

“WELCOME TO CYPRUS” (4.1.221): MAPPING STRANGE SPACES IN SHAKESPEARE’S *OTHELLO* BY UNCOVERING THE INTERACTION OF HISTORY AND FICTION

«Where is the Home for me? / O Cyprus, set in the sea, / Aphrodite’s home In the soft sea-foam, / Would I could wend to thee; / Where the wings of the Loves are furled, / And faint the heart of the world»¹. Considered the birthplace of the Goddess Aphrodite, Cyprus traditionally embraces tropes of love, beauty and fertility. Pafos in Cyprus, was the centre of the cult of Aphrodite and the historical site of Palepafos includes one of the most important sanctuaries of Aphrodite throughout the ancient world. Intriguingly, Shakespeare’s configuration of Cyprus in *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* collides with this celebratory view of the island. In *Othello*, Cyprus is the space where love meets its death. Cyprus is «the site where eros is violently crushed»² as crystallized by the image of the marital bed transformed into a «death-bed» (5.2.50)³, displaying the corpses of Othello, Desdemona and Emilia. By establishing a dialogue between Shakespeare’s early modern text of *Othello* and a wealth of rare documents in archives in Cyprus, the present chapter demonstrates how historical reality and fiction in relation to Cyprus interweave in *Othello*.

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- 1 EURIPIDES, *The Bacchae*, Engl. transl. Gilbert Murray (1941), George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, ll. 402-407.
 - 2 ELENI PILLA, 'Tis Certain then for Cyprus: *The Interaction of Historical Reality and Fiction in Shakespeare's Othello*, in «Literary Paritantra (Systems)», 3 (2013), 61.
 - 3 All references to *Othello* in this chapter are standardized according to WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Othello*, Edited by E.A.J HONIGMANN, Thomas Nelson, Walton on Thames 1997.

The centrality Shakespeare accords to the island of Cyprus in *Othello* is marked structurally, thematically and geographically. Only the first act of the domestic tragedy takes place in Venice and the other four acts are dramatized in Cyprus. Thus, a structural imbalance is created whereby the majority of the action takes place in Cyprus. Located at the southernmost extremity of Europe, at a distance from Venice, Cyprus is the space where extremities can be brought to «the world's light» (2.1.401-402). Othello, the once astute general on the battlefield, far from the civilising forces of Venice, is «[t]enderly [led] by th' nose / As asses are» (2.1.400-401), and becomes saddled with the «green-eyed monster» (3.3.169) of jealousy.

Most scholarly work on *Othello* has focused on the characters of the play, gender, race and violence. Cyprus has been relegated to the fringe of critical debate and does not receive the academic scrutiny it deserves. The present chapter thrusts Cyprus to the centre by studying the interaction of historical reality and fiction in relation to Cyprus in *Othello*.

The symbolic geography of *Othello* is overtly generated by a dichotomy between the two distinctively discrete spaces of Venice and Cyprus. Venice symbolizes order and civility and sends protection to Cyprus which is threatened by the "Turk". A contested space, vied for by the Venetians and the Turks, Cyprus bespeaks lawlessness. Shakespeare's source Giraldi Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi* presents the events during peacetime, whereas Cyprus in *Othello*, is a «warlike isle» (2.1.43), «wild» (2.3.210), and «the people's hearts [are] brimful of fear» (2.3.210). After the demise of the Turks in the powerful «high-wrought flood» (2.1.2), a disorderly brawl breaks out. The risk, danger and death harboured in Cyprus is unrestrained. Thus, the scheming Iago can «drown cats and blind puppies» (1.3.336-337). Iago kills Roderigo and his own wife, Emilia. He overwhelms Othello with jealousy to the extent that he kills his wife and himself. Only one death takes place in Venice, that of Brabantio, and the audience hear about it in Cyprus.

