Venetian Culture and the Politics of *Othello*

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In *Othello* Shakespeare represents a society in many ways fundamentally different from his own, and rather than minimizing or obscuring these differences he explores them in a politically creative way. The play is a powerful illustration of his ability to perceive and represent different forms of political organization, and to situate personal relationships and issues of individual subjectivity in a specific institutional context. Here and in much of his other work Shakespeare displays what might be described as a sociological imagination. He portrays in *Othello* not a feudal monarchy or Renaissance court but an enduring Italian city-state, a republic which continued to survive despite growing Habsburg domination in the rest of the peninsula. Taken in the context of his career as a whole the play is a fascinating example of Shakespeare's interest in republicanism, which is evident from 'The Rape of Lucrece' to *The Tempest.* It provides clear evidence that he was neither an uncritical advocate of conservative Tudor ideology, as an older critical tradition maintained, nor a writer materially unable to think and imagine beyond the monarchical paradigm, as a more recent historicist criticism has sometimes suggested. In the English context the act of representing a republican culture was itself a progressive gesture, since Venice offered an existing and stable alternative to the 'natural' and 'eternal' order of monarchy. In addition to this, and to a degree not usually recognized, Shakespeare represents the city's institutions exercising a shaping influence on personal relationships and individual experience. These institutions inform and complicate the ongoing process of cultural exchange at the heart of the play, which is Othello's attempt to thrive in the foreign cultural world of an aggressive European power, and they also influence the representation of women's experience, which the play suggests would be different in a patriarchal but non-monarchical culture. The play is itself the product of cultural exchange, and Shakespeare's imaginative sensitivity to the ways of a different society generates political energies in the text which carry it beyond the ideological boundaries of official English culture.

The extent of Shakespeare's interest in the institutional life of Venice can be suggested by a comparison with contemporary playwrights. John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (*c.* 1600) is set in the city but offers little sense of its specific social and political practices. Jonson's *Volpone* (1605) reveals a much greater interest in particular Venetian institutions, and Daniel C. Boughner has argued that Jonson's research for the play was stimulated in part by Shakespeare's recent portrayal of Venice in *Othello.*[1] Shakespeare had probably read Lewes Lewkenor's *The Common-Wealth and Government of Venice* (1599), a translation of Contarini's laudatory exposition of the Venetian state.[2] Those who wrote dedicatory poems for this volume include Edmund Spenser, who praises not only the beauty of Venice but its 'policie of right', and John Harington, who compares it 'For Freedome' with the Roman republic.[3] Jonson read Contarini for *Volpone,* in which Sir Politic Would-Be reveals that he has hastily studied 'Contarene' in order to pass himself off as a Venetian citizen (4.1.40). Boughner has argued that in this play Jonson deliberately undercuts the idealized portrait of Venice in Contarini's work and Lewkenor's introduction. This is a plausible view, since the Venice of *Volpone* is a greed-driven city where predatory relations are the norm, where the citizens take a Machiavellian attitude toward religion (4.1.22-7), and where the supposedly democratic law courts are venues in which 'multitude' and 'clamour' overcome justice (4.6.19).

Shakespeare's more favourable representation of Venice may suggest an imaginative willingness to explore the strengths of a republican culture, and may also reflect a sympathy with the political interests of the Sidney and Essex circles, with which of course he had some connection. Members of these aristocratic circles were interested in the mixed government of the Venetian republic, and as Protestants they approved of its steadfast opposition to the authoritarianism of the Counter-Reformation. Some took a specific interest in the work of Lewkenor, who in his address to the reader describes the Venetian state as comprising monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements. The prince has 'all exterior ornamentes of royall dignitie' but is nevertheless 'wholy subiected to the lawes'; the 'Councell of Pregati or Senators' is invested with great authority but has no 'power, mean, or possibility at all to tyranize'; and a 'Democrasie or popular estate' is evident in the existence of a 'great councell, consisting at least of 3000. Gentlemen, whereupon the highest strength and mightinesse of the estate absolutely relyeth.'[4] Lewkenor's adverb in this final clause demonstrates how terms usually associated with monarchy could slip from their ordinary usage in descriptions of a state with a mixed constitution, and his account is an example of how cultural exchange could destabilize and enrich conventional English political discourse. There is unquestionably a degree of idealization in Lewkenor's discussion of Venice, just as there is in the text of Contarini, but the enthusiasm he reveals is itself

suggestive of the political interest the city was generating in England at the end of the sixteenth century.

