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Charlene Cruxent

University of Montpellier III, France

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Cover Page Footnote

Charlène Cruxent is a PhD Student from the University of Montpellier III, France. Her thesis consists of a sociolinguistic analysis of nicknames during the Renaissance period, focusing on literary texts such as William Shakespeare and his contemporaries' plays, poems, and books of emblems. Charlène has been conducting her research in Cambridge, United Kingdom, where she also works as a French teacher. Contact:charlene.cruxent@gmail.com

Conjuring Magic and Witchcraft in William Shakespeare's *Othello*

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William Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* deals with a military officer who, after conquering the heart of Desdemona, is abused by his councillor, Iago. Because of the latter's insinuations, Othello will be lead to believe his wife has been unfaithful and will go as far as killing her out of jealousy. Even if the main plot of this play does not involve any obvious supernatural elements or characters like the witches in *Macbeth*, the spirits in *The Tempest*, or the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare often refers to magic and witchcraft. The audience cannot but be taken aback when the main protagonist is charged with witchcraft in the first scenes, and when he later speaks about Desdemona's handkerchief, saying it comes from a

“charmer”, and that “[t]here’s magic in the web of it”¹. We should consider Andrew Sofer’s definition of the word “conjuring” to understand what sort of magic is really at stake in Othello.

In Elizabethan England, to conjure meant ‘(...) to [c]all upon, constrain (a devil or spirit) to appear or do one’s bidding by incantation or the use of some spell, raise or bring into existence as by magic’. Like performing itself, conjuring was a Janus-faced endeavour whose ontological stakes were uncertain².

In a world where “[m]en should be what they seem”³, which implies that they are not what they seem, and where people are said to “counterfeit” (2.1.235) and to “play” (2.3.310); one can find occurrences of the term “conjure” under different forms in Othello’s (1.3.92), Brabantio’s (1.3.105) and Emilia’s (3.3.299) speeches, all those characters asserting that the moor conjures his lover, Desdemona.

Right from the beginning, Othello is described as a deceiver who controls magic and uses it to seduce Desdemona:

¹William Shakespeare. “The Tragedy of Othello the Moor of Venice”. *The Norton Shakespeare*. First edition. Eds. Greenblatt, Stephen, et al. New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1997. Act 3, scene 4, lines 54-68.

²Andrew Sofer. “How to Do Things with Demons: Conjuring Performatives in *Doctor Faustus*”. *Theatre Journal* 61.1 (2009): 1-21.

³*Othello*, 3.3.132.

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Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her,
(...)
If she in chains of magic were not bound
(...)
Would ever have, (...)
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou – (...)
(...) thou hast practised on her with foul
charms
Abused her delicate youth (...)
1.2.64-78.

He is depicted as an “abuser” (1.2.79) who “wrought upon her” (1.3.106) some “drugs or minerals” (1.2.75) or “mixtures” (1.3.104). And Brabantio goes as far as to accuse Othello of using “witchcraft” (1.3.64). Othello does not really deny being a witch, but instead, qualifies his magic, explaining to the senators that he did not use black magic or unnatural potions, but rather, his sincere words, since Desdemona fell in love with him when she heard his “tale” (1.3.90-170), that is to say “the story of [his] life” (1.3.129-64). This is the “(...) conjuration and (...) mighty magic” (1.3.92) he used to win the lady, in other words, no actual magic. Even if Brabantio’s immediate and far-fetched accusation may have shown the spectator that Othello is not a witch, the fact that his “power” comes from his words may alert the audience that words will play an important role in this play.

However, the roles are soon reversed, and after having accused Othello of witchcraft, Brabantio blames his own daughter: “She has deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3.292), says he, as if he

wanted to warn his son-in-law. Desdemona thus appears as the deceiver, an assertion which can be soon confirmed by her own words: "I am not merry, but I do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise", 2.1.125-6. Later, Iago tells Othello that "[s]he did deceive her father, marrying [him] (...) / She that so young could give out such a seeming / To seel her father's eyes up close as oak" (3.3.210-4), thus implying that his wife plays a role and is not sincere. Deceiving may be seen as the first step in conjuring - when one deceives someone, one tries to mislead this person, lying and hiding his real intentions so that he will later have the possibility to manipulate this same person. That might explain why Othello calls Desdemona a "Devil" (4.1.235); he considers she is a bad person because her fair speeches and her beguiling beauty blur his judgement, just like a witch would. He thinks that she has been lying to him and still denies having made a mistake.

It is true that Othello is abused by words and appearances, but even if he "can see" (3.3.449) his lady's behaviour, he is completely blinded because he cannot discern which words are fooling him. Indeed, even if Othello tells his wife the handkerchief he gave her is special ("There's magic in the web of it", 3.4.68), it is only so because Iago managed to have Othello believing in its magic: the moor is persuaded he can read his wife's guilt through this object since his ensign "shows" him Cassio possesses it and Desdemona is not able to show him she still has it. Othello, like the sorceress who gave his mother the handkerchief and "could

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almost read / The thoughts of people” (3.4.55-56), thus thinks he is now able to see through Desdemona’s soul and her sin. But Othello is misled, just like Brabantio in the first scene. He believes here in the power of magic, while conjuring is what is at stake – Iago indirectly tells them that Desdemona acts with intent to deceive them, and they believe it since what they can see corresponds to what they are told. The moor’s flaw resides in him being what Howard Felperin calls a “lunatic-lover”, that is to say a lover who has “the power of imagination as ‘to make possible things not so held’”⁴. But he would not be so if there was no evil agent using conjuring to manipulate him and his fears. Othello’s over-active imagination is fed on his ensign’s misleading words and the fear that Desdemona’s beauty would bewitch him.

