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Shakespeare's Dramatic Language

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Week 8: Imitation of *Othello*

Dear Jeff,

You'll soon see that I wrote a poem, and I hope you don't mind that I stuck with the written word instead of creating an audio recording or something of the like. I've been working quite a bit with received forms in my own writing practice, and after trying a mesostic over the break, I realized that this contemporary form would actually be an uncannily good fit for my thoughts on sound in *Othello*. I'll explain my choices in more detail in my write-up below, but here are the basic things you need to know before reading my imitation.

When writing this mesostic, I adhered to three basic formal constraints:

1. Much like an acrostic, the mesostic includes a vertical phrase that runs down the center of the horizontal lines of text (the letters in bold). My vertical phrase, "chains of magic," appears in Brabantio's speech in Act I, scene ii, line 65, when Brabantio accuses Othello of casting a spell on Desdemona.
2. Then, to select the index words (like "chances" and "breach" in lines 1-2, respectively) I moved chronologically through a found text, selecting the words in which the given letter from the vertical phrase first appears. I also created another constraint here, which differs slightly from the constraints John Cage (who popularized the form) used in writing his mesostics. My rule went like this: Let's

say I was searching for a word with “s” in it (see: “history” in line 6). I couldn’t choose a word in which the “s” is followed by the given letter in the following line (so, because the given letter in line 7 is “o,” a word with an “so” combination like “reason” would not be permissible, but “history” is fine). To select my index words, I scanned through Othello’s speech in Act I, scene iii, lines 128-170, in which he defends himself against Brabantio’s accusations of sorcery and explains how Desdemona fell in love through the process of storytelling.

3. After choosing the vertical phrase and the index words, my final task was to select the “wing words,” the remaining words in a line (i.e. all words besides “chances” in line 1). Again, my constraints differed from Cage’s. For Cage, the poet can select the wing words, adhering to a few more letter-based constraints I won’t bore you with here. I, however, wanted to use as much found text from *Othello* as I possibly could, so my wing words derive from Iago’s speech to Roderigo in Act I, scene iii, lines 315-327, in which Iago rails against passionate love and praises selfish, individual will. The challenge I issued to myself was that I needed to use every single word from Iago’s speech. As such, I needed to get a little creative.

You’ll see that the poem itself is perhaps more of an experiment in sound and process than in sense. I’ll explain my choices in more detail below, and I’ll also include my source texts at the very end of the document.

Enjoy!

-Jackie

The wealthy curlèd darlings of our nation,
Would ever have, to incur a general mock,
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou,—to fear, not to delight.

Index Words: Othello, 1.3.128-170

Her father lov'd me; oft invited me;
Still question'd me the story of my life,
From year to year,—the battles, sieges, fortunes,
That I have pass'd.
I ran it through, even from my boyish days
To the very moment that he bade me tell it:
Wherein I spake of most disastrous **chances**,
Of moving accidents by flood and field;
Of hair-breadth scapes i' the imminent deadly **breach**;
Of being **taken** by the insolent foe,
And sold to slavery; of my **redemption thence**,
And portance in my travels' **history**:
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,
Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven,
It was my hint to speak,—such was the process;
And **of** the Cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi, and **men** whose **heads**
Do **grow** beneath **their** shoulders. This to hear
Would Desdemona seriously **incline**:

Wing Words: Iago, 1.3.315-327

Virtue! a fig! 'Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry; why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions: But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts; whereof I take this, that you call love, to be a sect or scion.

And finally, a few more words on the choices I made in this poem: After reading Dolar's essay on the linguistics of the voice and then working my way through the first act of *Othello*, I began to think about the spell or incantation, and I wondered what sort of speech act a spell might be. Dolar highlights a contrast between the individuality of human voice, which is "like a

fingerprint, instantly recognizable and identifiable,” and the “impersonal,” “mechanically produced” voice issued by computers, which “always has a touch of the uncanny” (545). Perhaps the spell (and the possibility that Othello has cast a spell on Desdemona, which also carries with it racial undertones and the fear of the African Other) is so frightening because it is a speech act that combines both human and mechanical qualities. A spell is recited by a human voice, and yet the sorcerer is also a mouthpiece for a supernatural presence. The inhuman speaks through the human.

This thought propelled me to another thought: In the first act of the play, Othello’s voice is trapped in a sort of matrix, a machine even, of other voices speaking about him. The voice, as Dolar writes, “sustains an intimate link with the very notion of the subject,” and yet Othello’s subjecthood is constantly being questioned, constrained, retold (546). When Brabantio accuses him of sorcery, Othello refutes those claims by retelling his love story with Desdemona, which is in fact a story about storytelling: She fell in love with his personal history, the stories he told about his difficult life as a soldier, stories which were unique to him alone. If spell-casting contains a touch of the inhuman, here Othello attempts to humanize himself through narrative. Yet, in the next scene, Iago admonishes Roderigo for believing in the authenticity of romantic love, and instead champions the selfishness of individual will. Though Iago is speaking to Roderigo, we might also imagine him speaking across scenes to Othello, effectively undoing the love story that Othello has just told to Brabantio. Othello’s voice is bound by constraints on both sides.

So, to return to my poem: I wanted to choose a poetic form that would function somewhat like a spell, mixing the sounds of human and inhuman voices. I also wanted to utilize a series of formal constraints that would mimic the constriction of Othello’s voice. It was especially important to use Othello’s speech in selecting the index words, because those words

are quite literally trapped in the center of the page, cut in both directions by Brabantio and Iago's language. As for the lines themselves, I can't say that they make much sense. But here's what might be interesting: This poem, like the lines of a play, demand to be spoken out loud, in part because some words are actually meant to function like their homonyms (when spoken aloud, "set are virtue raging" will sound like "set our virtue raging," and "poise/one" will sound like "poison"). Finally, I wonder if the reader might catch some of my own poetic "voice" peeking through--whatever that might mean. I'm interested in the ways in which traces of the lyric seem to slip through the cracks of a poem, no matter how many constraints seek to withhold its force.