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Fortune Unbound in *Othello*

Lynn S. Meskill

- ¹ In his review of Frederick Kiefer's *Fortune and Elizabethan Tragedy* (1983), John M. Lyon notes that early modern dramatists "made opportunistic, eclectic, and diverse use of Fortune."¹ He argues that Kiefer "falls victim" to Shakespearean diversity and eclecticism and so fails to make coherent sense, for example, of the hash of "Fate, Fortune and human responsibility" in *Romeo and Juliet*.² Other reviewers were kinder to Kiefer's comprehensive study of Fortune, conceding the difficulty of untangling all the guises of the poetic figure of Fortune in the late sixteenth century.³ In the following essay, I will briefly examine some of Shakespeare's multiple uses of fortune in *Othello*. I would like to shed light on aspects of Shakespeare's *opportunism*, and his boldness in playing with and on the trope of Fortune. How is Fortune "unbound" in *Othello*? Shakespeare dispenses with a personified goddess, who guides "the fateful paths of ships, individuals or weapons,"⁴ to create a language of fortune in order to represent Othello's nature and that of his handkerchief, his most visible property.

The Goddess Blind

- ² We all know the stock image of Fortuna, turning her wheel, raising people up and bringing others down.⁵ In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, one of the sources of Shakespeare and his contemporaries' conceptions of her, Boethius describes a two-faced, monstrous woman, turning a wheel, distributing her gifts blindfolded.⁶ Medieval and Renaissance visual images of Fortuna turning her wheel, or accompanied by a sphere, denoting instability and mutability, were everywhere.⁷ We can still see such images of Fortune today, whether during a visit to Little Moreton Hall, where Fortune and Destiny confront one another at either end of the Long Gallery,⁸ or reproduced as "The Wheel of Fortune" in any deck of Tarot cards.⁹ In the emblem literature of the early modern period, Fortune was often depicted as a naked female figure riding the waves of a tempestuous sea, or surfing on her wheel or sphere, the wind blowing her hair.¹⁰ In an emblem from Jean-Jacques Boissard's *Emblematum Liber* (1593), a female figure extends a moneybag (wealth) and a crown (power) to a man whose hands are outstretched to receive them (Fig. 1).

These gifts represent the worldly material goods over which Fortune, in the Boethian tradition, exercised control. On the ground, beside her, we see the tell tale wheel propped up against a plinth, and a ball lying in the grass. These traditional attributes were so familiar that the reader of the emblem would automatically have filled in the syntactical gap, placing, in his or her mind's eye, the nude figure in its traditional position on top of the ball or turning the wheel, reconstructing the classic image of ever revolving Fortune. This reconstitution of the iconographic image is necessary to fully obtain the emblematic message not to put one's trust in Fortune's gifts because "Fleeting fortune shows faith in no one."¹¹

Figure 1: "N'adjouste foy à la foy de Fortune", in Jean-Jacques Boissard's *Emblemes [...]* *nouvellement mis de latin en françois par Pierre Joly*, Metz A. Faber, 1595, <https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/picturae.php?id=FB0c046> (last accessed Feb 26 2019)

- 3 These widely disseminated emblems and other images of Fortune were well known to Shakespeare. In *As You Like It* (1599), Celia playfully suggests that she and Rosalind "mock the good housewife Fortune from her wheel, that her gifts may henceforth be bestowed equally" (I.ii.31-33).¹² In *Henry V*, written at or near the same time, we can see just how familiar, even cliché, the traditional iconography of Fortune, and the sententious maxims that accompanied it, had become for Shakespeare: Pistol blames the goddess Fortune for Bardolph's impending execution for theft. Fortune is the direct agent of Bardolph's *fatum*, his destiny. Pistol declaims:

Bardolph, a soldier firm and sound of heart,
And of buxom valor, hath by cruel fate
And giddy Fortune's furious fickle wheel,
That goddess blind,
That stands upon the rolling restless stone... (III.vi.25-29)
- 4 Pistol's mock-heroic description may well be mimicking those translations of Senecan tragedy from the mid-sixteenth century. "Fortune's furious fickle wheel" was precisely

the kind of bombastic, declamatory, alliterative verse already being mocked in Shakespeare in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, such as when Bottom plays Hercules:

The raging rocks
And shivering shocks
Shall break the locks
Of prison gates;
And Phibbus' car
Shall shine from far
And make and mar
The foolish Fates (I.ii.31-38)

- 5 Like Bottom, Pistol's speechifying only indicates how empty and rhetorical traditional representations of Fortune had become. Fluellen interrupts Pistol to provide the "moral", a *subscriptio* or explanatory text, found in emblematic literature, which parsed the various components of the visual image:

By your patience, Aunchient Pistol: Fortune is painted blind, with a muffler afore his eyes, to signify to you, that Fortune is blind; and she is painted also with a wheele, to signify to you, which is the moral of it, that she is turning, and inconstant, and mutability, and variation: and her foot, look you, is fixed vpon a sphericall stone, which rolls, and rolls, and rolls. In good truth, the poet makes a most excellent description of it: Fortune is an excellent moral (III.vi.30-38).