Betrayal is more pervasive in Cyprus, and it appears to operate horizontally, refusing to allow any form of relationship to remain intact. Othello's lieutenant, Cassio, engages in the «vile brawl» (2.3.252), neglecting his duty and betraying his general's trust. Othello's long entrusted lieutenant, Iago, employs heinous scheming and subterfuge to avenge him. Othello perceives that Desdemona has "betrayed" him sexually and he kills her, «else she'll betray more men» (5.2.6). Emilia pro-

vides the ensign with Desdemona's handkerchief. The Venetians appear to betray Othello because as soon as the Turkish menace no longer exists, they call him back to Venice deputing Cassio in his place. Cyprus in *Othello*, as James A. McPherson explains, emerges very vividly as an "other" world:

«Venice and its Senate embody order, reason, justice and concord-binding forces that hold the city together. Cyprus, on the other hand is associated with chaos and violent storms, the Turk, the Ottoman, and the unharnessed forces of nature—the "Other"»⁴.

The element of urgency and expediency radiates throughout the historical and the fictional landscape of *Othello*. The Venetian occupation of Cyprus began on 26 February 1489 when Queen Caterina Cornaro passed the command of the island over to the Venetian Republic. During the Venetian period, Cyprus had two very important functions: quelling the expansion of the Ottomans and protecting the trade lanes of Venice and the Levant. The increasing challenge of the Ottoman invasion after they seized Rhodes in 1522, prompted the Venetians to begin improving the military fortifications of Nicosia and Famagusta. In *Othello*, Cyprus is located at the border between Christendom and Islam and is of strategic significance both to the Venetians and the Turks, as evoked by the words of the Senator who informs the Venetian Duke that the Turkish fleet has made a false preparation for Rhodes: «When we consider / Th'importancy of Cyprus to the Turk, / And let ourselves again understand [...] / We must not think the Turk is so unskilful to leave that latest which concerns him first» (1.3.28-31). The Ottoman is deemed as a general enemy of all Christianity as consolidated in the words of the Duke: «valiant Othello, we must straight employ you against the general enemy Ottoman» (1.3.49-50). The notion of Cyprus as a border provides fertile ground for exploring cross-cultural relationships and particularly intercultural bonds such as that of Othello and Desdemona. In Venice the Duke licenses Othello and Desdemona's marriage despite Brabantio's protestations that Othello should be sent «to prison» (1.2.85). History and fiction intertwine in a fascinating way generating the idea that the couple are imprisoned by being sent to Cyprus.

4 JAMES A. MCPHERSON, *Three Great Ones of the City and One Perfect Soul: Well Met at Cyprus*, in *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*, Edited by MYTHILI KAUL, Howard University Press, Washington D. C. 1997, 56.

During the Venetian period, as Camille Enlart has illustrated, the citadel in Famagusta was used as a state prison and prisoners from Italy were sent over to Cyprus⁵. Paradoxically, Othello and Desdemona's bedroom is in the citadel. Imagery of confinement and imprisonment pervades Othello's description of his love for Desdemona: «But that I love the gentle Desdemona / I would not my unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine / For the sea's worth» (1.2.25-28). The historical setting of Cyprus links with Orson Welles's 1952 cinematic adaptation of *Othello*, where the director places a gigantic cage, evocative of imprisonment, on the tower of the castle. The couple's bedroom with the grilled window, also symbolic of imprisonment, is in the castle tower. Notably, this film in contrast to all other screen versions of *Othello*, begins with Cyprus acknowledging its centrality in *Othello*.

Shakespeare's play repeatedly underscores a connection between the character of Othello and the island of Cyprus, endorsing the idea that Othello has a special association with the island. Othello is presented as being the most knowledgeable of Cyprus, as also supported by the Duke's forceful affirmation: «Othello, the fortitude of the place is best/ known to you» (1.3.223-224)]. The unstable and turbulent Cyprus fosters Othello with a sense of belonging, as Walter Cohen explains:

«as a colonial possession of Venice and military outpost in what was for the Christians the war between civilization and barbarism, Cyprus seems a place where Othello should feel at home»⁶.

