

## Women and Men in *Othello*:

"what should such a fool /  
Do with so good a woman?"

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"Almost damned in a fair wife" is Leslie Fiedler's alternate title for his chapter on *Othello* in *The Stranger in Shakespeare*. In it he asserts of the women in the play: "Three out of four, then, [are] weak, or treacherous, or both."<sup>1</sup> Thus he seconds Iago's misogyny and broadens the attack on what Leavis has called "The sentimentalist's *Othello*," the traditional view of the play held by Coleridge, Bradley, Granville-Barker, G. Wilson Knight, John Bayley, Helen Gardner, and many others.<sup>2</sup> These "Othello critics," as I shall call them, accept Othello at his own high estimate. They are enamored of his "heroic music," and like him are overwhelmed by Iago's diabolism, to which they devote much of their analysis.<sup>3</sup> Like Othello, they do not always argue rationally or rigorously for their views and so are vulnerable to attacks on their romanticism or sentimentality. Reacting against these traditionalists, the "Iago critics" (Eliot, Empson, Kirschbaum, Rossiter, and Mason, as well as Fiedler and Leavis<sup>4</sup>) take their cues from Iago. Like him, they are attracted to Othello, unmoved by his rhetoric, and eager to "set down the pegs that make this music."<sup>5</sup> They attack Othello at his most vulnerable point, his love. They support their case by quoting Iago's estimates of Othello, and they emphasize Iago's realism and "honesty"<sup>6</sup> while priding themselves on their own. Their realism or cynicism gives them, with Iago, an apparent invulnerability. But, like "Othello critics," they share the bias and blindness of the character whose perspective they adopt. Most damagingly, both groups of critics, like both Othello and Iago, badly misunderstand and misrepresent the women in the play.<sup>7</sup>

Iago critics implicitly demean Desdemona, for if Othello's character and love are called into question, then her love for him loses its justification and validity. Explicitly they have little to say about her.<sup>8</sup> Othello critics idealize her along with the hero, but like him they have a tendency to see her as an object. The source of her sainthood seems a passivity verging on catatonia:

Desdemona is helplessly passive. She can do nothing whatever.

She cannot retaliate even in speech; no, not even in silent feeling. . . . She is helpless because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute. . . . Desdemona's suffering is like that of the most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being he adores.<sup>9</sup>

Iago critics, finding the same trait, condemn Desdemona for it.

But the damage to her symbolic value is greater when we see her passively *leaving everything to Heaven*. She ought in a sense to have embodied Heaven, given us a human equivalent that would "make sense" of Heaven. For this task she had the wrong sort of purity.<sup>10</sup>

When Desdemona is credited with activity, she is condemned for that too; she is accused of being domineering, of using witchcraft, of rebelliousness, disobedience, wantonness.<sup>11</sup> Whatever view critics take, discussion of her is virtually an afterthought to the analysis of the men. Emilia and Bianca are still more neglected and are invariably contrasted with Desdemona.<sup>12</sup>

Such neglect has resulted not merely in misreadings of the women's characters and roles but in distorted interpretations of the entire play. Both Othello and Iago critics have tended to see good versus evil as the play's central theme, Othello versus Iago as the play's central conflict, and hence the major tragedies as its most important context. In order to correct this emphasis, I will show that the play's central theme is love—especially marital love; its central conflict is between the men and the women; and contexts quite as illuminating as the tragedies are its source, Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi* and, especially, Shakespeare's preceding comedies.<sup>13</sup> Within *Othello* it is Emilia who most explicitly speaks to this theme, recognizes this central conflict, and inherits from the heroines of comedy the role of potential mediator. She is dramatically and symbolically the play's fulcrum. It is as an Emilia critic, then, that I should like to approach the play, hoping to perceive it with something like her good-natured objectivity.

*Gli Hecatommithi* may have provided *Othello* with its theme and organizing principle as well as with its plot. The battle of the sexes in marriage is its central motif dominating the frame, the subject matter, and the arrangement of the tales. In the introduction the company debates whether harmony can be achieved in marriage. Ponzio denies this, supporting his view with platitudes Iago would relish: "Better bury a woman than marry her"; "For there to be peace between husband and wife, the husband must be deaf and the wife blind." Fabio, the group's

leader, asserts instead that "the only rational love is that which has marriage as its goal, and that this is the quiet of true and wise lovers, coupled together, cooling their amorous flames with sage discourse and in legitimate union."<sup>14</sup> *Othello* similarly presents marriage as potentially strife-ridden or potentially harmonious. In *Gli Hecatommithi* the debate continues in the tales, and in the Third Decade it is intensified by the inflammatory subject matter—the infidelity of husbands and wives. The seventh tale, *Othello's* source, is a rebuttal of the sixth, in which a husband discovers his wife's infidelity and, as the company judges, "most prudently" (*prudenter*) arranges to have her "accidentally" drowned. In the eighth tale, a contrast to the two preceding it, harmony supersedes warfare. A wife forgives her unfaithful husband and wins him back, behaving with a "prudence" (*la prudenza*) exactly the opposite of that of the husbands in tales six and seven. *Othello* similarly rings changes on the theme of male and female in a series of parallel and contrasting couples—Desdemona/Othello, Emilia/Iago, Bianca/Cassio—along with fantasy couples—Roderigo/Desdemona, Cassio/Desdemona, Othello/Emilia. Throughout the tales of the Third Decade it is most often the men who intensify the conflicts, practicing infidelity or taking revenge on wives they suspect of infidelity; the wives, even when wronged, often succeed in mending the relationships. The women in *Othello* similarly seek to secure harmonious relationships but fail to do so.

Their predecessors in this task are the heroines of Shakespearean comedy, to which *Othello* shows pervasive and profound resemblances.<sup>15</sup> Though it is almost always assumed that *Othello* is dominated by a tightly meshed plot, the play seems, like many of the comedies, loosely plotted, held together by theme. The conflicts introduced in the first act between Desdemona and her father and between Venetians and Turks evaporate before they are underway, exactly as do those between Hermia and Egeus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and between Duke Frederick and Duke Senior in *As You Like It*. As in the comedies, these early plot developments are presented in a flat, stereotyped way; they seem almost an excuse to get the characters to the woods or to Cyprus where the play's real conflicts emerge. Once on Cyprus, however, Act II is in many ways a repetition of Act I.<sup>16</sup> Iago plots the remainder of the play, but his scheme is slight, repetitive, and flawed. It has been found lacking in both motive (like Rosalind's plot in *As You Like It*) and goal (like Don John's plot in *Much Ado About Nothing*). Although the play's increasing intensity is undeniable, there is little actual plot development between the end of the first phase of

the temptation scene (III.iii.275) and the attempt on Cassio's life in Act V. Iago's temptation of Othello, like Rosalind's education of Orlando, is not merely linear. Both are continually starting over; they are repeated variations on opposite themes: Iago works to induce fantasy and Rosalind to dispel it. Neither entirely succeeds. Iago's plot, like those of the comedies, rests on coincidence and absurdity. The handkerchief is like the givens of the comedies—the fairy juice, the caskets, the disguises, the identical twins; it is trivial and ridiculous but, as I shall show, symbolically all-important. The play proceeds, then, as much by a clash of attitudes, viewpoints, sexes as by plot developments. As in the comedies, no single character or viewpoint prevails.

Structure, too, imitates that of the pastoral comedies in its movement from an urban center to an isolated retreat with resultant intensity, freedom, breakdown, and interaction of disparate characters.<sup>17</sup> Though Othello refers to Cyprus as a "town of war," once the threats of Turks and storm are lifted, it is instead Venus' isle, a place for celebration—relaxation, drinking, eating (dinner arrangements are a frequent topic of conversation here as in Arden), flirting, sleeping, lovemaking. In the comedies, the potential corruption of these activities is suggested in witty banter, in songs, in comic simile and metaphor; in *Othello*, this corruption becomes literal.

The play is a terrifying completion of the comedies. In them, realism and romanticism, lust and love, desire and illusion, love and friendship, cuckoldry and marriage, masculinity and femininity are held in precarious balance. The men's propensities for folly, cuckoldry, promiscuity, and cruelty are "laugh[ed] to scorn" (AYL, IV.ii.19); through mockery they are both acknowledged and made powerless. In all of the comedies "The cuckoo then, on every tree, / Mocks married men" (LLL, V.ii.896–97), and mockery grounds and strengthens love. In *Othello*, instead, "villainy hath made mocks with love" (V.ii.152), parodying and perverting love to destroy it. Many of the comedies begin, as *Othello* does, in a masculine world—isolated, rigid, hostile, foolish. But the women enter, take control, and by their "high and plenteous wit and invention" (IV.i.185) transform the men from foolish lovers into—we hope—sensible husbands. The women prepare the way for the harmonious endings symbolized by the consummation of a marriage—in the fairy-blessed beds of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* couples, the re-won beds of Bassanio and Portia, Gratiano and Nerissa in *Merchant of Venice*, the "well-deserved bed" of Silvius and the rest in *As You Like It*. In *Othello*, the women's wit is constrained, their power over men is lost, and the men are transformed downwards—"to be

now a sensible man, by and by a fool, and presently a beast!" (II.iii.296–97). In the romantic comedies the men, while foolish, are not beasts, and their follies are reined and dispelled by the witty heroines. In the dark comedies, the men are almost too foolish (Bassanio, Bertram) or too bestial (Shylock, Angelo) for the happy endings to be possible or satisfying. The women must work too hard, and the men are not changed enough for either sex to be entirely likable or for their reconciliations to be occasion for rejoicing. In *Othello*, the men's murderous fancies are untouched by the women's affection, wit, and shrewishness. The play ends as it began, in a world of men—political, loveless, undomesticated.<sup>18</sup>

The men in *Othello* extend and darken the traits of the comedy heroes. They are, in Emilia's words, "murderous coxcombs" (V.ii.234). Three out of the five attempt murder; five out of the five are foolish and vain. Roderigo, most obviously a coxcomb, shows in exaggerated fashion the dangerous combination of romanticism and cynicism and the dissociation of love and sex which all the men share. He is the conventional Petrarchan lover: love is a "torment," death a "physician" (I.iii.308–9), Desdemona "full of most blest condition" (II.i.247), and consummation of their relationship securely impossible. Yet he easily accepts Desdemona's supposed adultery and the necessity of Cassio's murder; his casual cynicism comes to outdo Iago's: "'Tis but a man gone" (V.i.10). The other men have similarly divided views of women. Brabantio shifts abruptly from protective affection for the chaste Desdemona—"of spirit / So still and quiet, that her motion / Blush'd at her self" (I.iii.94–96)—to physical revulsion from the sexuality revealed by her elopement—"I had rather to adopt a child than get it" (I.iii.191). Cassio's divided view is more conventionally accommodated. He idealizes the "divine Desdemona," flirting courteously and cautiously with her and rejecting Iago's insinuations about her sexuality; this side of women is left to Bianca, who is a "monkey" and a "fitchew" and is used and degraded for it. Othello's conflict regarding women is more profound, and the other men's solutions are not open to him. Because of his marriage and because of his integrity, he cannot, like Roderigo, assert Desdemona's chastity and corruptibility simultaneously; he cannot, like Cassio, direct his divided emotions toward different objects or, like Brabantio, disown the problem.

Othello's shifts from the idealization of women to their degradation are "extravagant and wheeling" (I.i.136). Iago is their catalyst, but Othello makes the task easy. At the play's start, Othello's idealistic love needs, like that of the comedy heroes, some realistic grounding in the facts of sex. For

Othello sex is secondary and potentially either frivolous or debilitating:

no, when light-wing'd toys,  
And feather'd Cupid, foils with wanton dullness  
My speculative and active instruments,  
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,  
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,  
And all indign and base adversities  
Make head against my reputation!

(I.iii.268-74)

Marriage and its impending consummation naturally pose a threat to this idealistic love. Othello's greeting on Cyprus reveals his preference for a perpetually unconsummated courtship:

If it were now to die,  
'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear  
My soul hath her content so absolute,  
That not another comfort, like to this  
Succeeds in unknown fate.

(II.i.189-93)

In response Desdemona asserts instead quotidian joys:

The heavens forbid  
But that our loves and comforts should increase,  
Even as our days do grow.

(II. 193-95)

Perhaps she, like Rosalind or Viola or the ladies in *Love's Labor's Lost*, might have tempered Othello's idealism. Instead, it is nudged by Iago into its antithesis—contempt for women, disgust at sexuality, terror of cuckoldry, the preference of literal death for metaphorical "death." The acceptance of cuckoldry and sexuality found in the comedies—"as horns are odious, they are necessary" (AYL, III.iii.49-50)—is impossible for Othello. Instead he turns Petrarchan imagery against Desdemona—"O thou black weed, why art so lovely fair?" (IV.ii.69), praising and damning her simultaneously. His conflicts are resolved, his needs to idealize and degrade her are momentarily reconciled only when he kills her, performing a sacrifice which is also a murder.<sup>19</sup>

Iago, though primarily the manipulator of these conflicts in the other men is also the victim of his own. His cynical generalizations are, like those of Jaques, the parody and inverse of the romantics' claims; they are self-conscious, self-aggrandizing, and divorced from reality: "My muse labours / And thus she is deliver'd" (II.i.127-28). Like the other men, he accepts generalizations—especially generalizations about women—as true, provided they are "apt and of great credit" (II.i.282), "probable, and palpable to thinking" (I.ii.76). Like the others, he is careful not to contaminate his fantasies with facts. Roderigo does not court Desdemona in person, Cassio does not sue for his position directly, Othello does not immediately confront Desdemona and Cassio with his suspicions, and Iago never tries to ascertain whether Emilia is promiscuous.<sup>20</sup> In fact he has little contact with the women in the play. He is at ease in Act II, engaging Desdemona in witty banter, but he is subdued and almost speechless in Act IV when confronted with her misery and fidelity. Like Brabantio, Iago assumes that "consequence" will "approve" his "dream" (II.iii.58) and ignores evidence to the contrary.

Even protected as it is from reality, Iago's cynicism has cracks just as Othello's idealism does. He has a grudging admiration for Desdemona's "blest condition," Othello's "constant, noble, loving nature" (II.i.289), and Cassio's "daily beauty" (V.i.19). He aspires to Cassio's job and Othello's "content" and tries to identify with their love for Desdemona—"now I do love her too" (II.i.286), though this love is immediately subsumed under notions of lust and revenge. The tension between his theoretical misogyny and his occasional intimations of Desdemona's virtue drive him to resolve the conflict, to turn that virtue "into pitch" (II.iii.351) just as his verses extravagantly praise the deserving woman, the better to be able to diminish her. Othello's conflict has the opposite issue; he murders Desdemona to redeem her from degradation.

The women in *Othello* are not murderous, and they are not foolishly idealistic or foolishly cynical as the men are. From the start they, like the comedy heroines, combine realism with romance, mockery with affection. Bianca comically reflects the qualities of the women as Roderigo does those of the men. The play explicitly identifies her with the other women in the overheard conversation about her which Othello takes to be about Desdemona and in her response to Emilia's attack: "I am no strumpet, but of life as honest / As you, that thus abuse me" (V.i.120-21). At this point, Iago tries to fabricate evidence against her just as Othello, in the scene immediately following, fabricates a case against Desdemona. Bianca's active, open-eyed, enduring affection is similar to that of the other women.



She neither romanticizes love nor degrades sex. She sees Cassio's callousness but accepts it wryly—"Tis very good, I must be circumstanc'd" (III.iv.199). She mocks him to his face, but not behind his back as he does her. Her active pursuit of Cassio is in contrast to his indifference, to Roderigo's passivity, and to Othello's naiveté. When jealous, she accuses Cassio openly and continues to feel affection for him. The play's humanization of her, much like, for example, that of the bourgeois characters at the end of *Love's Labor's Lost*, underlines the folly of the male characters who see her as merely whore.

Emilia articulates the balanced view which Bianca embodies—"and though we have some grace, / Yet have we some revenge" (IV.iii.92-93). She, like other Shakespearean shrews, especially Beatrice and Paulina, combines sharp-tongued honesty with warm affection. Her views are midway between Desdemona's and Bianca's and between those of the women and those of the men. She rejects the identification with Bianca yet sympathizes with female promiscuity. She corrects Desdemona's occasional naiveté but defends her chastity. Although she comprehends male jealousy and espouses sexual equality, she seems remarkably free of jealousy herself. She wittily sees cuckoldry and marital affection as compatible: "Who would not make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch?" (IV.iii.74-75). She understands but tolerates male fancy; the dangers of such tolerance become evident in this play as they never do in the comedies.

Desdemona's and Emilia's contrasting viewpoints in the willow scene have led critics to think of them as opposites, but they have much in common. When we first see them together, they encourage and participate in Iago's misogynist banter but reject his stereotypes. Desdemona here defends Emilia from Iago's insults just as Emilia will ultimately defend Desdemona from Othello's calumny. While Desdemona is no shrew (though she might be said to approach one in the matter of Cassio's reinstatement), her love is everywhere tempered by realism and wit like that of the comedy heroines. During courtship she hides, as they did, behind a sort of disguise—not literal male dress but the assumption of a pose of docility and indifference which conceals her passion from both her father and Othello. Like Iago's deserving woman she is one that could "think, and ne'er disclose her mind, / See suitors following, and not look behind" (II.i.156-57). Eventually, though, she takes the lead in the courtship as the heroines do; she finds an excuse to be alone with Othello, mocks him by speaking of him "dispraisingly" (III.iii.73), and traps him into a proposal using indirection not unlike Rosalind's with Orlando.<sup>21</sup>



After marriage, as during courtship, Desdemona's love tempers romance with realism. She is indifferent to Cassio's elaborate compliments (II.i.87ff.). She rejects Othello's desire to stop time, emphasizing instead love's growth.<sup>22</sup> Her healthy casual acceptance of sexuality is evident in her banter with Iago and with the clown,<sup>23</sup> in her affirmation that she "did love the Moor, to live with him" (I.iii.248), and in her refusal to postpone consummation of "the rites for which I love him" (I.iii.257). She will not allow herself to be idealized nor will she romanticize Othello. She had spoken "dispraisingly" of him during courtship, and she mocks him gently after marriage:

Tell me, Othello: I wonder in my soul,  
What you could ask me, that I should deny?  
Or stand so mammering on?

.....  
Shall I deny you? no, farewell, my lord.  
(III.iii.69-71, 87)

She reminds herself, in an emphatically short line:

nay, we must think  
Men are not gods;  
Nor of them look for such observances  
As fits the bridal.  
(III.iv.145-48)

Her concise statement about her love reveals its balance and health:

I saw Othello's visage in his mind,  
And to his honours, and his valiant parts  
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.  
(I.iii.252-54)

She loves Othello for his body and mind, for his reputation and actions; she consecrates herself to him spiritually and practically.

Desdemona's spirit, clarity, and realism do not desert her entirely in the latter half of the play as many critics and performances imply. In the brothel scene, she persistently questions Othello to discover exactly what he accuses her of and even advances a hypothesis about her father, linking with herself the "state-matters" which may have transformed Othello.

Throughout the scene she defends herself as "stoutly" (III.i.45) as she had earlier defended Cassio:

If to preserve this vessel for my lord  
From any hated foul unlawful touch,  
Be not to be a strumpet, I am none.  
(IV.ii.85-87)

Her naiveté and docility in the willow scene are partly a result of her confusion and exhaustion but perhaps also partly a protective facade behind which she waits, as she did during courtship, while determining the most appropriate and fruitful reaction to Othello's rage. The conversation and the song with its alternate last verses explore alternate responses to male perfidy—acceptance "*Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve*"—or retaliation "*If I court moe women, you'll couch with moe men*" (IV.iii.51, 56). Emilia supports retaliation—"The ills we do, their ills instruct us so" (l. 103) though, like Bianca, she practices acceptance. Desdemona's final couplet suggests that she is groping for a third response, one that is midway between "grace" and "revenge," one that would be more active than acceptance yet more loving than retaliation: "God me such usage send, / Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!" (ll. 104-5). The lines are a reply to Emilia and a transformation of an earlier couplet of Iago's: "fairness and wit / The one's for use, the other using it" (II.i.129-30). Desdemona will put fairness and wit to "use" in a sense that includes and goes beyond the sexual one, acknowledging and using "bad" to heal it. Her earlier command to have the wedding sheets put on her bed seems one expression of this positive usage. Just before her death, as in the brothel scene, she strives to "mend" Othello's debased view of her, transforming the "sins" he accuses her of into "loves I bear to you"; but he recorropts them: "And for that thou diest" (V.ii.40-41).

Vanity is the central characteristic of coxcombs and is at the root of the men's murderousness in *Othello*. Lovers in the comedies like Orsino, Orlando, and Bassanio suffer their foolishness gladly, but the men in this play must destroy the women who make fools of them. Jaques satirizes their particular brand of vanity in the portrait of the soldier in his seven ages speech: "Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard, / Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel, / Seeking the bubble reputation / Even in the cannon's mouth" (II.vii.149-52). Shakespeare himself, through the men in *Othello*, questions or perhaps even satirizes conventional Renaissance notions about honor and reputation.<sup>24</sup> Cassio, of course,

explicitly voices the men's concern with "the bubble reputation" and reveals how central their position and image are to their sense of identity: "I ha' lost my reputation! I ha' lost the immortal part, sir, of myself, and what remains is bestial" (II.iii.255). At the same time the men view reputation as detachable; it is a matter of rank or place, something conferred—or removed—by others. Hence Iago continues to care about the rank of lieutenant in spite of his continuing intimacy with Othello. Cassio equally relishes his title; "The lieutenant is to be saved before the ancient," he boasts (II.iii.103). Othello must fire Cassio for appearances' sake and because Montano "is of great fame in Cyprus" (III.i.46). Othello's dependence on others' "rich opinion" (II.iii.286) creates conflict in his love; "feather'd Cupid" potentially threatens "reputation" in the first act, and later he finds the scorn due the cuckold almost as difficult to bear as the loss of Desdemona.

Although they are neither "bearded like a pard" nor "full of strange oaths," the men in this play, in their vanity, desire the swaggering manliness which such characteristics conjure up. Iago successfully plays on the others' nervousness about their "manliness," driving them to acts of "malicious bravery" (I.i.100). He jovially calls them "man" while questioning their manhood or urging new proofs of it. He goads Cassio into "manly" drunkenness and good fellowship—"What, man, 'tis a night of revels, the gallants desire it" (II.iii.39). He urges Othello, "Good sir, be a man" (IV.i.65). He flatters Roderigo's manly pride: "if thou hast that within thee indeed, which I have greater reason to believe now than ever, I mean purpose, courage, and valour, this night show it" (IV.ii.213–16). His suggestive battle cries to Roderigo imply a connection between sexual and martial prowess: "Wear thy good rapier bare, and put it home. . . . fix most firm thy resolution" (V.i.2, 5); perhaps the gull's melodramatic attack on Cassio is "satisfying" even beyond Iago's "reasons," compensating him for his lack of sexual success. Inversely, cuckoldry invalidates Othello's military glories, and only the murder of Desdemona and his own suicide restore his pride in his "occupation."

Since the reputation and manliness which the men covet is achieved in competition with others, all of them are "jealous in honor"—indeed are "easily jealous" in every sense of the word. Brabantio is possessive, watchful, enraged to have the object of his esteem taken from him. Iago is critical and envious and resentful—of Cassio's position and "daily beauty," of Othello's love and power, perhaps even of Roderigo's wealth and rank. Othello is sexually possessive and envious and suspicious—of Cassio, of Emilia, and (too briefly) of Iago as well as of Desdemona. While overhear-

ing Cassio and Iago mock Bianca, his wounded vanity, obsessive jealousy, and competitive concern for reputation and manliness coalesce in his terse asides with their complicated sexual / martial double entendres:

Do you triumph, Roman, do you triumph?

.....

So, so, so, so; laugh that wins.

.....

Ha' you scor'd me? Well.

.....

I see that nose of yours, but not that dog I shall throw 't to.

(IV.i.118, 122, 126, 140)<sup>25</sup>

But although Othello vows to murder Cassio, he does not do so, and Iago and Roderigo together bungle the attempt. The cowardice, clumsiness, and insecurity which belie male pretensions to valor are manifested, comically—as in the *Twelfth Night* duel—in the hesitation of Lodovico and Gratiano to answer Roderigo's and Cassio's cries for help: "Two or three groans; it is a heavy night, / These may be counterfeits, let's think 't unsafe / To come into the cry without more help" (V.i.42–45). Even after Iago's entrance, they still hang back, ascertaining his identity (l. 51) but ignoring his cry (thus allowing him to murder Roderigo), introducing themselves (l. 67), discovering Cassio's identity (l. 70), and finally coming to his side following Bianca, who has just entered (l. 75). They still offer no assistance but only perfunctory sympathy and an anticlimactic explanation: "I am sorry to find you thus, I have been to seek you" (l. 81).

Male friendship, like male courage, is, in the play, sadly deteriorated from the Renaissance ideal. In romance and comedy the world of male friendship in which the work opens (in, for example, the *Arcadia*, *Two Gentlemen*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Love's Labor's Lost*) is shattered and transcended by romantic love. As *Othello* begins, romantic love already dominates, but friendship in which the work opens (in, for example, the *Arcadia*, *Two Gentlemen*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Love's Labor's Lost*) is shattered and transcended them, is the model for male friendship in the play. Brabantio's "love" for Othello evaporates when his friend marries his daughter. Roderigo intends to use Iago though he is worse used by him. Othello has no hesitation in cashiering Cassio and ordering his death. The men's vanity, their preoccupation with rank and reputation, and their cowardice render them as incapable of friendship as they are of love.

The women, in contrast, are indifferent to reputation and partially free

of vanity, jealousy, and competitiveness. Desdemona's willingness "to incur a general mock" is evident in her elopement and her defense of it, and her request to go to Cyprus. Emilia braves scorn to defend her mistress, "Let heaven, and men, and devils, let 'em all, / All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak" (V.ii.222-23). If Cassio's description of Bianca corresponds at all to fact, she too ignores reputation, comically, to pursue him—"she haunts me in every place . . . she falls thus about my neck; . . . so hangs, and lolls, and weeps upon me" (IV.i.131-36)—and we see her brave the confusion of the night and the ugliness of Iago's insinuations to come to Cassio's side when he is wounded. Bianca's jealousy is also in contrast to the men's; instead of corroding within, it 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. Likewise Emilia, though expert at noting and analyzing jealousy, seems untouched by it herself. Even her argument for the single standard is good natured; it contains little hatred of men and no personal animosity toward Iago.

Desdemona is neither jealous nor envious nor suspicious. She is not suspicious or possessive about Othello's job, his intimacy with Iago, or his "love" for Cassio but supports all three. She seems entirely lacking in the sense of class, race, rank, and hierarchy which concerns the men and is shared by Emilia, who refuses to be identified with Bianca. She treats her father, the Duke, Othello, Cassio, Iago, Emilia, even the clown, with precisely the same combination of politeness, generosity, openness, and firmness. Emilia's and Desdemona's lack of competitiveness, jealousy, and class consciousness facilitates their growing intimacy, which culminates in the willow scene. The scene, sandwiched between two exchanges of Iago and Roderigo, sharply contrasts the genuine intimacy of the women with the hypocritical friendship of the men. Emilia's concern for Desdemona is real and her advice well meant, whereas Iago's concern for Roderigo is feigned, his advice deadly—"whether he kill Cassio, / Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other, / Every way makes my game" (V.i.12-14). Roderigo accepts Iago's "satisfying reasons," finding them sufficient to justify murder; Desdemona rejects Emilia's reasonable justification of adultery without rejecting the concern which prompts her to offer it. In the willow scene intimacy stretches from Emilia and Desdemona to include Barbary and the protagonist of the song; in the Roderigo / Iago scenes enmity reaches Cassio. In this play romantic love is destroyed by male friendship which itself soon disintegrates. Meanwhile, friendship between women is established and dominates the play's final scene. Othello chooses Iago's friendship

over Desdemona's love temporarily and unwittingly; Emilia's choice of Desdemona over Iago is voluntary and final. Though the stakes here are higher, the friendship of Desdemona and Emilia is reminiscent of the frank warm witty female friendships in the comedies—for example, between Rosalind and Celia, Beatrice and Hero, Portia and Nerissa—and of the sympathy which certain of these heroines feel even for rivals—Julia for Sylvia, Viola for Olivia, Helena for Diana.

In spite of the men's vanity and competitiveness and their concern for honor and reputation, when they do act, they persistently place the blame for their actions outside themselves. Even Cassio, while abusing himself for his drunkenness, comes to personify that drunkenness as a "devil," something which invades him. Roderigo blames Iago for his failure to prosper: "Iago hurt [me]. Iago set [me] on" (V.ii.329–30). Iago, at the last, instead of boasting of the execution of his grand design (as, for example, Satan does in *Paradise Lost*), tries to shift responsibility for it elsewhere—to Bianca, to Emilia, and finally, even after the facts are known, to Othello: "I told him what I thought, and told no more / Than what he found himself was apt and true" (V.ii.177–78). Othello's longing for passivity and his denial of responsibility are intertwined throughout the play. He both sees himself as passive and desires passivity. His narrative history before the senate, the basis for our original impression of the heroic Othello, describes, when closely examined, what he has suffered rather than what he has done; he speaks of "moving accidents by flood and field; / Of hairbreadth scapes 'i th' imminent deadly breach; / Of being taken by the insolent foe; / And sold to slavery, and my redemption hence" (I.iii.135–38), and of his subsequent enslavement by Desdemona, whom he entertained with similar tales, for example, "of some distressed stroke / That my youth suffer'd" (I.iii.157–58). His farewell to arms is, curiously, a farewell to "content," to "the tranquil mind" (III.iii.354), and to the instruments of war; it is they who are seen as active and heroic, not himself. His vow of revenge, likening him to the "compulsive course" of the "Pontic sea," reveals the longing for external control which underlies the heroic stance. In a parallel passage after his error is revealed, he again wants to be swept along by a current even if the agency is hell-fire: "Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur, / Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!" (V.ii.280–81). Two of his significant actions in the play—the cashiering of Cassio and the murder of Desdemona—are, in a sense, "compulsive," achieved, as he himself notes, only when passion "Assays to lead the way" (II.iii.198) and he feels out of control. Even at his suicide, when he is in control, he sees himself as "you" rather than "I," object rather than actor, as "being wrought, / Perplex'd in the extreme . . . one whose subdued

eyes, . . . Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees / Their medicinal gum . . ." (V.ii.246–51). In the anecdote which accompanies his suicide he is actor and acted upon, hero and victim, and his action is again violent and enraged. Earlier he placed responsibility for his actions elsewhere—on "the moon which makes men mad" (V.ii.112), on his "fate" (V.ii.266), and on Iago who "perplex'd" him; now, even while acknowledging his unworthiness, he is taking credit for punishing himself.

Desdemona's self-recriminations must be seen in the light of Othello's evasions. Critics have found them puzzling, excessive, intolerable, even neurotic;<sup>26</sup> perhaps they are all of these. But her unwarranted self-accusations—"beshrew me much, Emilia, / I was (unhandsome warrior as I am) / Arraigning his unkindness with my soul; / But now I find I had suborn'd the witness, / And he's indited falsely" (III.iv.148–52)—and her false assumption of responsibility for her death—"Nobody, I myself, farewell" (V.ii.125)—provide the sharpest possible contrast to the men's excuses. Her last request, "Commend me to my kind lord" not only conveys her forgiveness but is one final active effort to mend and renew the relationship. Othello, at the last, responds to it as he dies "upon a kiss."

From the beginning, Desdemona has viewed love as risk and challenge; she has initiated while Othello has responded. She is neither the "rose" or "chrysolite" of Petrarchan convention seen by Othello nor the saint extolled by critics. She sets the stage for her wooing by an extraordinarily active listening which Othello naturally notices and describes; she would "with a greedy ear / Devour up my discourse" (I.iii.149–50). She engenders his love by her own—"She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd, / And I lov'd her that she did pity them" (168–69); she proposes and elopes. She is the one who challenges her father directly, who determines to go to Cyprus. She moves after marriage to bring the lovers' idiom down to earth, using all of her "plenteous wit and invention" at their reunion and in the discussion of Cassio. All the characters in the play make mention of her energizing power. Cassio, hyperbolically, attributes to her the ability to influence recalcitrant nature:

Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds,  
The gutter'd rocks, and congregated sands,  
Traitors ensteep'd, to clog the guiltless keel,  
As having sense of beauty, do omit  
Their common natures, letting go safely by  
The divine Desdemona.

(II.i.68–73)



Othello is awed by her power to move man and beast—"she might lie by an emperor's side, and command him tasks . . . O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear" (IV.i.180-81, 184-85). Iago, in soliloquy, attributes to her unlimited power over Othello—"she may make, unmake, do what she list" (II.iii.337). And Desdemona herself, vowing support for Cassio, reveals her sense of her own persistence and force:

If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it  
To the last article; my lord shall never rest,  
I'll watch him tame, and talk him out of patience;  
His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift,  
I'll intermingle every thing he does  
With Cassio's suit.

(III.iii.21-26)

But Desdemona does not educate Othello as the falconer does the falcon, the teacher the pupil, or the priest the penitent. The women, for all their affection, good sense, and energy, fail to transform or be reconciled with the men. The first reason for this is that the sexes, so sharply differentiated in the play, badly misunderstand each other. The men, as we have seen, persistently misconceive the women; the women fatally overestimate the men. Each sex, trapped in its own values and attitudes, misjudges the other. Iago acts on the hypothesis that women, on the one hand, share his concern with reputation and propriety—"Be wise, and get you home" (V.ii.224) he orders Emilia—and, on the other, enact his salacious fantasies. Othello assumes that just as he is the stereotypical soldier, foreigner, older husband, so Desdemona will be the stereotypical mistress, Venetian, young bride. He responds to Iago's claim to knowledge about Desdemona—"knowing what I am, I know what she shall be"—with comic enthusiasm: "O, thou art wise, 'tis certain" (IV.i.73-74). Likewise the women attribute their own qualities to the men. Desdemona projects her own lack of jealousy onto Othello. Emilia attributes to Iago her own capacity for empathy: "I know it grieves my husband, / As if the case were his" (III.iii.3-4). Even Bianca, because she does not view herself as a whore in her relationship with Cassio, is surprised that he should treat her as one.

The men see the women as whores and then refuse to tolerate their own projections. The women recognize the foolishness of the men's fancies but are all too tolerant of them. Emilia steals the handkerchief for the sake of Iago's "fantasy" (III.iii.303) and assures the success of his plot. Desdemona's salutation to Othello in Act III is lamentably prophetic—"Be it as your fancies teach you, / What'er you be, I am obedient" (III.iii.89-90).

He leaves her to be instructed in her whoredom. The failure of the women's power can be more fully understood by examining the handkerchief which is its symbol.

Both Othello's original description of the handkerchief and its part in the plot reveal that it is a symbol of women's civilizing power. It has passed from female sibyl to female "charmer" to Othello's mother to Desdemona. Othello is merely a necessary intermediary between his mother and his wife—"She dying, gave it me, / And bid me, when my fate would have me wive, / To give it her" (III.iv.61-63). Its creator, the sibyl, who "In her prophetic fury sew'd the work," and its next owner, the Egyptian charmer who "could almost read / The thoughts of people," place the source of its power in women's intuitive knowledge. This knowledge enables them to use and control sexuality. The middle ground which they find between lust and abstinence (as the men in the play cannot do) is suggested in the description of the process by which the handkerchief is made. The worms which did "breed" the silk, emblems of death, sexuality, and procreation, are "hallow'd." The thread which they spin naturally from themselves is artificially improved, dyed in "mummy" which is "conserved from maiden's hearts." The handkerchief then represents sexuality controlled by chastity. Its function is to induce love and control it:

. . . she told her, while she kept it  
'Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father  
Entirely to her love: but if she lost it,  
Or made a gift of it, my father's eye  
Should hold her loathly, and his spirits should hunt  
After new fancies.

(II. 56-61)

It represents women's ability to moderate men's erratic (and erotic) "fancies," to "subdue" their promiscuity, and perhaps, by extension, their vanity, romanticism, jealousy, and rage as well. These fancies are associated here, as in the comedies, with men's deluded and capricious "eye." At the play's beginning, Desdemona, like the comedy heroines, has this ability in abundance, as Othello affirms:

Excellent wretch, perdition catch my soul,  
But I do love thee, and when I love thee not,  
Chaos is come again.

(III.iii.91-93)

But the handkerchief is lost, the female power it symbolizes evaporates, and comedy gives way to tragedy.

After the handkerchief's original loss, all of the characters, men and women alike, symbolically misuse and misinterpret it; as a result, all the love relationships in the play are disrupted. The abuse begins as Othello pushes it aside, rejecting Desdemona's loving attempt to heal the "pain" on his forehead, and Emilia picks it up to give it to her husband.<sup>28</sup> In Iago's hands its function is reversed; it is used to give Iago power over Othello and Desdemona and to induce in him loathing for her. Iago's first mention of it incites Othello to reject love and embrace vengeance (III.iii.441-86). Now the hero proceeds to reinterpret the handkerchief as *his* love token—a pledge of his love and of Desdemona's fidelity—"She is protectress of her honour too, / May she give that?" (IV.i.14-15). Hence its loss provides "proof" of his suspicions. The reinterpretation continues in his altered description of its history in the last act. As he uses it to support his "cause" against Desdemona, it becomes "the recognizance and pledge of love / Which I first gave her . . . an antique token / *My father* gave my mother" (V.ii.215-18, italics mine). It is now a symbol of the male love which Desdemona has betrayed; hence she must be punished—"Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (V.ii.6).<sup>29</sup>

Desdemona too alters her view of the handkerchief. Instinctively using it to cure Othello's pain, she almost succeeds. She "loves" the handkerchief (III.iii.297) and recognizes the danger of its loss. But when pressed by Othello, she rejects its significance—"Then would to God that I had never seen it!" (II.iv.75). Her rejection reflects the failure of her power. In Desdemona's earlier discussion of Cassio she was in control; now her persistence is foolish and provokes Othello's rage. Even in the early part of this scene Desdemona deftly parries and "mends" Othello's ugly insinuations, turning his implied vices into virtues:

- Othello.* . . . this hand is moist, my lady.  
*Desdemona.* It yet has felt no age, nor known no sorrow. . . .  
*Othello.* For here's a young and sweating devil here,  
 That commonly rebels: 'tis a good hand,  
 A frank one.  
*Desdemona.* You may indeed say so,  
 For 'twas that hand that gave away my heart.  
 (III.iv.32-41)

But after the tale of the handkerchief she loses the initiative. She tries to

regain it by—just barely—lying and by changing the subject. But the attempt to calm and heal Othello fails. Her lie, like Ophelia's similarly well-intentioned lie to Hamlet, signals the loss of her maiden's power and innocence; it confirms—Othello believes—his notions about female depravity as Ophelia's lie confirms Hamlet's similar views. Both women, rejected by their lovers, do not regain the initiative in the relationship.

The handkerchief next creates conflict in the Iago / Emilia and Cassio / Bianca relationships. Both men use it, as Othello has done, to consolidate their power over women. When Emilia regrets its theft, Iago snatches it from her and dismisses her, "Be not you known on 't" (III.iii.324). Cassio similarly gives orders to Bianca regarding it and dismisses her (III.iv.188–89). She, though jealous, agrees to copy the work; her willingness to be "circumstanc'd" (l. 200) is a flaw which all the women share. Later, however, she returns the handkerchief in a scene which is a parallel and contrast to that when the handkerchief was lost. Bianca, like Othello, is jealous. The handkerchief is flung down here as it was pushed aside there, and it lies on the stage ignored by the couple who go off to a possible reconciliation. But Bianca's refusal to be used by the handkerchief or by Cassio leads to a truce and a supper engagement, whereas Othello's refusal to be healed by it opened the breach in his relationship with Desdemona which culminates in her murder.

Eventually the handkerchief's original function is reestablished; it becomes the vehicle through which civilizing control is returned to the women. The reference to it by Othello in the last scene enlightens Emilia; it ends Iago's domination of her, engenders her accusations of Othello and Iago, and provides her (and through her, Othello) with positive proof of Desdemona's chastity. Emilia, stealing the handkerchief, is catalyst for the play's crisis; revealing its theft, she is catalyst for the play's denouement.

The reiteration of "husband" and "mistress" in the last scene emphasizes the play's central division and the "divided duty" of Emilia. Like her mistress in the play's first act, she shifts her allegiance unhesitatingly. Instead of tolerating both Iago's "fancy" and Desdemona's virtue, she denounces the one and affirms the other. She questions Iago's manliness: "Disprove this villain, if thou be'st a man: / He said thou told'st him that his wife was false, / I know thou didst not, thou art not such a villain" (V.ii.173–75). Then she rejects the wifely virtues of silence, obedience, and prudence which are demanded of her: "I will not charm my tongue, I am bound to speak" (l. 185). A few lines later she adds, "'Tis proper I obey him, but not now: / Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home" (ll. 197–98). Her epithet just before she is stabbed appropriately refers to all the men in the

play—to Iago, to whose taunts it is a response; to Othello, who responds to it; and to Cassio, Roderigo, and Brabantio as well: “O murderous coxcomb! what should such a fool / Do with so good a woman?” (ll. 234–35). Emilia, another “good woman,” dies without self-justification or calls for revenge; instead she testifies to Desdemona’s innocence and love just as her mistress had done at her own death. Her request to be laid by her mistress, her reiteration of the willow song, and her own attempts to “by bad mend” complete her identification with Desdemona.

Thus in the last scene the gulf between men and women widens. Emilia’s confession is not just a refusal of obedience; it destroys Iago’s plot and refutes his philosophy, which requires that she act according to her own self-interest. Iago’s Othello-like response to his wife’s betrayal is to call her “villainous whore” and stab her in a vengeful fury, thus validating her confession and her epithet. With his power evaporated, philosophy repudiated, and guilt revealed, he has no reason to talk and nothing to say; it is his tongue which is “charmed,” not hers. After the stabbing he makes no further reference to Emilia, nor does she to him; all connections between them are severed. Bianca has been earlier separated from Cassio, and she is absent from the last scene. We can perhaps assume that Cassio, in his new post, will be even less eager to be “woman’d” (III.iv.193) or “damn’d in a fair wife” (I.i.21) than he was earlier.

The division between Othello and Desdemona remains, though it is not absolute. Desdemona, as we have seen, strives to sustain the relationship up to the moment of her death, and in the last scene Othello does move away from the men and toward the women. Othello, like Desdemona and Emilia, dies testifying to love, whereas Iago lives, silent. Othello, like the women, stays to acknowledge at least partial responsibility for his actions, while Iago flees, accepting none. But Othello cannot abandon his masculine identity by asserting a new one: “That’s he that was Othello; here I am” (l. 285). Instead of applying Emilia’s accusation to himself, he stabs Iago; the two men are one in their desire to place guilt elsewhere and eliminate its bearer. With Iago’s exit Othello grows concerned, characteristically, with his honor and a suicide weapon. Emilia’s death, though it reenacts Desdemona’s, is a mere parenthesis in his search, scarcely noticed by him. The “grimly comic little practical joke”<sup>30</sup> he plays on Montano is reminiscent of Iago’s larger, grimmer, and not so comic plot. Although male bombast is virtually silenced at the end of this play as it is in the comedies—Iago will “never more speak word” (l. 305) and the terseness and precision of Roderigo’s dying epithet for Iago (“O inhuman dog”) are equalled in Cassio’s epitaph for the dead Othello (“For he was great of

heart")—Othello's rhetoric continues unchecked. His last speech is his own brand of Iago's "motive-hunting." Throughout the scene, he persists in seeing himself and Desdemona as ill-fated, unlucky. Desdemona is still imagined as the remote, passive, perfect object of romantic love. He says she is "cold, cold, my girl, / Even like thy chastity" (276–77) and associates her with "monumental alabaster" (l. 5), with an "entire and perfect chrysolite" (l. 146), and with a "pearl" (l. 348). He leaves the play as he had entered it, extolling his services to the state (cf. I.ii.17), confessing, asking for justice and judgment (cf. I.iii.122–25), telling stories about his past, and putting his "unhoused free condition" into its ultimate "confine" for love of Desdemona. Because his character remains essentially unchanged (he still combines romanticism and cynicism, confidence and insecurity, love and folly), his relationship with Desdemona remains symbolically—as perhaps literally—unconsummated.

Indeed, as in the comedies, most of the characters remain where they started—or return there. Here there is not even the tentative movement beyond folly that we find in the comedy heroes. Roderigo was upbraiding Iago in the play's first lines and is still doing so in the letter which is his last communication. Cassio has again received a promotion and is again caught up in events which he does not comprehend. Brabantio, had he lived, likely would have responded to Desdemona's death exactly as he did to her elopement: "This sight would make him do a desperate turn" (l. 208). Iago, like Jaques, Malvolio, and Shylock, the villains of the comedies, is opaque and static. His cryptic last word, "What you know, you know" (l. 304), reveals no more about him than did his explanatory soliloquies. Desdemona, just before her death, challenges Othello as she had challenged her father and defends herself with the same straightforward precision she used before the Senate:

And have you mercy too! I never did  
Offend you in my life, . . . never lov'd Cassio,  
But with such general warranty of heaven,  
As I might love: I never gave him token.

(ll. 59–62)

Bianca comes forth to seek Cassio at her last appearance as at her first; both times she frankly declares her affection and is brusquely dismissed. Emilia's function and attitudes do change, however, though her character perhaps does not. She moves from tolerating men's fancies to exploding them and from prudent acceptance to courageous repudiation. She ceases

to function as reconciler of the views of the men and the women, and the separation between them becomes absolute.

The play's ending is less like tragedy than like cankered comedy. The *Liebestod* is not mutual and triumphant as in the tragedies of love; indeed the final speech does not even refer to the love of Desdemona and Othello. It does not look backward over the events of the play, creating a sense of completion and exhaustion as in *King Lear*; it does not look forward to a new beginning as in *Macbeth*. As in the comedies, the men are chastened and their rhetoric somewhat subdued, but they remain relatively unchanged. They do not go forth to do penance as do the men in the abortive comedy *Love's Labor's Lost*; even that play's tentative movement toward transformation and reconciliation is absent here. The conflict between the men and the women has not been eliminated or resolved. The men have been unable to turn the women's virtue into pitch, but the women have been unable to mend male fancy. So the comic resolution of male with female, idealism with realism, wit with sex is never achieved. The play concludes, not with symmetrical pairing off, but with one final triangle: Emilia, Desdemona, and Othello dead on the wedding sheets. Instead of the images of fertile marriage beds which the comedies provide, we are made here to look with Iago, ominously a survivor, at the "tragic lodging of this bed"; "lodging" here, with its resonance from other Shakespearean uses,<sup>31</sup> concludes the play on the note of arrested growth, devastated fertility. "The object poisons sight"; it signifies destruction without catharsis, release without resolution. The pain and division of the ending are unmitigated, and the clarification it offers is intolerable. "Let it be hid" is our inevitable response.

#### Notes:

- 1 (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), p. 169. The three he refers to are Emilia, Bianca, and Barbary. His description of Desdemona after her marriage as "a passive, whimpering Griselda" (p. 142) suggests that his statistics might more accurately be put at four out of four.
- 2 F. R. Leavis, "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero or The Sentimentalist's Othello," in *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), pp. 136-59; Coleridge's *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1930), I, passim; A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1932), pp. 147-200; H. Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1930), IV, 135-307; G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1946), pp. 107-31; John Bayley, *The Characters of Love* (New York: Basic Books, 1960), pp. 125-203; Helen Gardner, "The Noble Moor," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 41 (1955), 189-205.



- 3 On Othello's music, see especially Knight, pp. 107-18, and Bayley, pp. 150-59. On Iago, see especially Bradley, pp. 173-96, and Knight, pp. 125-26.
- 4 T. S. Eliot, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950), pp. 110-11; A. P. Rossiter, *Angel With Horns* (New York: Theatre Arts, 1961), pp. 189-208; H. A. Mason, *Shakespeare's Tragedies of Love* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), pp. 159-61; William Empson, "Honest in Othello" in *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951); Leo Kirschbaum, "The Modern Othello," *ELH*, 2 (1944), 283-96.
- 5 II.i.200 in the New Arden *Othello*, ed. M. R. Ridley (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958). All quotations from *Othello* are from this edition, for I find persuasive Ridley's arguments for using the 1622 Quarto rather than the First Folio as his copy text. All other plays are quoted from *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, ed. Sylvan Barnet et al. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).
- 6 For such quotations see Fiedler, p. 158, and Mason, pp. 75-76. On Iago's honesty, see Empson, and Mason, p. 75.
- 7 "Everyone in the play fails to understand her [Desdemona], and fails her." Philip Edwards, *Shakespeare and the Confines of Art* (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 123.
- 8 Neither Rossiter nor Leavis mentions her except as the object of Othello's love or jealousy. Even in D. A. Traversi's more general discussion in *An Approach to Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), Desdemona is the subject of only a couple of sentences.
- 9 Bradley, p. 150. See also Granville-Barker, p. 273; Knight, pp. 119-20.
- 10 Mason, p. 147. See also Fiedler, *passim*.
- 11 Robert Dickes, "Desdemona: an Innocent Victim?," *American Imago*, 27 (1970), 279-97; Fiedler, p. 141-42; Richard Flatter, *The Moor of Venice* (London: William Heinemann, 1950), pp. 72-74; G. Bonnard, "Are Othello and Desdemona Innocent or Guilty?" *English Studies*, 30 (1949), 175-84; Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 18-19.
- 12 This is true even in R. B. Heilman's *The Magic in the Web* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1956) and in Marvin Rosenberg's *The Masks of Othello* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1961), books which seek for Desdemona a middle ground between passivity and aggressiveness and which frequently illuminate the details of the play.
- 13 I do not mean to suggest that critics have not noted that love is a theme in the play. This theme is, of course, at the center of John Bayley's study of *Othello* in *The Characters of Love*. Helen Gardner emphasizes the play's concern with the union of romantic love with marriage in "The Noble Moor" as well as in her useful survey of criticism, "'Othello': A Retrospect, 1900-1967," in *Shakespeare Survey*, 21 (1968), 1-11. Rosalie Colie in "Othello and the Problematics of Love" in *Shakespeare's Living Art* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), brilliantly analyzes how *Othello* is an "unmetaphoring" and reanimation of the conventions of Renaissance love lyrics. I read her essay too late to be as indebted to it as I should like to be.
- 14 The translation is Geoffrey Bullough's in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), VII, p. 239.
- 15 Superficial resemblances to comedy have often been noted. Barbara C. De Men-

- donca in "Othello: A Tragedy Built on a Comic Structure," *Shakespeare Survey*, 21 (1968), 31-38; and Richard Zacha, "Iago and the Commedia dell arte," *Arlington Quarterly*, 2 (1969), 98-116, discuss the play's similarities of subject, plot, and character with the commedia dell arte. Mason, pp. 73-97, and Fiedler, pp. 39-55, show how the first act or the first two acts form a Shakespearean comedy in miniature.
- 16 Mason, pp. 73-97.
  - 17 See Alvin Kernan, Introduction to *Othello* in *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, and Fiedler.
  - 18 Fiedler, p. 194.
  - 19 See Winifred T. Nowotny's excellent discussion of the way in which the murder reconciles Othello's conflicts in "Justice and Love in *Othello*," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 21 (1951-52), esp. pp. 340-44.
  - 20 We are reminded of Orlando, who writes poems on trees instead of seeking Rosalind.
  - 21 (I.iii.161-66). Othello, along with many critics, fails to see that her approach is calculated and witty.
  - 22 Rosalind likewise educates Orlando in the necessities of time. In *Othello* Bianca, as well as Desdemona, stresses its passage. Compare her "What, keep a week away? seven days and nights?" "I pray you bring me on the way a little, / And say, if I shall see you soon at night" (III.iv.171, 195-96) with Desdemona's "Why then to-morrow night, or Tuesday morn, / Or Tuesday noon, or night, or Wednesday morn" (III.iii.61-62).
  - 23 Critics have been surprisingly intolerant of this episode, but Rosalind, Portia, and the ladies in *Love's Labor's Lost* engage more wholeheartedly in such banter without compromising their reputations.
  - 24 David L. Jeffrey and Patrick Grant suggest in "Reputation in *Othello*" *Shakespeare Studies*, 6 (1970), 197-208, that Othello corrupts the ideal of reputation, desiring "bad fame" rather than "good fame," secular rather than heavenly glory. It seems difficult to determine whether the characters are to be viewed as debasing the ideal or whether it is the ideal itself which Shakespeare is questioning. At any rate, Curtis Brown Watson, in *Shakespeare and the Renaissance Concept of Honor* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 209-11, 377-79, oversimplifies the relationship of the men in *Othello* to the ideals of honor and reputation. They are clearly not straightforward representatives of these ideals.
  - 25 Editors have been unclear about the precise implications of "Roman" and "triumph," but the latter perhaps contains a sexual innuendo as in Sonnet 151: "My soul doth tell my body that he may / Triumph in love; flesh stays no farther reason, / But, rising at thy name, doth point out thee / As his triumphant prize!" "Scor'd" seems to mean not only "defaced," as it is usually glossed, but also to have its contemporary meaning of "outscored," perhaps with sexual undertones. There is no O.E.D. citation for this sense before 1882, but "score" in the sense "to add up" is used punningly and bawdily in *All's Well*: "When he swears oaths, bid him drop gold, and take it; / After he scores, he never pays the score; / Half won is match well made; match and well make it. / He ne'er pays after-debts, take it before" (IV.iii.228-31). The first "score" is glossed here by Ribner, in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Irving Ribnor and George Lyman Kittredge (Waltham, Mass.: Xerox College Publishing, 1971), p. 461, as

"a) obtains goods on credit and b) hits the mark, as in archery," and perhaps some of the latter sense is present in the *Othello* passage too. Othello's reference to throwing Cassio's nose to an unseen dog has also puzzled editors. Plucking, tweaking, or cutting off the nose was an act of humiliation and revenge, and here Othello imagines himself getting back at Cassio for his "triumph." But "nose" appears frequently in bawdy contexts with bawdy implications in the plays—in Mercutio's Queen Mab speech, in the tavern scenes in 2 *Henry IV*, in the banter between Charmian, Iras, and Alexas in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and in *Troilus and Cressida*, where Troilus is described by Helen as "In love, i' faith, to the very tip of his nose" (III.i.125)—and it seems likely that it has them here, especially as the preceding line is, "Now he tells how she pluck'd him to my chamber." It is perhaps possible that, on this level of meaning, the "dog" Othello does not see and to whom he will throw Cassio's "nose" is Desdemona. At any rate, sex and combat seem fused and confused here as in Othello's other asides.

- 26 Dicks, loc. cit., and Stephen Reid, "Desdemona's Guilt," *American Imago*, 27 (1970), 279-97, 245-62.
- 27 It is noteworthy that in Shakespeare's plays this power belongs almost always to maidens—to the ladies in *LLL*, to Rosalind, Portia, Viola, Perdita, Marina, and Miranda. In married women it is in abeyance (Gertrude), used against them (Titania), perverted (Goneril, Regan, Lady Macbeth), or lost (Desdemona, Helena, Hermione, and Imogen). Cleopatra is an exception to this generalization as to every other; she retains her power long after losing her maiden's status.
- 28 Shakespeare's alteration of his source, removing Iago from an active role in the theft of the handkerchief and dramatizing its loss in these particular circumstances, emphasizes its symbolism and the active role played by Desdemona and Emilia in the misunderstandings which follow from its original loss.
- 29 Critics also willfully reinterpret—and misinterpret—the handkerchief. G. R. Elliott asserts that Othello "gave her the [handkerchief] with the secret hope that it would hold her faithful to him, as faithful as his 'amiable . . . mother' (56, 59) was to his father until her death" and explains further in a footnote the basis of this assertion: "It is surely obvious that Othello's dying mother in bidding him give the handkerchief to his future wife was concerned for the faithfulness, not of her son, but of that unknown woman," *Flaming Minister: A Study of Othello* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1953), p. 146. David Kaula, in "Othello Possessed: Notes on Shakespeare's Use of Magic and Witchcraft," *Shakespeare Studies*, 2 (1966), is relieved when Othello alters his story of the handkerchief's history: "Nevertheless, the fact that Othello's father now becomes the one who gave his mother the handkerchief converts it into a more plausible love token than the horrific thing contrived by the superannuated sybil in her prophetic fury. In communication once more with civilized representatives of the Venetian order, Othello, even though he has yet to suffer his awakening, is returning to a more normal view of love and marriage" (pp. 126-27). While I cannot accept this view of the handkerchief, much in the article is illuminating, especially the discussion of the implications of the handkerchief's augmented first syllable, "hank," whose meanings include "a restraining or curbing hold; a power of check or restraint" (O.E.D., fig. a).
- 30 Granville-Barker, p. 236.

- 31 See *R2*, III.iii.161; *2H6*, III.ii.176; and *Mac.*, IV.i.55, where the word is used to describe the destruction of young corn on the brink of maturity. Ridley cites these parallels in his detailed and informative note on the word in the Arden edition (p. 197) and demonstrates that Quarto's "lodging" is richer than Folio's more familiar "loading."



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