- 6 Fluellen's commentary joins Pistol's imagery in its banality. Fortune's muffler, or scarf, means fortune is blind; the wheel means that fortune is inconstant; the foot on the stone means that fortune is unstable. Fluellen concludes that Fortune "is an excellent moral". This facetious conclusion teaches no lesson, offers no comfort, responds to no abiding question concerning Bardolph's imminent execution. Pistol's riposte to Fluellen's "moral", namely that "Fortune is Bardolph's foe", shows up the limits of Fluellen's didactic moralizing. Far from providing any kind of true consolation or spiritual balm, rather than providing any kind of true philosophy, Fluellen, and the emblem tradition being mocked here, provides only potted, received wisdom. Far from offering an ordered universe within which Pistol can comprehend Bardolph's death, Fluellen offers a rag-bag of epithets: "turning, and inconstant, and mutability, and variation", signifying only the eternal change brought on by the unchecked turning of the wheel of fortune "which rolls, and rolls, and rolls".
- 7 At the same time, Pistol's rejoinder is just another piece of popular wisdom. Pistol turns to the title of the very popular tune, "Fortune, my Foe", which was also known as the "hanging tune", to understand Bardolph's death: "Fortune is Bardolph's foe, and frowns on him" (III.vi.39).¹³ Both Fluellen and Pistol trade bits and pieces of popular wisdom, none of which sufficiently address the import of the sentence of death for the particular individual named Bardolph. This passage combines pure comedy, in its parody of didactic and philosophic systems, with a real *philosophical melancholy*. This melancholy is personal, individual, and unique. For Pistol, the general is not adequate consolation for the individual. The *agon* between Bardolph and Fortune is personal. That Henry himself sends Bardolph to his death makes Pistol's response full of dramatic irony. Like the prisoner in Boethius's *Consolation*, Pistol, for all his clownlike elocution, is searching for the *cause* of Fortune's blind savagery. Someone like Fluellen can only offer him isolated *sententiae* from his philosophy and Pistol himself can only echo the lyrics to a popular "jingle".¹⁴
- 8 In *Othello* (1603) though, such a personification of Fortune as we find described above appears nowhere. The goddess Fortuna does not even make an initial appearance before

being “mocked”, whether by a Celia or in the comic confrontation between a Pistol and a Fluellen. Instead, Shakespeare unbinds the ossified iconography of Fortune to meditate anew on fate and destiny.

