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Performing Europe's 'Others:' Towards a Postcolonial Reinterpretation of the Shakespearean Canon

Cet essai propose une réévaluation de l'eurocentrisme de Shakespeare à la lumière des théories postcoloniales de Homi K. Bhabha et de W. E. B. Du Bois. Une telle analyse de trois pièces problématiques de Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, Othello *et* The Tempest, *suggère que, loin de refléter parfaitement le racisme ambiant de l'époque élisabéthaine, ces textes se prêtent aisément à une relecture fidèle aux sensibilités postcoloniales de l'Europe du XXI^e^ siècle. Cet essai consacre une attention particulière aux concepts de 'double conscience' (Du Bois), d'hybridité culturelle, de l''entre-deux' culturel et des stratégies de mimique (Bhabha) qui caractérisent les personnages shakespeariens. Vues sous cet angle, ces œuvres évoquent un Shakespeare plus attentif que l'on ne pourrait le croire a priori aux mécanismes d'oppression auxquels les 'Autres' de l'Europe étaient confrontés. Dans* The Merchant of Venice, *Shylock succombe à son hybridité culturelle, à son incapacité, en tant qu'Autre' situé à l'intersection de deux cultures, à décoder correctement les rouages de la société vénitienne dont il est le jouet. Othello peut être considéré comme une victime tragique de l'entre-deux culturel qui le caractérise. Le meurtre de Desdémone dont il est l'auteur en vient alors à symboliser son refus d'accepter les défauts de la société vénitienne qu'il a vénérée au mépris de sa propre identité culturelle. De même, dans* The Tempest, *Prospero peut être interprété comme une incarnation métaphorique des contradictions inhérentes au projet colonialiste de son époque. Sous son joug, Caliban endure les affres de l'entre-deux culturel qui avaient déjà condamné Othello à une fin tragique. En conclusion, cet essai souligne la flexibilité du texte shakespearien qui offre des possibilités de lecture aussi multiples que les différentes époques dans lesquelles son théâtre continue à être admiré.*

Dieser Aufsatz schlägt eine Neubewertung von Shakespeares Eurozentrismus im Lichte der postkolonialen Theorien von Homi K. Bhabha und W. E. B. Du Bois vor. Eine Analyse dreier in dieser Hinsicht problematisch erscheinender Stücke Shakespeares, The Merchant of Venice, Othello *und* The Tempest, *zeigt, dass diese Texte durchaus nicht perfekt den Rassismus des elisabethanischen Zeitalters spiegeln, sondern auch einer Lesart unterzogen werden können, die der Sensibilität für postkoloniale Fragen im Europa des 21. Jahrhunderts entspricht. Der hier vorliegende Beitrag beschäftigt sich besonders mit den Konzepten der* double consciousness *(Du Bois), der kulturellen Hybridität und der Strategien des* in-between *und des* mimicry *(Bhabha), die die Figuren Shakespeares bestimmen. Dabei zeigt sich ein Shakespeare, der den Unterdrückungsmechanismen, denen die ‚Anderen' ausgesetzt sind, wesentlich mehr Aufmerksamkeit schenkt, als man zunächst*

vermuten würde. In The Merchant of Venice *wird Shylock Opfer seiner kulturellen Hybridität, seiner Unfähigkeit, als ‚Anderer' zwischen zwei Kulturen die Maschinerie der venezianischen Gesellschaft korrekt zu dekodieren, deren Spielball er wird. Othello kann als tragisches Opfer des kulturellen* in-between *bezeichnet werden, das ihn charakterisiert. Der Mord an Desdemona, den er begeht, symbolisiert letztlich seine Weigerung, die Schattenseiten der venezianischen Gesellschaft zu akzeptieren, welche er unter Missachtung seiner eigenen kulturellen Identität verehrte. Im gleichen Sinne kann Prospero in* The Tempest *als metaphorische Inkarnation der Widersprüche interpretiert werden, die das koloniale Projekt seiner Zeit bestimmen. Unter Prosperos Joch muss Caliban die Qualen des kulturellen* in-between *erdulden, die schon Othello zu einem tragischen Ende verurteilt hatten. Zusammenfassend kann man sagen, dass dieser Beitrag die Flexibilität des shakespeareschen Textes unterstreicht: Dieser ist so vielen verschiedenen Lesarten zugänglich, wie es Epochen gibt, in denen Shakespeares dramatisches Werk bewundert wurde und wird.*

Under various theatrical shapes, stage representations of Europe's 'Others' abound in the entire history of Western drama. These enactments are particularly problematic for the sensitivities of early twenty-first century readers and theatre-goers in three of Shakespeare's most canonical works. Using these three Shakespearean plays as case studies, this essay seeks to shed additional light on the vision of Europe's 'Others' displayed in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest*, at a time when Europe, and our globalized world at large, is becoming increasingly multi-ethnic.

