

Othello's house on the Sagittary: Shakespeare's familiarity with Venice

by *Dottore Noemi Magri*



Fig 1 Braun and Hogenberg's View of Venice, 1572.

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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. This is most probably for the reason that they have not taken the local toponyms or street-names into account. That is the case for 'The Sagittary', twice mentioned in *Othello*. 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 Act I scene 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.

(*Othello* I. i. 155-7).

The initial capital letter shows that the 'Sagittary' was intended as a proper noun: 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, Othello 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.

(*Othello* I. iii. 116-7).

The word *sagitta* in Latin and in Italian means ‘arrow’ so a ‘Sagittary’ might at first suggest (1) an archer; or (2) a place where arrows are made; or (3) a house or an Inn identified by an image of an archer, perhaps the Centaur named Sagittarius. Now the use of that name raises many questions: what sort of residence was it if it existed? 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 ‘Sagittary’ only in one other play, *Troilus and Cressida*. Here more ~~that~~ than one meaning has been attached to the word. As the battle rages, Agamemnon is grieved by the death of Patroclus and many of his commander. So Agamemnon exhorts his fellow leader, Diomedes:

The dreadful Sagittary

Appals our numbers. Haste we, Diomed,

To reinforcement, or we shall perish all.

(Troilus and Cressida V.v. 14-15).

These are the two possible explanations: (a) according to Peter 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 condition, that at that time of the year were harassing his troops.¹ However, these explanations must be put aside as neither of them can apply to the Sagittary in *Othello*.

In order to answer the question above, we must consider Venetian customs, institutions, and local toponyms, which as the play evidences were well known to Shakespeare. Ridley in his long note to line 158 on ‘Lead to the Sagittar’ [sic], says that F’s ‘Sagitary’ suggests ‘an official building’.² The suggestion probably derives from the fact that it the place, though not defined, where in the play a captain of the Republic was living. Ridley 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.³

Fig 2 *Hell and Purgatory:*

Houses of the Patroni dell’ arsenal

Historically, since the eleventh 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 – officer, sailor or other - was allowed to lodge there, except for the three *Patroni dell’Arsenal* (Guardians of the Arsenal), who had to be patricians with experience as sea-captains elected by the Major Council. They 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.⁴ The two Gates of the Arsenal were guarded by 24 porters, *portoneri*, in the daytime, and 30 at night-time. No one who was extraneous to the works was allowed to enter.⁵ On the basis of documentary evidence, it is here argued that the Sagittary was not inside the Arsenal.

Not having found any other satisfactory explanation, the 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 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.⁶ 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 street where *sagittae* (arrows) were made and sold in the past. In Venetian Italian, the name of the street was, and is, ‘Frezzaria’ (or ‘Frezzaria’), from the Venetian dialect of Italian *frezza* (arrows).⁷ The Latin description of the city of Venice, *De situ Venetiae 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. (Ridley, p.13).

Fig 3 Location of Calle Frezzaria near St Mark’s Square.

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, a building was located by the name of the *contrada* (quarter) where it was situated,⁸ 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 very hard to explain how Shakspeare 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 was also described by Tassini in 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 likely explanation. '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*. It is in this prestigious street where Shakespeare chose to situate Othello's house, close to the centre of power.

Editor's Afterword

An earlier version of this article appeared in the DVS newsletter in February 2010. It was reproduced in the posthumous collection of Dott. Magri's essays *Such Fruits out of Italy* ed. Gary Goldstein (2014).

Magri's conclusion was reached independently from Shaul Bassi and Alberto Toso Fei (2007, 85-86), who also identify the *via Sagittaria* as the modern-day *via Frezzaria* without offering any reasons. Their book is a most useful guide for any Shakespeare lover who visits *La Serenissima*. Although they leave it unstated, the authors makes the persuasive case that the author must have visited the city in person. In the introduction, they state:

The image of Renaissance Venice provided by his works demonstrates such vitality that it still remains possible to discover the atmospheres and places in which his masterpieces are set. We have selected forty elements that are directly linked to the English playwright, all of them drawn from quotations of his works: places, people, events, situations, from San Marco to Rialto, the only place explicitly mentioned in Shakespeare's Venetian works, from the Carnival to the ghetto, which was in fact instituted in the early sixteenth century, from the figures of the most famous condottieri to the doges and scholars of the period – all contribute to helping us see Venice through the eyes of Shylock and the Moor. A sort of Elizabethan Venice, unknown to most.

Shaul Bassi and Alberto Toso Fei

Shakespeare in Venice: Exploring the City with Shylock and Othello (2007, 85-86)

Richard Paul Roe in *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy* makes the same identification of The Sagittary with Via Frezzaria also without argument (2011, 168-9). Roe quotes Dottore Magri elsewhere but not in this instance.

Kevin Gilvary, 2021

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Another interpretation is that Agamemnon uses 'sagittary' as an abstract noun meaning a 'volley or flurry of arrows', which would explain why so many named Greek warriors are casualties. *Ed*
- ² Sagittar Q 1; Sagittary Q2: Sagitary F.
- ³ Michael Neil, editor of *Othello* in the Oxford Shakespeare series (2006, 207) asserts: 'Sagittary: an inn with the sign of Sagittarius (one of the twelve signs of the zodiac, depicting a centaur with a bow and arrow). The Centaur was a monster with the body of a horse and the torso of a man: the inn-sign thus becomes another perverted 'sign of love' with an ironic appropriateness to the union of Othello and Desdemona, which Iago has already depicted as a monstrous coupling of horse and woman (ll. 110-13).'
- ⁴ See M. Nani Mocenigo, 52-53. An alternative explanation for their names is that they were derived from the *Divina Commedia* by Dante who visited Venice in 1321. In the *Inferno*, Dante evokes an image of the Venice Arsenale to explain the punishment reserved for swindlers: immersion in boiling pitch. Both explanations are possible.
- ⁵ Archivio di Stato di Venezia (AS.VE), *Patroni e Provveditori all'Arsenal. Capitolare delle patti*, p.5
- ⁶ See *Storia di Venezia. Temi. Il Mare*. Treccani, Roma, 1991
- ⁷ See the excellent article by Violet M. Jeffery, pp. 24- 35, and Tassini, p. 264-265.
- ⁸ Some examples of *contrade* (names of quarters) include Eagle, Unicorn, Tower, Ship, and Horse.