



# “I Must Be Circumstanced:” Bianca’s Effect on Othello

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“I Must Be Circumstanced:”

Bianca’s Effect on *Othello*

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A Thesis in the Field of English Literature  
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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## Abstract

This study examines the inclusion of Bianca in William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello, Moor of Venice*. What purpose did the character serve, if any? How does the play benefit from her creation? Previous scholarly criticism, along with a close textual analysis of both the play and its source material, provide a deeper understanding of the character. The investigation concludes that Bianca helps the audience decipher the play's action by creating a triptych of romantic couples, providing a better picture of the main character by serving as his foil, and by providing catharsis for the audience, cementing the interpretation of the drama as tragedy.

## Author Biography

Jennifer Bastin saw an uncut, repertory production of *Hamlet* at eight years old and has been in love with Shakespeare ever since. After earning a B.A. in English Literature from Hartwick College, Ms. Bastin relocated to Cambridge, MA. It was not long thereafter that Ms. Bastin decided to continue her study of the bard at Harvard.

Originally from Detroit, Ms. Bastin is not easily categorized and believes that quality is what initially drew her to dramatic texts. She feels there is no situation that cannot be benefitted or explained by Shakespeare. The poems and plays that have both survived and thrived in the past 400 years reach across every continent, language, and culture, teaching not just stories but the human condition itself. Ms. Bastin looks forward to learning more from Shakespeare in the future and hopes to one day see a production of *Hamlet* that uses a real human skull.

## Dedication

For my mother Betty,  
who always encouraged me to ask “Why?”

and to poor Yorick,  
for your infinite jest and most excellent fancy

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks goes out to all those who had a hand in this project. To Dr. Theoharis, whose guidance and expertise in tragedy helped get this idea off the ground and onto the page. Thank you for giving me permission to have an authoritative voice and for your flexibility, understanding, compelling teaching methods, and sense of humour. Thank you to Talaya Delaney for your patience and listening ear; your faith in my topic was instrumental to keeping me afloat within the sea of research. My gratitude to the teaching of Joyce Van Dyke, whose class first sparked my interest in Bianca's purpose.

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## Chapter I.

### Introduction

*“For such as we are made of, such we be.” –Twelfth Night*

While preeminent, archetypal roles such as Hamlet, Lady Macbeth, and Falstaff are typically in the limelight of Shakespeare’s dramatic canon, the impact of his minor characters cannot be ignored. It is impossible to imagine *King Lear* without the fool, or *Romeo and Juliet* without the nurse. Playwright Tom Stoppard went as far as to place subsidiary characters in the spotlight with his 1967 play *Rosencrantz and Gilderstern are Dead*, offering a fresh perspective for one of the bard’s most popular works. Despite their occasional cut from stage and/or film productions, these secondary figures were deliberately included by the author and are often crucial to the story. The addition of Bianca alters the essence of *Othello*, bringing a measure of humanity that gives depth to the narrative. She completes a triptych of couples allowing the audience to observe the social limitations of sex, class, and marital status by viewing the characters through the lens of romantic pairs. Placing the Cassio/Bianca pairing at the same level as Othello/Desdemona and Iago/Emilia elevates the play from a simple domestic revenge story of marriage upset by an interloper/paramour to a rich and complex tragedy. Through Bianca, Shakespeare simultaneously illuminates the passivity of the other female characters and highlights the irrationality of the men. Bianca also provides a deeper understanding into Othello’s actions by serving as his foil. She is the only other character who gets jealous of her lover and her reaction to that emotion showcases the

preventability of Othello's bloody deeds. Bianca's survival at the end of the play is necessary for viewers to achieve a catharsis that not felt by the death of Othello alone. It is only through the hope of Bianca's potential success that readers can be relieved of any pity or fear after play's conclusion. It is the goal of this thesis to critically expand Bianca's reach beyond the limits of social status, class, and gender by examining the impact of her coupling with Cassio, comparing her actions to Othello's, and analyzing the effect of her inclusion on the play's classification as tragedy.

## Chapter II.

*“Though I am not naturally honest,  
I am so sometimes by chance.” –Winter’s Tale*

Scholars agree that the majority of Shakespeare’s tragedies, including *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and *Timon of Athens*, were composed at some point during the decade spanning 1599-1608. The only subject more widely debated than chronology is the discussion among both critics and admirers over which of these tragedies should be classified as the greatest. *Hamlet* and *King Lear* are generally listed as the main contenders (followed closely by fan-favorite *Macbeth*) but Arden Shakespeare editor E.A.J. Honigmann suggests the following: “Why not *Othello*?” (1). In comparison to the iconic images of the Weird Sisters stirring their cauldron, Lear shrieking on the heath, and poor Yorick’s manhandled skull, *Othello* does not seem to have the same emblematic punch as its competitors. Yet Honigmann proposes that among these tragedies, *Othello* has “arguably the best plot, two of Shakespeare’s most original characters, the most powerful scene in any of his plays, and poetry second to none. We may fairly call it the most exciting of the tragedies...so why not the greatest?” (1). That “excitement” factor may precisely be what others perceive as a fault. *Othello* is often critically dismissed as merely a domestic tragedy or ‘race play’ and found wanting against the brooding, intellectual *Hamlet* or the cosmic, spectacular *King Lear*. The nature of these opinions, however, may not entirely relate to dramatic content. The racism, sexism, and classism of critics have influenced *Othello*’s reception from its creation though modern scholarship. Awareness of this problematic

history surfaced at the turn of the century and saw *Othello* brought prominently to the forefront of discussion. In *Othello and Interpretive Traditions*, Edward Pechter states that during “*Othello*’s growing ascendancy, criticism has been transformed by feminist, African American, and post-colonialist studies, to whose central concerns the play seems directly to appeal” (2). Through the lens of these emerging disciplines, one discovers that Bianca, not the title character, has been most maligned by critics. Though she may first appear inconsequential, Bianca is an integral part of *Othello*.

Like many great figures, Bianca comes from very humble beginnings. Shakespeare’s inspiration for *Othello* derived from “The Third Decade, Story 7” novella in Giraldi Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi* (1565) which tells the tale of “a Moorish Captain” whose Ensign accuses the Moor’s Venetian wife of committing adultery with a Corporal and, as a result, the Corporal’s life is threatened and the Captain murders his wife (Cinthio 370). During the story, a handkerchief belonging to the Moor’s wife comes into the Corporal’s possession and Cinthio states that the “Corporal had a woman at home who worked the most wonderful embroidery...and seeing the handkerchief and learning that it belonged to the Moor’s wife...began to make a similar one” (381). Having seen the woman copying the handkerchief through a window, the Ensign accosts the Corporal when he is “issuing one dark night from the house of a courtesan with whom he used to amuse himself” (Cinthio 382). In the hands of the bard, these separate, unnamed women were transformed into Bianca. In *Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists*, Graham Bradshaw gives particular attention to Shakespeare’s creative deviations, stating:

The critical value of considering Shakespeare's creatively purposeful departures from his source materials is like that of following an author's revision process: it can concentrate attention on whatever is now being done to replace what had been done, which in turn can confirm our sense

of when we need to ask “Why this?” or alert us in cases where we might not have thought, or wanted, to put that question. ... What Shakespeare has done is very much *meant*. (127)

But what, if anything, does Shakespeare achieve with Bianca’s creation? None of her thirty-four lines directly impact the plot. Leaving her a mute, peripheral figure would not have altered the play’s course. What does Shakespeare tell the audience with her inclusion, specifically with her dialogue? Applying Bradshaw’s point of authorial purpose, what does Bianca’s presence *mean* for the play? In essence, *why Bianca?*

One of the earliest critics to take up this question is Timothy Murray. In his 1985 article “*Othello’s* Foul Generic Thoughts and Methods,” Murray chastises his predecessors, stating “Shakespeare’s solicitors either forget Bianca or cite her as yet another example of the tragic whore” (76). Despite this insight, there is little to no change in Bianca’s critical discussion until nearly a decade later<sup>1</sup>. The 1990s saw the rise of third-wave feminism and its influence on academia, drawing special attention to Shakespeare’s female characters. Feminist critics primarily focused on examining and dismantling Bianca’s label of “whore” in both the play and its scholarship. In 1992’s *The Art of Loving: Female Subjectivity and Male Discursive Traditions in Shakespeare’s Tragedies*, Evelyn Gajowski notes Bianca’s importance stating “Shakespeare’s invention of the character Bianca is one of the more significant transmutations of his source material... Her presence expands the theme of men’s treatment of women, particularly that which is dramatized in the central relationship—of a husband who believes his wife to be a whore” (79). Gajowski’s assessment that Bianca exists to compare her alleged

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<sup>1</sup> A few Bianca-specific critics appear within that time frame but none match the level of discourse found in Murray and Rulon-Miller. For a comprehensive, historical look at critical response to Bianca, see Rulon-Miller 100-106.

‘whoredom’ to the other women is refreshing due to the absence of sexist undertones, but offers little in the way of new understanding regarding Bianca as a character in her own right. In 1995, Nina Rulon-Miller published “*Othello’s Bianca: Climbing Out of the Bed of Patriarchy*” essentially picking up where Murray left off, giving a scathing review of previous critics and highlighting the importance of examining Bianca’s character:

Bianca certainly was forgotten by most early *Othello* critics, but those who remembered her did not usually see her as a “tragic” whore. Rather, she was merely a *cheap* whore for these critics, inspiring either furtive titillation or censure and disgust...However, recent critics have begun to view Bianca as a strong, independent woman rather than as a complement to the play’s main characters or as a “tragic whore;” indeed, for some recent critics, Bianca may not be a whore at all. (99)

While this concept was progressive at the time, it falls somewhat flat in twenty-first century discourse. Rulon-Miller wants readers to examine Bianca as her own character outside of a patriarchal lens but does not offer any assessment beyond this change in scope. It is not until the publication of Pechter’s 1998 article “Why Should We Call Her a Whore? Bianca in *Othello*” (which was later integrated into *Othello and Interpretive Traditions*) that a significant shift in critical discourse is seen. Pechter succeeds where Rulon-Miller failed. He not only declares prior assessments of Bianca to be “gross misrepresentations,” but also examines why these ideas persisted (“Why” 367). While Pechter discusses Bianca at new lengths, his desire to distance himself from previous interpretations leaves gaps in his analysis. Using Pechter’s work as a launch-pad, Bianca can now be given a full-character analysis and brought into current critical conversations regarding *Othello* and its place among the tragedies.

## Chapter III.

*“If men could be contended with what they are,  
there would be no fear in marriage.” –Alls Well That Ends Well*

With the exception of *Romeo and Juliet*, marriage plots are typically reserved for Shakespearean comedies. A cornucopia of romantic entanglements—lovers escaping into the forest, taming a wild bride to guarantee a second one, wooing in the disguise of servitude, mistaken identities and the confused feelings that follow—generally conclude in one or more trips to the altar. A wedding presented as a conclusion leaves the audience to imagine how the story unfolds from there, if they consider it at all. By starting with an elopement, *Othello* seemingly begins where these comedies end, starting a new story that shifts focus from the experiences of two individuals to those of a married couple. In *Wooing, Wedding and Power: Women in Shakespeare’s Plays*, Irene Dash discusses how *Othello’s* matrimonial opening brings to the forefront what the comedies leave out, claiming that the play “asks whether the passion and idealism of two lovers who have courageously crossed color lines and defied conventions can be sustained in marriage. It asks whether the patterns of marriage are stronger than the individuals, even the most outstanding individuals” (103). These “defied conventions” open the action of the play. Iago and Rodrigo have gone to Brabantio’s house to alert him of his daughter’s elopement. Once an informed Brabantio realizes Desdemona is missing, he becomes alarmed and the first mention of marriage occurs:

*Brabantio.* Are they married, you think?

*Roderigo.* Truly, I think they are.

*Brabantio.* O heaven, how got she out? O treason of the blood!



(1.1.165-167)<sup>2</sup>

The audience's initial exposure to this marriage is the same as Brabantio's: seeing it as something outrageous, an illegitimate and traitorous act. Instead of this marriage as cause for celebration, the audience starts out with a negative impression of the couple and their union is called under speculation. Because the ceremony was not held publicly (whereby we can assume the other characters of the play were not in attendance), there was no opportunity to publish the banns<sup>3</sup>. Having denied anyone the right to privately object, Desdemona and Othello now have to deal with any grievances being aired publicly. With their outcry, Iago and Roderigo are figuratively giving reasons why these two should not be wed in holy matrimony, telling Brabantio "your daughter, if you have not given her leave, / I say again, hath made a gross revolt" (1.1.131-132). In "Tying the Knot in *Othello*," John Baxter talks about the anxiety produced from the unseen nuptials, stating that "because their elopement occurs off-stage and 'outside' the play (though not outside the action), the precise form of that ceremony is difficult to determine" (269). The audience cannot see this marriage as an act of love simply because they did not *see* it at all, forcing them to identify with the sentiments of present characters. By the time Othello and Desdemona appear, they must work backward to get out from under this negative impression. They introduce their marriage—to both the other characters and the audience—by legally defending it.

Desdemona and Othello not only have to advocate for their socially atypical elopement but also for their pairing itself. Elizabethan racial prejudices linked blackness

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all textual quotes taken from: Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*. Ed. E. A. J. Honigmann. Bloomsbury, 1997, 113-343.

<sup>3</sup> For further information regarding wedding practices, see: Boulton, Jeremy. "Itching After Private Marryings? Marriage Customs in Seventeenth-century London." *The London Journal*, 16.1, 1991, 15-34.

with evil, animalistic sexuality, and a rejection of Judeo-Christian order. This is reflected in the racist images that Iago and Roderigo use to rouse Brabantio, telling him “an old black ram / is tupping your white ewe!...the devil will make a grandsire of you...your daughter / and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” (1.1.87-88, 90, 114-115). When Brabantio confronts Othello, his objection is not to the haste or secrecy of their elopement, but to the union of his daughter with a black foreigner:

O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter?  
 Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her,  
 For I'll refer me to all things of sense,  
 If she in chains of magic were not bound,  
 Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy,  
 So opposite to marriage that she shunned  
 The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation,  
 Would ever have, to incur a general mock,  
 Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom  
 Of such a thing as thou? to fear, not to delight.

(1.2.62-71)

The implication that Othello has kidnapped Desdemona and is holding her with the power of evil enchantments is entirely based on racist and xenophobic conjecture. Othello's blackness aligns with imagery of the devil; his title of Moor, links him to barbarism. In ““And Wash the Ethiop White”: Femininity and the Monstrous in Othello,” Karen Newman explores these prejudices, stating “the black Moor and the fair Desdemona are united in a marriage that all the other characters view as unthinkable. Shakespeare uses their assumption to generate the plot itself” (41-42). Othello's elopement is seen as penetrating civil Venetian society with his presence and potential progeny. This fear of miscegenation heightens the controversy surrounding the

marriage's legitimacy, and creates a tension both on and off stage. According to Pechter, "the original audiences may have been more rather than less vulnerable to the play's peculiarly anxiety-producing effects. The indiscriminate mixing of black and Moorish impressions serves to endow Othello with an unstable quality that adds to and may indeed be at the heart of his terrifying strangeness" (*Int. Trad.* 35). Othello has to justify his position to, not only to answer Brabantio's claims, but also assuage the audience's fear.

Othello successfully corrects these misjudgments of character with his speeches before the senate. Allusions to military rank are made clear when the Duke addresses him as "Valiant Othello" and implores him to defend Venice in battle (I.3.49). The senate members appear collectively shocked at Brabantio's accusations, which immediately follow this otherwise warm greeting. According to Honigmann's stage directions, the reply credited to "All" senators—"We are very sorry for't" (1.3.74)—probably had one senator make a statement of surprise and the rest audibly agree (*Othello* 140). The astonishment at Othello's implication gives pause to the play's mounting anxious tension, muddling it with confusion. If Othello is affected by the discombobulated feelings of those around him, he does not show it. Othello gives the following preface to the company before making his full defense:

Rude am I in my speech,  
 And little blest with the soft phrase of peace,  
 For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith  
 Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used  
 Their dearest action in the tented field,  
 And little of this great world can I speak  
 More than pertains to feats of broil and battle,  
 And therefore little shall I grace my cause

In speaking for myself.

(1.3.82-90)

Even though his language here is similar to Richard III—"I, in this weak piping time of peace, / have no delight to pass away the time"—the results have the opposite impact: while Richard is "determined to prove a villain," Othello appears the hero (*R3* 1.1.24-25, 30). Far from "rude" in his full oration, Othello appears poised, well-spoken, and exudes a sense of integrity and honor befitting his rank. He impresses the senate so much that the Duke declares "I think this tale would win my daughter too" (1.3.172). Desdemona has the final say in quelling any critics. Not the "maiden never bold" of Brabantio's claim, Desdemona openly confirms Othello's recollection (1.3.95). She publicly declares a shift in her allegiance from father to husband before the senate, telling Brabantio:

I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband:  
 And so much duty as my mother showed  
 To you, preferring you before her father,  
 So much I challenge that I may profess  
 Due to the Moor my Lord.

(1.3.185-189)

Much like *King Lear's* Cordelia, Desdemona's claim negatively impacts her standing with her father. However in the eyes of the senate, it is not legally seen as an act of betrayal but an affirmation of her newfound wifely duty. What Brabantio cites as defiance, the court takes as obedience. By publicly acquiescing to—and thereby reinforcing—traditional social order, Desdemona undoes any damage caused by her elopement.

Despite any initial misgivings, Othello and Desdemona appear to be an apt romantic match given their similar dispositions and humility before the senate. By having

the play immediately address the common prejudices of the time, Shakespeare allows the audience to temporarily move (somewhat) past them and focus on Othello and Desdemona's relationship, not as an unnatural act, but as a typical union. According to Baxter, the main conclusion of Act One is "how normal their marriage is: how normative it is within the religious culture of the time, surprisingly so in view of the major obstacles they face in terms of race and ethnicity, and all the more surprising given that it is maintained *within* their glamorous and exotic relationship" (275). If *Othello* picks up where the comedies end, then it can be argued that the play actually *begins* in Act Two after the dust from the previous events has settled. The second act's starting point brings the play's action into the present, allowing the audience to shift focus back to the initial question of whether or not a marriage between 'outstanding individuals' can succeed.

One way to measure Desdemona and Othello's matrimonial success is in their juxtaposition with other couples. In *Cinthio*, the Moor and his wife have been married for some time but Shakespeare presents Othello and Desdemona as newlyweds, making it easy to contrast their feelings with those of Iago and Emilia, a long-term couple. This allows the Bianca/Cassio pairing to provide an unwed perspective completing a triptych of marriage: before, during, and after. This deepens the already prevalent comparison of *Othello's* characters, especially the women to each other. According to Bradshaw, "in the Shakespearean nexus of contrasts the three couples are also presented as two male-and-female *trios*, so that Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca make up a triad of women who all suffer from their men and from a disquietingly representative range of male attitudes" (172). Examining each character's behavior through the lens of a martial triptych allows one to fully assess the play's action.

The primary thing women “suffer” at the hands of men in this play is verbal abuse, with Bianca serving as the main target. *Othello* is imbued with misogynistic language; all three women are referred to as “whore” at least once within the text. The term itself appears twelve times (fourteen including “bewhored” & “whoring”) and is used more here than in any other Shakespeare play. The designation is often applied to Bianca before the play even begins. Honigmann’s Arden edition of the play defines Bianca in its “lists of roles” as “a courtesan [and Cassio’s mistress]” giving readers two different descriptions to unpack (*Othello* 114). The Oxford English Dictionary states that ‘courtesan’ is “a somewhat euphemistic appellation,” which slightly lessens Bianca’s editorial calumny and allows the play’s text and tone to determine the validity of that title (OED 2017). The added clarification “Cassio’s mistress” nudges readers in the direction of seeing Cassio and Bianca as a legitimate couple, but at whose suggestion? In “‘The very names of the Persons’: Editing and the Invention of Dramatick Character,” Random Cloud states “no Shakespeare text published before his death has such a list, and only a handful exist in the folio tradition after his death...The crucial thing to observe is that the dramatis-personae list has insinuated itself between the title page and the opening...[and has] now become as sacrosanct as the very body of Shakespeare’s playtext” (95). Given their variation across publications and editors, it is up to the reader to determine how these lists influence their interpretation of the work.

Within the play itself, the first depiction of Bianca is delivered by Iago. He describes her as “a housewife that by selling her desires / buys herself bread and clothes: it is a creature / that dotes on Cassio – as ’tis the strumpet’s plague / to beguile many and be beguiled by one” (4.1.94-98). This portrayal is problematic for two main reasons, the

first being that if one does take Honigmann's dramatis-personae into account, Iago is a known "villain" so his narration should not be trusted (*Othello* 114). Second, Iago's description of Bianca is delivered after she has appeared on-stage and it directly contradicts her behavior. Bianca arrives in a scene with Cassio at the end of Act Three, where they have the following exchange:

*Bianca.* Save you, friend Cassio!  
*Cassio.* What make you from home?  
 How is't with you, my most fair Bianca?  
 I'faith, sweet love, I was coming to your house.  
*Bianca.* And I was going to your lodging, Cassio.  
 What, keep a week away? seven days and nights?  
 Eight score eight hours? and lovers' absent hours  
 More tedious than the dial, eight score times!  
 O weary reckoning!

(3.4.169-176)

The language spoken between the two does not seem to indicate the relationship of a prostitute and customer but one of equally amorous young lovers. According to Pechter:

Bianca is economically and sexually independent. She governs her own life apparently without father or husband; she had amatory interests which she actively pursues, coming out from the domestic space of her own house to look for Cassio...to suggest that an autonomous, sexually active woman is necessarily a whore, selling her desires for bread and clothes, does not follow. ("Why" 369)

While there may not be any clear-cut terminology for Bianca's place within the play's social order, it appears that the title "courtesan," or the more vulgar "whore," is not accurate. Just as Desdemona and Othello began the play clouded by their elopement, Bianca enters under the shadow of this abasing title.





If to preserve this vessel for my lord  
 From any hated foul unlawful touch  
 Be not to be a strumpet, I am none.

*Othello.* What, not a whore?

*Desdemona.* No, as I shall be saved.

*Othello.* Is't possible?

*Desdemona.* O heaven, forgive us!

*Othello.* I cry you mercy then,  
 I took you for that cunning whore of Venice  
 That married with Othello.

(4.2.82-92)

Desdemona's objectionable refrains to Othello's taunts do not fit within the patriarchal confines of marriage. She does not play the part of a silent, submissive wife.

Consequently, when Othello repeats these abuses he will physically force her into submission, calling out "Down, strumpet" and then smothering her (5.2.78). Emilia also fails at her wifely duties when she emphatically rejects Iago's direct orders to "charm your tongue"—"*I will not charm my tongue*" and "get you home"—"*I will ne'er go home*" (5.2.179-180, 191,194). Since Emilia is not put in her place by her husband's words, Iago—like Othello—bodily asserts his penetrative dominance, screaming "villainous whore!" and fatally stabbing her (5.2.227). In "'Proper' Men and 'Fallen' Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello," Ruth Vanita states "*Othello* is the only one of Shakespeare's major tragedies in which the innocent victim is put to death before our eyes after systematic physical and mental torture in the presence of witnesses, and this is possible because she is a wife....The way [Emilia] is killed is a condensed version of the more long-drawn-out process of Desdemona's murder" (349). With her unchecked

contestation, Bianca separates herself from the other women, the wives, by doing what they cannot: she challenges her alleged 'whoredom' and survives.

## Chapter IV.

*“For love, thou know'st, is full of jealousy.” –Two Gentlemen of Verona*

In the world of *Othello*, the domestic dominance of men over women is absolute. Husbands maintained power over their wives, replacing the authority previously held by their fathers. Often, marriage was not ‘the meeting of true minds’ but the exchange of ownership between men. In “‘Too Gentle’: Jealousy and Class in *Othello*,” Rebecca Olson states:

Given jealousy’s association with guardianship, surveillance, and general “husbandry”...it was expected that a man would be jealous of his property, which would have included his wife or daughter. ...In *Othello*, Shakespeare quickly establishes the play’s fictional world as one in which desirable women are liabilities to those who possess them. (8-9)

Regarding this paranoia of possession, the concerns of father’s were different than the fears of husband’s. Father’s only face losing the assets of their household, while husband’s experience the addition of sexual jealousy (e.g. the fear of being cuckolded). Because of her social standing, beauty, and admirable character, Desdemona would be considered a ‘desirable’ woman with a high property value. This puts her guardian at greater risk of being emotionally compromised. In fact, the first expression of jealousy in the play comes from Brabantio over Othello’s newfound possession of Desdemona, a custody he did not willingly relinquish. Brabantio tells him: “I here do give thee that with all my heart / which, but thou hast already, with all my heart / I would keep from thee” (1.3.194-196). In “‘Truly, an obedient lady’: Desdemona, Emilia, and the Doctrine of Obedience in *Othello*,” Sara Munson Deats claims that “Shakespeare has created in Desdemona an oxymoronic blend of boldness and docility, sophistication and naïveté,



military and marital statuses are intertwined. The damage or loss of one, jeopardizes the safety of the other. For Othello, a betrayal at the hands of his wife would mean the complete loss of his masculine identity. In “Castration Anxiety and the Mirror Stage: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Shakespeare’s *Othello*,” Shadi S. Neimneh and Nisreen M. Sawwa suggest applying the psychoanalytic term “castration anxiety” to indicate this elevation from standard sexual jealousy to the fear of identity loss based on emasculation, claiming that “Othello’s high military rank as well as Desdemona’s love for him are symbols of power like the phallus for men...as a result, Othello is anxious about losing these two things that strengthen him” (26). This indicates that, in Shakespeare’s tragedies, male sexual anxiety is not solved by marriage but exacerbated by it.

The language of fear in *Othello* is not only dependent on genre but also on gender. Othello’s “castration anxiety” is seen not through direct emasculation but covert feminization. When Iago first warns Othello “O beware, my lord, of jealousy!” he responds: “think’st thou I’d make a life of jealousy / to follow still the changes of the moon / with fresh suspicions? No” (3.3.167, 180-182). Lunar cycles are symbolic of femininity, specifically regarding emotional inconsistency. Here Othello denies any fluctuating feelings and thus, womanliness, but the image of Desdemona’s infidelity quickly takes hold and, barely 100 lines later, Othello delivers a soliloquy expressing the emotional caprice he just renounced:

Haply for I am black  
 And have not those soft parts of conversation  
 That chamberers have, or for I am declined  
 Into the vale of years – yet that's not much –  
 She's gone, I am abused, and my relief  
 Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage

That we can call these delicate creatures ours  
 And not their appetites!

(3.3.266-274)

In this speech, Othello unloads previously concealed insecurities surrounding his marriage relating to race, class, age, and fidelity. He is not merely doubting Desdemona's love for him but fully identifying as a cuckold, using his alleged defects as proof of her transgressions. From this speech through his remaining interactions with Desdemona leading up to her death, Othello does make "a life of jealousy," primarily by behaving like the cliché caricature of a scorned woman: spying, engaging in coy wordplay, and succumbing to emotional outbursts. Newman claims "femininity is not opposed to blackness and monstrosity, as white is to black, but identified *with*<sup>4</sup> the monstrous...Othello internalizes alien cultural values, but the otherness that divides him from that culture...links him to the play's other marginality, femininity" (42, 50). The influence of Othello's position as an outsider on his consciousness makes it easy for him to transition into a feminine head-space. Based on this information, it seems only fitting that a woman—Bianca—serve as his foil.

Aside from Othello, Bianca is the only other character in the play who is directly accused of jealousy. Bianca's allegation occurs immediately after she first appears in Act Three:

<i>Bianca.</i>	O Cassio, whence came this?
	This is some token from a newer friend!
	To the felt absence now I feel a cause:
	Is't come to this? Well, well.
<i>Cassio.</i>	Go to, woman,

---

<sup>4</sup> Emphasis mine.

Throw your vile guesses in the devil's teeth  
 From whence you have them! You are jealous now  
 That this is from some mistress, some remembrance:  
 No, by my faith, Bianca.

*Bianca.* Why, whose is it?

*Cassio.* I know not neither, I found it in my chamber.  
 I like the work well: ere it be demanded,  
 As like enough it will, I'd have it copied.  
 Take it, and do't, and leave me for this time.

(3.4.180-191)

Despite Bianca and Othello discovering their 'green-eyed monsters' through similar means (namely Cassio brandishing a handkerchief), their reactions could not be more disparate. At Cassio's presentation of the handkerchief, Bianca instantly assumes it is a sign of his involvement with another but, unlike Othello, she immediately shares this with Cassio and questions his behavior. In "The Women's Voices in *Othello*: Speech, Song, Silence," Eamon Grennan states that "[Bianca's] directness of speech contrasts with Othello's convoluted response to his own jealousy" (283). Othello's vertiginous reaction is primarily due to the inorganic nature of his feelings. The idea of Desdemona's infidelity was implanted by Iago, whereas Bianca's concern stems from her own, genuine emotions. Unlike Othello, Bianca does not view herself as an outsider despite also bearing the social brand of "other." This self-awareness protects her from outside influence. She possessed the clarity to swiftly address her feelings simply because they are *her* feelings. This emotional honesty is especially evident in her next exchange with Cassio. Shortly after parting in the previous scene, Bianca returns incensed:

*Cassio.* What do you mean by this haunting of me?

*Bianca.* Let the devil and his dam haunt you! What

did you mean by that same handkerchief you gave me even now? I was a fine fool to take it – I must take out the work! A likely piece of work, that you should find it in your chamber, and not know who left it there! This is some minx’s token, and I must take out the work? There, give it your hobby-horse; wheresoever you had it, I’ll take out no work on’t!

*Cassio.* How now, my sweet Bianca, how now, how now?

*Bianca.* If you’ll come to supper tonight, you may; if an you will not, come when you are next prepared for.

(4.1.145-158)

In her anger, Bianca mocks Cassio with his own language, cancels their plans, and harshly dismisses any future meetings—a point emphasized by Honigmann’s notation of “e.g. never” on the end of her last line (*Othello* 264). Cassio’s attempts to pacify her seem to fall on deaf ears and he is reduced to chasing after her when she exits. Theories explaining the enhancement of Bianca’s jealousy from the previous scene to this one are open to speculation. Perhaps in her initial happiness at being reunited with Cassio (and in the swiftness of their parting), she forgot the handkerchief was in her possession and became reanimated upon noticing it. Perhaps she planned to fulfill Cassio’s request for a copy, but upon closer inspection, became newly convinced of its lascivious nature. Regardless of the reason, Bianca’s handles her feelings in each scene the same way: by confidently, directly, and publicly confronting them at the source, namely Cassio. In “Women and Men in *Othello*: “what should such a fool/ Do with so good a woman?” Carol Thomas Neely compares Bianca’s emotional reactions to Othello’s, noting that “instead of corroding within, [jealousy] is quickly vented and dissipates, leaving her affection for Cassio essentially untouched. Furthermore, she makes no effort to discover



her rival, to obtain “proof,” or to get revenge” (145). Bianca’s jealousy is not destructive and, because she is able to alleviate her jealous feelings, Bianca succeeds in being “other” without being monstrous.

Bianca and Othello’s reactions to jealousy also differ due to their relationship statuses. Because Bianca and Cassio are not married, they are able to retain separate identities outside of their relationship. This gives them the freedom of confrontation without consequence. Unlike Othello and Desdemona, neither Cassio’s masculinity nor Bianca’s life are threatened by her accusations. There is no inherent power imbalance in their relationship. This is reflected both by marital status and by class. Jealousy in Shakespeare is primarily seen in men who marry daughters of important, high-class men. According to Olson, “it is ultimately Othello’s own understanding of what he has gained, as opposed to the other characters’ that make him most susceptible to jealousy” (17). The class difference between Bianca/Cassio is clearly marked by social standing but any social differences between Othello/Desdemona are likely manifestations of his insecurities. It is clear that both Othello and Bianca perceive their social statuses as enhanced by their partners, however, Bianca’s reputation can only be elevated by Cassio. Unlike Othello whose jealousy translates to the potential loss of his identity, Bianca might feel anxious over Cassio, but she cannot be “unmade” by him.

Even Bianca’s name draws instant comparison to Othello. Bianca is called “most fair” by Cassio but, due to the constant slander she endures, she bears a blackened reputation (3.4.170). Othello is dark in complexion but is viewed as honourable and righteous by the other characters. The Duke tells Brabantio “if virtue no delighted beauty lack, / your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (1.3.290-291). Their differences are

often highlighted by their physicality. Othello is often played as a stately, honest soldier and, according to Pechter, “a stage tradition seems to have emerged to play Bianca as a mysteriously dark lady, a thing of darkness” (*Int. Trad.* 133). The use of constant visual and aural anthesis, Shakespeare creates *Othello* as a world of binary opposition. This often leads to both the audience and the characters within the play hearing one thing and seeing another. Newman labels this technique “rhetorical miscegenation,” claiming that “miscegenation an issue not only on the level of plot but also of language, for linked oppositions, especially of black and white and their cultural associations, characterize the play’s discourse” (42). Keeping both the audience and characters simultaneously informed and in the dark is often used as a comedic device. Shakespeare’s mirrored, antithetical rhetoric extends past the world of the play through the playtext all the way to the genre itself. *Othello* feels as though it sits on the cusp of comedy/tragedy and that the play’s action could fall in either direction, even though it is already known which way the scale ultimately tips.

## Chapter V.

*“I’ll speak thee into silence.” –Cymbeline*

*Othello* may be the tragedy of the Moor of Venice, but it is Iago’s villainous machinations—specifically the infection of his toxic masculinity through pervasive, poisonous language—that drive the play. The word “honest” appears forty-five times in the play with more than half of those instances relating to Iago, despite his telling Roderigo at the play’s opening “I am not what I am” (1.1.64). With this antithetical state of being, Iago infuses his language with duplicity in order to spread misogynistic ideas to the other men and conflate all the women together. According to Rulon-Miller, “Iago has worked throughout the play to make certain no one knows anything for sure...[he] reveals his penchant for both describing—and inscribing—women” (107). In the Act Two quayside scene, Iago expresses his misogynistic opinion of women to all those present:

*Iago.*           Come on, come on, you are pictures out of doors,  
                      Bells in your parlors, wild-cats in your kitchens,  
                      Saints in your injuries, devils being offended,  
                      Players in your housewifery, and housewives in ...  
                      Your beds!

*Desdemona.*                           O, fie upon thee, slanderer!

*Iago.*           Nay, it is true, or else I am a Turk:  
                      You rise to play, and go to bed to work.

(2.1.109-115)

This double-speak introduces the idea that all women are interchangeable. Here Iago makes a pun on the word housewives (sometimes written “huswives”) which Honigmann’s note translates to “hussies” (*Othello* 153). This is the same description he

used for Bianca. A woman in control of her house was also a woman in control of her body and thereby her sexuality, invoking the madonna/whore complex. In *Sexual Types: Embodiment, Agency, and Dramatic Character from Shakespeare to Shirley*, Mario DiGangi states that “Iago's defamation of housewives as hussies suggests how easily the distinction between the “chaste wife” and the “whore” can be made to collapse” (126). According to Iago, all women are whores including his wife, Desdemona, and Bianca.

This is an idea he will pass to both Cassio and Othello. In the temptation scene, Iago speaks to Cassio about Bianca, having stationed the eavesdropping Othello to believe their conversation is about Desdemona. Cassio, who previously expressed his desire not to have Othello or Iago see him “womaned,” appears to be embarrassed by Iago’s marriage talk (4.1.194). During their conversation, Cassio diminishes his relationship with Bianca, referring to her as “poor caitiff,” “rogue,” “customer,” “monkey,” and “bauble” (4.1.109-134), which can be argued is keeping in tone with Iago. When Iago speaks to Othello following that exchange, he refers to Desdemona (“the foolish woman your wife”) and Bianca (“his whore”) in the same breath, conflating the women in Othello’s mind (4.1.173-174). By transcribing qualities of one onto the other, Iago cements these women as sisters in whoredom. According to Vanita, “Iago’s villainy is as successful as it is because he speaks to the lowest common denominator, the most widely accepted prejudices,” specifically that a premium woman like Desdemona could never remain faithful (345). Iago writes, or rather rewrites, Desdemona into Bianca for Othello’s benefit. Previously, Othello had admonished Iago when the topic of Desdemona’s fidelity came into question, telling him “thou echo’st me / as if there were some monster in thy thought / too hideous to be shown...make me to see’t” (3.3.109-

111/367). Due to the high levels of castration anxiety in their marriage, Othello is already vulnerable to jealous thoughts involving his wife. Once he is convinced of her guilt, Othello parrots Iago's toxic language, asking her "was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / made to write 'whore' upon?" (4.2.73). Iago infects Othello with his misogynistic view of women, forcing him to see his chaste wife as a sullied strumpet.

This writing of female bodies is symbolized by the handkerchief. It is something that comes between all three couples and influences their behavior/feelings toward the other. According to Newman, "the handkerchief in *Othello* is what we might term a snowballing signifier, for as it passes from hand to hand, both literal and critical, it accumulates myriad associations and meanings" (56). The item itself is inherently feminine, expressing typical gender roles since embroidery was women's domestic work. Othello states that there is "magic in the web," once again linking the feminine to the unnatural, the monstrous (3.4.71). Female hands crafted it just as women create life through childbirth. In this same vein, the handkerchief represents Othello's bloodline and his own monstrousness. He tells Desdemona of its history as a token used by his mother to win over his father, stating "did an Egyptian to my mother give...she, dying, gave it me; / and bid me, when my fate would have me wive, / to give it her" (3.4.57/65-67). He later contradicts this story, stating it was a gift to his mother from his father (5.2.215). Regardless of the varying origin stories, Othello sees the handkerchief as a symbol of his parents and something passed to his wife, making it akin to his own paternal lineage.

The link between handkerchief and successful procreation is also reflected in the design. Said to be "spotted with strawberries," the pattern on the handkerchief mimics bloodstains that would confirm a bride's premarital virginity (3.3.438). In "Othello's

Handkerchief: ‘The Recognizance and Pledge of Love,.’” Lynda Boose states that “Shakespeare was representing a visually recognizable reduction of Othello and Desdemona's wedding bed-sheets, the visual proof of their consummated marriage” (363). In this way, to Othello the handkerchief serves as proof—not of their consummation (which has yet to occur)—but of her infidelity. Perceiving her to have given the handkerchief to Cassio, Othello believes Desdemona has also given her body to him. When she cannot reproduce the token on demand, he becomes enraged. This coincides with her requests for Cassio’s reinstatement, making their conversation one of rhetorical miscegenation, neither party fully understanding either what they are saying or hearing:

*Othello.* Fetch't, let me see't.  
*Desdemona.* Why, so I can, sir, but I will not now.  
This is a trick to put me from my suit.  
Pray you, let Cassio be received again.  
*Othello.* Fetch me the handkerchief, my mind misgives.  
*Desdemona.* Come, come,  
You'll never meet a more sufficient man.  
*Othello.* The handkerchief!  
*Desdemona.* I pray, talk me of Cassio.  
*Othello.* The handkerchief!  
*Desdemona.* A man that all his time  
Hath founded his good fortunes on your love,  
Shared dangers with you –  
*Othello.* The handkerchief!

(3.4.87-98)

The more Desdemona mentions Cassio in response to Othello, the guiltier she becomes in his mind. When Othello assumed ownership over Desdemona via marriage, her body as well as her reputation, became a tabula rasa—her fairness serving as parchment for him to

ascribe her alleged transgressions. The spotted fabric then becomes a visual reflection of Desdemona's soiled virtue. In "Historical Differences: Misogyny and *Othello*," Valerie Wayne observes that "the handkerchief becomes both metaphor and metonymy to prove the state of Desdemona's body before and after their marriage. And in serving this function it remains also a symbol for the women's *text* – for the work that women do, since in the play they do not write books but serve as bodies to be written upon" (171). Othello sees Desdemona's loss of the handkerchief as a loss of her chastity, the "ocular proof" he demanded from Iago (3.3.363). By taking Iago's word over Desdemona's actions, Othello figuratively beds Iago before his wife.

Othello also describes the handkerchief using the hendiadys "that recognizance and pledge of love" (5.2.212). This elevates it from a mere affection memento to the physical marker of their marriage. According to Baxter, this allows the handkerchief to "retain an irreducible doubleness...[performing] the function of the ring in the marriage service as the token and pledge of the love of Othello and Desdemona" (277). This emblematic nature can also be applied to its impact on the other couples. Both Emilia and Bianca are instructed by their male partners to copy the handkerchief. Metaphorically, both women are being told to copy Desdemona's likeness, to *remake* themselves for the benefit and at the direction of their men. According to Wayne:

Because the handkerchief serves as proof of married chastity, it cannot be copied by Emilia and Bianca. It is an emblem of Desdemona's body that does not circulate because her body is not supposed to circulate... [chastity] asserts a worth and purpose for women that contradict [sic] the assertions of misogyny by requiring the sexual control of women in marriage. Chastity was a charm. (172)





written her off. While it seems odd that Desdemona would ask the opinion of someone she just rebuked as a slanderer, she does so out of hope. She wants to believe that Iago's misogyny is merely hyperbole both to keep her high opinion of him and vice-versa (a sentiment she will repeat later in regard to Othello). While discussing Othello's accusations, she tells Iago "I cannot say whore: / It does abhor me now I speak the word" (4.2.163). Desdemona embodies the paradoxical nature of her paralipsis. She simultaneously is and is not a whore to both Othello and Iago, just as she cannot deny saying the term without mentioning it. It is as if by speaking the deed, she is guilty of committing it. Desdemona's acknowledgement of slander can also be viewed as a defense against Iago's harsh claims, similarly to Bianca's previously mentioned rebuttal. According to Wayne, "*Othello* conveys the need for a woman to defend herself from slander, because it calls attention to the relation between verbal abuses and their 'eventful' consequences, whether in defamation suits or in the murder of one's wife...slander [is] an act of verbal violence against women, one that will lead to physical violence" (161-163). Only Bianca directly counters the claims against her, naming them false. By abating the verbal threats, Bianca avoids the physical harm. The other women are married, a fact that prevents them from truly contesting the recriminations made by their husbands. This means the consequences only differ for the unbound Bianca; the repercussions for both Desdemona and Emilia are the same: death.

The silencing of wives only becomes necessary when their voices carry outside the confines of their relationship into the public arena. Desdemona and Othello's marriage, in spite of their intimacy, has always felt as though it belonged to the public. By having their elopement straddle the beginning of the play's action, Shakespeare

distorts the boundaries of what is public and private within matrimony, thus applying the contradicting language used to describe both characters individually to their marriage itself. Their union, like either of them, does not comply with typical social order.

According to Vanita, “the presumption that husband and wife, even when literally in a public space, metaphorically inhabit a private space wherein violence is somehow different from the violence of one man on another fosters the development of a continuum of violence that escalates from abuse to beating to killing” (348). When Othello strikes Desdemona in full view of her kinsman Lodovico, he merely reacts by telling Othello to “make her amends” and calling Desdemona “truly, an obedient lady” (4.1.243/248). Though Lodovico indicates that Othello’s act is reprehensible (“My lord, this would not be believed in Venice / Though I should swear I saw’t”), he offers her no protection and does nothing to indicate he saw anything out of the ordinary when he later dines with the couple (4.1.241-242). This could explain Desdemona’s otherwise curious lines about Lodovico during the disrobing scene. The following lines are exchanged between Desdemona and Emilia: “This Lodovico is a proper man. / A very handsome man. / He speaks well” but there is debate as to who says which line (4.3.34-36).

Honigmann has Desdemona state the first two pieces as one line, with Emilia stating the last. The folio version keeps the verse with the reading credited to Desdemona/ Emilia/ Desdemona. When taking Lodovico’s actions into account, the folio rendition is the better fit. Desdemona is responding not out of lust or affection, but out of contempt.

Lodovico did not defend her, making him a “proper man” who “speaks well” because he is ignoring his conscience in favour of civil compliance. According to Jardine, “words uttered in the privacy of the home are altered as they are ‘heard’ in public—whether

deliberately, or *overheard*. It is the spilling-over of private exchange into a public space...which alters the nature of the incident and turns it from verbal abuse into event in the communal sphere” (142). Because the dealings of husbands and wives are private affairs, Lodovico is bound by the social doctrines that facilitate such actions. What frees Othello’s hand, stays his, and while Desdemona observes this, she cannot alter it.

Emilia experiences the same abandonment by other supposedly well-meaning men. After Desdemona’s murder, Emilia demands to be heard: “I am bound to speak...let me have leave to speak...I will speak as liberal as the north. / Let heaven and men and devils, let them all / All, all cry sham against me yet I’ll speak” (5.2.180/192/118-220). She ignores Iago’s commands to hold her peace and return home (his effort to relinquish her to the world of the domestic) and begins to publicly tell their private dealings. Iago then attempts to stab her, something commented upon by Grantiano: “Fie! Your sword upon a woman?” (5.2.222). Despite this violent action and reproach, no one present attempts to disarm Iago thus giving him liberty to successfully hit his mark moments later. According to Vanita, the audience observes “a lone unarmed woman surrounded by armed men who deliberately fail to protect her—a visual presentation of the defenselessness of a wife” (350). Desdemona was also defenseless against her husband’s rage at her speech. Her last words to Othello are a request for prayer that he denies, smothering her to stop her voice. After Desdemona briefly stirs, Emilia begs her to “speak again...speak!” providing an anthesis for the misogynistic censorship (5.2.119-120). Grennen notes that “the women are always asking for and giving speech; then men always denying it, refusing it” (290). In *Othello*, the only truly silent wife is a dead one.

The destructive effects of misogynistic constructs are seen in *Othello* through the complete individual and martial disintegrations of the married couples, and the endurance of Bianca/Cassio. Black Othello and white Desdemona visually embody the ‘linked oppositions’ of rhetorical miscegenation making it difficult to visualize success with their union. Problems begin to arise when these anomalous individuals attempt to mold themselves to the standard forms of husband and wife. According to Dash, “until they marry, the tragedy does not occur because until that time [Othello and Desdemona] do not have to conform to any set roles; they function as two individuals. With marriage, they receive a new set of rules, new patterns for behavior” (110). Despite their eventual distance, their relationship had a certain initial intimacy. With the play being centered on misrepresentations and the drama being driven by miscommunications, their anterior communication appeared to set them apart. Desdemona claims she “saw Othello’s visage in his mind” (1.3.253) upon hearing his enticing tales, which he reports she would “with a greedy ear / devour up” (1.3.150-151). Once they are married, however, they can no longer see or hear each other as they once did. Desdemona ignores Othello’s irrationality, instead clinging to her mental image of his antecedent greatness. He, in turn, pledges himself to Iago’s lie above her truth. Grennan observes it is possible “to mark the decline of the tragic action, and it measure it in terms of the loss of comprehension between [Othello and Desdemona], a loss chiefly wrought by his refusal to hear her, his refusal to allow her speech to have any free, dependable being in their world....They are divorced initially in their speech” (286-287). Emilia and Iago are also “divorced” in speech. They are reciprocal in their disdain for each other, hardly speaking at all throughout the play and, when they do, it is with contempt. Conversely, Bianca and Cassio are always in

conference. They speak to each other in the same manner regardless of who is present or what has transpired. The impossibility of communication between married couples accelerates the tragic course of *Othello*, moving from the disallowance of speech to the absolute laconism of death.

## Chapter VI.

*“I cannot be a man with wishing,  
therefore I will die a woman with grieving” –Much Ado About Nothing*

Like the archetypal Greek figures before him, Othello embodies the tragic hero's doomed progression. His path has all the markers of Aristotelian tragedy: it is the story of a good person attempting to do a good thing who fails. As an outsider, Othello is trying to assimilate into Venetian society but every step he takes toward success only leads to his collapse. This can be partially attributed to Othello's classification as other. In *Tragic Plots: A New Reading from Aeschylus to Lorca*, Felicity Rosslyn compares *Othello's* plot to that of *Medea*, stating “a ‘barbarian’ arriving in civilization has placed absolute confidence on a civilized promise—only to be told that he has been duped...[Medea experiences] the annihilation of her selfhood in a world where her status hung entirely on another...It is not that Othello has been wronged as Medea has...only that he thinks he has” (124-125). Othello's reaction to that alleged wrong is similar to Medea's in that he too ends his lineage. During his accusation of Desdemona, Othello alludes to this murderous act:

But there where I have garnered up my heart,  
Where either I must live or bear no life,  
The fountain from the which my current runs  
Or else dries up – to be discarded thence!  
Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads  
To knot and gender in!

(4.2.58-63)

Othello has fused his identity with their union. The stagnation of their love, caused by her befoulment, has led to impotence. Othello, as he defines himself, no longer exists

presently and neither this version nor any others can exist in the future. Despite Rosslyn's claim that Medea's dishonor is "something only a woman can know," the link previously made between monstrosity and femininity makes the comparison between the two figures plausible (124).

Othello can also be compared to Oedipus, the paradigm of tragic figures. Like Oedipus, Othello's choices are what determines his outcome: he makes decisions based on information he knows to be true, only to learn of its falseness once consequence is unavoidable. Instead of facilitating his triumph, Othello's heroic characteristics—vast interiority and superior morals—all work against him. According to Gohlke, "Othello's discovery in matters of language and appearance, that things are not what they seem, involves an awareness of more than one level of consciousness in himself and others. Othello's mistake does not involve misreading or misinterpretation *per se*, but rather the fact that he misread the wrong person" (163). By trusting Iago and doubting Desdemona, Othello himself terminates all hope of resolution. Othello's misreading through complexity of thought and ability to recognize subtext alone is not enough to indicate tragedy. A foil is needed to fully show the extraneousness of that process. Just as Hamlet's hesitation is reflected in the swift actions of Laertes and Fortinbras, Othello's overthinking is illuminated by the simple reactions of Bianca.

Iago's words rapidly take root in Othello's mind. Despite the lack of evidence, Othello is almost instantly convinced of Desdemona's criminality. He delivers the following speech to Iago the morning just after the seed of jealousy was planted:

I had been happy, if the general camp,  
Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,  
So I had nothing known. O now for ever

Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content!  
 Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars  
 That makes ambition virtue! O farewell,  
 Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,  
 The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear-piercing fife,  
 The royal banner, and all quality,  
 Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!  
 And, O you mortal engines whose rude throats  
 Th'immortal Jove's dead clamours counterfeit,  
 Farewell: Othello's occupation's gone!

(3.3.348-360)

Even before demanding proof of her transgressions, Othello completely relinquishes himself to her guilt. He has embedded his occupation, livelihood, and very existence into his relationship and, because he can no longer understand Desdemona, life itself has no meaning. According to Baxter, Othello feels “not merely sexual jealousy...but a sense of total displacement” (286). Othello is lost among the multiple identities—soldier, husband, cuckold—within his own narrative because he is no longer its only author. Conflating Iago's influence for knowledge, Othello tells Iago, “I swear 'tis better to be much abused / than but to know't a little” (3.3.339-340). The irony of this statement surpasses Othello's distracted intellect, showing that he no longer thinks for himself, instead functioning as a vessel for Iago's vicarious musings.

Both the success and speed of this internal deception are possible because Iago's projections are not entirely foreign. In *Shakespeare and the Experience of Love*, Arthur Kirsch notes how the play “demonstrates that Iago echoes something within Othello, that he is a projection of at least a part of Othello's own psyche....Iago represents as deep a wellspring in Othello's soul as Desdemona does” (28-29). Othello, therefore, does not



yield to Iago but to the misogynistic part of himself. With this second male voice filling the space once reserved for Desdemona, Othello decides that she cannot live. In his hubris, Othello sees killing Desdemona, not only as a way to regain his masculine honour and identity, but as a method for protecting humanity: “she must die, else she'll betray more men” (5.2.6). In *Shakespeare on Masculinity*, Robin Headlam Wells states that “by arrogating himself into the roles of plaintiff, witness, jury, judge, and executioner all in one, [Othello] is in effect denying her the kind of hearing that he himself received at the beginning of the play...it is his sense of honor that demands that an adulteress be killed” (108). Othello’s folly lies in the certainty of his beliefs and constancy in his decisions. The free will that permits Othello to make the wrong choices, makes him complicit in his undoing.

The duplicity substantiated throughout the play by both Othello and Desdemona is especially evident in their demise. Each of their final acts reflect the rhetorical miscegenation they embody: Desdemona is both innocent and guilty of her own death; Othello is both innocent and guilty of his own tragedy. Desdemona reflects her paradoxical nature with her last words:

*Desdemona.* A guiltless death I die.

*Emilia.* O, who hath done  
This deed?

*Desdemona.* Nobody. I myself. Farewell.

Commend me to my kind lord – O, farewell!

(5.2.121-123)

Her two statements directly contradict each other. She is the only innocent character of the play to die and yet she takes responsibility for her own collapse. Ironically, critical interpretation of these lines vacillates widely between the Madonna/Whore dichotomy:

Desdemona is using her last breath to either defend/defy her husband/murderer. Grennan suggests a reading that—like Desdemona herself—qualifies as both/neither, stating that “at the very moment of her death she is capable of an ironic, but typically serious, use of language since “I myself” could be her way of saying (because of the absolute commitment she feels to the sacramental union of marriage) “my husband,” at once accusing him and forgiving him” (290). Othello’s final words come after his fatal stabbing. He lies next to Desdemona on their bed and states “I kissed thee ere I killed thee: no way but this, / killing myself, to die upon a kiss” (5.2.356-357). This line—reminiscent of Romeo’s couplet and final epithet: “The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss / a dateless bargain to engrossing death... Thus with a kiss I die” (*RJ* 5.3.114-115/120)—leaves the audience with the final image of Othello as a romantic, fulfilling the conventional last kiss between lovers.

Despite the sexual nature in his uxoricide, Othello’s last penetrative act is toward Iago—not Desdemona. In response to his anagnorisis, Othello strikes at Iago twice, hitting the mark on his second attempt. Iago responds: “I bleed, sir, but not killed” to which Othello replies: “I am not sorry neither, I’d have thee live: / for in my sense ’tis happiness to die” (5.2.285-287). This exchange can be read through the lens of Othello’s violent eroticism. As previously stated, Othello ‘got into bed’ with Iago first, making him the cause of Othello’s sexual jealousy. Othello is able to score with Iago where he couldn’t with Desdemona because—despite being in the throes of passion—Othello can see Iago clearly, neither one of them are misreading the other. Othello alleviates some of his castration anxiety by pricking Iago and drawing blood with his sword. Othello’s wish for Iago to live is a play on the double-entendre of orgasmic *la petite mort*. Othello also

failed in this act with Desdemona because of his false accusations. Kirsch states that “though Desdemona is not invulnerable, her love is. Elizabethan theological writers commonly equated virginity and marital chastity” (182). Othello could not physically claim Desdemona’s virgin blood because he had already taken it with speech. By drawing Iago’s blood, Othello completes the erotic exchange of Desdemona for Iago.

The only Othello can redeem himself is through his death. In order to atone for Desdemona’s murder, Othello must die for the same crime (spousal betrayal), in the same fashion (by his own hand), with the same reasoning (justice/protection of men). Before turning his sword on himself, Othello offers this preface:

...in Aleppo once,  
 Where a malignant and a turbanned Turk  
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
 I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog  
 And smote him—thus!

(5.2.350-354)

Here, Othello addresses both halves of his identity: the foreign Turk and the Venetian. It is not clear which is the “circumcised dog” because, like Desdemona, he is synchronously both/neither. Othello’s simultaneous incursion and sacrifice make his death virtuous and absolve him of the sin of suicide. According to Wells, “at the core of the heroic ideal is a masculine sense of honour. The heroic principles that dictated vengeance for an act of adultery now demand suicide; it is the same heroic sense of masculine honour that has guided all of Othello’s actions” (112). In his penultimate act, ‘Valiant Othello’ returns to destroy the villainous, effeminate ‘other’ by killing the misogynistic Iago-esque component of himself. He is both the villain and the hero.

Emilia dies in a similar fashion. Like Othello, she is culpable for Desdemona's death, partly from her willingness to swallow Iago's corruptive poison. She salvages their relationship by ultimately rejecting her husband in favor of her mistress. According to Neely, "Emilia, stealing the handkerchief, is catalyst for the play's crisis; revealing its theft, she is catalyst for the play's denouement" (151). Emilia's final act of support neutralizes her previous betrayal. In her closing scene, she confesses Iago's abuse of the handkerchief and openly defies his authority, stating "'tis proper I obey him—but not now...let heaven and men and devils, let them all, / all, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak" (5.2.193/219-220). Before being fatally wounded, she asks a question that can be directed at both Othello and Iago: "what should such a fool / Do with so good a wife?" (5.2.231-232). She is answered by Iago's sword just as Desdemona was ultimately answered by Othello: foolish husbands kill their wives. Her final request is to be placed at Desdemona's side, providing a visual allusion to adjacent cemetery plots, thus completing the shift in her allegiance. Her last words defend Desdemona's honour and reinforce the true honesty of both women: "she was chaste, she loved thee, cruel Moor, / so come my soul to bliss as I speak true! / so speaking as I think, alas, I die" (5.2.247-249). Emilia experienced the most intimacy and candor with Desdemona in life, and she pledged eternal devotion to her in death, thus she shares her grave with her mistress.

The play's close brings to fruition what was evoked with its opening: Desdemona and Othello's martial bed made public. The scene is not carnal but one of carnage: Desdemona, Emilia, and Othello's corpses lying together, observed by Grantiano, Lodovico, a restrained Iago, and a wounded, chair-bound Cassio. This communal deathbed is a fitting end to the tragic paths of its victims. Before her murder, Desdemona

requested that her wedding sheets be laid out, telling Emilia “If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me / in one of those same sheets” (4.3.22-23). Just as Othello’s final lines imitated Romeo, Desdemona’s prophetic request conjures Juliet: “my grave is like to be my wedding bed...I’ll to my wedding bed / And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead” (*RJ* 1.5.134/3.2.136-137). Juliet’s words end up being more applicable to Desdemona than herself. Unlike the young couple of Verona, Othello and Desdemona never consummate their marriage.<sup>5</sup> Bradshaw states that “virginity, like a life, can only be taken once: in Othello’s diseased, self-tormenting imagination all that remains for him to do—the only way in which *he* can “shed her blood”—is bloody murder...[which] is indeed this marriage’s only consummation, and the ghastly tragicomic parody of an erotic “death”” (166-167). Tortured by thoughts of her infidelity, Othello’s sexual desires quickly manifest into sexual jealousy, charging his speech with a violent eroticism. When Othello first speaks of killing Desdemona, Iago tells him to “strangle her in her bed /even the bed she hath contaminated” (4.1.204-205). Set in his cause, Othello waivers between methods. He initially states “thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust’s blood be spotted” (5.1.336) but then changes his mind, stating “yet I’ll not shed her blood” (5.2.3). According to Jardine, Desdemona’s final moments “focus on her now supposedly culpable sexuality, culminating in her suffocation on her bed, in a state of undress – a whore’s death for all her innocence” (140). Only through murder does Othello successfully bed his wife and “write whore” upon her.

The now contaminated martial bed serves a monument to *Othello*’s tragedy. The women represent the murderous rites of husbands, transformed by death into ideal wives:

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<sup>5</sup> For history and further exploration of the consummation debate, see Bradshaw (163-167).

something seen and not heard, confined to the domestic/procreational realm. At the inclusion of Othello, all three victims become equal casualties of failed marriages, destroyed in part by Iago's malicious whimsy. This final image separates *Othello* from other tragedies: the deaths of the women are treated with the same significance as that of the titular character. According to Pechter, "the women share space with the protagonist not just as adjuncts but as presences who have earned their own place in the story" (*Int. Trad.* 115). But which story? In a play centered on misrepresentation and filled with slander, one linear narrative is difficult to discern. Each character brings an alternative perspective to the next, perhaps then changing the question from "which story?" to "whose story?" As the nominal figure, Othello's report takes precedence and governs the overall narrative. With his final speech, Othello reclaims the authorial power he previously lost to Iago. After all accounts are given and the full series of events made clear, Lodovico tells Othello that he will be imprisoned until "the nature of your fault be known" (5.2.334). Instead of retiring, Othello delivers what is effectively his own eulogy, telling those present:

I have done the state some service, and they know't:  
 No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,  
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
 Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,  
 Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak  
 Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;  
 Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,  
 Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,  
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,  
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,

Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
 Their medicinable gum. Set you down this

(5.2.336-349)

Othello uses his exemplary oration skills to justify his actions, mirroring his time before the senate. Whereas his initial defense speech looked back to previous events, this one reaches into the future, making Othello his own historian. Like the missives that won Desdemona, this story is both “passing strange” and “wondrous pitiful” (1.3.161-162). He writes himself a sympathetic figure, someone who served and defended others but could not prevent his own misfortune. Aristotle defines the ideal tragic hero as “one who is not preeminent in virtue and justice, and one who falls into affliction not because of evil and wickedness, but because of a certain fallibility (hamartia)” (Halliwell 44). Having now learned from his mistakes, Othello leaves nothing to chance and declares his fatal flaw to reside, not with war or violence, but in love. This ensures that in his own story, he gets the last word.

While all the other characters fight to speak at the end of the play, Iago chooses to remain silent. His last words are his final act of manipulation. When Othello demands to know the motives for his cruelty, Iago sadistically responds, “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word” (5.2.300-301). This is the cumulative act of rhetorical miscegenation: Iago—the playwright within the drama—is speechless. However, silence can often speak volumes. Calling attention to the already prominent display of bloodshed, Lodovico tells Iago to “Look on the tragic loading of this bed: / This is thy work. The object poisons sight, / Let it be hid” (5.2.361-363). Despite the absence of words, Iago is still writing the scene. With the visceral proof of his conduct on display, Iago’s poison is still infecting both the world of the play and the

audience. This focus on the bed also shows that, despite being muted, neither Desdemona nor Emilia surrendered the stage to their murderer. They refuse to be ‘hid’ in death just as they once refused to be silent in life. Their visibility is a final act of defiance against their misogynist, patriarchal confines; but it is a small consolation against the weight of their deaths. However, just as discomfort emanates from what is seen, relief comes from what is absent: Bianca. It is women who speak for other women. Othello’s attempts to muffle Desdemona failed when Emilia arrived and began shouting. Emilia refused to let Desdemona’s reputation be tarnished so she dies with truth on her lips. It then stands to reason that Bianca remains to take up the mantle and serve as the voice for women.

In the play’s final scene, the speeches of the main characters indicated a reversal. The women each had an internal personality switch: Desdemona going from autonomous (vocal) to submissive (silent); Emilia, from compliant (silent) to defiant (vocal). While the men each experienced an external shift in power: Othello moving from persuasive (writing) to influenced (parroting Iago); Cassio from subordinate (malleable) to authorial (dominant); Iago from manipulator (master) to prisoner (slave). Lodovico presided over these changes and Grantiano served as a witness. This occurs because every character finally speaks their truth. Even the slain Rodrigo is heard via a note found on his body: “now he spake, / after long seeming dead, Iago hurt him” (5.2.325-326). This proves Iago’s point that guilt is too powerful to be ignored: “guiltiness will speak / Though tongues were out of use” (5.1.109-110). The dramatic action itself is also reversed: this scene functions as the martial ceremony, bringing what was previously hid into view. Othello and Desdemona pledge themselves to one another for eternity with their marriage bed serving as an altar. At the conclusion, everyone has said their piece, allowing the



airing the banns that was previously denied. Having neither confessions nor atonements, Bianca—the truly honest—is notably absent.

Unlike the other characters in *Othello*, Bianca is her own author. She dictates her own behavior and temperament, not falling victim to any outside influence. It is significant that she not only speaks for herself, but that she also refuses to let anyone else talk over her. According to Murray, “Bianca is the *only* woman in the play to proclaim openly and publicly her indifference to patriarchal beds and the magnetic webbing of heroic representation” (76). When Emilia calls to speak, Iago commands her to be silent but Bianca receives a drastically different response for her outburst. After she admonishes the title of ‘strumpet,’ Iago replies with “Come, mistress, you must tell’s another tale” (5.2.125). While his remark is superficially meant to indicate her dishonesty, it cannot be ignored that Iago is directing Bianca to talk—a statement foreshadowing how Bianca will, indeed, be the last woman speaking. Iago also responds differently to Bianca because of her expressed authority. Bianca is not requesting permission with her statement; she is making a declaration of agency. According to Gajowaki, “Bianca is Bianca because Iago is Iago. Women in *Othello* are, as the arc of the tragic action emphasizes, what men make them” (79). Bianca refusal to be rewritten denies any power Iago might wield over her, putting them at a stalemate. She has the final say while he is silenced.

Distinguishing himself from Roderigo and Othello, Cassio is ultimately not a casualty of Iago’s influence. His victimization was a manipulation of action, not thought—making him a fitting companion for the forthright Bianca. After Iago wounds him, Cassio cries “I am maimed for ever!” (5.1.27), which applies not just to his physical injury, but

also to his emotional scarring. Under Iago's influence, Othello stripped Cassio of his rank and his masculinity identity—"O, I have / lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of / myself" (2.3.258-260). This is returned to him in the play's final scene. Lodovico tells Othello: "your power and your command is taken off / and Cassio rules in Cyprus" (5.2.329-330). Cassio is not only reinstated, he is freed from the patriarchal burden of toxic masculinity. In "Lust for Audience: An Interpretation of Othello," Marjorie Pryse states how Cassio "symbolizes the triumph of the formally passive, the formerly speechless, the formerly powerless figure" (476). Cassio is the play's heir. Just as Bianca speaks for the voiceless dead, Cassio becomes a commander for those who survive; she is the last woman speaking and he is the last man standing.

## Chapter VII

## Conclusion

*“Since I saw thee, the affliction of my mind amends” –The Tempest*

Iago is so central to the plot of *Othello*, there is a critical debate over his station as the play's true central figure, but one truth that is universally acknowledged is that Iago is one of the strongest villains ever created. This is, in part, because his corruption extends past the world of the play and into the audience. Unlike Shakespeare's other manipulative villain Richard III (who invites the audience to witness his crimes with a wink and a nudge), Iago's speech is subtle and calculated. This allows his manipulation to spread beyond the stage and infect the viewer. The audience *forgets* their knowledge of his wrongdoing; he appears just as he does for the characters in the play: honest. Newman states that “Iago enjoys a privileged relation with the audience. He possesses what can be termed in the discourse of knowledge in *Othello* and annexes not only the other characters but the resisting spectator as well into his world and its perspective...[the audience is] implicated in his machinations and the cultural values they imply” (50). This taints the audience's reaction to the drama. Viewers are left stunned, confused, and embarrassed at their collusion. By being complicit with the play's antagonist, the overwhelming feeling of the audience at the end of the play's action is guilt. According to Vanita, this awareness “does not allow us to pass judgement [on *Othello* and Iago] without simultaneously judging ourselves” (352). This is the critical problem that *Othello* faces. How can the play be measured against the likes of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* if guilt remains?

The solution to *Othello's* tragedy problem is found in Bianca. With Bianca's final declaration of "I am no strumpet / but of life as honest as you, that thus / abuse me" alerts the audience to their compliance (5.1.122-123). Bianca had been taken for a whore at Iago's word and, like Cassio, the audience went along with it for the action of the play. By openly calling out his lies, Bianca's is the catalyst for Iago's reveal and the audience's realization of their amenability. Bianca's words shake everyone from their stupor. According to Pechter, the audience's "ability to acknowledge the extent to which Iago speaks for us and to reproduce his voice have added immeasurably to the energy of the interpretive response to play" (*Int. Trad.* 28). All of the actions that follow are darkened for viewers by the knowledge that like they too were taken in by Iago. This is what often leads to Othello's scholarly denigration within the Shakespearean dramatic catalog. In "Paradigms of Conflict: The Fatal False Dilemma [sic] in Shakespeare's *Othello*," Diane Elizabeth Dreher gives the following review:

Othello is the bleakest of tragedies, for although the two main characters love each other dearly, their love alone is not enough. They do not communicate. Their assumptions about one another drive them into two camps. Dominated by the paradigms of heroic man of action and silent dutiful woman, they do not reveal themselves to one another. They relate as stereotypes, not individuals. (31)

Since the problem in *Othello* centers around the attempt at a progressive marriage, the solution must come from an unwed couple. According to Deats, "the rejection by both Othello and Desdemona of the heroic ideal of amorous mutuality enshrined in the first conjugal pattern, and their acceptance of the patriarchal ideology of absolute authority and syndication affirmed in the second, serves as a catalyst to the tragedy" (247). The catharsis is found in Bianca and Cassio.

At the play's end, the world of *Othello* is now the new world of Bianca/Cassio. With the black/white bodies of Desdemona and Othello eternally joined and Iago's fount of toxic double-speak stopped, the duplicity of the play is ended. The reinstated Cassio rules without misogyny and the so-called whore Bianca provide a moral center that was previously absent. By shifting focus from Iago to Bianca, the audience can alleviate their guilt and introduce the pity necessary for catharsis. According to Bradshaw, Shakespeare's changes from the source material "make it easier, not more difficult, to see the play as a tragedy" (178). By including Bianca in the narrative, Shakespeare elevates both the play's action and the response to it. Without her, catharsis would not be possible. The true impact of the tragedy can only be felt by not falling into the same trap of misreading women that ensnared the protagonist and reading the play through the lens of humanity provided by Bianca. Shakespeare directed the successful path out of *Othello* by giving Bianca the last word.

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