In the late twentieth century, Shakespeare's body of plays came to be viewed as the incarnation of the hegemonic project of a Eurocentric humanism, i. e. as works which relied on an essentialist notion of humanism and encoded specifically European notions of eternal values such as love, hate, passion, honour etc… While for centuries Shakespeare's works had time and again been praised as the vehicles of these presumably universal values, in the second half of the twentieth century, with the advent of postmodernism and deconstruction, it became increasingly clear that these values, far from being universal, emanated from a distinctly European worldview, firmly anchored in a particular historical era. My aim in this essay is not to reject these deconstructivist reinterpretations, which I believe to have contributed to a healthy questioning of the European canon, but to recast them in the context of postcolonial studies and comparative literature methods of analysis. In doing so, I hope to offer a more differentiated understanding of Shakespeare's plays as a critique of European hegemony. My project is not to erase the reality of racism inherent in Shakespeare's plays in an over-sentimentalized recuperation of his humanism for liberal twenty-first century audiences. I acknowledge the fact that racism could not have the same connotation for Elizabethan theatregoers as for today's public and that Shakespeare probably shared his contemporaries' mixed feelings towards Europe's 'others.' However, I contend that a legitimate contemporary discussion of Shakespeare's

plays forces us to reconsider the presumed racial bias of the three problematic plays under scrutiny in this essay.

First, I would argue that the alleged negative attitude towards the non-European 'Other' embedded in Shakespeare's plays has often been misinterpreted, often by postcolonial writers themselves. The recent postcolonial critique of Shakespeare's universalism has perhaps too strongly underlined the bard's lack of respect towards the racialized or multi-ethnic 'Other.' As a result, Shakespeare's discourse has been perceived as reinforcing Europe's colonialist project. A superficial decoding of Shakespeare's portrayal of the Moor Othello as a naïve foreigner would seem to bear this out. In one of his plays, Caribbean playwright Derek Walcott even goes as far as presenting Shakespeare as a perpetrator of crimes against humanity.[1] However, I argue that many postcolonial rewritings of *The Tempest* have too easily conflated Shakespeare's own view of Caliban with Prospero's derogatory vision of him.[2] My question then is as follows: should we consider that Shakespeare's plays simply voice and reflect the racial prejudices so prevailing in his time? Even if we agree that Eurocentrism is a twentieth century concept whose underlying philosophy could only have been the predominant discourse of the Elizabethan age, I suggest that careful attention to Shakespeare's texts invites us to qualify this negative assessment of the bard's work. I propose to re-examine this issue in the light of recent postcolonial theories, which may appear anachronistic in the case of an Elizabethan playwright, but which help us balance our understanding of Shakespeare's positioning. Following in the footsteps of Shakespearean scholar Kiernan Ryan, I shall use contemporary literary theory to offer a new reading of the three above-mentioned Shakespearean plays.[3] Like Kiernan Ryan, I would argue that Shakespeare's text lends itself to multiple reinterpretations according to the prevailing philosophy of a particular age, even if Shakespeare himself may not have been aware of this. His dramatic texts have a life of their own, as it were – and that is perhaps an indication of great art, after all.

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1 Further discussion of these revisions of Shakespeare can be found in Loomba, Ania/Orkin, Martin (eds.): *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, London, New York: Routledge, 1998 (see in particular, pp. 1–19 & 143–163), as well as in Alexander, Catherine M. S./Wells, Stanley (eds.): *Shakespeare and Race*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000 (see in particular pp. 1–22, 23–36, 64–81, 124–138, & 165–176). My essay offers a similar approach to Shakespeare while emphasizing the European context. In addition, I privilege dramaturgical close-readings of scene sequences throughout the works considered.

2 For additional information on contemporary re-appropriations of this particular play, the reader may consult Zabus, Chantal: *Tempests After Shakespeare*, New York: Palgrave, 2002.

3 Unlike Kiernan Ryan's (*Shakespeare*, New York [etc.]: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), my analysis involves the use of postcolonial theory. Relevant passages in his book can be found on pp. 16–23, 83–89, & 147–157.

In this essay, along the lines of critics like Helen Gilbert[4], I shall use the term 'postcolonial' not only to designate the literatures in English that emerged in formerly colonized Commonwealth countries, but also to signify an attitude of resistance towards the former centre of the Empire, i. e. Europe. In this sense, the term 'postcolonial' can already be used when dealing with writers pre-dating the era of decolonization.

Postcolonial theory is particularly useful for a re-interpretation of Shakespeare's plays. Early examples of postcolonial theory can be found in the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, who articulated the concept of 'double-consciousness.' Du Bois used this notion to refer to the process that forced African Americans to conceive of their own identities as forged through the eyes of the predominant White society. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois asserted: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others […]."[5]

Especially critical in this discussion are Homi K. Bhabha's theories developed in *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha underlines the positive aspect of hybridity while erasing its racial connotations of impurity inherited from nineteenth century thinking. He rejects the notion of a clear-cut dichotomy between Europe and its colonies. His notions of hybridity or 'in-betweenness' suggest a flexible pattern of reciprocal cultural exchange between colonized and colonizer:

> Hybridity […] unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power.[6]

Bhabha's work thus implies a celebration of postcolonial hybridity. The critic coins the concept of 'in-betweenness,' often typical of the postcolonial condition: formerly colonized nations have inherited both European and local values. This blurring of boundaries can thus prove to be a source of new energy. Bhabha's definition of the notion of 'mimicry' is also of paramount importance. The colonized subject resorts to mimicry, an affect of hybridity,[7] to unsettle the artistic domination of Western hegemony. This use of mimicry is clearly subversive and creates an ambivalent, hybrid "Third Space."[8] It projects a desire for a

4 See Gilbert, Helen: *(Post)colonial Stages. Critical & Creative Views on Drama, Theatre & Performance*, Hebden Bridge: Dangaroo Press, 1999, p. 1.