The only character who deserves to be called a conjurer or witch is Iago. First, he keeps on concealing his real identity and intention from the moor. “I am not what I am” (1.1.65), he says to Roderigo; later underscoring that he “must show out a flag and sign of love, / Which is indeed a sign” (1.1.157-158) to deceive Othello. Even if he “play[s] the villain” (2.3.310), he just fulfils his role as “ensign”, he represents what the others see since

⁴Howard Felperin. “‘Tongue-tied our queen ?’: the deconstruction of presence in *The Winter’s Tale*”. *Shakespeare and The Question of Theory*. Eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman. New York and London: Methuen. 1985, 11-12.

he “is something like a standard-bearer”⁵. He is the one who deals with appearances, and who has the possibility to alter them manipulating how they are framed. According to Michael Andrews, “appearance belies reality: Iago, after all, is the sort of man who inspires confidence”⁶. It is a major problem for Othello since Iago is described as “honest”⁷ throughout the play while he is not, which has the effect to lead the audience to question the very meaning of this word (Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words*, 29). He is like “Janus”⁸, a two-faced Roman God, and sometimes has even more faces since there are several layers of concealment. He makes use of masks when he asked Roderigo: “Follow thou the wars, defeat thy favour with an usurped beard” 1.3.334), so that nobody would see their plan. He actually manipulates the man as to serve his own interest. He hides what Macbeth calls

⁵ According to Greenblatt, “ensign” means “standard-bearer”, that is to say the third-in-command. Shakespeare, William. “The Tragedy of Othello the Moor of Venice”. *The Norton Shakespeare*. First edition. Eds. Greenblatt, Stephen, et al. New York: W.W Norton & Company. 1997, 2101.

⁶Michael C. Andrews. “Honest Othello: The Handkerchief Once More”. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*.

13.2 (Spring, 1973): 278-279.

⁷ *Othello*, 2.3.303-309, 3.1.39, 3.3.5-247-263, 5.1.32.

⁸ *Othello*, 1.2.33.

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his “black and deep desires”⁹, for his “words and performances are no kin together” (*Othello*, 4.2.186). He is a real conjurer, “one who practises legerdemain; a juggler”¹⁰, who uses dissimulation and insinuation to alter the judgement of people around him, like Othello and Roderigo: “the tragic protagonist struggles with appearance and reality when another agent is deliberately confusing them”¹¹. And indeed, Othello’s judgement is blurred by Iago’s words: “I think my wife be honest, and think she is not. / I think that thou art just, and think thou art not” (*Othello*, 3.3.389-390). Unfortunately, he soon chooses to believe Iago even if he has not had any “ocular proof” (3.3.365) of his wife’s unfaithfulness at this juncture of the play.

Furthermore, what the ensign allows his friends to see is called “monstrous” (2.3.200, 3.3.111-431), and the word “monster” comes from the Latin “monstrare” : “to show, to advise”¹². Iago shows

⁹ William Shakespeare. “The Tragedy of Macbeth”. *The Norton Shakespeare*. First edition. Eds. Greenblatt, Stephen, et al. New York: W.W Norton & Company.1997, 2571. 1.4.51.

¹⁰“Conjurer”. *OED* Online. Web. 08.12.14. <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/39298?redirectedFrom=conjurer>>

¹¹ Robert Heilman. *Magic in the Web: Action and Language in Othello*. Westport: Greenwood Press Publishers. 1977, 51.

¹²“Monstrare”. William Whitaker. *Words: Latin-to-English & English-to-Latin Dictionary*. 2007. Web. 12.12.14.<<http://www.archives.nd.edu/cgibin/wordz.pl?keyword=monstrare>>.

Othello what he wants him to see and what he observes has a destructive effect, it is compared to some “poison” (*Othello*, 3.3.329-30) Iago would have administered to Othello, which could explain why the moor faints. “Work on; my medicine works. Thus credulous fools are caught” (4.1.41), he comments when the military officer falls on the ground. Iago enchants Othello and Roderigo with his potion, like a witch would do. On top of that, he seems to be associated with hell and even compares himself to a devil: “When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows, / As I do now.” (2.3.325-8). He is the “invisible spirit of wine” Cassio blames since he offered him to drink alcohol, the very spirit he calls “devil” (2.3.261-3)¹³. Iago might be seen as Lady Macbeth’s male counterpart, leading to a state of disorder and chaos but in no time directly appearing as being an active agent in Othello’s fall: he does not want to be associated with Cassio’s death so that he asks Roderigo to kill him (4.3.230-40). In the same way, he does not want Othello to use poison to murder Desdemona, but tells him: “Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated” (4.1.197-8), while the ensign’s poison and witchcraft is what is really contaminating the lover’s bed. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes comments on his wife’s unfaithfulness saying:

¹³ The entire quotation is: “O thou invisible spirit of wine, if thou hast no name to be known by, let us call thee devil”.

