

Othello's house on the Sagittary Shakespeare's familiarity with the streets of Venice

by Noemi Magri



'Hell' and 'Purgatory', Houses of the Patroni dell'Arsenal

IN the Italian plays of Shakespeare there are references to localities in Italy that critics have not identified as actual places, or, if some have, they have dismissed the identification as inconsistent, most probably for the reason that they have not taken local reality into account.

That is the case of 'The Sagittary', twice mentioned in *Othello*¹. Stratfordian commentators have tried to find an explanation of the use of the name, but they have not followed the right course of investigation, so their conclusions go far from historical reality.

In I.i., after waking up Brabantio to let him know that his daughter Desdemona has eloped with the Moor, Iago urges Roderigo to hasten to the place where they will find Othello. He says, 'That you shall surely find him, Lead to the Sagittary the raised search, And there will I be with him' (Honigmann, I,i,155-7).

The initial capital letter shows that 'Sagittary' is a proper name: it is the locality where Iago and Roderigo will find not only Othello but also Desdemona. In fact, when, summoned to the Council Chamber to be appointed by the Doge to be commander of the

Venetian fleet, he is accused by Brabantio of having won his daughter through witchcraft, Othello says, 'Send for the Lady to the Sagittary, And let her speak of me before her father' (I.iii.116-7)

Now, the use of that name raises many questions: what sort of residence was it, if it was one? What does the name refer to? What function did that place have, if any? Has there ever been a real place with that name, though in its Italian form, in Venice?

Shakespeare mentions 'the Sagittary' only in one other play, *Troilus and Cressida*, and here more that one meaning has been attached to the word. The battle rages. Agamemnon is grieved by the death of Patroclus and many of his commanders, and exhorts the troops. He says, 'The dreadful Sagittary Appals our numbers. Haste we, Diomed, To reinforcement, or we shall perish all.' (V.iv.14.6)

These are the two possible explanations:

- a) According to P. Alexander, it refers to 'the Centaur whom medieval romances represent as fighting as an archer for the Trojans' (p.1370).
- b) It may also be the zodiacal constellation of the Archer. The sun stays in that sign between November and December. Therefore, Agamemnon may refer to the 'dreadful' weather conditions that, at that time of the year, were harassing his troops.

However, these explanations must be put aside for the reason that neither of them applies to the Sagittary in *Othello*.

In order to answer the questions above, we must consider Venetian customs, institutions, and local toponymy, which, as the play evidences, were well known to Shakespeare.

Ridley, in his long note to line 158 ('Lead to the Sagittar'[sic]), p.13, says that 'F's Sagittary' suggests 'an official building'. The suggestion probably derives from the fact that it is the place, though not defined, where, in the play, a captain of the Republic was living. He also says that it 'has perhaps helped to mislead commentators', and quotes Knight who believes that it was 'the residence at the Arsenal of the commanding officers of the navy and army of the republic'.

Even though it is confuted by Ridley himself on the basis of what is said in I.ii.49 and I.iii.121, Knight's hypothesis has been reported as possible or true by many critics that followed, thus establishing a most erroneous explanation.

Historically, since the 11th century, various decrees of the Government Boards had regulated the organization of the Arsenal. In the 16th century it had been established that no one – no officer, sailor or other – was allowed to lodge there, except for the three *Patroni dell'Arsenal* (Venetian-Italian), patricians with experience as sea-captains elected by the Major Council, who were tasked with supervising all the activities inside the Arsenal, watch it and keep the keys. They held their office for 32 months, during which time, in turns of 15 days, they were obliged to lodge inside the Arsenal, day and night. Each of them had his own house: the houses were not far from one another and were close to the foundries: that is why they were called 'Hell', 'Purgatory', and 'Paradise', depending on how close they were to the foundries themselves.²

The two Gates of the Arsenal were guarded by 24 *'portoneri'* in the daytime, and 30 at night-time. No one who was extraneous to the works was allowed to enter.³

On the basis of documentary evidence, it is here argued that the Sagittary was not Othello's residence inside the Arsenal.

Not having found any other satisfactory explanation, Arden editors agree that it is an inn with the sign of Sagittarius. But that is questionable: why that specific sign, and not another one? Shakespeare's choice has not been explained: any other sign of the Zodiac would do as well, as the sign of an inn. If Shakespeare chose that one, it is certain that it was not a random choice: the name did refer to a specific locality.

Besides, on historical grounds, too, such a conclusion is not acceptable. The commander of the fleet of the Venetian Republic was an aristocrat (and, in the play, Othello is of noble birth) and received special treatment from the Government. The Senate, by voting the administrative ordinance through, provided him, his family and servants with a most sumptuous home: a commander and his wife would have never been accommodated at an inn, however luxurious it might have been.⁴

On the basis of historical evidence, it can be affirmed that the Sagittary in the play was not an inn where Othello would have lodged with his wife, as Stratfordian critics believe.

It remains to identify Shakespeare's source of the name.

As reported in a contemporary Latin description of Venice, a street near St Mark's was called *vicus sagittarius*, from Latin *sagitta* (arrow): it was the



The Frezzaria

Photo: Noemi Magri

street where *sagittae* (arrows) were made and sold in the past. In Venetian Italian, the name of the street was, and is, 'Frezzaria' (or 'Frezzeria'), from the Venetian-Italian *frezze* (arrows).⁵

The Latin description of the city of Venice, *De situ Venetae urbis* (1502), was written by the Humanist Marco Antonio Cocchio called Sabellico (c.1448-1506) and published in various editions throughout the century.

Shakespeare knew of the Latin name of that street in Venice and chose an equivalent in English which would have recalled both Latin *vicus sagittarius* and contemporary Frezzaria: 'Sagittary' was an effective way of rendering the Latin and Venetian-Italian names: in fact, it kept the meaning of 'arrow'.

On the basis of literary and historical evidence, it is possible to conclude that the Sagittary in the play is the name of the street where the house of Othello and Desdemona was situated.

With reference to 'Lead to the Sagittary the raised search,' it has been objected that Iago, in saying this, is not 'specific enough. An informer does not say, "Bring half a dozen constables to Park Lane and I'll give you your man"' (Ridley, p.13).

But indeed that is exactly what was, and is, said when mentioning a building. We must bear in mind that, at that time, a house was not identified by a civic

number: civic numbers were introduced only in the 19th century. If the street had no name yet, a building was located by the name of the *contrada* (quarter) where it was situated⁶, or by the name of the parish, or by descriptions of the surroundings with reference to a shop, an orchard, a convent, etc.

It was customary to just give the name of the street, if it had one, in order to locate a building, exactly as Iago does.

It is true that it is rather hard to substantiate how Shaksper from Stratford could have possibly known of *vicus Sagittarius*. Even though Jeffery's article is so well documented as to dispel any doubt, no Stratfordian critic has ever agreed on Sabellico as a source. (The street and the Latin origin of its name is also described in Tassini, first published 1863.)

Instead, any such problem finds an easy answer on consideration of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, as the author of Shakespeare's works.

In conclusion, it appears that *vicus Sagittarius* is the only consistent source. Sagittary is the English rendering of the Latin name of the street of Venice near St Mark's Square where arrows, *sagittae*, were made and sold. The contemporary Venetian name was, and is, 'Frezzaria'.⁷ It is the street where Shakespeare chose to situate Othello's house.

NOTES

1. Sagittar Q1; Sagittary Q2; Sagitary F.
2. See M. Nani Mocenigo (pp. 52-53).
3. Archivio di Stato di Venezia (AS.VE), *Patroni e Provveditori all'Arsenal. Capitolare delle parti*. p.5
4. See *Storia di Venezia. Temi. Il Mare*. Treccani, Roma, 1991.
5. See the excellent article by Violet M. Jeffery, pp.24-35, and Tassini, p. 264-265.
6. Some examples of names of *contrade*: Eagle, Unicorn, Tower, Ship, Horse, etc.
7. It may be of interest to note that Lord Byron's first lodging in Venice was the house of a fabric merchant situated on that very street.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexander, Peter (ed.), *William Shakespeare. The Complete Works*. Collins, London, 1962, p.1370
 Archivio di Stato di Venezia (AS.VE), *Patroni e Provveditori all'Arsenal*, p.5
 AS.VE. *Archivio Proprio Contarini. Case de l'officio de l'Arsenal*, p.25
 Coccio, Marco Antonio, Sabellico, *De situ Venetae urbis*. Venezia, 1502

Concina, E., *L'Arsenale della Repubblica di Venezia*. Milano, 1988

Honigmann, E.A. (ed.), *Othello*. Arden Shakespeare, Walton-on-Thames, 1998, p. 126

Knight, C. (ed.), *The Pictorial Edition of the Works of Shakespeare*, 8 Vols 1838-43

Jeffery, Violet, M., 'Shakespeare's Venice' in *MLR*, Jan. 1932, pp.24-35

Maranini, G., *La Costituzione di Venezia*. Firenze, 1974

Nani Mocenigo, M., *L'Arsenale di Venezia*. Ministero della Marina, Ufficio del Gabinetto, Roma, 1938

Ridley, M.R. (ed.) *Othello*, Arden Shakespeare. London, 1992, p.13

Sabellico, *Del sito di Venezia città (1502)* a cura di G. Meneghetti, Venezia, 1957

Shakespeare, W., *Troilus and Cressida*, Wells & Taylor (eds), The Oxford Shakespeare, The Complete Works, Oxford, 1994

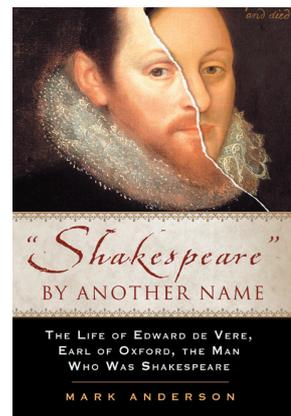
Storia di Venezia. Temi. Il mare. Treccani, Roma, 1991

Tassini, G., *Curiosità Veneziane (1863)*. Venezia, 1970

N.M.

"A WAKE-UP CALL"

—KRISTIN LINKLATER, PROFESSOR OF THEATRE ARTS, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
 "FRESH, ORIGINAL RESEARCH" —BOSTON GLOBE
 "DESERVES SERIOUS ATTENTION" —NEW YORK TIMES
 "ESPECIALLY IMPRESSIVE" —ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION
 "A REMARKABLE NEW BOOK" —MICHAEL YORK
 "ONE OF THE VERY BEST WHODUNNITS YOU WILL EVER READ" —SIR DEREK JACOBI, ACCLAIMED SHAKESPEAREAN ACTOR
 "THE MOST IMPORTANT SHAKESPEARE BIOGRAPHY IN 400 YEARS" —SARAH SMITH, AUTHOR OF CHASING SHAKESPEARES



"SHAKESPEARE" BY ANOTHER NAME
 [GOTHAM BOOKS, PENGUIN GROUP USA]

THE CONTROVERSIAL NEW BIOGRAPHY OF A BRILLIANT, COSMOPOLITAN MAN WITH A DARK SECRET: HE WROTE THE WORKS OF "SHAKESPEARE"

IN BOOKSTORES NOW
 free audio, video, sample chapter, links, and more at
<http://ShakespeareByAnotherName.com>