trovano collocazione come fr. 89 in riferimento a Democrito, in virtù del noto aneddoto che circolava in antico secondo cui Democrito aveva preferito lasciare a pascolo le proprie terre. Troppo poco, sostiene in maniera impeccabile Grilli, per un’attribuzione che l’esiguità del materiale non può in alcun modo sostenere.

Mi sembra di aver dato qualche breve, ma significativo saggio del modo di procedere di Grilli, aperto per necessità a più diretrici di senso e impegnato, pour cause, a lavorare su più fronti, in considerazione dell’amplissima fortuna di cui il trattato godette in ogni tempo, ma soprattutto in autori come Lattanzio o Agostino, presso i quali le meditazioni ciceroniane apparivano a tal punto contraddistinte da lucidità argomentativa da offrire un esempio particolarmente apprezzabile e un modello; ma proprio questa considerazione, che è nei fatti una valutazione attenta della ricezione del trattato e della considerevole fortuna di cui esso godette in ambito cristiano, impone allo studioso le ragioni della prudenza, in special modo quando si tratta di operare tra ciò che può risultare quanto meno con ragionevole certezza imputabile a Cicerone e quello che, ispirato all’Arpinate e al trattato, va invece letto come frutto della rielaborazione altrui. Di questi rischi Grilli avverte la pericolosità soprattutto per opere come il terzo libro delle Divinae institutiones di Lattanzio o i libri 13–14 del de Trinitate di Agostino, opere che risentono di certissimi influssi dell’Hortensius, ma proprio per questo ‘pericolose’ per i rischi di indebite attribuzioni al trattato di riflessioni in ogni modo ad esso riconducibili.

E proprio per tali ragioni, di tali finissime riflessioni di Grilli, mature in un lungo arco cronologico e concretizzatesi in questa preziosissima opera, la comunità scientifica non può che dirsi grata all’Autore, cui è mancato il piacere di veder pubblicata l’opera nella veste definitiva, e a chi, meritoriamente, ne ha ultimato gli sforzi.

ALFREDO CASAMENTO

Palermo


Joel Altman’s The Improbability of Othello: Rhetorical Anthropology and Shakespearean Selfhood is, like his earlier The Tudor Play of Mind, a big book. It offers extensive, detailed commentary on one of Shakespeare’s major tragedies as well as briefer examinations of other plays. It situates those readings, as well as the stage practices, the acting, and Shakespeare’s own sense of himself and his craft, in their historical context, specifically relating them all to what Altman calls the “rhetorical anthropology” that he sees as defining the Renaissance. It also traces that rhetorical anthropology back to
its sources in antiquity. Finally, Altman’s study offers a detailed analysis of a concept that is central to rhetoric—probability—and shows us its importance not just for that discipline, but for dialectic and philosophy as well as for concepts of self and society.

As in his previous book, Altman starts from the assumption that for the Renaissance rhetoric was the “Queen of the Sciences.” But whereas in The Tudor Play of Mind, he was interested in how the teaching of students to debate questions from different points of view (the argumentum in utramque partem) shaped the development of the English Renaissance drama, here he sees rhetoric as determining the basic ways that people viewed both themselves and their culture. According to the pre-Socratic philosophers, who invented rhetoric, we live in a world of appearances, where matter is in flux and the senses unstable, the world of rhetoric that deals not with absolute truths, but with probabilities. This view, which was inherited by Renaissance humanists, is what Altman calls “rhetorical anthropology.” It assumes that individuals operate in the transient historical world where cognition is always radically contingent; that people cannot truly know others; and that what they experience as their selves are the changeable products of rhetorical interactions. Orators can be persuasive in this world, not because their words reference realities, but because they create emotionally compelling heterocosms out of language for their audience. Altman distinguishes two kinds of rhetorical identities that get produced. Adapting Raymond Williams’ terms for ideologies, he calls one “emergent,” the identity that gets produced (“emerges”) in the rhetorical interaction itself, an identity that is contingent, temporally bound, and capable of further transformations. This identity was defined in the works of pre-Socratics such as Protagoras and Gorgias. By contrast, a second form of rhetorical identity, which Altman labels “residual,” is the collective experience of many emergent identities; looking both backward into the past and forward into the future, it seems to offer a more stable self to the individual. This identity was ultimately derived from the thinking of ancient rhetoricians such as Cicero and Quintilian, both of whom were relying on Aristotle and responding to Plato’s attack on rhetoric, and who believed one’s character was fixed, stable, and dependable. In Altman’s analysis, Renaissance individuals experienced identity both ways, that is, as something extemporized and constantly created anew, but also as something that is repeatable and thus seemingly permanent.

In Shakespeare’s play, Othello thinks of his identity in Ciceronian terms as residual, as something dependable and enduring, whereas Iago sees his in Protagorean terms as emergent and thus open to be fashioned anew. However, since all residual identities can be changed by new rhetorical transactions, their stability is an illusion. Iago is fully aware of this fact, and it gives him the upper hand in dealing with Othello, allowing him to reshape Othello’s identity by getting him to re-read the signs of Desdemona’s love, seeing them not as signs of her quasi-divine status, but of her status as a whore. Iago’s technique in changing the way Othello reads signs is to get him to take probabilities as truths, which is precisely what Aristotle,
Cicero, and others argued was the essence of rhetorical persuasion. The problem for Othello is that the probabilities he accepts simply are not true. Thus, although Altman proclaims at one point that Othello is a tragedy of probability (p. 10), what he really argues is captured in his title, the play is a tragedy of improbability.

The material I have summarized in the preceding paragraphs occupies the Prologue and the first two chapters of Altman’s book. In the next two, he rehearses the way that dialectic, or logic, which had been the “Queen of the Sciences” in the Middle Ages and concerned itself with arguments aimed at reaching true conclusions, became rhetoricized in the Renaissance, thanks to the work of Rudolph Agricola, for whom psychological credibility was the criterion by which one judged the truth of arguments. Despite some resistance, Agricola’s views dominated subsequent developments in the teaching of rhetoric, and they thus provide a useful context for reading Othello, since Iago’s “proofs” work almost exclusively on Othello’s psychology. In his fourth chapter, Altman argues that after Agricola, rhetoricians consistently conflated the probable with the true, persuasion with demonstration, and words with things. A self that is fashioned by such means is thus always open to treating mere thoughts as realities, ultimately vulnerable to being transformed itself by new persuasive arguments—which is precisely what happens to Othello in Shakespeare’s play.

In Chapter 5, Altman focuses on one of the features of Renaissance rhetoric that distinguishes it from its classical models, the will, which plays a key role in every rhetorical interaction since it was seen as ruling over reason and was linked directly to vivid speech (enargeia), the key to persuasion. For Saint Augustine, and for Petrarch and the Renaissance humanists who followed him, people have two wills, one that embraces worldly things and leads to damnation, and one that turns from the world and looks to God. The problem for rhetoricians in the Renaissance was that the will was seen as being far more easily moved by the passions than by reason, thus potentially allying rhetoric with the devil. From an Augustinian point of view, Iago’s will is errant, barren, and ultimately self-destructive, but as Altman argues in Chapter 6, it is powerful enough to get Othello and others to embrace conclusions before they actually know the arguments that lead up to them, a kind of mental confusion that runs throughout the play and that is emblematized by the figure Renaissance rhetoricians called hysterion proteron. Altman’s seventh chapter argues for the existence of another, complementary rhetoric at work in Othello, a rhetoric of omission. For what gets omitted in the action compels the characters to fill in the gaps to create the truth out of what are really probabilities. This rhetoric is precisely the one that Shakespeare employs in writing a play: he provides partial information and gets the audience to flesh out the action in their minds. In Othello Shakespeare uses this rhetoric of theatrical potentiality, but deconstructs it in the action, and thematizes that deconstruction.

In Chapter 8 Altman discusses the way that the anthropological rhetoric of the Renaissance was implicated in the creation of dramatic characters,
thus allowing Shakespeare to grasp the way it worked in his culture. For playwrights would start off with bare plot outlines and lists of *dramatis personae*, and then turn the latter into actual characters by having them engage in specific rhetorical interactions. Chapter 9 then argues that since Shakespeare fashioned characters in this way, one could expect them to be inconsistent because of the different situations they were subjected to; to contain a surplus of potential selves; and to be, like Hamlet, occasionally mystified by what they thought was inside them.

Chapter 10 tries to answer the question of what it meant for an English actor to play a rejected and despised Other, such as the Jew Shylock, the half-man, half-animal Caliban, or the Blackamoor Othello. This, the most speculative section of the book, may elicit the most resistance from readers since there is little detailed evidence documenting how actors actually responded to the parts they played. Nevertheless, Altman argues that when they assumed characters like Shylock and Caliban, they may have found themselves identifying with them, partly because of the transgressive fantasies involved and partly because of the humanity those characters were sometimes accorded. Chapter 11 makes this analysis specific by focusing on Richard Burbage who performed Othello in Shakespeare’s company. Altman suggests that Burbage would have played Othello both as the socially vilified Blackamoor caricature of English Renaissance culture, and as an exotic traveler, pilgrim, classical hero, and defender of Venice and Christendom. In the end, Burbage’s experience could have been paradoxical: he could have remained separate from Othello and seen how precarious his identity as a Venetian is, or he could have shared the anxieties Othello experienced, felt his murderous rage, and longed for the restoration of his noble identity at the end of the play.

In his Epilogue Altman argues that Shakespeare was dissatisfied with this notion of a rhetorical selfhood and finally renounced it in the late romances in favor of the greater assurance afforded by divine providence. In *The Winter’s Tale*, for example, and in other plays that anticipate it throughout Shakespeare’s career, he rejects the turning of mere probabilities into truths in favor of a faith that believes that truths do exist. This is the faith that is elicited when Hermione miraculously comes to life at the end of the play.

I am not sure that Shakespeare’s celebration of faith in his romances is entirely unqualified, but as my review should have indicated by now, although one may disagree with this or that particular, Altman’s work is a magisterial accomplishment. It will be required reading for anyone who studies Shakespeare, English Renaissance literature and culture, and the history of rhetoric between antiquity and the Renaissance.

Wayne A. Rebhorn

*University of Texas at Austin*