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There may be in the cup
A spider steeped, and one may drink, depart,
And yet partake no venom, for his
knowledge
Is not infected; but if one present
Th'ahorred ingredient to his eye, make
known
He has drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,
With violent hefts. I have drunk and seen the
spider.

The Winter's Tale, 2.1.41-7.

Othello also complains, saying he would not have suffered if he ignored Desdemona's behaviour ("I swear 'tis better to be much abused / Than but to know't a little", *Othello*, 3.3.341-2), but like Leontes, he makes a mistake identifying the wrong spider. Iago is this vile spider which tries to catch its victims in a web: "With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio" (2.1.169), "And out of [Desdemona's] own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all" (2.3.335).

The most striking feature of Iago's character is the way in which he succeeds in influencing his preys. The Oxford English Dictionary affirms that a conjurer is a person "who performs tricks with words"¹⁴; and that is exactly what the ensign does, he "abuse[s] Othello's ears" (*Othello*, 2.1.377) and "pour[s] this pestilence into [the moor's] ear" (2.3.330). At the beginning of the play, Brabantio

¹⁴"Conjurer". *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Web.08.12.14<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/39298?redirectedFrom=conjurer>>

tries to call attention to the strong power words have: “These sentences, to sugar or to gall, / being strong on both sides, are equivocal. / But words are words.” (1.3.215-8). That may be why Cassio does not understand Iago’s words when he tells him “Faith, [Othello] tonight hath boarded a land-carrack” (1.2.52), because he does not identify the metaphor and the figurative meaning of his words. Iago is the character who sows doubt in the other protagonists’ mind through words, using what Austin calls “performative” utterances, that is to say “ ‘(...) cases where one brings a state of affairs into existence by declaring it to exist, cases where, so to speak, saying makes it so’ ”¹⁵. Iago never directly tells Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful to him, he insinuates it, mentioning that the lady and Cassio seem quite close. Asking the moor not to be jealous, Iago actually wants to have the opposite effect: his speech must imply for the military officer that he has reasons to be jealous. Then, Othello bases his fears on the very words his ensign did not pronounce, and gives life to them saying that Desdemona is having a secret affair with his friend Cassio.

The references to magic allow the audience to observe the effect of conjuring in the play: Iago is able to control the characters’ mind thanks to persuasion and illusion, even if he does not really act or implicitly have someone doing something. He

¹⁵Eric Byville. “How to Do Witchcraft Tragedy With Speech Acts”. *Comparative Drama* 45.2 (Summer, 2001): 3.

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only draws his power from the way in which he uses words. He is not a magician, nor is Othello, whose delicate words and personality bewitched Desdemona; the ensign is a conjurer who deserves more to be called a witch than Othello. But to some extent, William Shakespeare might have attempted to present both the moor and the ensign as witches since revenge is what drives them on. Othello wants Desdemona to die because she was unfaithful to him, and Iago wants to hurt the officer since he had an affair with his wife Emilia (“For that I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leapt into my seat (...)”, 2.3.283-4). If magic and conjuring exist in this play, they only benefit daemons like Iago who is Othello’s evil spirit (“Thou know’st we work by wit and not by witchcraft”, 2.3.345). In the end, Othello realises that the spider he has “drunk and seen” listening to Iago’s words, did not consist of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness, but of Iago’s misleading pieces of advice. Even if “he cracks his gorge”¹⁶, it is too late since he has already strangled his beloved. Andrew Sofer concludes that “Othello’s jealousy mirrors the way magic works to alter consciousness at will; in fact, suggests Shakespeare, the mechanism is identical”¹⁷. In other words, Iago only plays with the protagonists’

¹⁶William Shakespeare. “The Winter’s Tale”. *The Norton Shakespeare*. First edition. Eds. Greenblatt, Stephen, et al. New York: W.W Norton & Company. 1997, 2897.

¹⁷Andrew Sofer. “How to Do Things with Demons: Conjuring Performatives in *Doctor Faustus*”. *Theatre Journal* 61.1 (2009): 1-21.

judgements and tries to alter them, framing appearances with his witch-like skills. The Tragedy of Othello is neither a fairy tale, nor a witch tragedy, but it concentrates on human [d]evils which are pride and jealousy. The direct references to magic in this play may point at the fact that there are no fixed bad or good characters: Iago is only a “demi-devil” (5.2.302), Othello is not completely innocent, and Desdemona should have told Othello she had lost his handkerchief. There are faults on both sides and things are much more complicated and subtle than what they seem to be. That is why the audience might see Othello’s request (“Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice”, 5.2.351-2), and the references to magic and witchcraft, as Shakespeare’s insinuation that judgement is easily influenced. What one sees is not always true, and the spectator has to make the difference between seeming and being in order to avoid being caught in the “web” of appearances made by malevolent witches.

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