The governmental structure of Venice may seem to be of only incidental importance to *Othello*, but in fact it is indispensable for generating the basic dramatic situation, and it influences every personal relationship in the play. In the first act Shakespeare offers a compelling representation of the city's political and cultural life, and his interest in its institutional structure is evident in a variety of ways. There is a notable shift, for instance, to a more explicitly republican discourse than he had used in *The Merchant of Venice*. In part this might be due to his intervening work with Roman republicanism in *Julius Caesar*, which seems to have influenced the later play. The councilmen who were simply 'magnificoes' (4.1.1 stage directions) in *The Merchant* have become 'Senators' in *Othello* (1.3.1 stage directions). Other traces of a discourse associated with republican Rome include Iago's early reference to 'togaed consuls' (1.1.24), with whom he compares Cassio for their common lack of military experience. Iago may be making a vague reference to classical culture, but he is probably referring instead to the current members of the Venetian council, as becomes clear in the next scene when Cassio uses the republican term 'consuls' for the senators who are meeting with the Duke (1.2.43). Iago's words may glance at Rome but can also be read as referring to a specifically Venetian practice. It was widely known that the members of the Venetian council had no military pretensions, and Lewkenor finds it extraordinary that these 'vnweaponed men in gownes' should give direction to 'many mightie and warlike armies'.[5] The practice of employing foreign mercenary officers and generals—by law no Venetian citizen could have more than twenty-five men in his command—was also based on republican principle. Contarini writes that Venetian leaders and armies involved in long wars on land would inevitably fall into 'a Kinde of faction' against the other 'peaceable citizens'. This could easily lead to civil war, and he notes in an analysis identical to Machiavelli's that this problem helped to undermine the Roman republic, since Caesar drew the loyalty of his men away from the state and to himself, and this permitted him 'to tyrannize ouer that commonwealth to which hee did owe all duty and obedience'.[6] The Venetian policy designed to prevent any conquering Caesar from turning against the republican state opened the way for men like Othello, and owing to its setting in this particular city the play has genuine plausibility.

Perhaps the character most clearly shaped by the institutional life of Venice is Desdemona. In part this influence is traditional, since Brabanzio's household functions on a typical patriarchal model. His rule seems to have been mostly benign, but a specifically political idiom emerges in his spontaneous laments over Desdemona's behaviour: 'O heaven, how got she out? O, treason of the blood!' (1.1.171). After he learns that she has willingly married Othello he employs the same political language:

> I am glad at soul I have no other child,
> For thy escape would teach me tyranny,
> To hang clogs on 'em.
>
> (1.3.195-7)

Throughout Act I Brabanzio speaks the language of fatherly ownership with a frightening intensity, and he has inculcated in Desdemona obedience to the father's word. But Brabanzio's absolutist regime at home exists in tension with the government of the state, which as the council scene attests is based on debate and consultation. His household is built on the older political model of a *corpus*, of which he is unquestionably the head, but it exists within a larger political order based on the more progressive model of a *res publica*, whose participants are citizens rather than subjects, and whose leaders conduct affairs of state on a generally equal footing.[7]

In the council scene Brabanzio uses a kind of absolutist discourse in his address to Desdemona, asking if she knows where most she owes 'obedience', and she replies by saying that what she owes her father is 'respect' (1.3.179, 183). Desdemona's response represents a cultural shift away from her father's conception of the family, with her carefully chosen term 'respect' indicating in part the degree to which she has been shaped by the relatively liberal institutions of Venice. It seems to be a word in some ways specific to the republican context, where it characterizes the tenor of relations among members of the council, and this government has certainly made Desdemona aware of alternatives to the royalist doctrine of unquestioning obedience. Desdemona herself introduces the concept of a broader cultural order in her reply to Brabanzio before the senators, in which she makes repeated mention of her 'education' (1.3.181)—the only time this word appears in Shakespearian tragedy. This education is partly responsible for her independence, and for the verbal agility with which she disengages herself from the identities constructed for her by her father. The most striking line by which she accomplishes this is 'I am hitherto your daughter' (1.3.184), in which she brings out an instability in the word 'daughter' itself, using it to designate not the natural bond she refers to earlier when she says she is 'bound' to Brabanzio for 'life', but rather a relationship of power in which the daughter is the father's possession as guaranteed by a specific set of cultural arrangements. By using the word in this second sense she implicitly asserts the role of culture in establishing such identities, and thus disturbs Brabanzio's simple distinction between a nature which cannot 'err' and the supernatural order of 'witchcraft' (1.3.62, 64).

The problem for Brabanzio is that the progressive political and economic life of Venice is at work beneath his conservative ideology of gender and paternal relations, and Shakespeare's broad representation of Venetian political life makes Desdemona's capacity for independent judgement and action more convincing. A comparison with the sexual politics of *The Merchant of Venice* can be instructive here. As Walter Cohen has pointed out Belmont functions in that play as a 'green' world inhabited by a traditional landed aristocracy, who in the course of events are brought into contact with the commercial and urban world of contemporary Venice.[8] The central figure of this green world is Portia, 'a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father' (1.2.23-4), and one who completely accepts that her father's word has taken away her choice in marriage. As witty and resourceful as she is Portia never contemplates the transgression of the patriarchal decree, and even allowing for the difference in genre her behaviour makes a notable contrast with that of the city-dwelling Desdemona, who does something incomparably more daring. It also happens that Portia is visited by the Moorish Prince of Morocco, who comes in suit to her for marriage, and of whom she says 'If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me' (1.2.126-8). The first thing Morocco says to her is 'Mislike me not for my complexion' (2.1.1), and when he has departed after failing to choose the correct casket Portia says 'Let all of his complexion choose me so' (2.7.79). Next to Desdemona's cosmopolitan openmindedness Portia's response looks very provincial, a predictable reaction to cultural otherness from the daughter of a traditionalist aristocracy. Portia lives idly in her great house on inherited wealth, with perhaps the nearest neighbour a 'monastery two miles off' (3.4.31); by contrast Desdemona lives in the city which Contarini describes as 'a common and generall market to the whole world', its streets thronging with a 'wonderful concourse of strange and forraine people'.[9] In this setting the traditionalist gender and racial ideologies of Belmont are on rather more shaky ground, subjected as they are to the pressures of a society moved by the concerns of commercial exchange and with a practical-minded government ready to reward merit rather than birth.

Shakespeare thus represents Desdemona's self-confidence as partly a product of the progressive Venetian culture he portrays in the play. Othello comes to this culture as an outsider, and his association with the city is based on both the government's republican principles and its readiness to seek out those with merit and to pay for their services. Much of Othello's relationship with Venetian culture is determined by the racial prejudice (like Portia's) he encounters there, which Shakespeare makes a deliberate point of portraying in the opening scenes of the play. This prejudice surfaces repeatedly, as in Brabanzio's insistence that the case be heard that very night:

> For if such actions may have passage free,
> Bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be.
> (1.2.99-100)

This is one of the earliest recorded uses of 'statesmen', a noun which evokes the republican setting of the Italian city-state. (Jonson had used it a few years earlier to name a category of men typified by Machiavelli.)[10] The limits to popular participation in contemporary republican government are abundantly clear in Brabanzio's speech, in which he apparently alludes to the period when Othello was 'sold to slavery' (1.3.137). He also leaves little doubt about his view of Othello's conversion to Christianity, which he evidently regards as a flimsy overlay for an essentially pagan nature. It seems to be Shakespeare's imaginative sympathy for the experience of the cultural outsider, particularly in the hostile environment often created by natives like Brabanzio, which enables him to move beyond the stereotypical images of Moorish people retailed in plays and pageants in England throughout his lifetime.[11] He created this highly original character by imagining Othello in a concrete social situation, and by permitting him to bring to Venice an ideological orientation formed under a different set of cultural institutions.