5 Du Bois, W. E. B.: The Souls of Black Folk, in: *Writings*, New York: The Library of America, 1986, p. 357–454, p. 364.

6 Bhabha, Homi K.: *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 112.

7 See Bhabha: *The Location of Culture*, p. 120.

8 Bhabha: *The Location of Culture*, p. 36.

> reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. […] the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; […] mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry […] poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers.[9]

Thus, Bhabha envisions mimicry as a double process of the colonized's wish to resemble the colonizer and the latter's desire to make sure that the colonized subject faithfully imitates the predominant culture. Thus, mimicry may be a technique of subversion based on a feigned imitation that may reveal the colonized subject's unavowed thirst for emancipation. Beneath a varnish of servile imitation, then, the colonized subject manages to reaffirm subtle signs of his/her cultural memory. Moreover, these concepts display similiarities to Stuart Hall's notion of identity as a perpetual process of change:

> Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact […] we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.[10]

Du Bois's, Bhabha's, and Hall's concepts are frequently used in postcolonial studies, even retrospectively, i. e. in contexts foreign to the postcolonial era. In this essay, I shall try to show how, with the aid of these theories, some of Shakespeare's works foreshadow issues of hybridity and multiculturalism so typical of today's globalized world, especially in the context of European culture.

The Merchant of Venice

The Merchant of Venice, a comedy revolving around love relationships, was probably produced for the first time in the 1596–97 theatrical season. It can be described as a tragi-comedy, in which the negative portrayal of Shylock, the Jewish usurer, has often led critics to underline Shakespeare's anti-semitic attitude. However, since the 1980s, critics have moved towards a reappraisal of this hasty condemnation of the play, employing to that effect postcolonial theory.[11] Their studies have often led to the radical view of the Jew as a vic-

9 Bhabha: *The Location of Culture*, p. 86.

10 Hall, Stuart: Cultural Identity and Diaspora, in: Williams, Patrick/Chrisman, Laura (eds.): *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, New York, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 392–403, here p. 392.

11 I am of course aware that notions of 'race' and 'racism' in Shakespeare's time differed from our own. Race could then be used to refer to social, cultural, and religious differences, as Ania Loomba brilliantly demonstrates in her essay 'Delicious Traffick:' Racial and Religious Difference on Early Modern Stages, in: Alexander/Wells (eds.): *Shakespeare and Race*, p. 203–224 (see in particular pp. 207–208 and 221). While not denying the importance of this historical distinction, my focus nonetheless lies on the wider concept of 'Otherness.'

tim. In a more nuanced way, I would suggest that this haunting comedy offers an ambivalent view of both Shylock and Venice. *The Merchant of Venice* undoubtedly deals with the issue of money, and the Italian Republic can be considered a historical ancestor of more recent capitalist and colonialist empires. From this point of view, Venice echoes Elizabethan society, which can be regarded as constituting the embryo of the economic and political hegemony of the British Empire. Viewed from this perspective, one can decode The *Merchant of Venice* not as a complete condemnation of Shylock but as a searing analysis of the hegemonic, colonial-like predicament in which he finds himself, forced to live in Venice's ghetto, constantly rejected as a non-Christian 'Other.' Shylock's plight illustrates the impasse in which the despised 'Other' finds himself in an oppressing society. Granted, Shylock's cruel behaviour is undeniable: he does not hesitate to ruthlessly claim his "pound of flesh" from Antonio, the Venetian merchant. This undoubtedly points to his lust for revenge, which presents him in an unfavourable light. However, as he himself claims at the outset of the play, his vengeful spirit is only provoked by the hegemonic oppression of Venice, which leaves him no choice. The irony resides in the fact that Antonio, plagued by financial difficulties, has to ask for Shylock's assistance, although he hates the Jew for precisely being an 'Other:'

> SHYLOCK: […] Shall I bend low, and in a bondman's key,
> With bated breath and whisp'ring humbleness,
> Say this:
> 'Fair Sir, you spat on me on Wednesday last,
> You spurned me such a day, another time
> You called me dog: and for these courtesies
> I'll lend you thus much monies.'[12]

Shylock's arrogance reveals an attitude of defiance comparable to that of a (post)colonial subject trying to resist the colonizer's hegemony. Venice, like any colonizing power, cannot survive without the economic support of the colonized.[13]

12 Shakespeare, William: *The New Cambridge Shakespeare. The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by M. M. Mahood, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003, I.3.115.

13 This interpretation, which re-casts Christians as oppressors, clearly informed the recent film drawn from the play, starring Al Pacino and Jeremy Irons. In this film, the Jew appeared as a human being suffering from being oppressed: he was, after all, betrayed by his servants and even by his daughter, who abandoned him to get married with Lorenzo, a Christian. Moreover, this recent film underlined the bitterness of Shakespeare's comedy, as its last images focused on a melancholy Jessica. The 2007 Globe Theatre production of the play in London, on the contrary, came short of presenting the Jew as a victim but nevertheless highlighted the cruelty of Venetian society.

Shakespeare's well-known dramatization of Shylock's humanity deserves our attention in this context. How can one reconcile this speech with the shocking vision of a Jew claiming the life of Sebastian? Shakespeare clearly thrives on contradictions, which need to be taken into account and held in balance in our memory of the play, if this work is to be properly assessed:

SALARINO: Why, I am sure if he forfeit thou wilt not take his flesh. What's that good for?

SHYLOCK: To bait fish withal; if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies – and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.[14]

Indirectly, Shylock affirms that his ruthless behaviour but constitutes a reflection of Venice's own rigidity, a notion calling to mind W. E. B. Du Bois's double-consciousness and Bhabha's subversive mimicry. As in Bhabha's theories, Shylock resembles the Christian subject only to better threaten him. Such a passage invites us to qualify the accusations of anti-semitism that are often attached to *The Merchant of Venice*. If the Jew is not perfect, nor is the Christian. Thus, Shakespeare underlines the constraints and complexities of a hegemonic society comparable in many ways to our modern European Empires.

In the tribunal scene, Portia, disguised as young male judge named Balthazar, defeats Shylock. She declares that he may obtain his pound of flesh only on the condition that not a drop of Christian blood be shed. This strikingly reaffirms the powerlessness of the colonized subject in front of hegemony. Venice reasserts its domination while Shylock is divested of all his wealth, a severe punishment indeed. This final negative image of Shylock should be held in balance with Shakespeare's earlier affirmation of his humanity. Considering Portia's condemnation as a proof of the playwright's racist stance originates in the hasty conflation of Shakespeare's voice with his heroine's. Rather, the play emphasizes the profound similarity between

14 Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice*, III.1.42.

European hegemony and its 'Other.' Injustice is perpetuated both by Shylock and Venice.

Moreover, if *The Merchant of Venice* has often been attacked for its stereotypical presentation of the Jew, one should not forget that this play's comic effects almost entirely rely on caricature. The famous caskets scene, in which Portia puts her would-be lovers to the test, ridicules the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Aragon, who are characterized by heavy accents and excessive naivety. Only Bassiano manages to pass the test, by opening the casket containing Portia's image. Frenchmen are also stereotyped as people with whom any kind of reasoning is impossible. This reliance on stereotypes should be taken into account when assessing the play's presentation of Shylock.

Finally, Portia herself takes pleasure in showing how Bassiano's serments of faithfulness are unreliable, an unethical conduct reminiscent of the Jew's. Indeed, the play contains a number of homo-erotic connotations: Bassanio confesses his friendship for Antonio in terms almost befitting heterosexual love. Portia's metatheatrical disguise as a male judge further underlines Shakespeare's transgression of sexual differences. Bassiano, in his happiness to see Antonio saved by the judge, does not hesitate to offer the ring sealing his eternal union to the real Portia as a gift to Balthazar. Quite clearly, then, in *The Merchant of Venice*, all human relations are depicted as unstable and Shakespeare does not hesitate to point to the conflict between good and evil characterizing the human heart, regardless of ethnic distinctions. Shakespeare's *Othello* offers yet another prefiguration of our modern vision of intercultural relationships in a European context.

Othello

Probably written in the years 1602–04, *Othello*, the tragedy of a Moor deprived from his cultural roots in the Republic of Venice, concentrates on issues of racial hybridity curiously calling to mind Homi Bhabha's theories. Although it would be difficult to determine the specific ethnicity of the Moor, various textual allusions privilege the thesis of a man of black colour, thus contrasting with the whiteness of his Venetian wife, the pure Desdemona.[15] The fear of racial hybridity, concretized in this play through miscegenation, resonates throughout the work. It reveals the underlying wish

15 Ania Loomba suggests that Othello could have been perceived by Elizabethans as either a Turkish Muslim or a black Moor having inherited a mixed Arabic and Berber heritage. Colour consciousness may not have been decoded as more dangerous than religious difference in Elizabethan times, she argues. Viewed from this perspective, Othello's difference is located in his fragile conversion to Christianity rather than in his actual colour (Loomba: 'Delicious Traffick,' p. 205–212).

of a European, Caucasian society to preserve its hegemony. Moreover, Othello's professional success is resented by Iago, who felt he deserved to be promoted. Iago's feelings of hatred are also characterized by racial prejudice against the Moor, whom he often describes, like other Venetians, as inferior to White people, as the embodiment of evil. Ironically, while Venetians regard the black race as unworthy of mingling with the White one, the Republic also needs Othello in order to affirm its imperial power against the Ottomans. This situation places Othello in a kind of cultural discomfort similar to Homi Bhabha's notions of hybridity and 'in-betweenness.' Using postcolonial theory, it is possible to interpret Othello as a victim of what W. E. B. Du Bois terms 'double-consciousness.' Deprived from his cultural roots, Othello remains an 'Other' in Venice, despite his high professional status and his marriage to a White princess. His psychological frailty reveals itself in his obsessive fear of losing Desdemona, his fear of not proving good enough to deserve the admiration of Venetian society, which fascinates him. This can be viewed as a fear of not being able to perfectly imitate the hegemonic model, which may even lead to self-disgust. This frailty makes Othello quite vulnerable to Iago's scheming devices. Indeed, Iago weaves a metaphorical web of revenge around Othello, which leads the latter to perpetrate murder out of jealousy. Othello allows himself to believe in Desdemona's unfaithfulness. Some contemporary critics have offered innovative interpretations of Iago's hatred towards Othello. Here follows a summary of some of these speculations. At the outset, Iago mentions that he hates the Moor: allegedly, Othello has had sex with Iago's wife, which Emilia denies towards the end of the play. Iago's hatred thus becomes endowed with racial connotations: "I hate the moor,/ And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets/ He's done my office."[16] "I do suspect that the lusty Moor/ Hath leaped into my seat […]."[17] It is possible, then, to detect more than a symbol of pure evil in Iago. As Iago tries to make Othello jealous while ironically guarding him against jealousy, one could wonder whether Iago himself does not suffer from a deap-seated form of jealousy. This would explain his first-hand knowledge of this passion: "O beware, my lord, of jealousy:/ It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock/ The meat it feeds on."[18] One may regard Iago as a director who engineers, in the metatheatrical vein so dear to Shakespeare, the fall of the Moor. Indeed, Iago goes as far as to allow Othello to witness a contrived conversation between Cassio and Bianca, staged by him. The fact that Cassio is in possession of Desdemona's handkerchief seems to incriminate him – a sign that Othello is no longer able to distinguish between illusion and reality. Iago's final refusal to justify his evil actions presents him as an enigmatic char-

16 Shakespeare, William: *The New Cambridge Shakespeare. Othello*, ed. by Norman Sanders, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003, I.3.368–9.

17 Shakespeare: *Othello*, II.1.276.

18 Shakespeare: *Othello*, III.3.167–169.

acter who has thrived on Othello's cultural malaise. Some critics even venture the possibility of a homoerotic link between Iago and Othello, a contention based on Iago's general disdain of women. One can at least suspect that Iago would wish to possess Desdemona rather than seeing her embrace Othello. Thus, it is possible to construe *Othello* as a tragedy based on the painful consequences of cultural hybridity.

In contrast to these theories, I would suggest that Othello is not the naïve character he seems to be, someone who can be, as Iago suggests, "led by the nose as asses are." On the contrary, this Moor of royal blood expresses himself in a language perhaps rougher than that of Venetian courtiers, but nevertheless possessing great poetry. Othello himself states: "Rude am I in my speech/ And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace, […] / I will a round unvarnished tale deliver/ Of my whole course of love: what drugs, what charms/ What conjuration and what mighty magic […]/ I won his daughter."[19] Actually, Othello has conquered Desdemona through a recitation of his heroic accomplishments. This clearly implies that literature, the act of story-telling, can prove as powerful as witchcraft itself – a dubious skill seen by the Venetians as Othello's means of seducing Desdemona. This suspicion of witchcaft further alienates Othello as Venice's irrational 'Other,' thus suggesting a relationship comparable to that which opposed Imperial Europe to its colonized others. Further, in a transgression of gender roles typical of Shakespeare, Desdemona feels seduced by those tales to the point of wishing to be a man herself: "[…] she wished/ That heaven had made her such a man."[20] The rough magic of Othello's speech finds a strikingly poetic expression in two major scenes. First, when he is reunited with Desdemona in Cyprus: "[…] if it were now to die,/ 'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear/ My soul hath her content so absolute/ That not another comfort like to this/ Succeeds in unknown fate."[21] These lines testify to a profound idealisation of Desdemona, which reveals Othello's fascination with Whiteness and the cultural values of Venice. Furthermore, Othello's lyricism reaches a moving climax as he prepares to kill Desdemona:

OTHELLO: It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul:
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars.
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow
And smooth as monumental alabaster –
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
Put out the light , and then put out the light:

19 Shakespeare: *Othello*, I.3.90–94.
20 Shakespeare: *Othello*, I.3.162.
21 Shakespeare: *Othello*, II.1.181–85.

> If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
> I can again thy former light restore
> Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,
> Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
> I know not where Is that Promethean heat
> That can thy light relume […].[22]

The 'cause' is thus rooted in Desdemona's fascinating Whiteness. In postcolonial terms of interpretation, Othello feels obliged to destroy Desdemona as she no longer corresponds to his ideal of the purity of White culture as he has construed it. Accordingly, Othello, burdened with his double consciousness, feels threatened in his cultural certainties through Desdemona's supposed unfaithfulness and can only find a solution to this dilemma through murder. After realizing his tragic mistake, he commits suicide while reaffirming his cultural malaise, his 'in-betweenness,' his inability to correctly decode Venetian society, as the source of his death:

> OTHELLO: I have done the state some service and they know't:
> No more of that. I pray you, in letters
> When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
> Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
> Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
> Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
> Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
> Perplexed in the extreme […].[23]

In this last speech, Othello appears to us not simply as a naïve human being easily contaminated by irrational jealousy but as a tragic hero endowed with dignity, betrayed by a Venetian society he has admired and served. Metaphorically spoken, we as spectators or readers are called upon to pass a fair judgement on Othello. We should depict him as a human being caught between contradictions, torn apart between kindness and cruelty, trapped in the woes of cultural hybridity. This malaise is reinforced by his adherence to Christianity and its notion of paradise: he wishes Desdemona to confess before he kills her. Hence his being "perplexed in the extreme," which reveals his inability to negotiate the contradictions inherent in the two cultural poles of his in-betweenness.

Before concluding, I would wish to return to the motif of the handkerchief, closely linked to the notion of witchcraft, associated by Venetians with Othello's 'Otherness.' While offering a false proof of Desdemona's unfaithfulness, the handkerchief is perceived by Othello as a crucial sign of his cultural identity and 'Otherness:'

22 Shakespeare: *Othello*, V.2.1–15.

23 Shakespeare: *Othello*, V.2.335–342.

OTHELLO: That handkerchief
Did an Egyptian to my mother give:
She was a charmer and could almost read
The thoughts of people […]/ […].
To lose't or give't away were such perdition
As nothing else could match […]/ […].
There's magic in the web of it:
A sibyl, that had numbered in the world
The sun to course two hundred compasses,
In her prophetic fury sewed the work;
The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,
And it was dyed in mummy, which the skilful
Conserved of maidens' hearts.[24]

Othello thus clearly associates the handkerchief with his mother, the origin of his cultural identity. In this speech, one can detect a sign of the cultural defiance of an 'Other' who tries to subvert the power of hegemony through mimicry, a pretence of being like other Venetians. Ironically, it is precisely this handkerchief, the symbol of his identity, which causes the death of Othello. As was the case with Shylock, the 'Other' cannot escape the control and the retribution of hegemony. Othello indeed feels deeply hurt when he allows himself to believe that Cassio gave his handkerchief to a whore, which the black general decodes as a profanation of his identity by hegemonic powers.

The pattern of contradictions typifying the male characters of this play is mirrored in Shakespeare's portrayals of his female heroines, who are at the mercy of their husbands. Towards the end of the play, Othello hates his wife to the point of hitting her. Moreover, the relationship between Iago and his wife seems far from harmonious. Further, in a scene between Emilia and Desdemona preceding the tragic murder, the two women experience a moment of intimate closeness. They freely talk about the cruelty of men, a scene in which some critics have detected Shakespeare's pre-feminist tendencies. Clearly, Othello is not the only one to suffer from the oppression of Venice's patriarchal order. In a way, Desdemona resembles him. In conclusion, *Othello* is based on a series of tensions impossible to resolve, like *The Merchant of Venice*. *Othello* nonetheless differs from *The Merchant of Venice* through its added emphasis on the metatheatrical theme of Iago's labyrinthine revenge. Iago's technique relies on the opacity of language, which contributes to the construction of this labyrinth and precludes any escape from it. The cultural themes manifest in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* reach a climax in *The Tempest*.

24 Shakespeare: *Othello*, III.4.51–71.

The Tempest

Premiered on November 1, 1611, *The Tempest* is often regarded as the summit of Shakespearian drama, being the bard's last play. In the romantic era, a parallel was established between Shakespeare and Prospero, who renounces his craft at the end of the play. *The Tempest* is undoubtedly the Shakespearean play that has elicited the highest number of hostile post-colonial rewritings. The revisions have indicted the bard's alleged allegiance with Prospero's hegemonic behaviour towards Caliban – a foreshadowing of the colonialist enterprise. My reading, informed by postcolonial theory, does not suggest such a negative interpretation. My analysis shows how Prospero can be seen to embody the contradictions inherent in the humanist project of European Renaissance. Although Prospero can be construed as the incarnation of the philosophical and humanist leader, bent on reconciliation, his kindness is nonetheless undermined by his tyrannical attitude towards Ariel and especially towards Caliban.[25] While Prospero projects the image of a benevolent leader, preferring his white magic to political intrigue, he also typifies the dangers inherent in endistancing oneself from the office of government. This can indeed result in the very opposite of Prospero's humanist aspirations.

Being both a comedy and a potential tragedy, *The Tempest* has been classified by the romantics as a romance, i. e. a play containing a number of fabulous events, often taking place in a world separated from everyday reality. Numerous theories have been suggested about the exact location of Prospero's island, the place of exile where he seeks refuge after being dispossessed from the Dukedom of Milan by his usurping brother. The Bermudas are a possibility, although the text seems to refer to a Mediterranean location.[26] Caliban's character has prompted an interpretation focused on First Nations people, especially as the European settlement of North America began in this era.[27] Although Prospero is hardly a colonialist in the strictest sense, being only forced to flee to this island, his characterization displays contradictions inherent in the nature of hegemony, foreshadowing the European colonialist enterprise. In our globalized era, Shakespeare's play resonates with (post)colonial allusions, which testifies to the flexibility of his dramaturgy.[28]

25 While my analysis of *The Tempest* comes to a conclusion similar to Kiernan Ryan's, my reading nevertheless privileges unresolved tensions between and within the different characters of the play, relying on a precise dramaturgical exploration of the economy inherent in the sequence of scenes in the work. Moreover, while Ryan resorts to deconstruction theories, my approach is distinctly rooted in a postcolonial framework.

26 Brotton, Jerry: 'This Tunis, sir, was Carthage:' Contesting Colonialisms in *The Tempest*, in: Loomba/Martin (eds.): *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, p. 23–42, p. 32.

27 Background information about *The Tempest* is derived from David Lindley's introduction to the play in the New Cambridge Edition (p. 30–45).

28 Jerry Brotton argued that the colonial significance of *The Tempest* should not be overemphasized, preferring to view it as a chronicle of "the belatedness of English forays in

At the outset, Prospero is presented as an intellectual, a magus lacking interest in power and consequently dethroned by his brother: "[…] Prospero the prime duke, being so reputed/ In dignity, and for the liberal arts/ Without a parallel; those being all my study,/ The government I cast upon my brother,/ And to my state grew stranger, being transported/ And rapt in secret studies […]."[29] Prospero defines himself as an erudite: "Me, poor man, my library/ Was dukedom large enough […]."[30] Moreover, he incarnates tolerance, benevolence and regeneration: he pardons all his enemies at the outcome of the play. Paradoxically, this reconciliation is brought about by the violent act of the shipwreck and the imprisonment of his enemies on a strange island. Thanks to magic, none of the passengers on the ship are drowned, not even wet. The ship is finally found in good shape, safely anchored in another part of the island. But Antonio, the King of Naples, and his son Ferdinand are for a while at the mercy of Prospero.

The dramatization of a humane Prospero, as his name even suggests, contrasts sharply with his authoritarian character. First, he punishes Ferdinand to test his love for Miranda, a relationship that, paradoxically, he himself has engineered. Like Iago, Prospero is a superb director. He devises a Jacobean masque in the middle of the play, staging Iris and Ceres, to celebrate the symbolic harvest of the union between Ferdinand and Miranda. His final consent to Miranda's wedding contradicts his earlier attitude of disapproval.

Prospero's tyrannical behaviour towards his two main servants is equally interesting. Ariel, the spirit of the air, and Caliban, the native and misshapen son of the witch Sycorax, both engage in a special relationship with their master. When Ariel refuses to obey Prospero, the latter reminds him that he freed Ariel from Sycorax's curse. Should Ariel further rebel, Prospero threatens to be as ruthless as the witch. However, Prospero promises him total freedom if he actively participates in his 'play within the play' aimed at facilitating the final reconciliation. A touch of homo-eroticism even characterizes Prospero's relationship to the androgynous Ariel. The latter, like a servile colonial subject, hopes to be loved by his master: "Do you love me master, no?"

As to the relationship between Caliban and Prospero, some of its features clearly prefigure the dichotomy between colonized/colonizer. Feeling victimized by Prospero, Caliban claims that the magus has stolen his island,

the Mediterranean" (Brotton: 'This Tunis, sir, was Carthage,' p. 37). However, I contend that, beyond historical accuracy, engaging the play with our contemporary postcolonial sensitivities may offer a fruitful new way of understanding this play.

29 Shakespeare, William: *The New Cambridge Shakespeare. The Tempest*, ed. by David Lindley, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002, I. 2.72.

30 Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, I. 2.109.

inherited from his mother, a fact which to our postcolonial sensitivities cannot fail to call to mind the process of colonial dispossession:

> CALIBAN: This island's mine by Sycorax my mother,
> Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first
> Thou strok'st me and made much of me; wouldst give me
> Water with berries in't, and teach me how
> To name the bigger light, and how the less,
> That burn by day and night. And then I loved thee
> And showed thee all the qualities o'the'isle […]/ […].
> For I am all the subjects that you have,
> Which first was mine own king; and here you sty me
> In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
> The rest o'th'island.[31]