A significant similarity between the character of Othello and Cyprus is that Othello's origins are unclear in the same way that the location where the events take place in Cyprus is unnamed⁷. G.K. Hunter has outlined the racial indeterminacy of the designation "Moor" in Renaissance England. Moor had no clear racial status but indicated someone who was different due to their skin colour and religion. Hunter explains:

«The first meaning [of the word Moor] in the OED (with examples up to 1629) is "Mahomedan". And very often this means no

5 CAMILLE ENLART, *Gothic Art and the Renaissance in Cyprus*, Translated and Edited by DAVID HUNT, Trigraph in association with the A.G. Leventis Foundation, London 1987, 449.

6 WALTER COHEN, *Introduction to Othello*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1997, 2095.

7 PILLA, *Tis Certain*, cit. (n.2), 62.

more than “infidel”, “non-Christian”. Like Barbarian and Gentile (or Wog) it was a word for “people not like us”, so signalled by colour»⁸.

Shakespeare does not clarify if the Moor is from North Africa, Arabia or Spain. Othello’s unclear origins are conveyed in Roderigo’s distrust of Othello’s “uncertain background”, when he refers to the Moor, as «an extravagant and wheeling stranger/ Of here and everywhere» (1.1.134-135).

Othello depicts Cyprus during the Venetian occupation at the time of the Turkish threat, but Shakespeare, as I have argued, may have been inspired to create the character of Othello after an earlier captain of Famagusta, Christoforo Moro⁹. According to Andros Pavlides, Moro was a luogotente in Cyprus from 1505 to 1507 and Shakespeare may have presented Othello as black because of the surname Moro which evokes that he was black and originated from Mauretania¹⁰. The play makes references to Mauretania when Iago lies to the gullible Roderigo that Othello will take Desdemona to Mauretania: «he goes into Mauretania, unless his abode be/ lingered here by some accident» (4.2.225-226). In the Shakespearean play, Othello offers Desdemona a «handkerchief/ Spotted with strawberries» (3.3.437-438) which was given to his mother by an Egyptian charmer to subdue her husband to her love. Similarly, the emblem of Moro’s Venetian family was three mulberries¹¹. The handkerchief in *Othello* has a variety of functions. It is integral to Othello’s construction as exotic because «there’s magic in the web of it» (3.4.71) and it is instrumental to the plot because it provides «ocular proof» (3.3.363) for Othello of Desdemona’s supposed infidelity, thus leading to the deaths of the two lovers.

In a play heavily studded with references to different places, the location where the four acts of Shakespeare’s tragedy are dramatized is never named. References to the citadel, the harbour, and the Turkish threat consolidate the idea that the unnamed city in *Othello* is Fama-

8 HUNTER, G. K., *Othello and Colour Prejudice*, in *Interpretations of Shakespeare: British Academy Lectures*, Selected by KENNETH MUIR, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1985, 188-189.

9 PILLA, 'Tis Certain, cit. (n.2), 65.

10 ANDROS PAVLIDES, Κριστόφορο Μόρο [Christoforo Moro], in *Μεγάλη Κυπριακή Εγκυκλοπαίδεια* 10 [*Big Cypriot Encyclopaedia* 10] (1984), 119.

