

Notes

Desdemona: A Star-Crossed Name

Shakespeare took the name of his heroine, together with the plot of his tragedy, from the *Hecatommithi*, the "Hundred Stories" (1565) by the Italian playwright and *novelliere moralista*, Giovan Battista Giraldi Cizio, from Ferrara. The story in question is the seventh of the third decade¹ and there, with the nameless *Moro di Venezia*, appears also his beautiful and virtuous wife, *Disdemona*.

Her name is patently Greek, and thus fits Giraldi's Grecomania. His fictional writings are brimful of Greek-named characters. A. Haggerty Krappe blames the Hellenizing obsession of this arch-pedant on the impact of the rising baroque.² Letterio di Francia, exemplifying with a set of *Filo-* compounds (such as *Filogamo* and *Filandro*), calls their bearers "victims of the sweetest Hellenic lexeme"³ (i.e. *filo* 'friend/admirer of,' but since early times perceived as verbal, 'being friendly towards').⁴ Yet, the author's passion for that source of inspiration was somewhat one-sided: His love for Greek did not always keep abreast of his linguistic knowledge. R. Barilli dubs him outright "indotto di greco," ignorant in Greek.⁵ The provenience of his Hellenisms is often unknown, and the possibility is strong that a native speaker of the language stepped in as an "informant." The phonological patterning of Giraldi's *Pognira*, a woman's name appearing in dec. V, nov. 9, is a case in point: it reflects acoustic impressions. The base is Gr. *ponērós* 'worthless,' with the fem. *ponērá* 'a broad.' Giraldi's transcription with its palatal *gn* renders a native Greek's pronunciation [poñirá] actually heard. The iotacist value, i.e. the sound [i] for the traditional letter eta, was general in Modern Greek then as it is still today; the palatalization of the nasal before [i] was typical of the Western dialects.⁶

Giraldi's choice of the name *Disdemona* suggests likewise the intervention of a native speaker. The word, as it stands, renders the Greek adjective *dysdaímon* (gen. *-onos*) 'cursed with and evil destiny, ill-starred, unhappy,' and thus has been interpreted by various commentators, among them (as the more specific) A. Haggerty Krappe⁷ and A. Tesch.⁸ Such designation, however, although perfectly fitting the fate of the

woman, appears somewhat odd as the name of a girl, and the first doubt about its appropriateness came from, of all critics, Giraldi himself. His comments have, apparently, escaped attention. The Moor's story, as mentioned, is told as the seventh *novella* of the third decade. But right after completing III.7, for reasons that are bound to remain obscure, the author must have had "second thoughts." In the introductory passage to III.8 the *brigata*, the group convened to hear the next story, discussed Disdemona's doom precisely in relation to her name. The passage runs as follows:

It seemed incredible to everyone that so much wickedness could be found in a human heart, and they bewailed the fate of the wretched woman, *blaming the father, who had given to her a name of ill omen*. And the group determined that, with the name being the first gift bestowed by a father on his offspring, *he should give a splendid and auspicious one*, as if in this way he could augur for them happiness and distinction.⁹

The *brigata* of sceptics was, of course, not only the author's creation but also his mouthpiece. They accuse the father (in other words, the author) of having given the heroine a nonsensical, absurd name. The passage reads, indeed, as if Giraldi, by using the "father" as a scapegoat, would challenge his own choice of *dysdaímōn*. The criteria of namegiving, on the other hand, which he formulated through the consensus of the group, point at another Greek base suggested by the information, quite similar in sound but just as dissimilar in structure and meaning: *desidaímōn* 'God-fearing,' a verb + object compound of *deidō* (aor. *édeisa*) 'I fear' and *daímōn*, paralleling synonymous *deisítheos*. This term is suited, indeed, for a name, flanked in its patterning by the widespread equivalent *Timótheos*, consisting of *tim-* 'to honour' and *theós* 'God.' *Timótheos* was Latinized as *Timotheus*, our *Timothy*, and, in the period of Pietism, Germanized as *Fürchtegott*. Gr. *desidaímōn* 'religious,' found in ancient authors,¹⁰ came into vogue through the laudatory introduction of Paul's speech before the Areopagus (Acts 17:22): *desidaimonestérous* hymâs theōrô "I perceive that you are very religious people."¹¹ The Greek lexeme lived on with this meaning 'religious,' documented in Greco-Latin glossaries. These transcribe *desidemon*¹² and, interestingly, *dysidemon*.¹³ The spelling "y" of the latter gloss indicates the same intrusion of the pejorative prefix *dys-* which later led to Giraldi's "mistake." For in Byzantine and post-Byzantine times the pronunciation of the classical vowel "y" and the classical diphthong *ei* coalesced into [i], so that the native speaker pronounced both morphemes, *deis-* and *dys-*, as [ðis].

Our hypothesis that plain ignorance of Greek, reinforced by an acoustic mixup, caused Giraldi to write "unhappy" where the educated Greek had meant "religious" is supported by features of the narrative. Disdemona's death scene reveals her true nature:

The hapless woman ... feeling that the end was near ... said that *as witness to her faith she was invoking Divine justice since the earthly one was failing*, and while she was *appealing to God to help her*, the third blow followed, and she died, a victim of the wicked ensign [Shakespeare's Iago].¹⁴

And, as in old legends of saints, her prayer is heard. The felons are punished and Divine justice has vindicated the sufferings of the pious Disdemona. It is, then, not unhappiness that is the focus of her name but faith. Seen in a broad context, this "moralist" attitude tallies with B. Porcelli's interpretation¹⁵ of Giraldi as "preponderantly" an author of the Counterreformation.

Henry and Renée Kahane

University of Illinois

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¹The Italian text: *Gli Ecatommiti ovvero Cento Novelle*, (Firenze, 1834), 185-87. English translation: *The Story of the Moor of Venice*, translated from the Italian by Wolstenholme Parr (London, 1795), 37-62.

²*Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, 18 (1930), 232.

³*Storia dei generi letterari italiani: Novellistica*, II (Milano, 1925), 86.

⁴H. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg, 1960-72) and P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Paris, 1968-80), s.v. *philos*.

⁵*Il Cinquecento*, IV:2 (Roma-Bari, 1973), 523 [in Muscetta et al., *La letteratura italiana*].

⁶H. and R. Kahane, A Case of Glossism: Greghesco and Lingua Franca in Venetian Literature, in *Mélanges Petar Skok* (Académie Yougoslave des Sciences et des Arts: Zagreb, 1985), 224 and 225.

⁷*Modern Language Notes*, 39 (1924), 160, n.13.

⁸*Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, 17 (1929), 387-88.

⁹Text: *Ecatommiti*, 185. Translation and emphasis are ours.

¹⁰P.J. Koets, *Deisidaimonia: A Contribution to the Knowledge of the Religious Terminology in Greek* (Purmerend [Netherlands] 1929), 106.

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¹¹The translation follows W. Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*, translated and adapted by W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich (Chicago, 1979), 173.

¹²G. Loewe and G. Goetz, *Corpus glossariorum latinorum* (Leipzig, 1892), III, 177.21.

¹³Op. cit., 136.19

¹⁴*Ecatommiti*, 184. Translation ours.

¹⁵*Il Cinquecento*, IV:2 (fn. 5 above), 198-99.

Iago, Iachimo, Jaques, Jaques de Boys, Jaquenetta, St. Jaques, and Jacob

Shakespeare used many names, such as *Antonio* and *Balthasar*, for several different characters. The name *Jacob* likewise occurs many times, but here the usage is curious. In the text and in the history plays (where non-fictional characters are required) the English, Scottish, and Biblical English forms appear - *James*, *Jamy*, and *Jacob*. But in the comedies and tragedies, Shakespeare employs *Iago* (Spanish), *Iachimo* (Italian), *Jaques* (French), and *Jaquenetta* (French feminine) (Weidenhan, s. v. *Iago*, *Iachimo*, *Jaques*, *Jaquenetta*).

The primary meaning of *Jacob* is "supplanter." Murray J. Levith recognizes this root sense (54), but appears not to consider it significant, preferring to stress the relationship of the different foreign forms to "various jokes about privies [jakes] ... the foul smells associated with privies were thought to result in the melancholic humor ..." (54)

It would appear, however, that "supplanting" is associated with each of Shakespeare's characters who bears a form of the name - more comprehensively if we consider both those who supplant and those who are supplanted.

Most significant is Iago's name, for he in several instances would supplant others and also feels that he is supplanted. First, Cassio supplants him as lieutenant; Iago as the elder soldier felt that he was entitled to the position. He says,

And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof
At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on [other] grounds
Christen'd and heathen, must be belee'd and calm'd
By debtor and creditor - this counter-caster,
He (in good time!) must his lieutenant be,

And I ([God] bless the mark!) his Moorship's ancient.
(*Othello*, I.i.28-33)

Second, Iago suspects that both Othello and Cassio have supplanted him in bed with Emilia. He says,

... I hate the Moor,
And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
{H'as} done my office ...
(I.iii.386-88)

and

... I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leap'd into my seat;
(II.ii.295-96)

and

(For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too) ...
(II.ii.307)

Third, Iago hopes to supplant Cassio as lieutenant. He says, "Cassio's a proper man. Let me see now: / To get his place ... " (I.3.392-93). And fourth, Iago hopes to supplant Othello by getting even with him "wife for wife" (II.ii.299).

Iachimo, in Act I, scene 6 of *Cymbeline*, first attempts to supplant Posthumus Leonatus by lying to Imogen and then offering to go to bed with her. When she sees through him, he pretends that this was but a test of her fidelity. Then, in Act II, scene 2, he supplants Posthumus in the bedroom - though not in bed - by hiding in a trunk brought into her bedroom for safekeeping. While she sleeps, he gazes on the dressed-for-bed Imogen and supplants her husband in viewing the beauties of her revealing body.

Iachimo tells Posthumus that he has been supplanted:

... Had I not brought
The knowledge of your mistress home, I grant
We were to question farther; but I now
Profess myself the winner of her honor,
Together with your ring ...
(II.iv.50-54)

In *As You Like It* there are both Jaques and Jaques de Boys. Without questioning the fairly obvious meaning of "jakes" as mentioned above, one may add that the name is additionally appropriate since there is a certain amount of supplanting involved. Jaques de Boys will supplant Jaques at

court. At the end of the play the gloomy Jaques is leaving the court of Duke Senior to retire with Duke Frederick, who "hath put on a religious life, / And thrown into neglect the pompous court" (V.iv.181-82). When Duke Senior leaves the Forest of Arden to return to his rightful court, will Arden be supplanted by a reminiscence of woods in the name of Jaques de Boys?

As for female characters, there is a Jacquenetta in *Love's Labours Lost*. She too is a supplanter. In a play where the various couples remain pledged to each other, Jacquenetta takes up with Costard and then becomes pregnant by Don Adriano, who supplants Costard. Don Adriano de Armado says, "Boy, I do love that country girl that I took in the park with the rational hind Costard" (I.ii.117-18). But Armado, who is appointed Costard's keeper by the King and is to see that the clown receives his punishment, also supplants Costard in committing with Jacquenetta the same crime for which Costard was sentenced!

In *All's Well that Ends Well*, Helena says that she is making a pilgrimage to St. Jaques Le Grand. Why this particular shrine? Actually, *Jaques* is appropriate, for she will supplant Diana in bed, and take the consummation of the marriage night as her own. The situation will have Biblical overtones. Jacob, who supplanted his elder brother Esau, was repaid with what could be called poetic justice. He thought he was spending his marriage night with Rachel, only to discover that it was her older sister Leah whom he had wedded and bedded. If a pilgrimage is made for the purpose of supplanting, what better saint's name could have been chosen than *St. Jaques*?

Thus, the varieties of *Jacob*, supplanter and supplanted.

Norman Nathan

Florida Atlantic University

References

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