If one judges this orientation in the context of the Venice Shakespeare represents, Othello emerges as arguably the most conservative character in the play. The rich portrayal of his conservative sensibility seems to be generated in part by Shakespeare's interest in liberal Venetian institutions, and in the contrasts which accordingly emerge as Othello's relationship with Venice unfolds. He finds a model for his personal and political relationships in the tradition of monarchy, and in his first appearance he offers an indication of the degree to which his sense of self has been shaped by this tradition: 'I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege' (1.2.21-2). Among the things to which Othello will later bid farewell is 'the royal banner' (3.3.358), a detail suggesting once again his experience of a political order remote from the republican institutions of contemporary Venice. Othello's language before the council in Act I tends to obscure the economic basis of his relationship with the state, which is accurately described by Iago's reference to their employment in 'the trade of war' (1.2.1).[12] Othello has a more nearly feudal conception of this relationship, which he speaks of in terms of duty and religious devotion. He conveys this in his first address to the senators—'Most potent, grave, and reverend signors, / My very noble and approved good masters' (1.3.76-7)—where his devotional attitude contrasts with the practical tone of the council's deliberations. Othello positions himself here in the role of devoted servant, and interestingly to the men themselves rather than to the state as an institution. His sense of his relationship

with Venice as a personal tie rather than a contractual agreement is also evident when he prefaces a request to the council with 'Most humbly therefore bending to your state' (1.3.234), where 'state' slips from its usual sense of designating the Venetian republic and refers instead to the personal status of the senators. At one point he likens their council to the judgement seat of the Christian God:

> as truly as to heaven
> I do confess the vices of my blood,
> So justly to your grave ears I'll present
> How I did thrive in this fair lady's love,
> And she in mine.
> (1.3.122-6)

Some have read this as an ominous passage, as perhaps revealing an unconscious identification in Othello's mind between sexual vice and his love for Desdemona,[13] but more plainly it indicates the hierarchical understanding he has of both political and religious institutions. The deep identification Othello makes in these lines would seem to be between Roman Catholicism and political absolutism, a conceptual integration roughly on the Habsburg model.

The council acts in a way which contrasts sharply with the political world as understood by Othello. Shakespeare represents them as a functioning participatory government, with a large measure of equality among aristocratic peers. Brabanzio makes reference to 'my brothers of the state' (1.2.97), an unusual locution which recalls the republican rhetoric of *Julius Caesar,* in which the anti-imperial faction employs the metaphor of fraternity in regarding themselves as the true sons of Rome. The members of the council make no sweeping ideological claims about what is at stake, but engage instead in a business-like attempt to calculate the number of ships in the Turkish fleet. In denying the accuracy of a certain report the First Senator says ''tis a pageant / To keep us in false gaze' (1.3.19-20), which suggests the deliberative nature of their government, and their ability to see through theatrical displays of power associated in contemporary culture (and in present-day criticism of Renaissance texts) with imperial and absolutist governments. The practical-mindedness of the council was objected to in the late seventeenth century by Thomas Rymer, who found that Shakespeare's presentation lacked sufficient nobility:

> By their Conduct and manner of talk, a body must strain hard to fancy the Scene at *Venice;* And not rather in some of our Cinq-ports, where the Baily and his Fisher-men are knocking their heads together on account of some Whale, or some terrible broil up the Coast.[14]

What Rymer sees as a fault (and exaggerates to make his point) can also be read in terms of Shakespeare's awareness of different political cultures. He may have thought it fitting that the senators of this commercial republic should be less concerned with shows of worldly greatness than with shrewd calculation and getting their figures right.

Certainly the religious character of Othello's devotion to the Venetian cause cannot be found among members of the council, who make no plea of any kind for Christendom. In fact in the context of Venetian culture Othello's religious sensibility seems rather antiquated. More than any other character he invests the Turkish-Christian conflict with spiritual significance, as his attribution of the Turkish defeat to God's will and his plea for 'Christian shame' among the victors makes clear (2.3.163-5). His piety seems to belong more to the era of the Crusades than to the increasingly secular world of sixteenth-century politics, when the powers of Europe were sometimes willing to ally themselves with the Ottoman empire to gain an advantage over other Christian states. Desdemona's sensitivity to this aspect of her husband's character may emerge when she tells Emilia that instead of losing the 'handkerchief' she would rather have lost her purse 'Full of crusadoes' (3.4.26). This is Shakespeare's only reference to this coin, which was stamped with a cross and current in contemporary England, and its name evokes the larger context of religious war in which Othello is involved, and perhaps also his tendency to regard the Christian-Turkish conflict in heroic and romantic terms. Desdemona's reference to 'crusadoes' might thus be read as an involuntary testimony to her sympathetic understanding of Othello's motives.

The character most aware of how Othello's traditionalist perspective makes him vulnerable to exploitation in Venice is Iago. Shakespeare makes a point of emphasizing Iago's role in the Venetian army, whose rigidly hierarchical relations contrast markedly with those within the state government, where the rule is consultation among equals rather than a structure of command and obedience. Like Brabanzio's household, the army and the martial law government in Cyprus have absolutist associations. Marguerite Waller has pointed out how Iago derives a sense of his own value from the military hierarchy—'I know my price, I am worth no worse a place' (1.1.11)—and that what he regards as the intrusion of Othello and the Florentine Cassio helps to create the 'obsessive energy' with which he plots their ruin.[15] Othello and Cassio are also incorporated into the structure of the army in a way which shapes their subjective experience, but their concept of this institution lacks the commercial connotations of Iago's view. Both tend to regard the army as an instance of the organic community envisioned by the ideology of contemporary monarchy, and the politicized language of love which typifies political discourse in absolutism comes easily to them both. Cassio reveals this in his fall from Othello's favour,

particularly in his request to Desdemona to intercede on his behalf:

> I do beseech you
> That by your virtuous means I may again
> Exist and be a member of his love
> Whom I, with all the office of my heart,
> Entirely honour.
> (3.4.108-12)

Cassio's identity is dependent on his place within the institution, though he figures this not in practical political or economic terms but in the language of love, with the term 'member' recalling the traditional monarchical rhetoric of the 'body' politic and the organic community. Shakespeare may represent Cassio in this way partly because he is a product of the absolutist government of Florence, which had reverted from its earlier republicanism to the autocracy of the later Medici. In any case the crucial role played by the army in supporting Cassio's sense of self is evident in his use of the surprisingly strong verb 'Exist', and in its prominent placement. The play offers an analysis of male identity within the army as profoundly dependent on place and hierarchical relations, and as being distinct in this way from the system of relative equality among members of the Venetian governing class. In the speech quoted above Cassio's discourse of love and duty is suggestive of the personalized politics of absolute monarchy, and at odds with the legalism and practical business relationships of Venetian society as a whole. As a product of this society Desdemona is influenced by these more progressive conditions, and the legal or contractual basis for relationships in the city is evident in her language. She tells Cassio 'If I do vow a friendship I'll perform it / To the last article' (3.3.21-2).

Othello prefers to conduct his political relationships in the older language of loyalty and loving service, and Iago plays on this idealistic and somewhat dated vocabulary to exploit him. In the central scene of the play (3.3) he is attuned to Othello's habit of viewing power relations in terms of devotion and love. When Othello threatens to kill him he projects indignation at his general's ingratitude: 'I'll love no friend, sith love breeds such offence' (3.3.385). At this Othello retreats, and presently Iago swears himself to 'wronged Othello's service':

> Let him command,
> And to obey shall be in me remorse,
> What bloody business ever.
> OTHELLO I greet thy love,
> Not with vain thanks, but with acceptance bounteous.
> (3.3.470-3)

In the speech partly quoted Iago never mentions love, and that Othello interprets his promise of devoted obedience in this way reveals the politicized nature of 'love' in his discourse. The extent to which Othello's mind is imbued with the monarchical is evident in the despairing language he uses after falling to Iago's treachery. It emerges in his vow of revenge, 'Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne / To tyrannous hate!' (3.3.452-3), in which Othello represents his own subjective world as an absolutist political order. The following image in which he compares his 'bloody thoughts' to the rushing Pontic Sea is a remarkable intensification of a conventional Renaissance metaphor for tyranny, in which the boundless ocean is used to figure engulfing despotism.

There is also a religious element in the political discourse Othello uses at this point in the play, as in his accusation that Desdemona's hand is 'moist':

> This argues fruitfulness, and liberal heart.
> Hot, hot and moist—this hand of yours requires
> A sequester from liberty; fasting, and prayer,
> Much castigation, exercise devout,
> For here's a young and sweating devil here
> That commonly rebels. 'Tis a good hand,
> A frank one.
> DESDEMONA You may indeed say so,
> For 'twas that hand that gave away my heart.
> OTHELLO
> A liberal hand. The hearts of old gave hands,
> But our new heraldry is hands, not hearts.

It is typical of Othello's deeply conservative notions of service and heroism that he praises the 'old' ways and speaks of infidelity in love in terms of the debasement of heraldic signs. His speeches here are an interesting mix of political and sexual discourse, in which he conflates the Venetian tradition of political liberty with sexual licence—another tradition for which the city was widely known.[16] Othello uses the term 'liberty' to imply sexual indulgence, and the remedy he prescribes is the very un-Venetian practice of authoritarian religious discipline, indicating once again the distance of his sensibility from the religion and politics of Venice.

One further aspect of Othello's ideological orientation needs to be mentioned: he has no conception of a world divided into public and private spheres. This is manifest when Iago impugns the fidelity of Desdemona, and Othello responds by bidding farewell to his career in war, uttering in a painful lament that his 'occupation's gone' (3.3.362). Michael Neill has noted Othello's tendency to make no distinction in his life between public and private roles, and that his reference to 'occupation' can be read at a variety of levels both political and sexual.[17] The play seems to suggest in fact that the domestic or private sphere is in the pro-

cess of evolving as a practical and conceptual category within the broader institutional life of the Venetian state. Francis Barker has argued that a conception of the public and private as autonomous spheres developed mostly after Shakespeare's work in the theatre, and he cites the second scene of *Hamlet* to support his point.[18] He suggests that in that scene the looming war with Norway, Laertes' intention to return to France, and Hamlet's melancholy are all represented as continuous issues within a single conceptual and political order. The scene which invites comparison in *Othello* is the gathering of the council, in which the Duke responds tellingly to the question of whether Desdemona should be permitted to accompany Othello to Cyprus: 'Be it as you shall privately determine' (1.3.275). In *Hamlet* Claudius involves himself much more conspicuously in the familial debate over whether Laertes should return to France.[19] What Shakespeare seems to suggest in *Othello* is that the distinction between public and private is more developed in the context of a commercial and republican society. If it is less evident in *Hamlet* this is probably because in that play he represents a monarchy in which the traditions of feudalism continue to exert an influence. In royalist countries the corporate ideology which Barker finds in *Hamlet* may have inhibited any sharp distinction between the domestic and public spheres, but Shakespeare's treatment of the issue in his play about Venice suggests his ability to think beyond the social practices of monarchy, and perhaps also his awareness of how the conceptual order would be different in a commercial state based on citizenship rather than on the older notion of membership in a body politic.

As the play develops Shakespeare shows an increasing interest in the association of Venetian women with the private sphere, and in the different roles they play there. In part this seems to be because the domestic sphere is charged over the course of the play with the displaced energies of state politics, and this politicizes the language of this sphere and the actions and speech of women to an unusual degree. The relative equality of Desdemona and Othello in their marriage is evident in the encounter when she first pleads Cassio's 'cause', in which she adopts the part of a 'solicitor' and establishes the setting for debate and persuasion (3.3.27). Both the legalism of Venice and its consultative government are influences here, and Desdemona brings a consciousness shaped by republican traditions to both her marriage and the more conservative institutional setting of Cyprus. After speaking her mind freely throughout this scene she exits telling Othello 'Whate'er you be, I am obedient' (3.3.90), and thus uses a traditional discourse of submission to male authority only when she has already succeeded in creating a space for negotiation. Much more oppressive is the marriage between Iago and Emilia, in which the husband exerts a despotic control over his wife's actions and speech. In this relationship Shakespeare portrays the private sphere as a place of privation, with Emilia deprived of any broader agency or public role. Her plight reflects Iago's virulent misogyny and his obsession with hierarchical relations, and perhaps also a contemporary republican tendency to masculinize the state and to confine women exclusively to the private order. That Iago believes Emilia has no role in the public world is evident in his rebuke to her for suggesting that some 'villainous knave' is poisoning Othello's mind: 'Speak within door' (4.2.148). But Shakespeare also shows an interest in the private order as the place of women's collective experience, and this is most clearly evident in the 'willow' scene (4.3). Desdemona and Emilia experience solidarity and freedom of speech in this setting, and in the absence of male controls they touch issues of power and desire beyond the range of ordinary discourse.[20] Shakespeare represents them developing a collective consciousness by quietly exploiting the limited freedom of the private sphere, and this scene clearly generates some of the political energy Emilia displays in the final act.

