

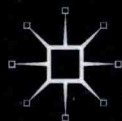
REPRODUCING  
SHAKESPEARE  
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# SHAKESPEARE'S ITALY AND ITALY'S SHAKESPEARE

*Place, "Race," Politics*



Shaul Bassi



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# Shakespeare's Italy and Italy's Shakespeare

Place, "Race," Politics

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Shaul Bassi  
Ca'Foscari University of Venice  
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Reproducing Shakespeare  
New Studies in Adaptation and Appropriation

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*To Susy and Samuel P.K.*

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## LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 8.1	Juliet's balcony, Verona. CCL	147
Fig. 8.2	Compagnia de' Colombari rehearsing <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> in the Ghetto (2015)	156
Fig. 9.1	Campo dei Mori, Venice	160
Fig. 9.2	The Tetrarchs	165

# CONTENTS

1	Introduction: Country Dispositions	1
	Part I Race	19
2	Iago's Race, Shakespeare's Ethnicities	21
3	Slav-ing Othello	43
4	Shakespeare, Nation, and Race in Fascist Italy	63
	Part II Politics	81
5	Neocon and Theoprog: The New Machiavellian Moment	83
6	Infinite Minds: Shakespeare and Giordano Bruno Revisited	99
7	Hamlet in Venice	121

Part III Place	137
8 The Grave and the Ghetto: Shakespearean Places as Adaptations	139
9 Fixed Figures: The Other Moors of Venice	159
10 The Prison House of Italy: <i>Caesar Must Die</i>	181
Bibliography	203
Index	223

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## Introduction: Country Dispositions

In the heart of the temptation scene, planting what may be his most poisonous seed in Othello's mind, Iago warns his general: "look to your wife", "observe her well", "wear your eye not jealous nor secure". The reason for such hypervigilance is that

I know our country disposition well;  
In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks  
They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience  
Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown.

3.3.204-7

As E.A.J. Honigmann glosses, Iago means "I know, *but you cannot know...*"<sup>1</sup> Othello is confident that his religious conversion, his service to the state, his command of oratory, and the intimacy of marriage have sanctioned his admission and assimilation into Venetian society; Iago intervenes to conjure up a "country disposition", an ethnic/national factor which by its (feminine) nature eludes knowledge, rendering the Moor an irreducibly flawed stranger. According to this new, unofficial script of Venetian identity, Othello discovers himself the simultaneous victim of a double cognitive deficiency, as a foreigner and as a husband. Iago has convinced his general that while Desdemona may still be a faithful wife, he is not yet a

<sup>1</sup>William Shakespeare, *Othello* (Arden 3), edited by E. A. J. Honigmann (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1997), 221.

Venetian. Othello will be ready to commit the most extreme acts, murder and suicide, out of the desperate desire to master this disposition and, in the same breath, his wife. But of course his efforts will be vain, because the inner sanctuary of Venetian identity, as envisioned by Iago, is empty.

Even though a sexual pun akin to that of Hamlet's "country matters" (3.2.108) might be intended—nationalist and racist ideologies typically exploit women while claiming to defend them from some enemy—it is indicative that the word "country" derives from the Anglo-Norman *contré*, *countré*, or *cuntré*, stemming in turn from classical Latin *contrā*, that is, "against", "opposite", lit. "that which lies opposite or fronting the view, the landscape spread out before one".<sup>2</sup> Ethnic and national identities have a number of positive values (language, beliefs, traditions), but they often require someone who is opposite, an "other", to affirm themselves.<sup>3</sup> In Iago's advice, we may see the mechanism operating at its most literal: his country is an imagined community, created through his masterful use of hypotyposis,<sup>4</sup> defined mostly by the simultaneous deprecation of women ("they") and the exclusion of the Moor: Venice is a closed cultural text because its women are unreadable, and it is "our" country because it is emphatically not Othello's. In Iago's picture, a "country disposition" is made to function as a "cognitive or moral island",<sup>5</sup> the state to which incline those versions of radical relativism advocating the intrinsic validity (and hence impermeability) of each and every cultural formation; as the ensign would put it, "what you know, *you* know" (5.2.300, my emphasis). It is, in contemporary terms, a fundamentalist view of identity, which presupposes an unbridgeable gap between "us" and "them" and informs racist and xenophobic discourses. But, as Hayden White cautions us, "communities or societies ... may regard themselves as related by opposition or negation to some other community or society and indeed may act in such a way as to become merely an 'other,' but in reality they are only different from one another".<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup>A "country disposition" first and foremost operates in and through language; to underline this aspect, I include in every chapter of this book a brief etymological or linguistic analysis of an Italian word that exists in some sort of tension with its English cognate.