11 Ibid.

gusta. The Greek name for Famagusta is "Ammochostos" which means buried in the sand. Famagusta is famous for its long defence but also its surrender to the Ottoman Turk Lala Mustafa Pasha in 1571. The conquest of Famagusta by the Ottoman Turk had a theological significance as it was tied to one of Christianity's most dramatic moments. Cyprus, and specifically Famagusta, was «the last bastion of Christianity»¹². The twelve-month siege of Famagusta lasted from 16 September 1570 to 1 August 1571 and was very well known in Europe. Shakespeare may have had access to documents regarding this siege. Fifty-one historical documents, as Marangou informs us, particularly by Venetian military officials, describing the fall of the city were available from 1572¹³. At the time of the siege, maps of Cyprus and the two besieged cities, circulated around Europe. Thus, Christians in Europe, in England, France, Germany and Spain—were well informed about the siege of Famagusta through bulletins in their native language¹⁴. The Captain of Famagusta at the time was Mark Antonio Bragadino. Since Famagusta was the key to the security of the entire island, abroad, its Captain was considered the captain of Cyprus. Famagusta was described by both travelers and pilgrims as *omnium urbium fortissimo*, i.e. the most powerful of all the cities. Antonio Loredano in 1476 described Famagusta as the key and heart of Cyprus: «*El ditto luogo di Famagosta e, rispetto al porto, le chiave et cuor de Cipri*»¹⁵. The significance of Famagusta is also evident in a document by the Council of Ten, where Famagusta is described as «the foundation and the head of the whole of Cyprus»: «*La città nostra de Famagosta, come quella che e el fondamento et capo de la insula nostra de Cipro*»¹⁶. This act of not naming the city in *Othello* raises complex questions, especially since information about Famagusta was available to individuals of the early modern period. The dramatist may not have known the name of the city, but he also appears to further a tendency prevalent at the time of the Venetian occupation of Cyprus, of equating the city of Famagusta with Cyprus¹⁷. In the same way that Fa-

12 MARANGO G. ANNA, *The Harbours and Ports of Cyprus*, Laiki Group Cultural Centre, Nicosia 2002, 124.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 MARANGO G. ANNA and KOUTAS G. ANDREAS, *Ammochostos: The History of the City*, Imprinta, Nicosia 2005, 41.

16 MARANGO, *Harbours and Ports*, cit. (n.12), 113.

17 PILLA, *'Tis Certain*, cit. (n.2), 63-64.

magusta was the “heart” of Cyprus during the Venetian era, it is also the heart of *Othello* because, as already emphasized, four acts of the tragedy take place in Cyprus.

Shakespeare’s fictive text was composed in 1603-1604 and it depicts the Turkish fleet drowning in a storm [«News, friends, our wars are done, the Turks / are drowned» (2.1.201-202)] thus departing from two historical realities: that in October 1571 the Turkish navy had been defeated in a naval battle at Lepanto, and that Cyprus had passed over to the Ottomans in August 1571. The Turkish threat subsides in the storm in *Othello*, but metaphorically another “Turk” arises, Othello. In his suicide speech Othello identifies himself as the fearsome “other”: «Set you down this, / And say besides that in Aleppo once, / Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk, / Beat a Venetian and traduced the state, / I took by the th’ throat the circumcised dog / And smote him—thus» (5.2.349-354). Daniel D. Vitkus’s arresting discussion explains the notion of Othello metaphorically “turning Turk”, and points out,

«Sent out to lead a crusade against Islamic Imperialism, [Othello] “turns Turk” and becomes the enemy within. He has “traduced” the state of Venice and converted to the black Muslim other, the European’s phobic fantasy: Othello has become the ugly stereotype»¹⁸.

The violence and mercilessness of the “stereotypical ‘cruel Moor’ or Turk”¹⁹ are also displayed in the threat of Mustapha Pasha to the Venetians on 28 March 1570 :

«We demand of you Cyprus, which you shall give us willingly or perforce; and do not irritate our horrible sword, for we shall wage most cruel war against you everywhere; nor let you trust in your treasure, for we shall cause it suddenly to run away from you like a torrent; beware not to irritate us»²⁰.

The historical account of the treatment of Bragandino and his soldiers when they surrendered to Mustafa, evokes ideas of deception and extreme violence, as revealed in the work of Sir David Hunt,

18 DANIEL J. VITKUS, *Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor*, in «Shakespeare Quarterly», 48 (1997), 176.

19 Ibid.

20 See MARANGOU, cit. (n.12), 124.

«[the Venetians] were at first received with elaborate courtesy. At a certain moment Mustafa gave the pre-arranged signal for the massacre to begin. Bragadin alone was reserved for a more prolonged fate. Mustafa himself cut off his ears and nose; he was kept waiting for two weeks in this state and then flayed alive. His skin was stuffed with straw and taken to Constantinople in triumph»²¹.

