Iago, which undoubtedly rules the play, but even more an alternative to a more general ruling force of power.

I do see an energy in Desdemona which is an equally sound method in the interaction with events, and a tool for improvisation, as the spectacular method of Iago. Thus, I would take issue with those who find Desdemona in the end "reinserted securely within masculine control" (Traub 1995, 127). The way I see Desdemona is that she presents a force in the drama that is not subdued by her death in the end. And this is her way of improvisation, an improvisation that is outside power.

Greenblatt's article is introduced with a story recounted in 1525 by Peter Martyr about the Spanish in Hispaniola who, facing serious labour shortage in gold mines, lured the whole population of an island (now the Bahamas) into a trap and shipped them to the unpopulated area. Their method included promising the natives that they would be transferred to the paradisaical island of their mythology, where they expected to enjoy eternal delights. Greenblatt sees in this a characteristic Renaissance behaviour, linking the Spanish of the story with Iago, and this is what he calls improvisation meaning "the ability to both capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform *given materials* into one's own scenario" (227, my italics). What makes improvisation possible, he says, is "the ability and willingness to transform oneself, if only for a brief period and with mental reservations, into another.(...) Such role-playing in turn depends upon the transformation of another's reality into a manipulable fiction" (228). According to Greenblatt it is essential for an improviser to be empathic and to have the ability of self-cancellation (235), both of these being necessary for a successful creation of a narrative into which the other is subdued. Greenblatt is, thus, talking about imposing a fiction upon the other which will be taken as reality by the other, and thus the one who governs the victim's conception is able to govern the other so, that it fulfils his own interest.

I agree that this is precisely what Iago is doing. He has a narrative control over his victims: their views will depend on his narrations. My problem with Greenblatt's definition is that he considers the interaction of the agent and the given material such that the former incorporates the latter into his "scenario". I agree that flexibility and the ability of self-cancellation are essential for improvisation, but it should also apply to the original scenario of the agent. Namely, in my definition it is not real improvisation if one is not open enough and willing to change his scenario, if the self-cancellation is only temporary, and it lasts only as long as it is necessary for the role-playing which is the prerequisite of subduing the other into one's own narrative control. This I would rather call a control of the events than improvisation, which requires interplay.

No doubt, much of the play *Othello* is about control. And it is not only Iago's. We not only see how the ways imposing control on one another function among characters, but we also see that control is one of the chief values respected in the Venetian culture. "The values most important in this play are power (...), control (...) and possession" (French 1992, 232). When I stated above that in my view Desdemona is not securely reinstated within masculine control in the end of the play, I was suggesting that her aggressive death does not annihilate the behaviour she embodied: a behaviour that does not give control a playground. Desdemona's "betrayal" of Brabantio shows that she is not possessed by her father the way he wished to believe. Othello's fear that Desdemona was unfaithful leads to his loss of identity. Ironically, it seems that Desdemona is an immense potential of threat to the others. But once we identify, with Marilyn French (as she thinks, Shakespeare was likely to suggest) that "the values that motivate and characterise an Iago are accepted and respected values in the Western world" (239), and we keep in mind that Iago can be understood as the voice of the common sense, the always already given, we see that the source of threat is inherent in the nature of these values, namely power, control and possession, that appropriated by the male characters.

French is radical about male legitimacy in the play when she states that it is "based on pretence and thus it is always shaky. Like Brabantio and others of his culture, Othello believes in his possession and right to command his wife: inconstancy would be a 'revolt'. But beneath this belief always lurks the suspicion that one person cannot really own another" (237). Perhaps Iago's presenting himself as "honest Iago" is much more successful and powerful than, for example, Brabantio's being a powerful father or Othello's as a self-controlled husband. Still, when viewed from Desdemona's perspective, there is not much difference in them until trying to control one another remains the key issue. What French calls pretence is, in my view a parallel to what Greenblatt calls by "role playing", an element of improvisation that he sees victorious and typical in the Renaissance. Let me summarise again the main elements of Greenblatt's con-

cept of improvisation. There are three major elements in it: capitalizing on the unforeseen, transforming given materials and transforming oneself temporarily – the latter two being the tools for the first. Iago's advice to Roderigo in act 2 scene 3 epitomises this approach, except from the temporary nature of one's transformation: "I could heartily wish this had not/ befallen; but, since it is as it is, mend it for your own good" (2.3.303). It is obvious that this skill requires, on the part of the agent, an acceptance of elements over which he has no control and a certain flexibility, openness to change if the circumstances require. In my understanding Desdemona's actions in the play do not only include all the main elements necessary for improvisation, but through them she carries out an improvisation which cannot be controlled by the narrative of Iago, exactly because her acts lack the element of control.