In the last scene Othello is moved not only by his desire for revenge but by what he regards as the requirements of 'Justice' (5.2.17). As it opens he is still the military governor of Cyprus, and he evidently believes the murder of Desdemona to be within the purview of his powers under martial law. Desdemona may refer to his status as the ruler of the island when she says 'O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not' (5.2.85). Othello is thus guilty not only of murder but of the arbitrary exercise of power, and Shakespeare represents his actions as both morally wrong and tyrannical. Othello has himself been tyrannized by Iago, and the character responsible for overthrowing both these tyrannies is Emilia. That Shakespeare chose her as the agent responsible for breaking her husband's domination can be regarded as the fulfilment of a certain logic in the play in which a relationship develops between the women of Venice and the city's tradition of political liberty. The aspect of this tradition focused on in the text is the idea of free speech, which is defined not in terms of modern liberalism but in the contemporary context of monarchical and patriarchal restrictions on utterance, an absolutist context in which political speech is made 'tongue-tied by authority' (Sonnet 66). Desdemona's candid political and sexual discourse before the council is the first evidence of this relationship between women and the city's traditions, and she is associated with such discursive freedom repeatedly in the play, as when Othello says (approvingly) that his wife is 'free of speech' (3.3.189), and when she later tells Cassio that she stands in the blank of her husband's displeasure for 'my free speech' (3.4.127).

In the final scene Emilia uses much the same discourse to bring down the tyranny of her husband. Shakespeare's interest in Emilia in the context of the relationship between Venetian women and political speech

emerges much earlier in the play. When Iago implies in Act 2 that his wife is a scold Desdemona defends her by saying 'Alas, she has no speech!' (2.1.106). This is a rather unusual phrase for making the point, and its oddity signals the gradually developing connection between the women of Venice and political expression. When Emilia's speech threatens him at the end of the play Iago tries to return her to the private sphere: 'I charge you get you home' (5.2.201). Having already spoken without male permission in interrupting Montano's address to Othello, Emilia asks the representatives of the Venetian state for 'leave to speak':

> 'Tis proper I obey him, but not now.
> Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home.
> (5.2.203-4)

What Emilia announces in these lines is a political revolt: in this context 'going home' has both its literal meaning and the political sense of returning to a state of complete subordination. Emilia's disobedience of her husband's authority will likely have radical consequences, as she is well aware. When Iago again tells her to be silent she again rejects him:

> 'Twill out, 'twill out. I peace?
> No, I will speak as liberal as the north.
> Let heaven, and men, and devils, let 'em all,
> All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak.
> (5.2.225-8)

In Emilia's use 'liberal' is completely without the sexual connotations it had in Othello's discourse, and suggests a freedom exercised with great effort in the face of traditional male authority. Her image of the north wind for the force of a woman's speech in the public sphere summons up other Renaissance usages in which storm and tempest are metaphors for political upheaval and revolution. And the emerging emphasis late in the play on the solidarity of women makes it possible to take her reference to 'men' as designating not humankind but the ruling gender. Like the Venetian woman she serves Emilia seems to be an agent for realizing the city's political ideals of justice and liberty. Her last words are 'So, speaking as I think, alas, I die' (5.2.258), a line which foreshadows Edgar's closing speech in *King Lear,* in which he says that the witnesses to the catastrophe must 'Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say' (5.3.300). Emilia's words endow what Edgar says with a significance more clearly political, and they may suggest that Shakespeare regarded such speech as a recourse against both loss and tyranny.

Critical awareness of Shakespeare's interest in fundamentally different forms of social organization allows this kind of political content in his work to emerge more clearly. Certainly this interest informs *Othello,* and the tension between monarchy and republicanism charges its language with nuance and political significance. Shakespeare's representation of a non-European's life in Venice and of women's experience in the city is creatively influenced by his awareness of these different systems, and his encounter with the foreign political culture of Venice produces a play that explores and at times subtly endorses ideological perspectives outside the framework established by the monarchical and patriarchal traditions of contemporary English politics.