Echoes of the motif of the cutting of body parts indicated in the above extract are also evident when the enraged Moor communicates how he will treat his wife [«I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me!» (4.1.196)] and Cassio [«O, I see that nose of yours, but not that dog I shall throw it to» (4.1.141-142)].

Encoded in the fabric of *Othello* is a critique of Venice as uncovered through an exploration of the symbolism and architecture during the Venetian occupation of Cyprus. The lion of St. Mark is visible on many remnants of the military architecture of Famagusta of the Venetian era and it appears on the entrance gate of the Citadel of Famagusta, known as Othello's Tower. The winged lion also features on many maps of the time. Although there is consensus in Shakespeare Studies that Othello's words: «You are welcome, sir, to Cyprus. Goats and monkeys!» (4.1.263) are a reference to Cassio's supposed sexual act with Desdemona, contextualizing *Othello* offers a new reading of these words. Othello exclaims this mocking salutation to Ludovico and the other Venetian senators when they arrive in Cyprus to inform him that he is no longer the general of Cyprus. Providing Othello with a mandate instructing him back to Venice, the Venetian officials depute the Italian Cassio in Othello's place. «You are welcome, sir, to Cyprus. Goats and monkeys!» (4.1.263), is a very famous line in Greek Literature because the Nobel Prize Winner (1963), George Seferis (1900-1971) incorporated it in his 1953 poem "Saint Neophytos the Recluse Speaks" (1953). If a Cypriot is asked where the line comes from they will attribute it to Seferis. Saint Neophytos of the 12th century, as the poem conveys, can still "speak" to Cypriots in the 1950s who were under British rule, due to the similarity of the two periods. The poem provides a blueprint of how conquerors should be treated. Conquerors, the poem advocates, should

21 HUNT DAVID, *Footprints in Cyprus: an Illustrated History*, Trigraph, London 1982, 220.

be approached with contempt and resistance²², indifference, irony and sarcasm²³. The sarcasm and irony in the poem of Seferis is very pertinent to the Shakespearean play. Engaging in an act of mocking the symbol of the lion, Othello vehemently equates sir, a rank of nobility with goats and monkeys. The representative of Venetian military power in Cyprus, Othello, who can stand for the lion, provocatively subverts the wisdom, intellectual and cultural supremacy of the Venetians. Hence, Othello overtly undermines the sixteenth century conception of Venice as the epitome of civilization, freedom, justice and wisdom. Othello in Cyprus, at a distance from Venice, launches a critique of the metropolis suggesting that it is a farmhouse. Thereby, his words challenge Brabantio's bold affirmation in Venice, «This is Venice:/ My house is not a grange» (1.1.103-104).

The Shakespearean play registers the idea that Othello has close friendly ties with the Cypriots. The Cypriots are depicted as eagerly awaiting the arrival of Othello, «How does my old acquaintance of this isle? / Honey, you shall be well desired in Cyprus / I have found great love amongst them» (2.1.202-204). The depicted bond does not echo historical reality. The Venetian occupation of Cyprus was a very oppressive period, hence there was general enmity between the Cypriots and the Venetians. As Ekaterini Aristidou has pointed out, there were at least ten attempts to organize a movement against the Venetians. The Cypriots on four occasions sought help from the Turks (1487, 1516, 1562, 1565), on three other occasions from the Duke of Savoy (1505, 1514, 1520), twice from the emperor of Germany Maximilian (1509, 1530) and once from the Mameluke Sultan²⁴. The prevalent sentiment of the Venetians

22 PILLA, *Tis Certain*, 67; and ID., *Review of Shakespeare's Othello*, by Nikos Charalambous for the Cyprus Theatre Organization, as performed by the Cyprus Theatre Organization, Latsia Municipal Theatre, Nicosia, Cyprus, 27 November 2010, in «Shakespeare», 9.3 (2013), 365.