<sup>3</sup>Chapter 2 will analyze this point in detail.

<sup>4</sup>Hypotyposis, the "vivid description of a scene, event, or situation, bringing it, as it were, before the eyes of the hearer or reader" (OED), is one of Iago's rhetorical weapons of choice. Alessandro Serpieri, *Otello: Peros negato* (Napoli: Liguori, 2003), 21.

<sup>5</sup>Sen, *Reason Before Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 31.

<sup>6</sup>Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 3.

This book investigates the cultural difference of Italy *in* and *through* Shakespeare. It looks at the encounter, collision, and intermingling of the “country dispositions” represented respectively by Shakespeare and Italy, both understood as vast constellations rather than fixed stars. The obvious premise is that several plays by Shakespeare are adapted from Italian sources; the additional context is the constant presence of Shakespeare in Italian culture from the mid-nineteenth century on. The classical topic “Shakespeare and Italy” is here revisited from a new perspective, focusing on the playwright’s Italian afterlife through the lens of the three categories that structure this book: place, “race”, and politics. My twofold and chiasmic objective is to ask how Italy explains Shakespeare and how Shakespeare explains Italy, seeking possible answers in various texts, events, and sites: a Victorian racist interpretation of Shakespeare that casts Iago as the archetypal Italian specimen, a Romantic adaptation of *Othello* written in Venice under Austrian rule, the Fascist appropriations of Shakespeare, the disparate uses of Machiavelli in recent Shakespearean criticism, the absence of Giordano Bruno in Shakespeare studies after Frances Yates, an essay on *Hamlet* by a prominent Italian philosopher and politician, monuments and sites associated with Shakespeare in Verona and Venice, and the Taviani brothers’ filmic version of *Julius Caesar*.

These repositionings of Shakespeare share some inspiring analogies with the postcolonial appropriations analyzed by Thomas Cartelli. Agreeing with Jonathan Bate that “Shakespeare” is best understood as “a body of work that is refashioned by each subsequent age in the image of itself”,<sup>7</sup> Cartelli adds a key geopolitical factor: “[T]his tendency becomes even more pronounced when ‘Shakespeare’ is ‘refashioned’ outside the national boundaries of British culture and society “in the image” of cultures and societies seeking either to establish their independence from imperial influence or to identify, define, and assert their own national values or priorities.”<sup>8</sup> In applying this notion outside of the Anglosphere (a concept analyzed below), I try to capitalize on his specific examination of the American case. Although my main interest in the book is in the differences between the two “country dispositions” as regards Shakespeare, I find a productive parallelism between Italy and the USA as former

<sup>7</sup>The reference is to Jonathan Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3. See also Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare. A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (London: Vintage, 1991).

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Cartelli, *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 2.

colonial spaces turned into nation-states with *imperial ambitions*.<sup>9</sup> *Some chapters will then examine the role of Shakespeare in the Italian process of national self-fashioning, some will focus on Fascist and racist appropriations of his plays, and others will deal with more recent Italian transactions with Shakespeare in the age of globalization.*

Italy has been for centuries less a stable national and political entity than a work in progress, with all its interhal contradictions and dissonances, an ideal aspiration troubling, obsessing, and frustrating its advocates and supporters as well as its opponents. Situated at the borders of East and West, Europe and Africa, struggling for centuries to define itself, always oscillating between freedom and oppression, experiencing democracy and tyranny, enforcing and suffering colonialism, negotiating modernity and tradition, Italy is marked by a history of political fragmentation, haunted by the memory of its ancient Roman past, strongly identified with the Catholic Church and yet striving to distinguish itself from it. Occupied for centuries by several foreign regimes, when it acquired independence, it turned in succession into a parliamentary monarchy, a fascist dictatorship that established a short-lived empire, and eventually into a democratic republic. Today it is the southernmost frontier of Europe in a geopolitical crisis characterized by unprecedented mass migrations from Africa and Asia. The various stories told in this book analyze the reverberations of these various political circumstances in the coeval appropriations of Shakespeare. These peripheral events may both illuminate singular potentialities of the plays activated by these specific Italian circumstances and simultaneously turn Shakespeare into a special guide to a nation's changing ethos and political unconscious. This particular case is more compelling insofar as most of the plays under scrutiny are derived from Italian sources, making of each new Italian staging, edition, and interpretation of Shakespeare *an adaptation of an adaptation*, an act of translation that brings a text and a set of meanings back to their "original" context, creating in turn new texts and new meanings.

The territory is vast and there is no attempt at a comprehensive survey. This book deals with criticism, adaptations, performance, and film, but hardly mentions opera and, in most cases, it looks at the margins rather than at the center. In my analysis, I am guided by Slavoj Žižek's insight:

We effectively understand a foreign culture when we are able to identify with its points of failure: when we are able to discern not its hidden positive

<sup>9</sup> Cartelli, *Repositioning Shakespeare*, 6.

meaning, but rather its blind spot, the deadlock the proliferation of meaning endeavors to cover up. In other words, when we endeavor to understand the Other (another culture), we should not focus on its specificity (on the peculiarity of “their customs,” etc.), we should rather endeavor to encircle that which eludes their grasp, the point at which the Other is in itself dislocated not bound by its “specific context”.<sup>10</sup>

The specificity of Italian culture has been a constant theme and preoccupation for Italians and foreigners alike. Italians have interrogated themselves and their collective identity as part of their long struggle for national unity, and, more recently, in their longing for an accomplished democracy. For foreign observers, especially citizens of the Anglosphere, Italy has long been a real and imaginary place, a mirror and a refuge, and a screen where a wide array of negative and positive stereotypes is projected. Italophobia and Italophilia have ancient roots and sometimes coexist in the same viewer, as is probably the case with Shakespeare.<sup>11</sup> Many precious studies have been devoted to the “hidden positive meaning”, the “specific context”, and the “peculiarity of customs” of Italy as constructed by Shakespearean and other early modern texts.<sup>12</sup> This book, on the other hand, is more interested in Žižek’s “blind spots” and “points of failure”, which I read as a way to interpret Shakespeare’s “country dispositions”. For Iago, a “country disposition” is a virtual reality aimed at excluding Othello. In its less extreme version, a “country disposition” is the milieu and habitus in which we grow up and live, often unaware of its cultural and anthropological assumptions. As Giordano Bruno, one of the protagonists of this book, reminds us: “[H]ow great is the impact of the habit of believing and of being nourished from childhood with certain persuasions, on blocking

<sup>10</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Abyss of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 50.

<sup>11</sup> Attilio Brilli, *Il viaggio in Italia: storia di una grande tradizione culturale*. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006); Joseph Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008); Manfred Beller, “Italians”. In *Imagology. The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters: a critical survey*. Edited by Manfred Beller and Joseph Theodor Leerßen, 194–200 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Michele Marrapodi, A. J. Hoenselaars, Marcello Cappuzzo, and Lino Falzon Santucci, eds., *Shakespeare’s Italy: Functions of Italian Locations in Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Michele Marrapodi, ed., *Shakespeare, Italy and Intertextuality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Michael Redmond, *Shakespeare, Politics, and Italy* (Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).



the understanding of most evident things.”<sup>13</sup> A “country disposition” is the norms we take for granted, and that we take for granted other people take for granted; a bias, a horizon within which we operate undoubtedly until we cross a different disposition, which may generate tension, friction, anxiety, hostility, sometimes admiration, and which, at best, may lead to questioning our own prejudices. Against Iago’s fundamentalist approach, this is the hermeneutic potential of Othello’s “unhoused free condition” and Desdemona’s “divided duty”, their willingness to open their own experiences to a radically different country disposition.

The hypothesis of this book is that if we productively put in mutual tension Shakespeare and Italy, certain “points of failure” of Italian culture may come into relief. To quote Žižek, I will be looking for what the proliferation of Shakespearean meaning in the Italian context covers up, seeking what may elude our grasp; as a corollary, this view on/from the margins may also evidence some “blind spots” of mainstream Shakespeare criticism.

#### SASPER IN ITALY

“Sasper [sic] is the English Corneille”<sup>14</sup>—the eccentric, defamiliarizing view attested by the first critical appraisal of Shakespeare in Italian (1726) is the vantage point from which I address some lesser known episodes in the critical and theatrical history of plays such as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. The relationship between Shakespeare and Italy has produced a wealth of critical work. The main scholarly approach is summarized by Michael Redmond: “[D]espite all the claims about the death of traditional source criticism, the focus of most research about early modern English drama’s engagement with Italian culture is still the identification of more or less specific parallels with Cinquecento verse, prose narration, and theatre.”<sup>15</sup> More recently, Julia Lupton and Paul Kottman have suggested a more original agenda, suggesting that the nexus can be also studied “in relation to

<sup>13</sup> Giordano Bruno, *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, edited by Stanley L. Jaki (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), 69–70.

<sup>14</sup> Antonio Conti, *Il Cesare. Tragedia del Sig. Ab. Antonio Conti nobile veneto con alcune cose concernenti l’opera medesima* (Faenza: Gioseffantonio Archi, 1726), 54.

<sup>15</sup> Redmond, *Shakespeare, Politics, and Italy*, 1.