In Desdemona's marital choice I see one of the main indicators of her improvisational attitude. Although Othello established himself as a noble warrior, an excellent soldier and supporter of the Venetian order, his being foreign and a moor, as well as the exotic tales he told about his past acted a main role in Desdemona's choice of the "extravagant and wheeling stranger" (1.1.137) against her father's option, whom Brabantio describes – and perhaps advertises – as the "curled darlings" (1.2.63) of the nation. Marrying the moor in the Venetian society is embracing the unpredictable and in Desdemona's case it is clearly not with the wish to assimilate and control it. The contrast between father's and daughter's attitude towards the moor may be equated with the residual and emergent early 17th century opinions. According to Karen Newman (Newman 1991,80) nationalism and the fear of the black's difference were characteristic of the late 16th century, still there was an exotic or mythic dimension that characterised the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century discourse (90). Newman points out that from the contemporary concepts of blackness it is the heroic rather than the demonic that Desdemona, and thus Shakespeare's representation of her "dislocates the conventional ideology of gender the play also enacts" (93). From this perspective Brabantio's fury at her choice is not so much directed towards the fact that his daughter has chosen someone whose barbarous baseness is inadequate to the girl's perfection, but rather towards the threat this choice poses on the stability of his system: the senator has no wish to show even a modest flexibility; he would clearly make a very bad improviser. There are several occasions in the play where Desdemona demonstrates her bravery to face the unknown. She seems to have been aware of the dangers that were inherent in her choice. When it is considered whether she should go to Cyprus with her husband she argues in the senate "if I be left behind/ A moth of peace, and he go to the war, the rites for which I love him are bereft me" (1.3.256–8). She seems to have faith in coming to terms with whatever will happen to her, in other words, she believes in her improvisational power. When Othello finally arrives to Cyprus, he demonstrates that his attitude towards the unknown future is quite the opposite: "...I fear/ My soul hath her content so absolute/ that not another comfort like to this/ Succeeds in unknown fate" (2.1.192–5). Eamon Grennan in his article about female voices in Othello finds about the performance of Othello and Iago that they always have a rhetorical end, a persuasion in view (Grennan 1987, 284). He says that Emilia is performing too, but she performs herself. This performing herself¹ is a major characteristic of Desdemona, and I find it much closer to improvisation than the one that necessarily requires narrative control. In Act 4 scene 3 Emilia helps Desdemona prepare for bed, and this is when Desdemona mentions her mother's maid, Barbary, and by singing Barbary's song, she places herself in the sequence of abandoned women. Although she is consciously not aware of the actuality of her identification with the made, in her song I find a beautiful instance of improvisation, a spontaneous expression of herself through the interplay with the element that is given, her fate. Her song clearly foreshadows the events that are to happen. We may wonder why she is not wise enough to escape, but it seems that she will continue the way she started loving Othello – together with the unpredictable element in him, and she is paradoxically willing to accept whatever comes with it. I find remarkable the contrast with which man and wife relate to the possibility

of their betrayal by the other: Othello's suspicion is unfounded in reality, while Desdemona literally has to face her husband strangle her. Still, it is Othello, who wants to "tear her all to pieces" (3.3.432) and "chop her into messes" (4.1.209), while Desdemona's final reaction to her ultimate betrayal are the puzzling lines where she takes the blame off her murderer and announces that she was the one to kill herself. The paradox of these lines lies in the fact that although we do not find it likely that Desdemona in lying, it is difficult to find an acceptable meaning to her illogical words. Eamon Grennan, focusing on the moral issue involved in the scene suggests that Desdemona's "I myself" is perhaps her way of saying "my husband", because she feels absolute union in marriage, and by uttering the (literal) lie, she is "acknowledging in action that speech can only reach so far as truth, and that untruth can be a speech embodying the higher morality of love" (290). I agree with Grennan that Desdemona feels "absolute commitment" to the "sacramental union of marriage". Still, I do not find it necessary to interpret her words on a moral plane. I see it rather as her identification with the above described idea of improvisation: she has to deal with the given while she continues to perform herself. In her last lines I see her ultimate acquiescence to the events, where in her answer she embraces her life and death as they are, and regrets none of her choices. The source of her calm at this point I find in her certainty that it was always herself that she acted out, and she had the necessary openness towards the unknown, which she does not lose at the threshold of her death either.