23 ID., *An Intertextual Exchange between Shakespeare's Othello and Two Theatrical Versions*, in «Mediterranean E-Journal of Communication and Media», 2.1 (2013), 6, accessed 31 March 2019, <http://www.mediajournal.org/an-intertextual-exchange-between-shakespeares-othello-and-two-theatrical-versions/>.

24 ARISTIDOU CH.EKATERINI, *Venetian Rule in Cyprus (1474-1570)*, in *Cyprus Jewel in the Crown of Venice: An Exhibition sponsored by the Anastasios G. Leventis Foundation, organized by the occasion of the 22nd International Symposium of the International Map Collectors Society*, Kailas Printers & Lithographers, Nicosia 2003, 41.

towards the Cypriots was one of distrust. Although around 1520 seven different garrisons consisting of Germans and Italians guarded Famagusta, as shown by Marangou, the Cypriots were excluded from the army²⁵. This feeling of distrust is captured in the words of Count Otto Heinrich: «They employ no Greeks, since they don't trust them; a soldier or mercenary who marries a Greek woman is at once dismissed»²⁶. Similarly to the exclusion of Cypriots from the army, Iago feels shamed that the Florentine Cassio, and not himself, has been made Othello's lieutenant. Othello also experiences feelings of exclusion when informed that he is no longer the general of Cyprus.

Othello is essentially and ineluctably intertextual. The island of Cyprus is constructed in Shakespeare's early modern text through a complex convergence of history and fiction. Departing from traditional representations of Cyprus as the territory of love and beauty, Shakespeare depicts a disquieting portrayal of the destruction of love, warning us of the fragility of the domestic unit and that love should not be denigrated, but celebrated. Once quenched, the flame of love cannot be restored to its former light.

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25 MARANGO, 115.

26 Ibid.

Ամփոփում

«ԲԱՐԻ ԵԿԱՔ ԿԻՊՐՈՍ» ՕՏԱՐ ՎԱՅՐԵՐՈՒ ՈՒՐՈՒԱԳԾՈՒՄ ՇԵՑՔՍՓԻՐԻ ՕԹԵԼԼՈՅԻՆ ՄԷՋ ԿԱՊԵՐ ՊԱՏՄՈՒԹԵԱՆ ԵՒ ԳՐԱԿԱՆՈՒԹԵԱՆ ՄԻՋԵՒ

ԷԼԷՆԻ ՓԻԼԼԱ

Կիպրոս, որ Ափրոդիտէ դիցուհիի ծննդավայրը կը նկատուի, ըստ աւանդութեան՝ սիրոյ, դեղեցկութեան եւ բեղմնաւորութեան փոխաբերութիւններու առարկայ կը դառնայ:

Պափոս Ափրոդիտէի պաշտամունքի կեդրոնն էր եւ Պաղեստինայի պատմական վայրը կ'ընդգրկէ Ափրոդիտէի կարեւորագոյն տաճարներէն մէկը հին աշխարհի մէջ:

Հետաքրքրական է, որ Շէյքսպիրի Օթելլոյ, Վենետիկի Մաւրը ողբերգութեան մէջ, Կիպրոսի այս ցնծալի երեսին հակապատկերը կը պարզուի մեր առջեւ. Օթելլոյի կղզիին մէջ, սէրը կը հանդիպի մահուան: Կիպրոսը կը դառնայ այն տեղը, «ուր էրոսը դաժանօրէն կը ճգմուի», որու խորհրդանշը կը դառնայ ամուսնական անկողինը, որ կը դառնայ Օթելլոյի, Տեղտեմոնայի եւ Էմիլիայի մահուան անկողինը:

Կիպրոսի մէջ գտնուող դիւանական փաստաթուղթերու շնորհիւ, կարելի կ'ըլլայ այս գլխուն մէջ կապերը տեսնել կղզիին պատմական իրողութիւններուն եւ գրականացուած դէպքերուն միջեւ: