To cuckold and to be cuckolded Parallels between Shakespeare's Othello and Greek mythology

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The thought of one's partner, or spouse even, cheating has passed through many heads and poisoned many minds. It is this poison that led Othello to his demise, the poison that oozed into the Greek god of fire, Hephaestus. The story of his resulting attempted revenge forms the myth of Aphrodite and Ares. This essay will show how it is reasonable that Shakespeare was aware of this myth and which aspects of it might have served as inspiration to him while writing "Othello".

To answer the question of whether Shakespeare was aware of Greek and Roman mythology in general, we can first turn directly to the analysed work, "Othello". Here, one discovers that he must not only have been aware of Greek mythology but clearly also rather fond of it. He even chose to directly reference it in Othello's first monologue of the last act. On line 12f, he says: "I know not where is that Promethean heat that can thy light resume". This is a crucial moment for Othello since it is the last time he allows himself to doubt whether he will murder Desdemona. At this point, all but Roderigo and Brabantio's death could have been prevented

Figure 1: Prometheus stealing fire

In Greek mythology, Prometheus is a titan who first created humans and then brought them fire from Hephaestus' volcano against the will of Zeus. Othello is thus exclaiming that without this divine fire from the giver of human life, Desdemona's death would be definite. Once she is dead, there is nothing in his power to undo his actions.

Even Desdemona's very name is Greek, meaning "unfortunate one" or "ill-fated woman"[1] . How is that possible? Ben Johnson claimed that his famous contemporary, William Shakespeare, only knew "little Latin and less Greek".

Johnson seems to have been exaggerating. Shakespeare must have been relatively well versed in reading and analysing Latin classics[2] . He thus would have been able to read Greek classics in the form of Latin translations, even if he wouldn't have been sufficiently good at Greek, which is a matter of academic debate. Furthermore, Andrew Wert has presented parallels between the Odyssey and other works written by Shakespeare. In conclusion, it is entirely within the realm of

1: "Shakespeares's Lesse Greek" by Andrew Werth (2002)

2: "William Shakspere's Small Latine & Lesse Greek" by T. W. Baldwin (1944)

possibility that Shakespeare has read the very book in which the story which we are trying to find parallels in his work.

With the historical plausibility clarified, I will now argue that Hephaestus' reality parallels what the reality Iago infused into Othello. Hephaestus is an ugly cripple, while Aphrodite is the goddess of beauty. He is a foreigner, as Ares remarks, he "is off in the wilds of Lemnos, consorting with his raucous Sintian friends". To add some symbolism of being cast out, he was thrown off Mount Olympus upon his birth by his disgusted mother Hera.

For Othello, this feeling of not belonging builds the basis of the self-doubt, which turns into rage. Iago uses this sense of foreignness when first confronting Othello with the idea of Desdemona cheating on him by supposing that such unfaithful behaviour is Venetian women's custom[3] , which Othello can't know. Trying to find reason where there is none in Iago's claims, Othello concludes that in part his appearance and age must be what drove Desdemona off to Cassio[4] , who, contrary to him, is well-spoken, handsome and young. Hephaestus also blames his appearance, namely his crippledness compared to Ares' "stunning looks and racer's legs".

Furthermore, both characters have their action rooted in their marriage bed. This begins with their wives cheating on them in that bed. Both their resulting rages again culminate in punishing their unfaithful wives in the marriage bed, Hephaestus enchains the lovers and Othello kills his wife.

One might claim that this is where the narratives simply diverge since Hephaestus doesn't go on to end Aphrodite's life. Nevertheless, I argue that this actually is the point where the evidence for the parallels between them begins to get rather substantial, as Shakespeare seems to very carefully explain the reasons for differences between the two plot lines. First of all, enchaining represents the best available alternative to killing an immortal goddess. The main difference remaining is that enchaining is reversible. For example, the aforementioned Prometheus was enchained for his disloyalty to Zeus and much later freed from his torment. And Shakespeare explicitly reminds the reader of the irreversibility of murder through the voice of Othello with the words: "But once put out thy light, [...] I know not where is that Promethean heat that can thy light relume".

Shakespeare thus decided that in the scene where the plot-lines start to diverge between definite murder and reversible

3: "I know our country disposition well. In Venice, they do let God see the pranks they dare not show their husbands. Their best conscience is not to leave't undone, but to keep't unknown", Act 3, line 204ff

4: "Haply for I am black, [...] for I am declin'd into the valve of years (i.e. old)" Act 3, line 265 and "And yet how nature ering from itself" Act 3, line 229ff

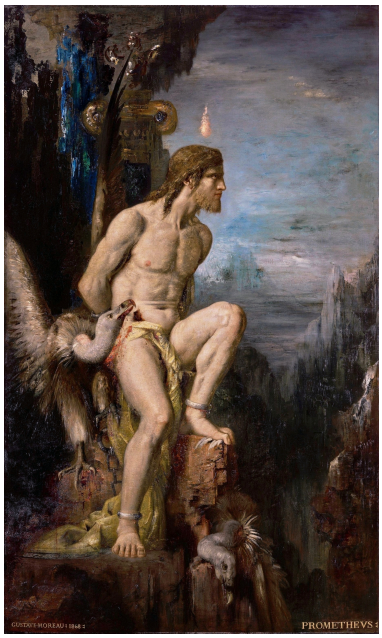

Figure 2: Prometheus enchained for his disloyalty to Zeus (notice the vulture devouring his liver)

imprisonment, the character he named the play after should reference a mythological figure well-known for being enchained and later freed when contemplating the irreversibility of murder. Furthermore, the very chains essential to the myth of Aphrodite and Ares were forged under Promethean heat, as Prometheus lit his torch from the fire in Hephaestus workshop.

Nevertheless, many other interpretations view Othello as parallel to Ares instead. Even though there are multiple reasons for this choice, the rather obvious one is that Ares is a god of war and Othello is a man of war. But Shakespeare lets Othello exclaim: "Farewell [...] the circumstance of glorious war! [...] Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone." From act 3, scene 3 onwards, he simply doesn't see himself as a man of war any more. Shakespeare again explicitly gives reason for differences between the two narratives.

To conclude, Shakespeare must have been rather fond of Greek mythology, based on how often he chose to reference it in his works. This, combined with the number of themes shared between the mythological story of Ares and Aphrodite, makes it seem entirely plausible that Shakespeare actively chose to borrow certain themes from the said myth. However, even if this weren't the case, it would only speak for the relevance of Othello and the Odyssey that they both developed such similar themes, even though they were written more than two thousand years apart from each other.

Figure 3: Hephaestus seeing the "ocular proof" Othello wouldn't bear to see

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In the case of parts taken from scientific publications, the Internet or any other document, I have expressly and directly indicated the source at the end of the quotation or at the foot of the page as well as having duly marked them in the text by quotation marks where indicated.

Appendix

Mythological stories have a tendency to be scattered throughout various sources in different time frames, often contradicting each other. In the interest of brevity, I have therefore mainly focused on one specific written version of the myth, namely the one in Book 8 of the Odyssey by Homer. I kindly refer the interested reader to the respective translation by Robert Fagles below. **The following text was thus not written by me.**

Excerpt of a translation of the Odyssey by Robert Fagles

Now the bard struck up an irresistible song: The Love of Ares and Aphrodite Crowned with flowers ... how the two had first made love in Hephaestus' mansion, all in secret. Ares had showered her with gifts and showered Hephaestus' marriage bed with shame but a messenger ran to tell the god of fire— Helios, lord of the sun, who'd spied the couple lost in each other's arms and making love. Hephaestus, hearing the heart-wounding story, bustled toward his forge, brooding on his revenge— planted the huge anvil on its block and beat out chains, not to be slipped or broken, all to pin the lovers on the spot. This snare the Firegod forged, ablaze with his rage at War, then limped to the room where the bed of love stood firm and round the posts he poured the chains in a sweeping net with streams of others flowing down from the roofbeam, gossamer-fine as spider webs no man could see, not even a blissful god — the Smith had forged a masterwork of guile.

Once he'd spun that cunning trap around his bed he feigned a trip to the well-built town of Lemnos, dearest to him by far of all the towns on earth. But the god of battle kept no blind man's watch. As soon as he saw the Master Craftsman leave he plied his golden reins and arrived at once and entered the famous god of fire's mansion, chafing with lust for Aphrodite crowned with flowers. She'd just returned from her father's palace, mighty Zeus, and now she sat in her rooms as Ares strode right in and grasped her hand with a warm, seductive urging: "Quick, my darling, come, let's go to bed and lose ourselves in love! Your husband's away— by now he must be off in the wilds of Lemnos, consorting with his raucous Sintian friends."

So he pressed and her heart raced with joy to sleep with War and off they went to bed and down they lay— and down around them came those cunning chains of the crafty god of fire, showering down now till the couple could not move a limb or lift a finger— then they knew at last: there was no way out, not now. But now the glorious crippled Smith was drawing near ... he'd turned around, miles short of the Lemnos coast, for the Sungod kept his watch and told Hephaestus all, so back he rushed to his house, his heart consumed with anguish. Halting there at the gates, seized with savage rage he howled a terrible cry, imploring all the gods, "Father Zeus, look here— the rest of you happy gods who live forever— here is a sight to make you laugh, revolt you too! Just because I am crippled, Zeus's daughter Aphrodite will always spurn me and love that devastating Ares, just because of his stunning looks and racer's legs while I am a weakling, lame from birth, and who's to blame? Both my parents—who else? If only they'd never bred me! Just look at the two lovers ... crawled inside my bed, locked in each other's arms—the sight makes me burn! But I doubt they'll want to lie that way much longer, not a moment more—mad as they are for each other. No, they'll soon tire of bedding down together, but then my

cunning chains will bind them fast till our Father pays my bride-gifts back in full, all I handed him for that shameless bitch his daughter, irresistible beauty—all unbridled too!"

So Hephaestus wailed as the gods came crowding up to his bronze-floored house. Poseidon god of the earthquake came, and Hermes came, the running god of luck, and the Archer, lord Apollo, while modesty kept each goddess to her mansion. The immortals, givers of all good things, stood at the gates, and uncontrollable laughter burst from the happy gods when they saw the god of fire's subtle, cunning work. One would glance at his neighbor, laughing out,

"A bad day for adultery! Slow outstrips the Swift."

"Look how limping Hephaestus conquers War, quickest of all the gods who rule Olympus!"

"The cripple wins by craft."

"The adulterer, he will pay the price!"

So the gods would banter among themselves but lord Apollo goaded Hermes on: "Tell me, Quicksilver, giver of all good things— even with those unwieldy shackles wrapped around you, how would you like to bed the golden Aphrodite?"

"Oh Apollo, if only!" the giant-killer cried. "Archer, bind me down with triple those endless chains! Let all you gods look on, and all you goddesses too— how I'd love to bed that golden Aphrodite!"

A peal of laughter broke from the deathless ones but not Poseidon, not a smile from him; he kept on begging the famous Smith to loose the god of war, pleading, his words flying, "Let him go! I guarantee you Ares will pay the price, whatever you ask, Hephaestus, whatever's right in the eyes of all the gods."

But the famous crippled Smith appealed in turn, "God of the earthquake, please don't urge this on me. A pledge for a worthless man is a worthless pledge indeed. What if he slips out of his chains—his debts as well? How could I shackle you while all the gods look on?"

But the god of earthquakes reassured the Smith, "Look, Hephaestus, if Ares scuttles off and away, squirming out of his debt, I'll pay the fine myself."

And the famous crippled Smith complied at last: "Now there's an offer I really can't refuse!"

With all his force the god of fire loosed the chains and the two lovers, free of the bonds that overwhelmed them so, sprang up and away at once, and the Wargod sped to Thrace while Love with her telltale laughter sped to Paphos, Cyprus Isle, where her grove and scented altar stand. There the Graces bathed and anointed her with oil, ambrosial oil, the bloom that clings to the gods who never die, and swathed her round in gowns to stop the heart ... an ecstasy—a vision.

That was the song the famous harper sang and Odysseus retished every note as the islanders, the lords of the long oars and master mariners rejoiced.