Notes

[1] Daniel C. Boughner, 'Lewkenor and *Volpone*', *Notes and Queries,* n.s. 9 (1962): 124.

[2] For discussions of Lewkenor as a source for *Othello* see Kenneth Muir, 'Shakespeare and Lewkenor', *Review of English Studies,* n.s. 7 (1956): 182-3; William R. Drennan, '"Corrupt Means to Aspire": Contarini's De *Republica* and the Motives of Iago', *Notes and Queries,* n.s. 35 (1988): 474-5; and David McPherson, 'Lewkenor's Venice and Its Sources', *Renaissance Quarterly,* 41 (1988): 459-66.

[3] Gasparo Contarini, *The Common-wealth and Gouernment of Venice,* trans. Lewes Lewkenor (London, 1599), 3v, A4.

[4] Contarini, *The Common-wealth and Gouernment of Venice,* A2v.

[5] Contarini, A3.

[6] Contarini, pp. 130-I.

[7] For a discussion of these contemporary political models see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 339ff.

[8] Walter Cohen, '*The Merchant of Venice* and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism', *ELH* 49 (1982): 777. Cultural historians have pointed out that in contemporary Italy the countryside became a prime area for the investment of urban capital, and this was especially true of the region around Venice. Powerful families who made their fortunes in banking or trade bought estates in the country, and city interests dominated the rural economy. Partly as a result there was a revival of the pastoral genre and older aristocratic ideals, a 'refeudalization' similar in some respects to what was happening elsewhere in Europe. Cohen is right to stress the conservatism of aristocratic culture in the 'green' world of the play, though in actual historical terms it was often an instance of the 'new' traditionalism. See Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States*

in Renaissance Italy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 221-9.

[9] Contarini, *The Common-wealth and Gouernment of Venice,* p.1.

[10] See *Every Man Out of His Humour,* 2.6.168.

[11] For discussions of the representation of Moors and other non-Europeans in contemporary English culture see Samuel C. Chew, *The Crescent and the Rose: Islam and England during the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937); Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African In English Renaissance Drama* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); and Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare,* vol. 7 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 207ff.

[12] Barbara Everett has noted the conflict between Othello's romanticized view of war and the fact that he is paid to fight by a city known for commerce and secularism. See her '"Spanish" Othello: The Making of Shakespeare's Moor', *Shakespeare Survey* 35 (1982), p. 112.

[13] See Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 245.

[14] From his *Short View of Tragedy* (1693); quoted in G. R. Hibbard, '*Othello* and the Pattern of Shakespearian Tragedy', *Shakespeare Survey* 21 (1968), p. 41.

[15] Marguerite Waller, 'Academic Tootsie: The Denial of Difference and the Difference It Makes', *Diacritics,* 17.2 (1987): 17.

[16] For a discussion of how contemporary observers of Venice found it difficult to distinguish between the political freedom fostered by the city's institutions and its reputation for sexual indulgence see William Bouwsma, 'Venice and the Political Education of Europe', in *Renaissance Venice,* ed. J. R. Hale (London: Faber, 1973), p. 461.

[17] Michael Neill, 'Changing Places in *Othello*', *Shakespeare Survey* 37 (1984), p. 127.

[18] Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), pp. 30ff.

[19] The practice of Shakespeare's own culture was closer to that represented in *Hamlet.* On 29 June 1601 William Herbert, third earl of Pembroke, asked the queen through Robert Cecil for permission 'to go abroad to follow mine own business'. He was still asking for this permission two months later. At Elizabeth's court such royal control over the travels of the nobility was the general rule, and Shakespeare was thus departing from the custom of his own society in imagining a different political practice for contemporary Venice. See 'William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke', *Dictionary of National Biography,* vol. 9, p. 678.

[20] Carol McKewin has noted that the women's friendship in this scene is an 'implied rebuke' to relationships between men in the play. See her 'Counsels of Gall and Grace: Intimate Conversations between Women in Shakespeare's Plays', in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare,* ed. by Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 128.

Source: "Venetian Culture and the Politics of *Othello,*" in *Shakespeare Survey: An Annual Survey of Shakespeare Studies and Production,,* Vol. 48, 1995, pp. 123-33.

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