

A Note for Future Queries on Shakespeare's Sonnet 116: is it a Condensed Explanatory résumé of Othello's Mistakes?

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Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 –“*Let me not to the marriage of true minds*”– has always been read as an attempt a) to define love's constancy in a world of change, b) to describe an unaltered and unalterable ideal of true love, or even c) to set up a rhetorical rebuttal of the very concept of everlasting love. Be as it may, a given reading is always debatable, incomplete and equally defensible if well exposed. In my case, every time I read this sonnet I have always remembered, perhaps unconsciously, Othello, the *persona*, and the mistakes he commits all along the play. I think Sonnet 116 is setting out something like an abridged “grammar” of Othello's mistakes by describing what he believes in at the beginning and betrays as the plot unfolds. If Othello had followed the maxims given by Sonnet 116 as a sort of guide for true lovers, he would have changed his tragic final fate, a direct result of their breaking. It is my aim in this note to determine how those maxims found in Sonnet 116 work and how the main character in *Othello* keeps on breaking them to reach thus to the fatal ending. This is another interpretation we could add to the previous list of readings of Sonnet 116.

Tradicionalmente, el soneto shakespeariano 116 –“*Let me not to the marriage of true minds*”– se ha interpretado como un intento de a) definir lo constante del amor en un mundo en cambio, b) describir el ideal de amor verdadero inalterado e inalterable, o c) establecer una refutación retórica del mismo concepto de amor eterno y verdadero. Sea como fuere, todas las lecturas son casi siempre debatibles, incompletas e igualmente válidas y justificables si se exponen y fundamentan de un modo adecuado. En mi caso, siempre que releo el presente soneto 116 me viene a la mente, casi de un modo inconsciente, la

imagen de Otelo, la *persona*, y los errores que comete a lo largo de la obra. Los contenidos del soneto 116 podrían establecer algo así como una “gramática” condensada de los errores que comete Otelo, pues en dicho soneto quizás podamos leer la descripción de aquello en lo que Otelo cree al principio de la obra y que acaba finalmente transgrediendo a lo largo de la trama. Si Otelo hubiera seguido las máximas expuestas por el soneto 116 a modo de guía para los creyentes en el “amor verdadero”, quizás hubiera sido capaz de cambiar su trágico destino, resultado directo del quebrantamiento de dichas máximas. Mi intención en la presente nota es lanzar algunas ideas para determinar cómo el personaje principal de *Othello* quebranta los principios de “amor verdadero” expuestos en el soneto 116 para alcanzar así su dramático final. Esta nota pretende ofrecer algunas ideas para establecer una nueva conexión o interpretación del soneto shakesperiano que podamos añadir a las lecturas ya existentes. Shakespeare escribió *Othello* entre 1602 y 1604. Si tenemos en cuenta que, aunque publicados en 1609, Shakespeare compuso los sonetos en diferentes momentos a lo largo de su vida, quizás se pudiera pensar que el soneto 116 se escribió cuando *Othello* y su argumento ya rondaban la mente del poeta. O quizás sea al revés: el soneto pudo ser escrito cuando Shakespeare ya estaba escribiendo la obra dramática, haciendo de él un resumen explicativo de los errores básicos cometidos por Otelo.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Sonnet 116, *Othello*, Renaissance English Poetry.

Palabras Clave: Shakespeare, Soneto 116, *Othello*, poesía renacentista inglesa.

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS: SONNET 116 AND ITS MAXIMS

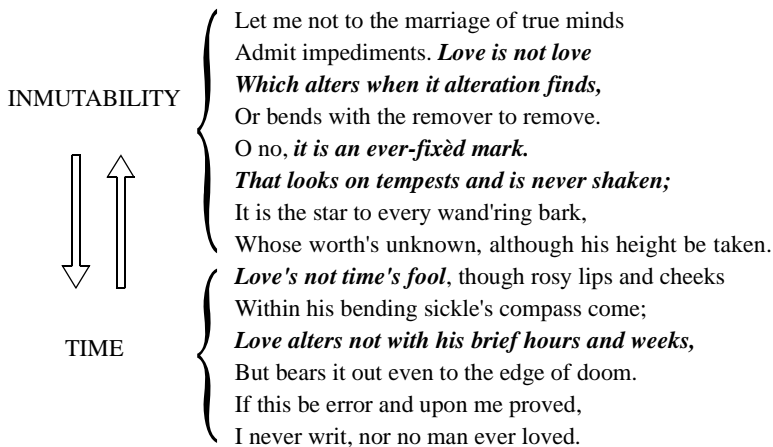
Quite often in Literary Criticism certain connections tend to be established between the different works a given author writes. This being a very common way of making critical analysis of certain regard, if the

author you deal with approaches his literary creative task from different generic/stylistic angles, the very fact of connecting those angles could lead us to interesting worth-mentioning findings. In the case of William Shakespeare these connections are usually made in his dramatic work. However, we could find interesting analogies when reading a sonnet whose content instantly drive our thoughts to a particular feature of a given play. Such is the case of Sonnet 116 and its probable connection with *Othello*.

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no, it is an ever-fixèd mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
 If this be error and upon me proved,
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

This sonnet has always been read as an attempt a) to define love's constancy in a world of change (Duncan-Jones 1997), b) to describe an unaltered and unalterable ideal of true love (Duncan-Jones 1997), or even c) to set up a rhetorical rebuttal of the very concept of everlasting love (Vendler 1999). Be that as it may, a given reading is always debatable, incomplete and equally defensible if well exposed. My interpretation of the text would be included among the first ones, a) and b): in a world of change the ideal of true love is constant and unalterable when confronted with ourselves and with the passing of time. However, as a supplement to this interpretation, every time I read this sonnet something always comes into my mind, perhaps unconsciously: the image of Othello, the *persona*, and the mistakes he makes throughout the play. I think we may read Sonnet 116 as a poem that could be setting out something like an abridged "grammar" of Othello's mistakes by describing what he believes

at the beginning and betrays as the plot unfolds. Although the content of the poem as a whole complies with the concept of love Othello holds at the beginning of the play, we could point out four maxims –shown in bold type– that conform the basic mistakes made by Othello throughout the play:



If Othello had followed these maxims given by Sonnet 116 as a sort of guide for true lovers, he would have changed his tragic fate, a direct result of their disregarding. These four maxims could be summarized in two closely connected parameters that describe and characterize the conception of love defended by the poem: immutability –first two quatrains– and time –third quatrain–. These two ideas offer a synthesis of the contents of the sonnet and present two unbreakable rules for true lovers. It is my aim in the following pages to determine how the main character in *Othello* keeps on breaking those maxims found in Sonnet 116 to reach thus the fatal ending.

2. “LOVE IS NOT LOVE...” & “IT IS AN EVER-FIXED MARK...”: OTHELLO AND THE IMMUTABILITY OF LOVE.

The immutable condition of true love is the first maxim that appears on the sonnet. Shakespeare defends his line of argument in the first two quatrains by establishing that one of the basic features of true

love –and true lovers– lies in the immutability of its condition when facing the unexpected. Shakespeare elaborates his claim by opposing concepts. He begins by describing love in the first quatrain by what it is not –i.e., alteration–, and then continues by defining in the second quatrain what love is –i.e., immutability– with a very suitable navigational metaphor that designates love both as a signal unaltered when problems arise and as a guide setting the pace of every true love relationship between two true minds.³ The frequent use of the adjective “true” to qualify the mind, the relationship and the very idea of love itself, has drawn my attention to the medieval courtly-love concept of *treupe*, an idea connected with the integrity, honesty and faithfulness of the medieval knight before himself, his king and the lady he loves. In my opinion, in these two quatrains we could perceive undertones of this idealized concept of medieval love that mixes fidelity, honesty, loyalty and immutability. This idea, already present in medieval romances, was captured and incorporated to the Petrarchan love ideal in the Renaissance. This classical love imagery of the Petrarchan tradition formed part of the Renaissance literary stock, appearing in a wide number of Shakespeare’s works –especially in the *Sonnets*, although with a certain degree of adaptation and evolution (Bueno 1997) – and by all means in the sonnet we are dealing with. In short, the sonnet establishes that true love feelings have to remain unaltered and immutable when facing any unforeseen situation, no matter how serious it could be.

Let us now focus on *Othello*. Is Othello’s love for Desdemona something immutable that “looks on tempests and is never shaken”? It is not, but it began like that. From the very first moment their mutual attraction was more based on spiritual matters than on physical aspects, though the physical level formed part of their attraction in a later stage. This initial mutual spirituality is found already in act one, not only in Othello’s explanatory speech before the Duke, Brabantio and the Senators –“She loved me for the dangers I had passed/And I love her, that she did pity them”(1.3.168-169)– but also by Desdemona in the same scene of act one –“I saw Othello’s visage in his mind/And to his honours and his valiant parts/Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate”(1.3.253-255)–. Their relationship begins with a concept of love based on instinct, on the features you intuitively perceive in your lover, on the qualities your lover presents to you when he builds his “lover self”, when he –as Stephen Greenblatt (1980: 238) appropriately stated– self-fashions his narrative for Desdemona.

It seems, thus, that Othello initially believes in the immutability of true love. However, doubts are set from the start by Brabantio (1.3.293-294) and his clear caveat for Othello: “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see./She has deceived her father, and may thee”. The medieval concept of *treuþe* could appear here as in the maxim of Sonnet 116: if love is true love, it has to be immutable, honest, loyal and immune to deception. If it is true there will be no deception, especially if you use your reason, if you are not altered by alteration, if you have “eyes to see”, if you only act based on real proofs, no matter how many things you are told of your lover. Has Othello eyes to see? Is Othello’s love for Desdemona something immutable that “looks on tempests and is never shaken”?

Act two begins with a real tempest, a storm with gothic atmosphere that moves the action from the balanced order of act one into the wild chaos that is going to rule the plot from that moment of the play onwards. Othello embarks on the transformation process that will lead to the gradual destruction of his integrity. His first signs of weakness begin in 2.3.200-203:

Now, by heaven,
My blood begins my safer guides to rule,
And passion, having my best judgment collid,
Assays to lead the way.

Are these sentences pronounced by a man of unaltered love and immutable feeling when facing the unexpected? They are the words of a noble man with self-control who starts to be driven into unreasoning frenzy (Muir 1994: 329), whose fair judgment begins to be controlled by passion and wrath rather than by an ever-fixed mark.⁴ Othello will soon stop believing in the immutability of love and completely abandons such a belief when he states: “When I love thee not, Chaos is come again” (3.3-91-92). Although he is still in love with Desdemona when uttering these lines, his belief in true love and its immutability begins to shatter and vanishes just a few lines afterwards.

The turning point of his degradation process –when he definitively breaks with the immutability maxim described in the sonnet– is located later in act 3 in several of his appearances:

For she had eyes and chose me. No, Iago,
I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, **prove**:
And on the **proof**, there is no more than this:
Away at once with love or jealousy!
(3.3.192-195)

Be sure thou **prove** my love a whore:
Be sure of it: give me the **ocular proof** (...)
Make me to see't: or at least, so **prove** it
That the **probation** bear no hinge nor loop
To hang a doubt on – or woe upon thy life!
(3.3.363-364, 367-369)

Othello's words declare the very solution to discover the truth: *the* ocular proof. Othello has the solution in front of him: paying attention only to the real evidence of Desdemona's supposed treason. But, as we know, what he does is quite the opposite. The appearance of a great number of words connected with "proof" and "see" in these lines – in bold type – highlight the importance of these two items for the issue of our concern, as they are key aspects for being faithful to the concepts of immutability and *treupe*.

Othello fails to follow the maxim. If he had seen, if he had obtained evidence, if he had maintained himself unaltered when facing the tempest and reacted only after obtaining real evidence – not the false untested ocular evidence Iago gives to him –, his fate as a heroic character would have changed notably. Has he eyes to see? Has he seen before doubting? Quite the contrary, he doubts before he sees. Perhaps Shakespeare is showing Othello as a sort of "chivalric lover" who believed in *treupe* and in the immutability of love, and stopped believing only to transform himself into a beast. As M. R. Ridley (1994: lvi) states, Othello is "a man of essential nobility debased by humiliating passion to a level not far above the animal, a level far lower than that to which any of Shakespeare's other heroes sink". Only before the vision of the proofs could *treupe* begin to wane. When Othello becomes aware of his mistakes it is too late for him. He admits what he has done and returns for a while to his former self – "he that was Othello" (5.2.281) – only to finish with his life later on, in another classical situation for the hero: the moment of clarity that precedes the hero's end. Only when

the play is about to finish Othello sees himself as he has really been and declares his mistakes:

Then you must speak
 Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
 Of one, not easily jealous but, being wrought,
 Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand
 Like the base Indian threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,
 Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
 Their med'cinable gum. Set you down this.
 (5.2.341-349)

Although Othello recovers the beauty of his language –the beauty he showed in act one and was progressively losing throughout the play– it is clear that there is no Isle of Avalon waiting for Othello's redemption. True love –and loving *treuþe*– has to display wisdom and strength at the same time, *sapientia et fortitudo*, two features of the chivalric lover directly inherited from the old Anglo-Saxon epic heroes. You have to love well and wisely, one condition cannot exist without the other, as Kenneth Muir very appropriately (1994: 330) states when commenting on Othello's final speech:

In speaking of his own epitaph, Othello claims that he had loved not wisely but too well. This is true. If he had loved less intensely, if he had not garnered his heart in Desdemona, if she had not been the fountain from which his current ran, his reaction to her supposed unfaithfulness would not have been so violent, or so disastrous.

A feeling of true love has to be unaltered and immutable when facing the unexpected. Othello did not follow the advice of Sonnet 116. He was not guided by the true love's *treuþe* and showed no traces of an adequate combination of wisdom and mental strength.

3. “LOVE’S NOT TIME’S FOOL” & “LOVE ALTERS NOT”: OTHELLO ’S LOVE SUBDUED BY TIME

The idea of the immutability of love when facing the unexpected is completed in the sonnet with the concept of the immutability of love when facing the passing of time. Shakespeare considers this subdivision as something important within the overall framework of the idea of immutability and dedicates the third quatrain of Sonnet 116 to develop this matter. This quatrain states that love is not altered with the passing of time and time’s effects on people. For Othello time is an enemy to be faced, a test he has to pass, a trap he falls into and a new maxim he did not follow.

From the beginning of the play time is something that hangs over the head of the characters and controls the direction of the plot. Othello himself at the end of 1.3. –though he refers to the period of time he still could enjoy with Desdemona before parting– states that his love is subject to time –“We must obey the time” (1.3.299)– and Iago a few lines afterwards makes the following proleptic statement: “There are many events in the womb of time, which will be delivered” (1.3.370-371). From the beginning of the play Shakespeare uses time as the concept that marks the development of the plot and puts before the characters a test to be passed. Although the sonnet states that “Love’s not time’s fool” everything in *Othello* spins around the very concept of time. As a progressively deranged character, Othello pays no attention to the sonnet’s statement and falls into the time trap set both by Iago and by the very “Double-Time Scheme” designed by Shakespeare to make time one of the mechanisms that speed the narration making it believable for the audience.

This time scheme –accepted nowadays by a wide majority of critics– displays the existence of two narrative times that run parallel in the play, the so-called “short-time” and “long-time”. This forms part of Shakespeare’s extraordinary narrative skill when designing the general structure of the play. What he manages to achieve is, as M. R. Ridley (1994: lxx) states, “to present before our eyes an unbroken series of events happening in short time, but to present them against a background, of events not presented but implied, which gives the impression of long time”.

Othello disregards the maxim and alters his feelings of love when time itself alters, when the “brief hours” go by. Iago is the master of short time and it is that control he exerts upon time –and time itself, of course– what makes Othello fail as a true lover. Sonnet 116 refers to the length of love as time passes by, but Othello has not allowed time to go on. When he faced the very first problem, he fell into the trap of time and broke his initial true lover promise. Othello has really been “time’s fool”.

4. CONCLUSIONS: IS SONNET 116 A CONDENSED EXPLANATORY RÉSUMÉ OF OTHELLO’S MISTAKES?

With the ideas and suggestions presented in this article I only wanted to examine the possibility of considering Sonnet 116 as a poem containing the keys to the main mistakes made by Othello. Some of the concepts shown in the sonnet –immutability, time, true love, *treuþe*– constitute decisive rules whose breaking provokes Othello’s disgrace. This is so if we assume the two most classical interpretations of the sonnet we considered at the beginning of this article, a reading of the text as an attempt to define love’s constancy in a world of change and to describe an unaltered and unalterable ideal of true love. However, I think that my suggestion could still work even though we accept the third interpretation stated by Helen Vendler (1999: 487-493). She turns the sonnet upside down and reads the text as a poem that defends quite the contrary, i.e. the impossibility of true love and its immutability. For Vendler the sonnet sets up a rhetorical rebuttal of the very concept of everlasting love and her reading of the poem could be summarized as follows (1999: 488):

You would like the marriage of true minds to have the same permanence as the sacramental marriage of bodies. But this is unreasonable –there are impediments to such constancy. After all, persons alter; and when one finds alteration, one himself is bound to alter as well; and also, people (or some qualities in them) leave, and one’s love is bound to remove itself when the qualities of one’s lovers remove. I did love you once; but you have altered, and so there is a natural alteration in me.

Although Vendler reverses the situation, Sonnet 116 could be understood as a description of Othello's mistakes. Whether the sonnet is a guide for true lovers that propounds the maxims of true love Othello does not pay attention to, or the proof of the non-existence of everlasting true love, the connection with *Othello* could still be made. In fact, if both interpretations are defensible taking the poem into account, we may conclude that the sonnet's ambiguity is an effect consciously designed by Shakespeare. Both readings –i.e., definition of true love & rebuttal of the very concept of everlasting love– could have been set before the readers to choose the conception of love they defend, the kind of love they believe in. Both views could make up a summary of the basic plot of *Othello*, as they set out a choice that, like in *Othello*, the readers have to solve.

This interpretation /connection of Sonnet 116 seen through the filter of *Othello* could be added to the previous list of readings. We could even have the pleasure of speculating with the moment in which both works were written, or at least, designed and argue for a close connection in time. There is almost total agreement in dating the composition of *Othello* between 1602 and 1604 (Honigmann 2003: 1, Ridley 1994: xv, Muir 1994: 303). If we bear in mind that although published in 1609 the sonnets were composed in the course of Shakespeare's life,⁵ if we take into account that according to recent editions –as Katherine Duncan-Jones (1997: 28) states– there is “internal evidence and external reference that point to 1603-04 as initiating an intense period of writing, and perhaps revising, which may have continued, off and on, shortly before publication”, maybe it is not outrageous to say that Sonnet 116 could have been written when *Othello* was in Shakespeare's mind, or even the other way round: it was in the poet's mind when writing *Othello*. Nevertheless, although it is a very interesting speculation, this idea is just a hint that has to be proved by further research.

In his classic edition and commentary of Shakespeare's sonnets, Stephen Booth (1980: 387) affirmed the following:

Sonnet 116 is the most universally admired of Shakespeare's sonnets. Its virtues, however, are more than usually susceptible to dehydration in critical comment. The more one thinks about this grand, noble, absolute, convincing and moving gesture, the less there seems to be to it. One

could demonstrate that it is just so much bombast, but, having done so, one would have only to reread the poem to be again moved by it and convinced of its greatness.

Whether one agrees with this or not, it is evident that part of the attraction these poems still have is due to the wide reading possibilities contained by their wonderful language. Be that as it may, bearing in mind the possible connections between the plot of *Othello* and its development and the maxims and concepts contained in the sonnet that I have highlighted so far, we may propose an additional interpretation to those previously presented and re-read Sonnet 116 as a condensed explanatory résumé of Othello's mistakes. In this brief note I have just suggested several ideas for further research, for future queries that will have to be made, not only to offer better proofs of the connections I put forward but also to check if these connections take place or not between other sonnets and plays by William Shakespeare.

NOTES

- ¹ This note is a revised version of a paper presented in the sessions of the XVth Conference of the *Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies* (SEDERI), held at the University of Lisbon in March, 2004. My thanks go to all those who offered me their comments and suggestions, and also to the anonymous reviewers whose comments improved some of the general ideas presented in this note.
- ² Quotations from *Othello* and Sonnet 116 have been taken from the editions by Katherine Duncan-Jones (1997) and E. A. J. Honigmann (2003) mentioned in the reference list at the end of the article.
- ³ When describing the conception of love present in *Othello* E. A. J. Honigmann (2003: 1) states: "Othello and Desdemona use the same language of love, as if intending theirs to be a mating of souls". We may wonder if this "mating of souls" means the same as the "marriage of true minds" from Sonnet 116. I think that the connection between both ideas could be very easily and appropriately established.

- ⁴ It is very interesting to mention the explanation of the term 'ever-fixed mark' that Duncan-Jones (1997: 342) includes in the footnotes of Sonnet 116: "ever-fixed mark: permanent beacon or signal for shipping; cf. *Othello* 5.2.268-9: 'Here is my journey's end, here is my butt,/And very sea-mark of my utmost sail'." It is very curious that to explain the metaphorical meaning of this term Duncan-Jones selects a quotation from *Othello* in which he laments Desdemona's death and describes her life and love as the mark that guided his life. In my opinion a very clear relation could be established between the meaning of this word in *Othello* and the connection I want to trace with Sonnet 116.
- ⁵ Katherine Duncan-Jones (1997: 13) offers a very good detailed summary of the four main possible moments of composition of the whole sequence of Shakespeare's sonnets: (1) ?-1598, (2) 1599-1600, (3) 1603-4, (4) August 1608-May 1609. She defends period (3) as the key period in which "the sequence began to take its final shape".

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