Iago’s Dissonant Voice: Rhetoric and Reality in Othello
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Abstract

The present paper examines Shakespeare’s Othello as a reflection on the nature of language and rhetoric. The tragedy problematizes the relationship between language and reality, and questions the validity and ethical implications of the system of rhetoric basically through the enigmatic figure of Iago. The paper analyzes the rhetorical dimension of the villain’s discourse and the way it operates on the rest of the characters’ minds, in an attempt to discover the source of the persuasive power of his peculiar and unconventional handling of rhetoric. It explores the rhetorical notion of enargeia or evidentia as central for the understanding of Iago’s success in manipulating reality, and analyzes the rhetorical nature of his revenge. The play shows, in this way, the power of rhetoric and its most dreadful aftermath, and reveals the susceptibility of the human mind to be changed by words.

This paper purports to analyze Othello as a reflection on language within the context of the highly rhetorical culture of Elizabethan England, as a play in which Shakespeare is conveying a specific view of language in general and rhetoric in particular. The play goes deeply into the very foundations of language by raising and problematizing the basic question of the relationship between language and reality, words and things, verba and res. It shows an underlying concern with human knowledge and human understanding of the world, and with the essential role that language plays in this process, that is, with the potential of language not only to reflect but also to transform reality. As Wall (1979: 362) has pointed out, “If the play is about love and hate [...] it is also about the power of words to shape realities”. I will examine Othello in the light of the previous ideas and through the enigmatic figure of Iago as embodiment of the central concerns of a play which is simultaneously rhetorical display and conscious and sceptic questioning of its validity, its limitations, its dangers and its ethical implications.

From the very first scene, the reader/spectator notices the centrality of language in the Venice depicted in the play. We are entering a world crowded with rhetoricians in which the mastering of rhetorical strategies has philosophical, ethical and social implications. The system of rhetoric, assumed and internalized by all of the characters, determines not only their discourse but also the way in which they perceive the world. As Walter J. Ong (1968: 40)argues, during the Tudor Age “the influence of rhetoric is clearly discernible not merely in style of expression but also deeply ingrained in ways of thought and world outlook”. In Othello, Shakespeare presents a group of characters whose language, behaviour, interaction with others, and worldview are all filtered by rhetoric.

Within this world of rhetoricians, the author introduces a dissonant voice perfectly distinguishable from the rest: the voice of Iago. “He speaks home, madam;” Cassio tells Desdemona, “you may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar” (2.1.161-162). Cassio, perhaps swayed by some social prejudice, assumes lago’s inferiority concerning his command of language. lago “speaks home”, that is, his manner of speech is direct and simple, far from the formal elegance and rhetorical sophistication of Othello’s or even of Cassio’s own language. Characters seem to underestimate the power of lago’s words probably confusing the apparent straightforwardness of his speech with a frankness of mind that allows “honest lago” to remain free from suspicion almost till the end of the play. lago despises and mocks rhetorical conventions. Yet, if rhetoric is defined as the art of persuasion, lago turns to be the most effective, though less conventional, of all the rhetoricians in Othello.
The opening scene of the play is quite revealing as regards Iago's conception of rhetoric. In his conversation with Roderigo, Iago presents himself as a man of action, as someone experienced in warfare, and refers scornfully to Othello's rhetorically inflated language as “bombast circumstance/horribly stuffed with epithets of war” (1.1.13-14). In Iago's view, it is language that has favoured Cassio's promotion in the army and, consequently, in the social scale. He realizes that Othello prefers Cassio's “mere prattle without practice” (1.1.26) to the “ocular proof” of his worth in the battlefield: Cassio is promoted to lieutenant whereas he, “of whom his [Othello's] eyes had seen the proof/At Rhodes, at Cyprus and on other grounds/ Christian and heathen” (1.1.28-29), is relegated to be his ensign. From this moment onwards lago adopts language as weapon to achieve his ends and it is eventually lago’s “mere prattle” that unleashes the tragedy.