The last lines of Desdemona make French suggest that with them she is placing the blame on herself, and that they are the words of a martyr" (240). We may agree with French that "Desdemona must stand as a symbol of what men destroy" (243). But even if she is indeed a martyr, I do not see that *she* wants to identify with the lamentable. The way I imagine martyrs is that it is not they, but rather the audience that feels sorry for them.

WHO'S AFRAID OF DESDEMONA?

Desdemona's overconfidence in the first half of the play may indeed be reflecting some essential innocence, which remains with her to the end – as Honigmann suggests (Honigmann 2003, 43). It is exactly this innocence that allows her to perform herself, that pushes her towards becoming a martyr, but also as a consequence, makes it impossible to the others to control her. I agree with Honigmann when he says that her strength depends partly on Othello's love: "only when he rejects her handkerchief is her self-confidence checked". But, as Honigmann continues: "Thereafter she may seem passive; it would be kinder to describe her as bewildered, out of her depth, not as defeated. True, she bows to Othello's anger (...); it is possible though, to see Desdemona as *the strongest, the most heroic person in the play*" (ibid. my italics).

"The robbed that smiles steals something from the thief", is the Duke's advice to Brabantio (1.3.208–9). Such a smile means that the robbed had the necessary flexibility to restructure the world so that what is stolen is not missing. Brabantio is unable to restructure or reinvent his situation. This is the flexibility that is characteristic of the improvisors: Iago and Desdemona. In act 2 scene 3 Iago plans to capitalize on Desdemona's virtue: "So will I turn her virtue into pitch,/ And out of her own goodness make the net/ That shall enmesh them all." Although not competing with the other improviser, with her last sentence Desdemona on her deathbed definitely steals something from Iago's victory. Still, the improvisational powers of both are admirable. In the case of Desdemona's speaking in front of the senate or of Iago's comment on Cassio's sudden withdrawal in act 3 scene 3 in a way to feed the jealousy of Othello – neither Iago, nor Desdemona had originally an influence on the event, but they can make use of what is given. The "given" element in the scene may be anything, the improvisor's role is to make the best out of it. Desdemona's method is acting out herself, while Iago's, following Greenblatt, is to impose his own vision on the others through narrative control. This is what Grennan phrased

by Othello's and Iago's always having a rhetorical end or persuasion in view (Grennan 1987, 284). Imposing power, since it weakens the necessary flexibility, does not fit into my concept of improvisation.

I find it extremely interesting how Greenblatt sees the lack of this very element in Desdemona more unsettling than anything. He compares her to Emilia and Bianca and concludes that "Desdemona performs no such acts of defiance, but her erotic submission, conjoined with Iago's murderous cunning, far more effectively, if unintentionally, subverts her husband's carefully fashioned identity" (244). We should note the tension between what Grennan has claimed characteristic to the female characters, i.e. performing themselves, and the threat that the same poses according to Greenblatt, to the "carefully fashioned identity" of Othello. Indeed, the logic of power and narrative control is incapable of dealing with such a behaviour, and therefore feels threatened by it. Such a threat is real for anything that is "carefully fashioned", but lacks the necessary openness to acknowledge the "given material" and an eventual change of one's own scenario. And this is the point where I would like to suggest that power is not the main characteristic of Iago's improvisation either. He is transforming materials into his own scenario to a certain extent, but it is difficult to pinpoint a single and precise scenario into which he wishes to assimilate the acts of the others, apart from the fact that he enjoys manipulating them. The improvisational process depends on the concealment of its symbolic center, says Greenblatt (251). If there is a symbolic center for Iago, then it is his willingness to perform and his fascination by play, just the way it is proper for the descendant of the Vice, the master of ceremonies of the morality plays. I do not think that behind his machinations there is any similar aim to the Spanish colonizer's wish to turn the population of the island into free workforce. I consider him an improviser exactly because power in his game is subordinated to the pleasure of the play, and he does not stick to the scheme into which he subdues the others longer than is needed for the show to go on. What Desdemona perhaps achieves with realising herself as her own symbolic center is that she escapes becoming an element in a fiction of somebody else. She has not fashioned herself through imposing control on others, and there is nothing in her that can be subverted. What she teaches us about improvisation is, that it is not about power, but rather (and let me quote Dobroljubov from Bakhtin at this point) "a firm belief in the need and possibility of a complete exit from the present order of this life". If anyone feels threatened by it, they should double-check their self-fashioning.

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