In this passage, Caliban evokes the gradual process of historical colonization, while expressing his anger at being oppressed – the more so as a collaboration first existed between Caliban and Prospero. Retrospectively, once can detect in this speech an echo of the mechanisms of the European colonization of North America. Prospero replies that he wanted to prevent Caliban from raping his daughter Miranda, thus revealing his hegemonic fear of the racial hybridity celebrated by Homi Bhabha: "[…] Thou didst seek to violate/ The honour of my child."[32] Miranda does not hesitate to call Caliban an "Abhorrèd slave" when the latter confesses the ultimate goal of his attempted rape: "Would't had been done./ Thou didst prevent me – I had peopled else/ This isle with Calibans."[33] Caliban thus foreshadows the cultural malaise of the 'in-betweenness' of the colonial condition. Miranda agrees with her father's rejection of Caliban, citing the latter's ingratitude after she tried to teach him the rudiments of a Western language. In terms of postcolonial theory, Miranda's erasure of Caliban's own culture calls to mind the cultural genocide typical of the colonial enterprise. This allusion also alludes to Caliban's hybridity, who as an oppressed subject is familiar with some features of the dominating society but who fails to completely integrate or perfectly imitate them, like Othello. Moreover, like Othello, Caliban is fascinated with Miranda's whiteness: "And that most deeply to consider, is/ The beauty of his daughter. He himself/ Calls her a nonpareil."[34] Caliban's naivety leads him to be fooled by Trinculo and Stephano, two lower-class Neapolitans who escaped from the shipwreck and behave like drunkards. They force Caliban to drink, hoping to make a profitable public show of him

31 Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, I.2.332.
32 Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, I.2.362.
33 Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, I.2.349.
34 Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, III.2.89.

in Europe, another similarity with the mechanism of hegemonic exploitation. Ironically, Caliban thinks they are true kings and promises them eternal faithfulness if they help him to retrieve his freedom from Prospero. He encourages them to kill the magus. This episode underlines the fact that Caliban cannot evade his 'Otherness,' unable as he is to correctly understand the social fabric of Europe. His attempts to escape hegemony miserably fail, as was the case with Othello. And yet, Caliban utters one of the most poetic speeches which is typical of the island:

CALIBAN: […] the isle is full of noises,
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That if then I had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again.[35]

This speech is striking through its lyricism and its tragic intensity, as Caliban suffers deeply from being a servant. He echoes the tragic grandeur of Othello, albeit to a lesser extent.

If Prospero can symbolize the tyranny of any hegemonic power, the dignity with which he is endowed in Act V transforms him into a quasi-stoic character, when he forgives all his enemies and decides to abandon his magic powers at the approach of death. Thus, Shakespeare manages to make us forget the darker sides of Prospero's personality:

PROSPERO: Our revels now are ended; these our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.[36]

Relying on the metatheatrical metaphor so dear to Shakespeare, this speech echoes the philosophical meditations of Hamlet and Macbeth. Prospero asserts the difficulty of distinguishing between illusion and reality – and by

35 Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, III.2.127.
36 Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, IV.1.148.

extension of distinguishing between Prospero the magus and Prospero the tyrant. Prospero expresses his desire for further regeneration: "But this rough magic/ I here abjure […] I'll break my staff,/ Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,/ And deeper than did ever plummet sound/ I'll drown my book."[37] He stoically accepts the idea of his oncoming death: "And thence retire me to my Milan, where/ Every third thought shall be my grave."[38] Nonetheless, this positive image of Prospero should not blind us to his ambiguous attitude towards Caliban. After unveiling the plot against his life devised by Caliban, Trinculo and Stephano, Prospero decides not to punish his servant/slave excessively. However, his pardon is far from being unconditional: he orders him to continue to provide good service in the hope of possible freedom. Caliban implores his master, crushed by the difficulty of escaping the oppression of European hegemony, which recalls Shylock's predicament. If Prospero does not totally abandon his tyrannical behaviour, then, one of his lines referring to Caliban suggests that he is aware of the oppression he has himself contributed to create: "This thing of darkness, I/ Acknowledge mine."[39] Thus, until the very end, Shakespeare manages to provide an oscillating dramatization of the tensions and contradictions inherent in European culture and humanism. The play concludes on Prospero's own lack of freedom, in an image that asserts his link with the oppressed Caliban. Indeed, Prospero turns towards the audience, pleading for his own release through strong applause.

As a summary, I hope to have shown, through the filter of a postcolonial reading, the complexity of Shakespeare's dramatization of the relationships between hegemony and oppressed people. From this angle of vision, his plays can be regarded as a latent critique of the oppressive mechanisms of European supremacy. His theatre to some extent prefigures the postcolonial concerns of our age. Thus, any interpretation of Shakespeare's plays as a celebration of Eurocentrism needs qualification. Far from unequivocally embracing the values of Europe as being universal, Shakespeare's works analyze the old continent's underlying hegemonic structures while interrogating simple racist binaries. These structurally complex and ambivalent enactments of cultural difference provide his plays with a power that continues to haunt the imagination of spectators, actors, and directors worldwide at the dawn of this new millennium.

37 Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, V.1.50.
38 Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, V.1.308.
39 Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, V.1.273.

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