Leaving aside the much discussed issue of lago's real motivation, in the approach to Othello I propose the focus is not on why but rather on how Iago comes to set off the final tragedy. As he remains passive almost till the end, the discovery of this how is much related to the analysis of the rhetorical nature of lago's revenge, to the exploration of his discourse and the way it operates on the minds of Othello and the rest of the characters. lago is able to create, out of the same reality, different worlds in the minds of each of the characters. His only instrument is his peculiar command of rhetoric. As has already been noted, lago does not employ rhetoric in a conventional way. He is a rhetorician that laughs at the conventions of rhetoric. Thus, one of the features that define lago's discourse is his spite -at times revealed, at other times hidden- towards rhetoric. The scene in which Desdemona asks lago to exhibit his skill in praising women can be considered a mock exercise on epideictic rhetoric in which lago turns praise into mispraise, in the same way that he will strive to and finally succeed in turning Desdemona’s “virtue into pitch” (2.3.327).

With his straightforward rationality, lago trivializes and undermines the noble passions that move the rest of the characters. Reputation, good name, love, honour or virtue are some of the concepts debased by lago. These abstract notions collapse under his amoral practicality. In this respect, the dialogue between Cassio and lago in 2.3. is quite relevant. It represents a clash between two different conceptions of rhetoric which entail two different visions of reality. On the one hand, the exalted lamentation by Cassio:

Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, lago, my reputation (2.3.242-244)

Cassio laments because he is hurt “past all surgery” (2.3.240) and lago understands or feigns to understand that the cause of Cassio's affliction is a “bodily wound”: “I thought you have received some bodily wound: there is more of sense in that than in reputation.”(3.2.245-246). For him, reputation is just a rhetorical construct, a word devoid of meaning: “Reputation is an idle and most false imposition” (2.3.247). Cassio’s fruitless lamentation is confronted to the practicality of lago, who immediately after, as one step farther in his plot, proposes Cassio ways of recovering the general’s favour.

Previously, in 1.3, a similar situation takes place: Roderigo's expectations are not fulfilled since the Senate has talked in favour of Othello and his marriage to Desdemona. He laments and resolves to commit suicide as solution for his frustrated love:
RODERIGO What will I do, think’st thou?
IAGO Why, go to bed and sleep.
RODERIGO I will incontinently drown myself.
IAGO If thou dost, I shall never love thee after. Why, thou silly gentleman?
RODERIGO It is silliness to live, when to live is torment: and then we have a prescription to die, when death is our physician.
IAGO O, villainous!... Ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea-hen, I would change my humanity with a baboon. (1.3.297-310)

The fragment is equally interesting as confrontation of two different worldviews. Roderigo’s conception of love or unrequited love is clearly influenced and filtered by rhetoric whereas Iago does not understand any kind of love but self-love. This fragment illustrates what Gross (1989: 836) calls Iago’s “hatred of romantic self-delusion”.

Another element that characterizes Iago’s speech is his constant awareness of his verbal production. He is always in control of his verbal performances and scrupulously conscious not only of the election of the appropriate word at the appropriate moment, but also of all the details that should accompany a perfect delivery (the tone of the voice, the gestures, the pauses, etc.), details which sometimes have more effect in the hearer than the words themselves. Othello frequently refers to those details: “[...] these stops of thine, fright me the more” (3.3.121)

And when I told thee he was of my counsel
In my whole course of wooing, thou cried’st ‘Indeed?’
And didst contract and purse thy brow together,
As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain
Some horrible conceit [...] (3.3.112-116)

Iago’s success derives, as well, from his knowledge of human nature. He possesses privileged information concerning the character, private life and circumstances of each of the characters, a fact that allows him to take advantage of their weaknesses. He knows, for instance, that Roderigo is lovesick for Desdemona. He knows of Cassio’s most prominent trait -his courtesy- and that he is “rash and very sudden in choler” (2.1.255), features that, under Iago’s manipulation, turn against Cassio himself: his courtesy becomes a further proof inflaming Othello’s jealousy; his choleric temper, the trap that is going to deprive him of his lieutenancy. But, above all, Iago knows that Othello “thinks men honest that but seem so” and that he considers that thoughts and words must be in tune. In opposition to “Othello’s logocentrism” (Calderwood, 1987: 295), to Othello’s blind belief in the truth of words, we find Iago’s ability to dissociate language and reality and his awareness of the breach between signs and realities. From the very beginning, he resolves to appear under “forms and visages of duty” (1.1.50), to throw “shows of service” (1.1.52) and to “show out a flag and sign of love” (1.1.155). From this moment, the audience is warned of Iago’s doubleness.

