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Shakespeare's Language
Othello Representation

Act 1.3, ll. 128-169

Her father loved me, oft invited me,
Still questioned me the story of my life
From year to year: the battles, sieges, fortune,
That I have passed.
I ran it through, even from my boyish days
To th' very moment that he bade me tell it.
Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances,
Of moving accidents by flood and field;
Of hairbreadth scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach;
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence,
And portance in my traveler's history;
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,
Rough quarries, rocks, hills, whose head touch heaven,
It was my hint to speak—such was my process—
And of the cannibals that each other eat—
The Anthropophagi—and men whose heads
Grew beneath their shoulders.

.....
She'd come again, and with a greedy ear
Devour up my discourse. Which I, observing,
Took once a pliant hour, and found good means
To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart
That I would all my pilgrimage dilate
Whereof by parcels she had something heard
But not instinctively. I did consent,
And often did beguile her of her tears
When I did speak of some distressful stroke
That my youth suffered. My story being done,
She gave me for my pains a world of kisses.
She swore, "In faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange.
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful."
She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished
That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story,
And that would woo her. Upon this hint, I spake.
She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
And I loved her that she did pity them.
This only is the witchcraft I have used.

I chose this passage in part because I think its subject matter fits the assignment. Othello is telling a story about stories—one that contains no content or context for the stories themselves. While his actual past remains more or less a mystery, Othello gains power not through his stories, *per se*, but through the telling of them. I thought this the best passage for an assignment about sound over sense.

Othello keeps his promise to tell a “round unvarnished tale,” but only just: his tale is not varnished with events, but with sounds. The amount of assonance and consonance in this passage (“disastrous strokes,” “earnest heart,” “greedy ear”) is striking from someone who claims to be “rude” in speech, as are some of the words he chooses, such as “antres” and “anthropophagi.” But what is striking about “antres” is not necessarily the elevated diction, but the way that line knits itself together internally, with the assonant “a” in “antres vast” and the elision and sibilance that causes “deserts idle” to sound like one word or two possible combinations of words (something akin to what Garrett Stewart calls “transegmental adhesion” in an essay on Woolf’s *The Waves*). Likewise, what is striking about “anthropophagi” is the way it unfolds its length across an otherwise monosyllabic line—its presence there is notable even before we know the meaning of the word. And depending on the voice of the actor/reader we don’t necessarily need to look it up: James Earl Jones, for example, emits a series of grunts after line 145 in his reading of this passage at the White House—a vocal addition that makes a dictionary decidedly unnecessary.

My point is that while Othello more or less keeps his promise to tell a “round unvarnished tale” when it comes to plot, he is not above varnishing the sound, setting, and effects of these events—and this is more apparent when the lines are listened to than when they are read. Line 135 illustrates this well: “Of moving accidents in flood and field.” The third foot here is almost pyrrhic—the stress on “dent” is so much lighter than the line’s other stresses that it at least gives a pyrrhic impression, de-emphasizing the poetic function of the accidents themselves. Meanwhile, the strong iambs and alliteration at the end of the line play-up the importance of setting: “of flood and field.”

In an effort to make my process as transparent as Othello’s, I should note that I linger over this phrase in particular because Wordsworth did, too: he quotes line 135 directly during one of the *Prelude*’s “spots of time” (a literary device with its own curious relationship to narrative), and mentions “moving accidents” in three other poems (“The Heart-Leap Well,” “Michael,” and “The Ruined Cottage”). In each mention, Wordsworth or his narrator promise to keep his tale “ungarnish’d” or “uncharactered” with “moving accidents.”¹ Wordsworth has some anxiety about these moving accidents—he relates them to the sensational stories he denounces in the Preface—but he is also drawn to Othello’s claims to narrative power that (hear at least) do not rely on narrative. Narrative is replaced by image for Wordsworth and (I want to argue) by sound and setting for Othello, but the space that narrative leaves in this passage (as well as in the “spots of time”) remains essential to their function.

In light of all this, I became interested in exploring the ways in which these elements are open to vocal interpretation, and how we might represent those varying interpretations musically in order to echo Othello’s power over the senses rather than his sense of narrative. I wanted to try to answer my own basic question about this passage: Othello has merely told us that he told Desdemona stories, so what elicits the Duke’s immediate and enchanted response, that he thinks this tale would win his daughter as well?

¹ I owe this observation, in part, to a PMLA article by Susan Wolfson on this particular “spot of time.”

In part because Othello's references to enchantment and charms in the preceding passage made me think of song, in part because the *Lyrical Ballads* were on my mind through Wordsworth, and in part simply because it is a form that is more or less available to me, I chose to render a small part of this passage as an Appalachian ballad. This is a tradition that ostensibly relies on story for its source of entertainment and appeal, but as the stories themselves rarely change and are strikingly similar to one another, their actual appeal usually stems from vocal and instrumental interpretation and variation, something that is significantly different from the variation afforded by performance. What's more, Othello himself invites us to think about an oral tradition: "if I had a friend that loved her, / I should but teach him how to tell my story, / And that would woo her."

Lyricaly, I tried to stick to those moments that I thought most song-like in the original passage thanks to their meter and/or alliteration/assonance ("flood and field," again), and I emphasized setting over plot. Where there is plot, it focuses on Othello's ability to entrance Desdemona's as well as her father's desire, as opposed to the elusive "moving accidents."

My first of many disclaimers here is that I have no technical musical ability! I collaborated on the accompaniment with my stepfather, who is a professional claw-hammer banjo player (appropriately, this is an older style of banjo-playing than most people are used to—I believe it dates back to around the time the banjo itself first made it to North America). I hope the attached sound-clip is not too collaborative: I arranged the lyrics and wrote the vocal part, but was only able to direct/ask my stepfather for certain effects on the accompaniment; I have no ability to actually write the instrumental section.

At first I thought that our representation was too interpretive, because at its core is a three-part melody meant to reflect a shifting narrative arc (her father invited me, I told my enchanting stories, and then she fell for me). However, I kept the bare outline in part because the more I thought about it, the more I could not in fact divorce sound from interpretation—the curious ways in which "voice points toward meaning," as Dolan puts it (540).

The first part consists of slower musical phrases of equal length; I wanted to get at the slow, rhythmic (chant-like?) dimeters with which Othello begins his tale: "from year to year;" "I have passed;" "I ran it through." I tried to capture that beginning vocally, but asked Edwin to add some complexity around the melody to reflect the varying meter of this section. The second part picks up pace and is far more complex, in order to capture the effect of words like "anthropophagi" and somehow relay that this is the strangely compelling, narrative(less) center of the passage. We also got louder and faster to try to get at that paratactic build-up of lines 135-137 (the series of "Of" clauses), and the heavy stresses of phrases like "quarries, rocks, hills." Lyricaly, though, I wanted to make this section pure image, so it only contains sentence fragments.

The final section proved too difficult to write vocals for, at least not with the time I've had, but I might prefer it that way in the end. I asked Edwin to play something longer, slower, and more melodic, because the lines get a bit long and certainly more lyrical from "She swore" through to the end of the passage I've quoted—I am thinking of the pleasing isocolon in "twas strange...twas pitiful," among other things—before the rhythm slows and the enjambments cease at the end of the passage. He is a very good banjo player, though, and I simply ran out of time to write a vocal part that didn't just make this section sound worse, in my opinion. So I've left it as is, and I have to apologize for the sound quality if it's not entirely

apparent just how good he sounds. We were only physically playing/singing together for a short time while I was at home, and the rest I've had to graft together using incredibly rudimentary means (I am neither a musician nor someone who has any knowledge of audio-visual-anything).

Below is a fragment of the passage, rearranged into ballad (ish) form:

From year to year,
He bade me tell
I ran it through,
He loved me well

Wherein I spoke
Of boyish days
Disastrous chance
And hairbreadth scapes

Flood, and field;
Deadly breach;
Antres vast;
Deserts idle

Hints to speak
She did eat
With greedy ear
Devour me