Othello: A Meditation on Fortune

- 9 The number of appearances of the word “fortune” in *Othello* is among the most frequent in Shakespeare’s corpus. All the main characters mention, even reflect upon their own fortunes or those of others, at times ventriloquizing contemporary arguments concerning how best to confront “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (*Hamlet* (1601), III.i.57). *Othello* may be considered, as a result, a kind of meditation on fortune, dispensing with the standard personification of the blind goddess. The play opens with Roderigo already foreshadowing Othello’s fall as payment of a *debt* to fortune: “What a full fortune does the thicklips owe/If he can carry’t thus” (my emphasis, I.i.65-66). In other words, what a great fall inevitably awaits Othello for the material goods, the gifts of rank, glory, and felicity that Fortune has given him and which, according to her nature, she will inevitably withdraw. Yet, even as Roderigo portrays Othello as in *debt* to fortune, in the narrative of his own life, Othello portrays himself as a *victim* of fortune. He has suffered hardship, endured “battles, sieges, fortunes” (I.iii.130), meeting with “moving accidents” (134) and “disastrous chances” (135).¹⁵ Othello’s life, as he narrates it to the Venetian elders in Act I, a “round unvarnish’d tale” (90), is a kind of playbook of narrowly missed encounters with death and bad luck. That Othello should so soon be in fortune’s debt, dramatizes the rapidity with which fortune is won and lost.¹⁶ It dramatizes as well the role of envy in helping to turn the wheel of Fortune downwards.
- 10 Compounding the obsessive focus on fortune in the first Act, Act II begins by relating Desdemona’s sea voyage to Cyprus, becoming a new emblematic set-piece, so closely was fortune associated with the wind, the sea, and shipwreck at the time. We are again briefly in the world of the first lines of *The Merchant of Venice*, when Salerio imagines being kept awake at night if he had ships at sea like Antonio: “Should I go to church...And not bethink me straight of dangerous rocks,/Which touching my gentle vessel’s side/Would scatter all her spices on the stream...” (I.i.29;31-33). Desdemona’s boat, carrying as rich a cargo, the “divine Desdemona” (II.i.73), manages to avoid the “guttered rocks and congregated sands” (69) to arrive safely in Cyprus.
- 11 Cassio refers often to his fortunes: “I am desperate of my fortunes if they check me here” (II.iii.331-332) and Iago describes Cassio as plying Desdemona to “repair his fortune” (354). Desdemona herself tells Othello, in response to his repeated demand for the handkerchief, that Cassio, “[H]ath founded his good fortunes on your love” (III.iv.94). According to Roderigo in Act 1, Desdemona has tied her own fortunes to Othello and later she herself credits this story saying that her “storm of fortunes” led her to be with the Moor, consecrating her “soul and fortunes” to him (I.iii.249; 254).¹⁷ In the beginning of his doubts concerning Desdemona, Othello states that he will let her go to “prey at fortune” (III.iii.263) like a hawk cut loose. Desdemona refers to her “wretched fortune” (IV.ii.128) toward the end of the play. She notes that the song of willow expressed the fortune of her maid Barbara: “She had a song of “Willow,”/An old thing ‘twas, but it express’d her fortune” (IV.iii.28-29).¹⁸ And, finally, Emilia will state that she found the handkerchief, “by fortune” (V.ii.226).

- 12 In addition to characters referring to their own, or others' fortunes, Shakespeare gives voice to contemporary views on how best to accommodate or adapt to it. The Duke of Venice clearly endorses a Stoic attitude to fortune's ups and downs. In Act I.iii, he attempts to put the fact of Desdemona's marriage to Othello in a comforting philosophical light for Brabantio:

To mourn a mischief that is past and gone
Is the next way to draw new mischief on.
What cannot be preserved when Fortune takes,
Patience her injury a mock'ry makes. (I.iii.204-207)

- 13 He warns Brabantio that dwelling on events whose outcomes cannot be changed is not only pointless, it opens the way for new "mischief".¹⁹ He tells him, in good Stoic fashion, that "when fortune takes" the best remedy is "Patience". Brabantio's reaction to these apothegms or cheap consolatory "sentences" (216) is comparable to Fluellen's: he's having none of it: "But words are words; I never yet did hear/That a bruised heart was pierced through the ear" (I.iii. 218-219). Again we find Shakespeare showing the possible limits of such standard consolations that do justice, neither to a particular grief, nor to the abiding questions posed by the strokes of fortune.
- 14 A little later, in the same scene, we are witness to a comparable conversation. Roderigo grieves over his own misfortune, comparable to Brabantio's, namely the loss of his hopes for Desdemona. Iago consoles him, not with "words", but by exhorting him to action. And this may, in fact, be precisely the "mischief" that is unleashed in the play. Iago tells Roderigo that "'tis in ourselves that we are *thus*, or *thus*" (my emphasis; III.ii.319-320). The meaning of "thus" here encompasses, I would argue, not only our particular nature, but also the *consequences* of our particular nature, namely, our place in society, our situation in life, in short, our *fortunes*. Iago goes on: "Our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners...If the [beam] 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 the most preposterous conclusions" (320-321; 326-329). These "preposterous conclusions" are Roderigo's own fortunes. Iago's gardener may well be a version of Francis Bacon's architect: *Faber quisque fortunae suae* [Every man is the architect of his own fortune].²⁰ Roderigo's decision to follow Iago's advice to weed and plant his own nature, and thus change his fortunes, ironically leads him straight into Iago's designs. Believing himself architect of his own fortune, gardening his own garden, Roderigo ends up part of Iago's evil architectural designs for *his* own fortune.
- 15 How does this conversation between Roderigo and Iago on fortunes—or *preposterous conclusions*—differ from that on Fortune—or *the goddess blind*—between Pistol and Fluellen? In *Othello*, Shakespeare has introduced fortune with a resolutely small "f". Fortunes are hatched in the brain of a conniving man such as Iago, who holds sway over the temporal fortunes of other characters for the duration of the play, all the while arguing that every man comes to his own "conclusions". The slippage from the blind goddess, Fortune, in *Henry V*, to the mischief-making Iago, signals a first stage in Shakespeare's unbinding of Fortune in *Othello*.

The Wheel in *Othello*

- 16 The second stage of Fortune unbound in *Othello* can best be appreciated by looking at what Shakespeare does with Fortune's best-known attribute: her wheel. Note what

Shakespeare has done with Fortune's wheel in Act II of *Hamlet*; the First Player ends his monologue with a harangue against Fortune:

Out, out, thou strumpet Fortune! All you gods,
In general synod take away her power!
Break all the spokes and fellies from her wheel
And bowl the round nave down the hill of heaven
As low as the fiends! (II.ii.493-497).

- 17 In *Othello*, we have neither Fortune nor "her" wheel, nor the spokes and fellies, nor the round nave or hub. Instead, we have Shakespeare distilling Fortune's wheel into verbs of motion: rolling, wandering, encircling, and turning. Unhitching the wheel from Fortune, and transforming it into a verb, alerts us to something new. In Act I, Scene i, Roderigo tells Brabantio:

Your daughter (if you have not given her leave),
I say again, hath made a gross revolt,
Tying her duty, beauty, wit, and fortunes
In an *extravagant* and *wheeling* stranger
Of here and every where. (my emphasis, I.i.133-137).

- 18 The word "wheeling" is used here for the first and only time as an adjective in Shakespeare. It is compounded with "extravagant". Randal Cotgrave's 1611 English definition of the French *extravagance* is pertinent: "To extravagate, to roam, to range, wander, err in a humour, stray, gad in a fantastical way".²¹ The epithet "wheeling" has a similar semantic consistency, describing Othello's peripatetic travels and dramatic *peripeteia*. The wheel epithet, then, associates him closely with his own revolving fortunes. Iago even describes Othello's verbal dilation as a verbal *wheeling*. The first thing Iago says he hates about Othello is how he "[E]vades...with a bumbast *circumstance*/Horribly stuff'd with epithites of war" (I.i.13-14).²² Iago hates Othello's roundabout, evasive indirection in speech, a kind of windy grammar, a form of circumlocutory or *wheeling* discourse that will eventually roll, like Fortune's hub in *Hamlet*, from heaven to as low as fiends, from the sublime "*Othello music*" to a discourse on "Goats and monkeys" (IV.i.263).²³ And so Othello, wheeling through exotic countries, across boundaries, and through accidents and disasters, is intimately linked to the wandering and wheeling speech that is ultimately an image of his own changing fortunes.²⁴ This wheeling wandering leads even to Brabantio's accusation that Othello is a witch. For Brabantio, the Venetian, Othello, the Moor, is "a practiser/Of arts inhibited and *out of warrant*" (my emphasis; I.ii.78-79). He and the arts he practices are outside the law, outside legal limits, outside the sphere of what is warranted in Venice. Othello's wheeling nature, his circumlocutory speech, and his witchcraft are all of a piece: they pinpoint who and where he is in the world.

- 19 The wheel image appears, significantly, with respect to Desdemona, as well as to Othello. Cassio apostrophizes Desdemona when she has safely landed in Cyprus: "Hail to thee, lady! and the grace of heaven,/Before, behind thee, and on every hand/*Enwheel* thee round!" (II.i.85-87) Shakespeare's only use of the word, "enwheel", is uttered in the context of both the safe landing of Desdemona's ship in Cyprus and the "fortunate" (II.i.61) match between Othello and Desdemona described as such by Cassio. The possible echo of Donne's Elegy 19, "On Going to Bed" compounds with "love's quick pants" (II.i.80) to signal the sexual nature of Desdemona's arrival in Cyprus, but the word *enwheel*, I would argue, points also to something else. Desdemona may both evoke the familiar figure of Fortuna inside her wheel, and, at the same time, be a *captive* in the round of the

wheel. In other words, to be *enwheeled* is to be a kind of prisoner to the wheel, even bound, like a martyr, to the breaking wheel.

- 20 Finally, Othello's tirade against Desdemona in Act IV, Scene I may well be connected to the turning of Fortune's wheel. "Sir, she can turn, and turn; and yet go on /And turn again." (IV.i.253-254). Othello's pointed reference to the inconstancy of women echoes the habitual language referring to the fickleness of Fortune. It is precisely this conflation of Fortune's inconstancy with that of all women that gives us the epithet for Fortune in *Hamlet* and elsewhere: "strumpet Fortune". Fortune is a whore, a prostitute, turning tricks. Yet, in *Othello*, since Shakespeare has completely stripped the play of all references to a personification of Fortune, the "strumpet" of *Hamlet* becomes Desdemona herself. Lodovico's comment immediately following Othello's accusation that Desdemona is a version of the best "turn" in the bed is, pointedly, a classic Stoic reaction to outrageous Fortune: "Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate /Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature/Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue/The shot of accident nor dart of chance/Could neither graze nor pierce?" (264-268) Perhaps Ludovico too has sensed the spinning wheel of Fortune behind Othello's misogynistic "turn, and turn". In *Othello*, Shakespeare has not only unbound Fortune's wheel from a personified Fortune, but has also distilled the metonymic function of the wheel into verbs such as "wheeling" and "turning".

Othello's Handkerchief

- 21 In the third stage of the unbinding of the stock image of Fortune in *Othello*, Shakespeare invests a stage property, a piece of cloth, with all the awe and power of the goddess Fortuna. The most radical unbinding of Fortune can be seen in the transfer of its attributes into a handkerchief, whose haphazard movements through the hands of various characters represents a new version of the chaotic movements of fortune. Instead of Fortune's wheel rolling down the hill of heaven, as in *Hamlet*, the handkerchief passes from hand to hand, initiating new action and motion, which in turn will lead to preposterous conclusions.
- 22 In Shakespeare's principal source for *Othello*, Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* (1565), the handkerchief is described briefly as "embroidered most delicately in the Moorish fashion".²⁵ After the Ensign steals the handkerchief from Desdemona, he places it in the Corporal's room, who, recognizing it, then brings it to Desdemona's house:
- So he waited till the Moor had gone out, then went to the back door and knocked.
*Fortune, it seems, had conspired with the Ensign to bring about the death of the unhappy lady; for just then the Moor came home, and hearing the knock on the door went to the window and shouted angrily, 'Who is knocking?'*²⁶
- 23 In Cinthio, the purloining of the handkerchief, and its subsequent displacements and apparitions, are part of the consequences of a personified Fortune *conspiring* with the Ensign. The Ensign sets off the chain of events, but in the economy of the novella, Fortune is introduced to show both the fatality of the Ensign's actions, as well as the element of chance in the design. Yet, the Moor's arrival at just the wrong moment, the secret back door, the knock, the choleric husband, has all the earmarks of the comic. This strange concatenation of tragedy and comedy finds its way into *Othello*, as many critics have noted. And the mixture of genres is already inherent in the wildly differing faces of the goddess Fortuna, both as (tragic) Fate and (comic) prostitute.

- 24 In *Othello*, it is Emilia who expresses the indissoluble bond between the handkerchief and Fortune when she finally narrates the trajectory of the object that Othello has so thoroughly misinterpreted, revealing to him that his “ocular proof” (III.iii.360) is, in fact, a *trompe l’oeil*. Othello protests: “I saw it in his hand,/It was the handkerchief, an antique token/My father gave my mother” (V.ii.215-2117). Emilia counters: “O thou dull Moor, that handkerchief thou speak’st of/I found by fortune and did give my husband” (V.ii.224-5). Here juxtaposed are two versions of the handkerchief, that of Othello and that of Emilia. For Othello, the handkerchief *means* something because it is an “antique token”, a gift, “[M]y father gave my mother”, which in turn became a kind of family heirloom, given by Othello to Desdemona. For Emilia, the handkerchief is something she picked up off the ground, a “trifle”(228), except that her husband had often “begg’d of me to steal’t” (229).²⁷ Shakespeare transforms Cinthio’s Fortune *conspiring* with the Ensign into Othello’s personal investment in the handkerchief. The magical thinking that believes Fortune connives in Desdemona’s death, is redirected into magical thinking about a handkerchief, manipulated and handled by a human agent, a stage-prop wielded by a stage villain.
- 25 As we shall see, Othello’s hyperbolic description of the handkerchief confirms his hyper-investment in it and this hyper-investment, in turn, effectively makes it the *unbound* proxy for (Cinthio’s) personified Fortune:

Othello That handkerchief
 Did an Egyptian to my mother give;
 She was a charmer, and could almost read
 The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it
 ‘Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father
 Entirely to her love; but if she lost it
 Or made a gift of it, my father’s eye
 Should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt
 After new fancies. She, dying, gave it me
 And bid me, when my fate would have me wiv’d,
 To give it her. I did so, and take heed on’t,
 Make it a darling, like your precious eye.
 To lose’t or give’t away were such perdition
 As nothing else could match.
Desdemona Is’t possible?
Othello ‘Tis true; there’s magic in the web of it.
 A sibyl that had numb’red in the world
 The sun to course two hundred compasses,
 In her prophetic fury sew’d the work;
 The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,
 And it was dy’d in mummy, which the skilful
 Conserv’d of maidens’ hearts.
Desdemona I’faith, is’t true?
Othello Most veritable, therefore look to’t well. (III.iv.55-76)

26

- 27 We learn that the handkerchief has been passed from woman to woman, not, as Othello asserts at the end of the play, from his father to his mother. It possesses the power to keep a man faithful; if lost, the owner loses her immortal soul. After Desdemona’s interjection of wonder, the account continues, becoming even more “impassioned” as Michael Neill has described it.²⁸ We pass through the realm of superstitious belief, the practices of wise women and fortune-tellers providing their clients secrets with which to

hold onto a man, or recipes for love-charms; we then move into the deep origins of the manufacture of the handkerchief. We learn that it has a formidable genealogy stretching back to more women, the Cumean, or another, Sybil. It is imbued with magic, and possesses the medicinal properties of *mumia*, the universal panacea, a balsam cure-all, which Ian Smith has recently reminded us could be black, making the handkerchief a pitch black piece of cloth.²⁹

28 Following Desdemona's interjections of wonder, Othello assures her: " 'Tis true" and "Most veritable", adding more description to back up the veracity of his account. The handkerchief has its origins in Egypt, the origin of origins, and in the worm: worms that were hallowed, by conjurors or cunning-men, while or before "breeding" their silk. The storied Sybil in her prophetic frenzy, together with the hallowed worm, make the material; the dye, the *mumia* is conserved (kept fresh?) in the hearts of dead virgins. We are not told in this description how or by whom the "strawberries", part of the design of the handkerchief, were embroidered into it (III.iii.435). The strawberries are the "work" (III.iii.296) that must be taken out precisely to hide its origins. But they are not included in Othello's description. Is this because Sybils do not ordinarily embroider strawberries?

29 Shakespeare may well be laughing up his sleeve in describing the handkerchief so, and in so doing, commenting on the bustling trade in charms, fortunes, oracles, fetishes, and relics that proliferated at the time and the medicines, salves, love-potions, help in finding lost objects provided by conjurers and village wizards, all that white witchcraft deployed to enable people to believe they could control and ensure their fortunes. Shakespeare may indeed be outdoing the most ardent of almanackers to show the superstitious nature of this handkerchief and, by extension, the magical thinking that makes the handkerchief mean much more than it does. The handkerchief, in its Egyptian fortune-telling and prophetic guise, quite efficiently and poetically represents the goddess Fortune conspiring with Iago.

30 In Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, Volpone dresses as a mountebank to sell magic oil to the Venetian public. He knows the effect that can be produced upon an audience eager for novelty, but also for myth, legend, for all that is hermetic and abstruse and, of course, eager for long-life and eternal youth:

Here is a powder, concealed in this paper, of which, if I should speak to the worth, nine thousand volumes were but as a page, that page as a line, that line as a word, so short is this pilgrimage of man (which some call life) to the expressing of it....it is the powder, that made Venus a goddess (given her by Apollo), that kept her perpetually young, cleared her wrinkles, firmed her gums, filled her skin, coloured her hair. From her, derived to Helen, and at the sack of Troy, unfortunately, lost: till now, in this our age, it was happily recovered, by a studious antiquary, out of some ruins of Asia, who sent the moiety of it to the court of France (but much sophisticated), wherewith the ladies there now colour their haire. The rest, at this present, remains with me; extracted, to a quintessence, so that, wherever it but touches, in youth it perpetually preserves, in age restores complexion; seats your teeth, did they dance like virginal jacks, firm as a wall; makes them white as ivory, that were as black as - (*Volpone*, 2.2.193-196; 199-209).³⁰

31 Othello's description of the magic handkerchief resembles Volpone's advertisement for his authentic oil. We are assured in both of a storied antiquity. We are told that both have been passed originally from a mythical figure, a god or a Sybil, to women for their use in keeping young or keeping a hold of men. The hyperbolic rhetoric, vaunting the particular powers of both the oil and the handkerchief, is oddly comparable. Yet, the comparison pretty much stops there for, in the end, the mountebank's rhetoric is in the service of

selling an anti-age cream. For Othello, on the other hand, the handkerchief is the abstract of his birth, his life, and his end. Yet, seen from another angle, from Iago's perspective, from the perspective of the theatre, the handkerchief is truly just "a trifle" that can be put to good use because it will be believed like "proofs of holy writ" (III.iii.324) by credulous gulls. Belief in mind-readers and fortune-tellers, the power of a piece of cloth to determine fate, or a fetish object to protect a person from the dart of chance or unforeseen accidents, all speak to those superstitions that adhere to the mystery of an individual's fortune. The handkerchief is an object lesson that mocks the superstitions associated with getting and keeping fortune, in health, wealth, love, and power. Fortune is nothing but a mere stage device, a vaudeville act, managed by a Iago, not a predestined life-span written in sibylline books or safely kept in a box or a drawer.

- 32 And yet, the prophecies surrounding the handkerchief are proved true. The dramatic irony of the play is that while the handkerchief is simply a couple of inches of cloth, imbued with those mythical and mystical properties, it does also appear to correctly prophesy Desdemona's fate. As we are in a tragedy, oracles are true. This is where Shakespeare *conspires* with the common desire to see and read signs; the desire to see events as having been predicted, and written, not happening by pure chance, the desire for a personal destiny, not a common fate that lacks rhyme or reason. For this is the desire expressed in the oracular handkerchief. The cloth attests as well to a desire for poetry, fed, so often by mythology, exoticism, and, as Jonson knew, the magical language of alchemy. The fulfilment of the handkerchief's prophecy is Shakespeare's sop to an audience which holds dear the idea that someone, like a mythical Fortuna, turns a wheel, or that a magical sibyl writes prophecies—anything rather than the boundless hatred represented by a Iago, for whom the handkerchief is not "holy writ", but indeed a trifle to be trifled with, and to trifle with others.

NOTES

1. John M. Lyon, Review of *Fortune and Elizabethan Tragedy* (1983) by Frederick Kiefer, *The Modern Language Review*, 82.2 (April 1987), pp. 443-444; 443. Kiefer's book remains the most comprehensive study of fortune in the Elizabethan period.
2. Lyon, p. 434.
3. See Rolf Soellner, "The Many Facets of Fortune", Review of *Fortune and Elizabethan Tragedy* by Frederick Kiefer, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 35.2 (Summer, 1984), pp.246-250.
4. Michael Witmore, *Culture of Accidents: Unexpected Knowledges in Early Modern England*, Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 23.
5. See for example the copy of a miniature found in Herran von Landsberg, *Hortus deliciarum* (12th century), Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, *Département des Estampes*, Ad 144a: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Hortus_deliciarum#/media/File:L%E2%80%9999Hortus_Deliciarum.jpg (last accessed Feb 26 2019)
6. See Book II in Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Green, New York and London, Macmillan, 1962, pp.21-22.

7. See for example Hans Sebald Beham, *Fortuna*, 1541, Private collection https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fortuna_or_Fortune.jpg (last accessed Feb 26 2019)
8. The end tympana of the Long Gallery at Little Moreton Hall have plaster figures of Fortune and Destiny copied from images in Robert Recorde's *Castle of Knowledge* (London, 1556), the first astronomical treatise to be published in English. I thank Alison Findlay for drawing my attention to the images at Little Moreton Hall in Cheshire, England.
9. See for example Bonifacio Bembo, Antonio Cicognara, *I Tarocchi dei Visconti* (15th century) <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/b0/Visconti-sforza-10-fortune.jpg/320px-Visconti-sforza-10-fortune.jpg> (last accessed Feb 26 2019)
10. See for example Gilles Corrozet, "L'ymage de Fortune", in *Hecatomgraphie*, 1540, reproduced from Glasgow University Library: SMAdd385, <https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/picturae.php?id=FCGa040> (last accessed Feb 26 2019)
11. For the image and the translation of Boissard's emblem, please see The Glasgow Emblem Project, French Emblems at Glasgow: <https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/emblem.php?id=FBOb046>
12. William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, eds. G. Blakemore Evans *et al* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974). All quotations from Shakespeare will be to this edition.
13. For Pistol's probable allusion here to the ballad "Fortune, my Foe! Why dost thou frown on me?" see *Henry V*, *The Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. Gary Taylor (Oxford: OUP, 1982), p. 188, n.38. Tiffany Stern, in a recent talk in Paris (May 2018), mentioned the identification of the popular tune with hanging and execution. For more on ballads, see Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England*, (Cambridge, CUP, 2013).
14. In the same note on the allusion to the ballad, "Fortune, my Foe", Taylor describes it as a "jingle": p. 188, n.38.
15. My emphases.
16. We cannot be certain exactly how much time elapsed between Othello's adventures, his narration of them to Desdemona, and his subsequent narration of them to the Venetian elders. The play, nevertheless, closely juxtaposes Iago's hatred and Roderigo's envy with Othello's narration of a life of difficulty and misfortune, giving us the impression that Othello has enjoyed good rather than bad fortune quite briefly.
17. *The Riverside Shakespeare* uses "storm", while the Arden 3 editor, E.A. Honigmann, uses "scorn", noting that in the period "Both scorn and storm of fortune were commonplaces". See *Othello*, *The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. E. A. Honigmann, Third Edition (London, 2002), p. 151, n.250.
18. Like Pistol, turning to the ballad, "Fortune, my Foe" to express Bardolph's fortune, Desdemona turns to an "old thing" to express her own. Her interesting inability to remember the words of the ballad: "Nay, that's not next" (IV.iii.53) has been discussed by, for example, Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld in "Shakespeare's Nobody" in *Othello: The State of the Play*, ed. Lena Cowen Orlin (London, Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.257-280.
19. Compare with Brutus' recourse to this idea of mischief to describe the danger Caesar represents: "And therefore think him as a serpent's egg/Which, hatched, would, as his kind, grow mischievous..." (*Julius Caesar*, II.i.32-33). And later, Antony, "Now let it work. Mischief, thou art afoot,/Take thou what course thou wilt!" (III.ii.260-261).
20. Francis Bacon, "Of Fortune", *The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall* (London, 1625), p. 234.
21. Randle Cotgrave, "Extravagance", *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London, 1611).
22. I have followed *The Riverside Shakespeare* spelling of "epithets".
23. For the phrase "Othello music" see the chapter by that name in G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy* (London, Routledge, 1930).
24. Note that Othello says: "I would not my unhoused free condition/Put into circumscription and confine/For the sea's worth" (I.ii.26-28).
25. In *Othello*, ed. Honigmann, Appendix 3, p. 378.

26. Honigmann, p. 378.

27. See also III.iii.290-299, the moment when Emilia does pick up the handkerchief for comparison.

28. Michael Neill, "Othello's Black Handkerchief: Response to Ian Smith", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 64.1 (Spring, 2013), 26-31; 28.

29. Ian Smith, "Othello's Black Handkerchief", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 64.1 (Spring 2013), 1-25.

30. Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, in David Bevington et al, eds., *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, Volume 3 (Cambridge, CUP, 2012), p. 88.

ABSTRACTS

Shakespeare, like his contemporaries, makes ample use of the standard iconography of the goddess Fortuna and her wheel in his plays, although always with a twist. In *As You Like It* and *Henry V*, Shakespeare brings the traditional personification of Fortune to the stage, showing the limitations of such a worn signifier in the context of his theatre. In *Othello*, the playwright transforms, or "unbinds", the ossified image of Lady Fortuna turning her wheel, using poetry and the properties of the theatre to convey the changing fortunes of the characters. The play is obsessed with the idea of Fortune from beginning to end. All the characters talk about and refer to their fortunes, but it is with Othello's own present and past fortunes, his "wheeling" nature, and his hyper-investment in a fortunate handkerchief that Shakespeare completely transforms the goddess Fortuna and her furniture into a new semiotic system.

Shakespeare, comme ses contemporains, a souvent recours à l'iconographie traditionnelle de la déesse Fortune avec sa roue, mais toujours d'une façon inédite. Dans *As You Like It* et *Henry V*, il met en scène la personnification de la Fortune, pour, justement, montrer les limites, dans un théâtre comme le sien, de cette figure galvaudée. Dans *Othello*, le dramaturge transforme l'image trop bien connue de la Dame Fortune en exploitant la poésie et autres éléments du théâtre pour mieux exprimer les fortunes changeantes des personnages. *Othello* est une pièce de théâtre tout simplement obsédée par la Fortune. Tous les personnages en parlent, constamment, mais c'est par rapport à Othello lui-même et à sa fortune, présente et passée, sa nature extravagante, et finalement son obsession hors-norme pour un mouchoir de « bonne fortune », qu'on voit comment Shakespeare métamorphose la déesse Fortuna et ses attributs en un système sémiotique nouveau.

INDEX

Keywords: Fortune, Fortune's wheel, Iconography of Fortune, Ben Jonson, mountebank, Othello, William Shakespeare, stage properties, superstition, Volpone, witchcraft

Mots-clés: Accessoires de théâtre, charlatan, Fortune, iconographie de la Fortune, Ben Jonson, Othello, roue de la Fortune, William Shakespeare, sorcellerie, superstition, Volpone.

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