Iago exploits two basic rhetorical concepts, which are essential for the understanding of his discourse and worldview: *enargeia* or *evidentia*, and paradox. The first one explains, to a great extent, the effectiveness and persuasive power of Iago’s words; the second accounts for the complexities of Iago’s discourse as well as for his duplicity as character. At the core of the play is the idea that knowledge of
reality and truth is mediated by language. Iago knows that language, if appropriately
manipulated, can change a person's view of reality. Nevertheless the manipulation of
language cannot be exclusively attributed to Iago. All the characters use, for their
own benefit, the power of persuasion proper to rhetoric. Othello admits to have used
language in order to get Desdemona's love and again uses rhetoric in the senate to
defend himself from Brabantio's accusations; Cassio uses rhetoric to persuade
Desdemona to help him in recovering Othello's favour, and Desdemona uses or tries
to use rhetoric to persuade Othello in favour of Cassio. However, these characters
are moved by noble passions and show a certain moral or ethical stature that
establishes the limit. On the contrary, Iago is cerebral and amoral. He seems to be
moved exclusively by self-interest and there is no hint of any ethical constraint
interfering with his use of rhetoric. Platt (1999: 277) has summarized the traditional
distrust surrounding rhetoric as a double-edged weapon in the following terms:

But persuasion is never simple or wholly
innocent [...] There can never be a guarantee
that rhetoric’s tremendous power will be used
or received in a constructive or healing
fashion [...] rhetoric’s effect can be
destructive, false and harmful [...] 

Iago manipulates reality through language. His speeches incite others to act
while he remains passive. But why is Iago so successful in imposing his own fabricated
version or versions of reality? Enargeia or evidentia is crucial, in my opinion, to
understand Iago’s success. This concept appears in some of the Elizabethan
contemporary manuals on rhetoric and poetics. In his Arbe of English Poesie,
Puttenham (1589: 199) defines the term hypotiposis (a synonym of enargeia) as “the
counterfeit representation”. According to him:

The matter and occasion leadeth vs many
times to describe and set foorth many
things, in such sort as it should appeare they
were truly before our eyes though they were
not present, which to do it requireth
cunning [...] 

Peacham (1577: Sig. O2r) in his Garden of Eloquence defines hypotiposis as “a
discription of persons, things, places, and tymes [...] set forth so plainly, that it
seemeth rather paynted in tables, then expressed with wordes”.

Both Puttenham’s and Peacham’s definitions explicitly relate enargeia to
sight. Energeia implies a vivid description whereby what is aural becomes visual, and
what is absent becomes present. This strategy is one of the pillars of Iago’s
discourse, whose power lies largely in his outstanding ability to create this sense of
immediacy. The force of the images he uses -their plasticity, their brutality- fosters
actualization, and the hearer does not only hear but sees through Iago’s words. The
hearer becomes an eyewitness in the present moment of what Iago is painting with
words. One instance is the moment in which Iago and Roderigo inform Brabantio of
his daughter’s elopement and marriage to Othello: “Even now, now, very now, an old
black ram/ Is tupping your white ewe” (1.1.89-90). It has always been emphasized
that Iago presents to Brabantio the marriage between Othello and Desdemona in the
most obscene way (see Wall, 1979: 363) by means of “images of Othello’s animal
lasciviousness” (Gross, 1989: 821). But I would call the attention upon the iteration
of ‘now’: “Even now, now, very now”. This gradation emphasizing the instant
enhances the sense of immediacy. Some lines after, Iago insists on the same idea by
means of a new image: “You’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse” (1.1.111-112); and later on: “Your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” (1.1.115-116). These lines illustrate, on the one hand, the strength of Iago’s brutal and explicitly sexual images, on the other hand they are an exercise on amplification and, finally, they are related in a gradation: Iago starts using a metaphor which will be progressively dissolved till both Desdemona and Othello are explicitly identified. Another example of the use of *enargeia* is Iago’s description of Cassio’s dream:

In sleep I heard him say, ‘Sweet Desdemona,  
Let us be wary, let us hide our loves.’  
And then, sir, he would gripe and wring my hand,  
Cry, ‘O sweet creature!’ and then kiss me hard,  
As if he plucked up kisses by the roots  
That grew upon my lips; then laid his leg  
Over my thigh, and sighed, and kissed, and then  
Cried, ‘Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor.’
(3.3.420-427)

The episode which is probably part of Iago’s fabrication is depicted in such explicit visual terms that Othello takes for granted not only that the incident actually took place but also that the dream reflects a reality and is, consequently, an irrefutable proof of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness. Such is the impact of Iago’s words that Othello’s words that Othello’s brutal and disproportionate resolution is to “tear her all to pieces!” (3.3.432) As Lunde (2004: 54) argues “rhetorical *enargeia* (*evidentia*) comes into play because of a lack of “real” *evidentia*; it is evidence created in and by words”. And this is what Iago does: since there is no actual ground, no factual evidence liable to originate such a tragedy, he creates evidence with his words. Iago’s procedure consists basically of the linguistic creation and accumulation of “proofs” out of which a certainty seems to spring. He shapes “trifles light as air” into “confirmations strong” (3.3.323-324) and knows probably “that the mind whose passions are aroused by a vivid speaker does not know the difference between things and words” (Altman, 1987: 142).

Apart from the visual power of his speeches, the effectiveness of Iago’s particular use of rhetoric resides in his ability to destabilize other characters’—especially Othello’s—beliefs and in making them question their own assumptions. Never asserting facts roundly and rarely lying in a literal sense, Iago gets a quasi-absolute control over the rest of the characters. He manages to raise doubts and suspicion, moving more easily than any other character in the unstable ground between truth and falsehood, realities and appearances. Finally, it is worth mentioning the relationship of rhetoric with the characters’ selves and identities. In Othello, speech and self are indissolubly linked. His evolution as a character can be explained in terms of the evolution of his language. In the case of Iago, self and speech are completely different things and we only have access to Iago’s real self in his asides and monologues. Iago represents doubleness and duplicity. This can be observed in the noticeable divergence between what he says and what he thinks, between what he is and what he seems to be. Othello, on the contrary, is “the rejection of ambiguity and doubt” (Platt, 2001: 142). He needs the firm ground of absolute truths and steady assumptions. When his system of beliefs staggers under Iago’s insinuations, Othello proves unable to cope with doubts: “By the world/I think my wife is honest, and think she is not;/I think that thou are just; and think that thou are not” (3.3.384-386). This fear of doubts is made evident when Othello desperately asks for “the ocular proof” of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness in the midst of an agony of uncertainties:
Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore;  
Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof [...]  
(3.3.360-361)

Exclusively by means of his handling of language and with the petty material support of a handkerchief, Iago is able to orchestrate a scheme to destroy Othello in which most of the characters become puppets that see what Iago wants them to see and whose motions are determined by Iago’s interests. In this way, the play makes evident the susceptibility of the human mind to be changed by words and illustrates, at the same time, the power of rhetoric and its most dreadful aftermath. In the hands of an amoral character like Iago, “that demi-devil”, rhetoric becomes a dangerous weapon. Othello explores in depth the problems surrounding language and its relation to reality basically through the character of Iago as key element to understand the vision of language that Shakespeare presents in his work. Iago is the representative of a particular kind of rhetoric more practical in nature. He understands that rhetoric is necessary to achieve specific ends but, unlike Othello, Iago is not a prisoner of words.

References: