

THE *TROUBLE WITH GENDER* IN *OTHELLO*: A BUTLERIAN READING OF  
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *THE TRAGEDY OF OTHELLO*,  
*THE MOOR OF VENICE*

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Jeri Lynn Peters

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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By applying the theories of gender as performance developed by feminist theorist Judith Butler in her 1990 work, *Gender Trouble*, to the canonical text of William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*, this thesis seeks to prove that the primary causes of the action of the play are the flaws in Desdemona and Othello's gender performance, as well as Iago's inability to tolerate these flaws.

## Acknowledgments

### In Honor of Fred Feagin

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## Introduction: The Matrix Revolutions

In 1990, Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble*, a work that had a profound impact on feminist politics, as well as literary and cultural studies. In it, she writes:

The pro-sexuality movement within feminist theory and practice has effectively argued that sexuality is always constructed within the terms of discourse and power, where power is partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions. [...] If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is 'before,' 'outside,' or 'beyond' power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream, one that postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself. This critical task presumes, of course, that to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination. (Butler 30)

If, as Butler writes, there is no practical possibility of forming a sexuality outside of the cultural, “matrix of power” (which must be at least “partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions”) then it is of course important that we address the “task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself.” Butler herself does this by careful examinations of the cultures of drag and butch/femme lesbians, among other fringe sexualities, concluding that these are in fact not replications of the “matrix of power,” but subversions.

However, must we only look at these possibilities in our own time? It is appropriate to look for examples of transgression and subversion of the “matrix of power” within earlier works of literature and art as well, particularly those prominent in the western canon, because it is impossible to ignore the impact that many of these works have had on western culture. Therefore, this thesis will examine William Shakespeare’s *Othello* using the above quote, as well as others from *Gender Trouble*, to examine ways in which the characters Desdemona and Othello form “subversive” identities within the “matrix of power” that exists within the text, as well as the “matrix of power” in which the fictive work was created.

A primary reason for choosing *Othello* for Butlerian examination is that, as Michael Neill states, *Othello* is “a play that has rightly come to be identified as a foundational text” (Neill 361). The play is a core work of the western canon, and

is one that is familiar to even casual readers of Shakespeare. A further reason for this choice is that the text of *Othello* is particularly ripe for this type of Butlerian reading because so much of the action of the play is concerned with who is sleeping with whom, who is being transgressive with whom, and the perception of sexual subversion and both sexual and social transgression is at the very core of the pathos of the play itself. If, as Margaret Sonser Breen writes, "*Gender Trouble* provides a theoretical framework for understanding the punitive social consequences of gender and sexual transgression," (Breen 147) then in *Othello* we see these punitive social consequences brought about coldly and calculatedly by Iago.

Viewing the text through the lens of Butlerian theory allows us to not only see Desdemona as a strong, subversive woman who is willing to transgress her social roles as daughter, and even wife at times through her "incorrect" gender performance and disregard for status as "object" and her insistence of being perceived as an acting "subject," but also to examine the ways in which it is the "punitive social consequences" of her actions that lead to her death. In addition, by broadening Butler's scope slightly (for she is most concerned with the way society effects the gender performance of women) we may examine how the script of "an oppressive status quo" (Faulluga) also controls the actions and identities of the men in the text, specifically Othello and Iago.

Another benefit of this type of reading of *Othello* is that by looking at the reactions to Desdemona's and Othello's disruptions of patriarchal society gives us an exciting insight into two more of the ongoing debates in *Othello* criticism: What are Iago's "true" motivations and why is Othello so easily convinced that his "fair warrior" is a "whore"? Both of these questions can be answered by taking into account the importance of gender performance to these characters.

## Section One:

### Desdemona in the Matrix

Taking as a given Butler's statement that: "sexuality is culturally constructed" and there is no way to construct a sexuality "'before,' 'outside' or 'beyond'" the "matrix of power" from which it is a "cultural impossibility" to escape, let us first turn our attention to Desdemona's transgressions, and the ways in which they serve as "displacements" of the "relations of domination" (Butler 30) within the text of *Othello*.

The first form of Desdemona's transgression is her disobedience to her father by eloping with Othello. Perhaps this aspect of Desdemona's disruptive transgressions is less examined by literary critics discussing *Othello* because the matter of her marrying outside her race (which I shall deal with in a later portion of this thesis) is more "in your face"; one sees Desdemona with her "Other" throughout the action while the initial act of disobedience occurs before the action of the play begins. Although the matter of Desdemona's and Othello's elopement takes up the vast majority of the dialogue and action of Act I, the actual act occurs off stage. Or perhaps, it is because the trope of the young people pulling the wool over the eyes of their elders is readily accepted in comedy, Shakespearean and otherwise. However, it must be borne in mind that in the comedies, the action nearly always ends *with* the marriage and more often than not, with the grudging, if not joyful, parental approval. *Othello*, like *Romeo*

*and Juliet* show what happens after the comedy ends: “Plays that continue beyond the point where comedy ends, with the old fogies defeated and a happy marriage successfully concluded, depict the condition as utterly disastrous” (Orgel 674). It should also be borne in mind that while the theme of children subverting their parents is a theatrical convention that dates back to the Greek and Roman theater:

The degree to which this dramatized generation gap reflected actual social conditions remains highly problematic, but, presumably patriachs in the audience participated in the laughter at the obtuse *sennex* (sic) foiled by his canny children even as they returned to their homes to exert their patriarchal, and often tyrannical, power over their own offspring. (Lenker 22)

It is a safe assumption, according to historians dealing with the time period, that no matter what happened on the stage of a comedy, the patriarchy was alive and well in Shakespeare’s England (Lenker 17-19).<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Stone hypothesizes that there was an increased enforcement of patriarchy during the early modern period:

The growth of patriarchy was deliberately encouraged by the new Renaissance state on the traditional grounds that the subordination of the family to its head is analogous to, and also a direct contributory cause of, subordination of subjects to the sovereign.

In 1609 James I informed his somewhat dubious subjects that 'the state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth,' one of his arguments being that 'Kings are compared to fathers in families: for a King is truly *parens patriae*, the political father of his people.

(Stone 110)

The kingdom was the macrocosm, the family was the microcosm, and in both the father ruled by a divine right. Therefore, we can place Desdemona's transgression culturally "within the terms of discourse and power, where power is partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions," (Butler 30) both early modern England in which Shakespeare created the character and early modern Venice in which the fictive action of the text takes place are repressive patriarchies; therefore, Desdemona's actions are indeed disruptive. Stone further writes:

Patriarchy for its effective exercise depends not so much on raw power or legal authority, as on recognition by all concerned of its legitimacy, hallowed by ancient tradition, moral theology, and political theory. It survives and flourishes only so long as it is not questioned and challenged, so long as both the patriarchs and their subordinates fully accept the natural justice of the relationship of the norms with which it is exercised. Willing acceptance of the

legitimacy of the authority, [...] are the keys to the whole system.

(Stone 109)

If the entire system of patriarchal authority depends on the “willing acceptance” of those subjected by it, (as well as those who must, perforce do the subjecting) Desdemona’s action in eloping is without a doubt a socially transgressive action, but can also be classified as a sexual transgression for several reasons. First among these reasons is that she disobeys her father to whom she owes “life and education” for, all intents and purposes, sex. While it is easy to discount the sexual aspect of marriage when dealing with historical periods in which contractual marriage was the norm, the sexual element must not be overlooked, not least of which because of the procreative nature of marriage. To a man such as Brabantio, a nobleman who has no other child besides Desdemona, it is not only her “fortunes” that are now tied to the Moor, but Brabantio’s genetic lineage and monetary wealth as well; the overarching importance of dynastic marriage, the purpose of passing on wealth and family traits is one the tools that Iago uses so effectively to raise Brabantio’s ire against his daughter and new son in law: “the devil will make a grandsire of you. [...] you’ll have your nephews neigh to you; you’ll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans” (I.i.99, 124-126).

Therefore, what should seem a private choice becomes a matter for dynastic concern. Returning to Butler, specifically her explication of Levi-Strauss’ *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, will help to illuminate the depth of

Desdemona's transgression in her refusing to perform her role as daughter/  
"reflect"ion of masculine identity properly:

The bride functions as a relational term between groups of men; she does not *have* an identity, and neither does she exchange one identity for another. She *reflects* masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence.[...] As wives, women not only secure the reproduction of the name (the functional purpose) but affect a symbolic intercourse between clans of men. [...]the woman in marriage qualifies not as an identity, but only as a relational term that both distinguishes and binds the various clans.

(Butler 39. Emphasis original to the text)

Ergo, Desdemona has forced her father to "intercourse" with a patrilineal group he did not choose. Further, by eloping she rejects her role as a "reflection" or "symbolic exchange" and instead claims an identity for herself, rejecting her identity as "Brabantio's daughter."

As the feminist mantra goes, "the private is political"; it is impossible, in any patriarchy where women must be trusted carrying children (and therefore, with passing on genetics as well as fortunes) to separate a social transgression from a sexual transgression. For a Butlerian reading such as this the distinction is even less important because, as Dino Falluga explains:

For Butler, the distinction between the personal and the political is itself a fiction designed to support an oppressive status quo: Our most personal acts are, in fact, continually being scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies. (Falluga)

Therein lies the crux of Desdemona's sexually transgressivity. If her most personal choices are scripted by an "oppressive status quo," Desdemona has, to continue the performance metaphor, gone off the page. By her elopement with Othello, she has defied the script Venetian society has written for her, and begun to improvise. As Butler has shown us, it is impossible to separate the private from the public, because all are governed by the "matrix of power" in which they are formed. Therefore, Desdemona's decision to marry without permission is both a social and sexual transgression.

Desdemona's speech to her father in I.iii. offers further insight into Desdemona's willingness to subvert the patriarchy. While couched in the language of dutiful submissiveness, there is a streak of "will"; a "will most rank" in the mind of a patriarchal traditionalist such as Iago (III.iii. 265):

My noble father,

I do perceive here a divided duty.

To you I am bound for life and education;

My life and education both do learn me

How to respect you. You are the lord of duty;

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. (I.iii. 198-207. Emphasis mine)

Even while using the words of submissive words appropriate to a daughter addressing her father, "operating within the matrix of power" as it were, Desdemona is disrupting the patriarchal control (Dash 105) her father seeks to exert over her...and she knows it. Desdemona is completely unapologetic for her disruption. Throughout Act I, Desdemona has been identified as object, i.e., my daughter, his daughter, my wife, etc. But here, Desdemona steps out of the role of object and becomes a subject, in the process making Brabantio and Othello objects, "my father, my husband." Brabantio never identifies himself as Desdemona's father, Othello never as Desdemona's husband, reserving for themselves an identity separate from her. By referring to Othello as "my husband" and Brabantio as "my father", it is she who objectifies the men, claiming for herself the separate identity. While Desdemona is respectful in her dissent (she consistently uses the more respectful "you" appropriate for addressing someone of higher rank than oneself), she is unapologetic.

It is not only the way Desdemona addresses her father in this speech that makes her words transgressive, but also the way she speaks of herself. To

further understand the subversion inherent in Desdemona's speech, let us look at Butler's explication of Wittig's discussion of the use of the word "I" by a woman.

A woman cannot use the first person "I" because *as* a woman, the speaker is 'particular' (relative, interested, perspectival), and the invocation of the "I" presumes the capacity to speak for and as the universal human. [...] This privilege to speak "I" establishes a sovereign self, a center of absolute plenitude and power; speaking establishes 'the supreme act of subjectivity' This coming into subjectivity is the effective overthrow of sex and hence, the feminine; 'no woman can say *I* without being for herself a total subject – that is ungendered, universal, whole' (Butler 117)

Desdemona, seemingly without fear or apology, claims the privilege to speak 'I' in this speech. Not only does she with her first line of speech change her father from a subject, one who claims "my daughter" repeatedly, to an object, "my father", but with the second line she takes for herself full subjectivity; "effectively overthrow(ing)" her gender. This is, of course, a complete subversion of her gender performance.

This is only the beginning of Desdemona's insistence upon being perceived as a subject, not just an object of possession, in Act I. When it is mandated that Othello must go to Cyprus, the Duke proposes that Desdemona should return home with her father. Both Brabantio and Othello dismiss this

idea, which socially should have been enough to prevent it. However superfluous her protestation is, Desdemona still registers it: "Nor would I there reside,/ to put my father in impatient thoughts/ by being in his eye" (I.iii.263-265). Desdemona will not sit idly by and allow the men to determine her destiny. Not only does she register her displeasure with the idea of being sent home to her father, "Desdemona speaks at length, offering several reasons against the Duke's plan" (Dash 108) and she is the only of the three of them to propose a solution to the matter of "fit disposition" (I.iii.255) for her while Othello is in Cyprus.

Other than sexual organs, according to Butler, there are no "natural" aspects of gender: "Consider that sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a 'natural sex' or a 'real woman' or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions" (Butler 140). Natural gender attributes are a myth. But, within the text of *Othello*, this mythology of either "natural" or "unnatural" gender performance is predominant. In fact, one of the most compelling charges Iago (and Brabantio, we must never discount the impact of his judgment upon Desdemona has on Othello) brings to bear is two-fold, and both aspects of it have to do with her nature: 1. That it is un-natural (i.e., contrary to her gender, which is inseparable from her race, culture, and status) for her to physically desire Othello because of his race; and 2. That it is natural

(i.e., fitting her gender, race, culture and status) for her to sooner or later become unfaithful.

In Act I, Brabantio is so convinced that it would be unthinkable for his daughter to “run from her guardage to the sooty bosom/ [...] to fear, not to delight” (I.ii.85-86) that he suspects witchcraft. Some of his response may be simple denial and some can be attributed to how he perceives Desdemona’s personality; however, if “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 140 Emphasis original to text) then we can not separate Brabantio’s perception of Desdemona’s gender performance, i.e. what he believes to be her natural state of behavior, from her gender performance itself. To put it another way, Desdemona has performed her gender so well to this point, that Brabantio has trouble believing that she would be capable of going off the page so drastically: “For nature so prepost’rously to err,/being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,/sans witchcraft could not” (I.iii.70-72) It is not only the shocking act of “gross revolt” (I.i.148) that leads to Brabantio’s disbelief, though that is an integral part of it, it is also the fact that Othello is a Moor.

Heretofore, I have only dealt with her act of disobedience, her insistence on being recognized as an acting subject in her own destiny. While that is a large part of her “unnatural” gender performance so stressed by her father (and Iago, as we will discuss shortly), however, it is not only the fact that she married

without her father's permission that is problematic. The fact that she not only chooses for herself, but chooses a man not of her "clime, culture (or) degree" (III.iii.263) can not be discounted. Her disobedience and willingness to disrupt the social order (by marrying outside her class, culture, and even race) are both edges of the sword that Iago uses, and therefore both must be discussed.

In the early modern mind, it is supremely unnatural for a white woman to want a black man<sup>2</sup>. That Desdemona should so "err from nature" would be indicative of her 'unnatural' therefore, wrong, gender performance. The very fact of her miscengentistic marriage, both within the script of the play and the societal script that existed in the culture in which the play was created, makes Desdemona deviant from her gender performance. That the belief that Desdemona's desire for a man not of her "clime, complexion, and degree" (III.iii.263) would have been deemed deviant was deeply ingrained in the psyche of the males in the play is seen by the fact that it is Othello himself who first comments, when Iago first begins to plant the seeds of Desdemona's disobedience in his mind: "I do not think but Desdemona's honest.[...] And yet, how nature erring from itself-" (III.iii.259, 263). Iago, seeing the opening, jumps in immediately, driving home the 'fact' that Desdemona's rejection of any man "of her own clime, complexion, and degree, whereto we see in all things nature tends – Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank, foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural" ( III.iii.263-266).

Therefore, the fact of Desdemona's "breaking the script," as it were, by her desire for a black man is just as incriminating as her act of disobedience. These two "errors" in her gender performance are the keys to her destruction. Conversely, even perversely, however Desdemona would be doomed by the script, even if she had never "err'd from nature". It is not only the places where Desdemona follows the script that dooms her; it is the script itself. Iago ties together the arguments that because Desdemona violated the script once, she must do it again with the argument that all women, sooner or later, will become sexually transgressive. "It is against nature," Iago argues, "for Venetian women to sleep with Black Men." Fair enough, but then he continues to argue, "and it is nature of women, (particularly Venetian women) to be unfaithful to their husbands." It would seem that, at least in the mind of Iago, and Rodrigo, and finally, Othello himself, because a woman defies the script in some ways, (disobedience, marrying outside her race) does not mean that she will not stick to the script in others, particularly in those ways in which women are prone "naturally" to badness. But, if we agree with Butler that there is no "natural" woman, that all of her gendered actions are scripted by forces outside herself, Iago is convincing those around him that his version of the script for "natural" women is the correct one. And in Iago's script:

You are pictures out of doors,

Bells in your parlors, wildcats in your kitchens,

Saints in your injuries, devils being offended,

Players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds.

[...] your rise to play, and go to bed to work. (II.i.125-128, 131)

Iago, as I will discuss later in this thesis, performs the role of the re-enforcer of the status quo. Therefore, we can take that his “script” is the “script of the oppressive status quo” (Falluga). Desdemona, had she followed the script that she was meant to, would still have been doomed. Because a prominent script in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century stated that women were carnal beings, Iago does not even have to work very hard to convince Othello of Desdemona’s treachery. Othello has lived in Venice long enough to be aware of the script that controls the patriarchy there.

However, Perhaps one of the most debated and discussed lines in Othello, the one that causes nearly all critics that discuss the character of Desdemona are driven in one way or another to explain, are Desdemona’s dying words: “Emilia: O, who hath done this deed? Desdemona: Nobody – I myself.” (V.ii. 148-149)

This line is often used to support critics’ arguments that Desdemona is complicit in her own death, either by her willingness to lie with her immortality at hand or by her supposed passivity. I would not completely disagree that Desdemona’s dying words and actions in her death imply a certain complicity, but I would not agree that she is represented as deserving death at the hands of

her husband. However, there can be no denial that it is her actions, her disruptions of the patriarchy from within the discussed matrix of power that she lives in, have led to her final moments on stage. If the status quo is to be restored, then those who have transgressed must be removed. Desdemona's dying words are an admittance of complicity; they are not, however, apologetic or regretful as is seen in her statement, "A guiltless death I die" (V.ii.147). If, for the patriarchal status quo to be maintained, strict adherence to the "script" must be maintained, then Desdemona (as well as Othello, whose end we shall discuss shortly) must, perforce, have an awareness of the ways in which she has violated the societal norms, the ways in which she has not performed her gender (as well as race and culture) correctly. Therefore, it was "she, herself" that made the decisions that led to her violent death. With immortality at hand, Desdemona takes back her subjectivity, reclaims herself as an "I".

Desdemona, although she attempts it at times, refuses to be returned permanently to her status as object, therefore the only conclusion that will allow a return to the status quo is her death. By Iago's machinations and Othello's actions, Desdemona is, to put it crudely, reduced back to an object. For what is more lifeless or less individual than a dead body? She is even referred to as such in the final lines of the play: "Lodvico: Look on the tragic loading of this bed. This is thy work. The object poisons sight: Let it be hid." (V.ii.420-421) Further, under the pressure of Othello's wrath Desdemona begins to lose her ability to

view herself as a subject: "Othello: Why, what art thou? / Desdemona: Your wife, my lord; your true/ and loyal wife" (IV.ii. 39-41). Desdemona has been returned to her "correct" status; an object, not an acting subject.

But it is not only the gender performance of Desdemona that leads to the "tragic loading of the bed" in Act V. As the next two sections of this thesis will explore, Iago's and Othello's investment in their own gender performance as men bears as much of the responsibility for the play's tragic end. Although the fact is not given much attention by Butler, it is of course not only women who are forced by that status quo to "perform" their gender correctly. There must also, perforce, be a performative aspect to the performance of male gender as well. An integral aspect to the male performance of gender would be dependent on the behavior of the women related to (by birth or marriage) them. To be a man, as it were, one must "control" one's women. There can be little doubt of this within the text of *Othello*.

## Section Two:

### Othello in the Matrix

We will now turn our attention away from Desdemona's disruption of the patriarchy, and turn to Othello's. It is not only the fact of Desdemona's disobedience to her father, her violation of The Law of the Father, which is represented as offensive in her relationship with Othello. To begin to explicate how Othello's initial treatment of Desdemona is an encouragement of her gender transgressions, as well as transgressive of his own scripted gender performance, we must begin by looking at the words of Brabantio. Brabantio never refers to Desdemona by name. "My daughter! My Daughter! She is abused, stolen from me, corrupted!" (I.iii.65, 68) None in the gathering of city fathers even considers asking Desdemona if she voluntarily ran away with Othello. It takes Othello to suggest this radical idea: "I do beseech you, send for the lady to the Sagittary and let her speak" (I.iii.128-130) although, when speaking to Brabantio and the Duke, Othello does refer to Desdemona as "his(Brabantio's) daughter", it is Othello who refers to her the most as Desdemona. In all of Act I, Desdemona is called by name six times, four of them by Othello (the only other person to refer to her by name is the Duke). While Othello is, of course, not free completely of the patriarchal ownership idea of possession of wife or daughter, that Brabantio only refers to her as "my daughter" can be viewed as indicative that he only views Desdemona as a possession, while Othello's more frequent use of her

given name can be seen as indicative of at least a certain amount of acknowledgment of Desdemona as an individuated person. “What is at stake in her defiance is the fact that women were not allowed to be desiring subjects within the reigning gender of Shakespeare’s Venice – and of Renaissance England” (Singh 147). Othello’s treatment of Desdemona, allowing her to behave as a desiring subject is as much a transgression as Desdemona’s, perhaps more of one.

But, as Butler has told us, there is no escape from the matrix of power. This can be seen in Othello’s perception of Desdemona’s transgression by eloping with him. Here we have a perfect example of how society shapes sexual desires and expectations; even when an individual chooses to overstep the boundaries of societal expectation, it is virtually impossible to escape “the matrix of power”. For proof of this, we must look to Brabantio’s parting words to his unwanted son in law, and then turn attention to Act III, when a father’s distraught words come home with a vengeance: “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. She has deceived her father, and may thee” (I.iii.317-318). Othello, who is occupied with matters of war, responds with a firm statement of his belief in Desdemona’s honor, “My life upon her faith” (I.iii.319). However, it is this idea that Iago uses to first make Othello doubt Desdemona’s “faith” in Act III.iii. Othello is secure in his wife who “is fair, feeds well, loves company,” for “she had eyes, and chose me” (III.iii.211, 217) Iago repeats Brabantio’s parting words

nearly verbatim, "look to your wife" (III.iii.224), and Othello is still doubtful, "Dost thou say so?". Then Iago shoots the first bullet to hit its mark: "She did deceive her father, marrying you" (III.iii.244). It is only after this reminder that Desdemona has once subverted patriarchal authority that Othello's tone changes, from the dismissive "Dost thou say so?" (III.iii.232) to the thoughtful "and so she did" (III.iii.236). It is the fact of Desdemona's willingness to betray her father that leads Othello to accept the idea that she is capable, nay likely, to betray him.

Unlike Desdemona, Othello is fully committed to performing his gender correctly, so committed to it in fact that the prospect of being graced with a set of cuckold's horns can drive him to a bloody vengeance. Once convinced (albeit on rather shoddy ocular proof) of Desdemona's guilt, Othello will stop at nothing to restore his manhood. Further, he refuses to believe any evidence to the contrary, particularly that offered by Desdemona and Emilia; they are, after all, merely women; and transgressive women at that, particularly if Iago's suspicions regarding a sexual relationship between Othello and Emilia are correct. Further, in IV.i, the very idea of Desdemona with Cassio drives Othello into a mad fit. His very sanity, it would seem, is invested in aspects of his gender performance, that realistically, he can not control: the behavior as his wife. When faced with the possibility of Desdemona's infidelity, Othello becomes incapable of performance at all, falling into an apoplexy:

Lie with her? Lie on her? We say lie on her when they belie her. —  
lie with her! Zounds, that's fulsome. Handkerchief — confessions —  
handkerchief — To confess, and be hanged fro his labor — first to be  
hanged, and then to confess! I tremble at it. Nature would not  
invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction.  
It is not words that shakes me thus. — Pish! Noses, ears, and lips?  
Is't possible? Confess? — handkerchief? — O, devil! *Falls in a trance*  
(IV.i.44-52)

In act III.iii, Othello proclaims of Desdemona: “Excellent wretch! Perdition catch  
my soul but I do love thee! And when I love thee not, chaos is come again.”

What is meant, one assumes, as an endearment becomes a foreshadowing of  
Othello's state of mind after he comes to believe Iago's lies. The compromise of  
his gender performance is too much for his mind to bear; chaos truly has come to  
Othello's brain.

Another concern in the gender performance of males in the early modern  
period is the concern that “lust effeminates, makes men incapable of manly  
pursuits” (Orgel 678). The relevance of this as a concern in *Othello* can be seen  
in several places in the text, beginning with Othello's assurance to the Venetian  
senate that the presence of his wife will not distract him from his duty as soldier:

Vouch with me heaven, I therefore beg it not  
To please the palate of my appetite,

Nor to comply with heat, the young effects  
In my defunct and proper satisfaction:  
But to be free and bounteous to her mind.  
And heaven defend your good souls that you think  
I will your serious and great business scant  
For she is with me. No, when light winged toys  
Of feathered Cupid seel with wanton fullness  
My speculative and officed instruments,  
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,  
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,  
And all indigent and base adversities  
Make head against my estimation! (I.iii.283-296)

In other words, Othello assures the senate that he will not let the presence of a woman, nor lust itself, interfere with his manly occupation of war. To have any interaction with a woman, particularly sexual interaction, a man runs the risk of becoming bestial, or perhaps even worse, like a woman. Therefore, if Othello has already run the risk of increased effeminacy by his marriage, the risk of becoming a cuckold, a “beast” with horns, is more than Othello can bear. To properly return to his male gender performance, he must remove the effeminizing and monster-creating presence of Desdemona. Othello addresses this concern with the power of women to weaken a man’s mind (and body) in

IV.i.219-221: "Get me some poison, Iago, this night. I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again."

Othello's gender performance as a man is further complicated by the fact that he is a black man. Ania Loomba points out how closely Othello's vision of himself as a "man", particularly a black man, becomes tied to Desdemona's choice of him as spouse:

Desdemona' is both her father's 'jewel' (I.iii.195) and her husband's 'purchase' (II.iii.9). [...] Desdemona is also the gate to white humanity slowly his conception of his own worth comes to centre in the fact that she chose him over all the 'curl'd darlings' of Venice. Her desire for him [...] replaces his heritage or exploits as proof and measure of his worth. It thus becomes the primary signifier of his identity; that is why 'my life upon her faith' (I.iii.294) and 'when I love thee not,/Chaos is come again' (III.iii.92-3). That is why if she loves him not, 'Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone' (III.iii.361). (Loomba 164)

If, as Loomba asserts, Desdemona's fidelity has become integrally tied to not only Othello's male gender performance, but his performance as "far more fair than black" (I.iii.315) then it becomes even more imperative that he react like a "man" particularly a man who is warrior; He must destroy that which unmans him. It is *unnatural* for Desdemona's gender performance to disobey her father

and leave her home in Venice for a foreign man, therefore it is *natural* that she would soon or late abandon her “frail vow” (I.iii.277) because “Very nature will instruct her in it and compel her to some second choice.” (II.i.265-266). However, it is equally as “natural” that both Iago and Othello, faced with the possibility of cuckoldry, would seek revenge to restore their challenged manhood.<sup>3</sup>

One of the indicators of Othello’s willingness to allow Desdemona to be an acting subject is that he calls Desdemona by her name, not just refers to her by her relationship to a man, be it father or husband. As discussed earlier, in Act I alone, Othello refers to Desdemona by name, either when talking to her or of her, four times. However, from Act III, Scene iii until after her death, Othello only uses Desdemona’s name five times. From the time he suspects her adultery Desdemona becomes less and less of a human to Othello. She is “a closet lock and key of villainous secrets” (IV.ii.24); a “weed” (IV.ii.27); a “paper” or “book” with “whore” written upon it (IV.ii.82-83)<sup>4</sup>, inanimate objects all. It is significant that even in his final speech, Othello does not make reference to Desdemona by name or even status. She has become only a “pearl” that has been thrown away

### Section Three:

#### Iago in the "The Matrix"

Thus far, we have examined the ways in which Desdemona and Othello have subverted and therefore disrupted the matrix of power in which they exist. In this section, I would like to turn my attention to Iago; the character who seems on the surface the most disruptive as it is he that connives, lies, plots, and he brings about the death of three people whom we perceive as 'innocent' (in addition to the death of his fellow-plotter, Roderigo). However, if we are viewing Venice, and by extension, Cyprus, as oppressive patriarchies, (and by further extension, the early modern English culture in which the fictive work was created) we must come to perceive Iago as the restorer of the status quo. As evil as Iago's actions are, the mass havoc he wrecks, there is no denying that the status quo has been re-established when Iago's machinations reach their bloody conclusion. The woman who disobeyed her father and turned to "foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural" (III.iii.266) is dead, so is Othello who did not follow the social or sexual script he should have, and incidentally, so is Emilia, who may very well have placed on Iago the cuckold's horns that Othello fears so much.

While "since Coleridge first accused him of 'motiveless malignity,' there has been much debate over the allegedly confused and contradictory nature of Iago's motives," (Neill 204) it seems apparent to me that what truly offends Iago

is the threat to his gender performance caused by the known and suspected disruptive actions of Othello. That it is these disruptions can be seen in explanations that Iago offers as his motives: that Othello passed over Iago for promotion, refusing to follow the “old gradation, where each second/ stood heir to the first” (I.i.39) and that Othello may have slept with Emilia. Othello disrupts the way things are supposed to be. Iago cannot tolerate that, and he uses Desdemona’s aforesaid transgression of the patriarchy as a means of punishing Othello for his social and sexual transgressions, (known and suspected). That it is the disruptive actions of Othello (and Desdemona) that Iago is mentally unable to bear, that must be stopped, is seen by the fact that Iago chooses to prosecute Othello, and not Emilia, for their suspected adultery. While Iago is horrified by even the suspicion of adultery, Emilia has at least followed Iago’s “script” for women. (behaving as a ‘huswife in her bed’). Therefore, it is Othello who has caused the (supposed) disruption. .

One can never be sure which (if any) of Iago’s justifications for his virulent hatred of Othello are Truth; but it seems that there must be an element of truth in the reason given in soliloquy, Othello’s possible adultery with Emilia because soliloquies are meant, in large part, to be viewed as externalized internal monologue, it seems a fair assumption that what a character says in soliloquy, therefore, can be (at least to some extent) trusted as indicative of the reasons Iago himself believes, though certainly as proof of actual adultery by Emilia and

Othello. Further, the only incidence in which Iago offers the explanation of being passed over for a deserved promotion to *another man*. If adultery, even the possibility of adultery, serves as an emasculation, then it stands to reason that a man, particularly a “man’s man” such as the soldier Iago, would not reveal that possibility to another man, especially one he holds in such contempt as Iago holds Roderigo. Further, the possibility of Othello’s having slept with Emilia is mentioned not once, but twice, and both in soliloquy when Iago is presumably alone.

Iago: I hate the Moor;

And it is thought abroad that ‘twixt my sheets

‘has done my office. I know not if’t be true;

Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind,

Will do for surety. (I.ii.404-408)

Iago: But partly led to diet my revenge,

For that I do suspect the lust Moor

Hath leaped into my seat; the thought whereof

Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards;

And nothing can or shall content my soul

Till I am evened with him, wife for wife; (II.i.322-327)

Iago is so invested in his performance as a man that the mere thought of cuckoldry is enough to drive him to one of the most memorable and horrific

fictive revenge schemes in the western canon. I do not wish to rehash much of the of the discussion of the psychic emasculation caused by adultery covered in the section dealing with Othello's gender performance, but it bears repeating at this point that as Othello says, "A horned man's a monster and a beast" (IV.i. 74). Iago, even less so than Othello (who at least demands some proof) can not bear the disruption of his gender performance; the very suspicion of this "psycho-social castration" (Kahn 132)<sup>5</sup> is enough to lead him to destroy the man he suspects of cuckolding him.

It is logical to give more credence to Iago's suspicion of adultery as a possible motive. However, it would not do to completely discount the motive he mentions first:

Three great ones of the city,  
In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,  
Off-capped to him; and by the faith of man,  
I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.  
But he, as loving his own pride and purposes,  
Evades this with a bombast circumstance  
Horribly stuffed with epithets of war,  
And, in conclusion,  
Nonsuits my mediators. For, "Certes," says he,  
I have already chose my officer." [...]

But he, sir, had th' election;  
And I, or whom his eyes had seen the proof,  
At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds [...]  
He, in good time, must his lieutenant be,  
And I—God Bless the mark!—His Moorship's  
Ancient. (I.i.9-34)

A man's job, his "place," is an integral part of his gender performance. Othello has not only (possibly) emasculated Iago through adultery with his wife, Othello has also passed over Iago for promotion, endangered his job. For a man as invested in his career as Iago, this could be as horrific an emasculation, as much of an attack on Iago's gender performance as a Venetian man, as any adultery.<sup>6</sup> As Butler writes, "It would be wrong to think that the discussion of 'identity' ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that 'person's only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (Butler 16). Identity is inseparable from perceived gender, gender is inseparable from gender performance, and for either Othello or Iago, and their gender performance is inseparable from the gender performance of "their" women.

Karl Zender posits an interesting theory regarding Iago's motivations that are not incompatible with my own, arguing after a close reading of the dockside encounter that a primary motivation is Iago's humiliation at

Desdemona's exposure of "a limit of his capacity to simulate love," that is, Iago's inability to play word games with the type of proficiency that Desdemona, Othello, and Cassio can. Even more simply, Iago leads Othello to the decision to "strangle her (Desdemona) in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated." (IV.i.206-207) because he is embarrassed by Desdemona, although Zender sees Iago's motivations as "less about her death than her and Othello's silence" (Zender 332). This is particularly interesting when connected to my theory that Iago serves to reestablish the status quo because Desdemona has a pronounced tendency towards transgressive speech, insisting on her own subjectivity, and the prime way that Othello's transgression in allowing Desdemona to be a subject is shown by his calling her by her name, and not insisting on relegating her only to her role as his wife or Brabantio's daughter. Therefore, it is only logical that Iago would need to 'silence' them both, as their subversive speech is the most apparent aspect of Desdemona and Othello's transgression.

A great deal of the subversion inherent in the actions of Othello and Desdemona have been demonstrated by their spoken words: Desdemona's unapologetic claiming of "I" in her speech to her father, Othello's propensity to both address and refer to Desdemona by name, not status. As the enforcer of the oppressive script, it is unsurprising that Iago in the final scene of the play claims

silence as his prerogative: "What you know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak word" (V.iii.352-353).

## Conclusion

### The Matrix Restored

By reading *Othello* through a Butlerian lens, we can perceive, if not a confirmation of Shakespeare as the social conservative that many critics believe him to, at least a very conservative world view in this play. Because, even as we weep for Desdemona, Othello and Emilia, we take away the social script the play has reinforced: Girls who disobey their fathers die. Women who admit to wanting sex die. White women who marry black men die. Women who talk when told to be silent die. Black men who marry white women die. The only woman who survives the action of the play does so because she has followed the script: she is a whore who acts like one.

Daileader states “Othellophile<sup>7</sup> narratives are less concerned with the praise or blame of their black male protagonists than with the sexual surveillance and punishment of the white women who love them. In other words, Othellophilia as a cultural construct is first and foremost *about women* – white women explicitly, as the subject of representation.” ( Daileader 10)

It is especially important to keep in mind the social script that is enforced by *Othello* in light of the information provided in Stephen Orgel’s essay, “The Performance of Desire”:

The theater was a place of unusual freedom for women in the period; foreign visitors comment on the fact that English women go

to theater unescorted and unmasked, and a large proportion of the audience consisted of women. The puzzle here would be why a culture that so severely regulated the lives of women in every other sphere suspended its restrictions in the case of theatre. (Orgel 669)

It is not unreasonable to wonder if, at least in part, one of the unconscious reasons for the freedom these women were granted in regard to theatre attendance may not have been that plays such as *Othello* worked to reinforce the social mores and patriarchal values that so pervaded Early Modern society. The play was certainly viewed that way in the early modern period. In 1693 Thomas Rhymer said that the morals of *Othello* were:

First, This may be a caution to all Maidens of Quality how,  
without their Parents consent, they run away with Blackamoors.  
Secondly, This may be a warning to all good Wives, that they look  
well to their Linnen. Thirdly, This may be a lesson to Husbands,  
that before their Jealousie be Tragical, the proofs may be  
Mathematical. (Rhymer 132)

While Rhymer was not overly impressed with *Othello*, concluding that it was a “Bloody Farce, without salt or savour” (Rhymer 164) it is significantly revelatory

of a possible agenda of enforcement of gender performance that over three hundred years later, Daileader determines that *Othello* is:

the story of a woman killed – smothered in her bed – for having sex. Which *particular* man she is killed for having sex *with* matters less [...] than the sexual nature of the transgression she dies for: [...] from the standpoint of the masculinist-racist hegemony it is her defiance of paternal authority and the miscegenation taboo that results (and rightly so) in her death. (Daileader 2)

Gender is performance; incorrect performance can not be tolerated. Therefore, the only way to restore the “oppressive status quo” is to end the disruptions caused by the incorrect gender performances of Desdemona and Othello. With the tragic loading of the bed, the “masculinist-racist hegemony” is restored.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In this section of her book, Lenker discusses the major historians of the family in the early modern period: “The most extensive works to date on gender and family dynamics are Lawrence Stone’s *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (1977), Alan Macfarlane’s *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300-1840* (1986); and David Cressy’s *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (1997)

<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion of early modern views of interracial eroticism, particularly those pertaining to white women with black men, see Daileader’s *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth*.

<sup>3</sup> Food for Thought: How much of the audience’s sympathy for Desdemona would dissipate if we did not have the benefit of knowing that the ocular proof is misleading? How much would the audience’s sympathy for Iago grow if we had some ocular proof that Othello had, in fact, been intimate with Emilia? Daileader demonstrates that the idea of bloody revenge for the sexual transgression of a woman is still prevalent and deemed natural today “in a single comment by one of my undergraduate students: ‘If my wife cheated on me, I’d kill her.’” P 2.

<sup>4</sup> This use of “paper” and “book” is interesting in light of Desdemona’s many transgressive speech acts, as it is words that appear most often on paper and in books, and it is words that are a large part of Desdemona’s transgression.

<sup>5</sup> Kahn coins this phrase as part of her explication of Madelon Gohlke feminist-psychoanalytic reading of Shakespeare, “‘I wooed thee with my sword’ Shakespeare’s Tragic Paradigms”. (*Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*. Ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppelia Kahn. Baltimore; The John Hopkins University Press. 1980.): “Madelon Gohlke outlines a paradigm of masculine identity in Shakespeare that illuminates this aspect of cuckoldry. For a Shakespearean hero, to be betrayed by a woman, she argues, is to be humiliated or dishonored, and thus placed in a position of vulnerability that makes him psychologically like a castrated man, and thus womanish. [...] To be betrayed by a woman thus threatens a man’s very masculinity – his identity as a man” (emphasis mine)

<sup>6</sup> This confluence of occupation and manhood can also be seen in Othello’s “Farewell! Othello’s occupations gone.” III.iii.273

<sup>7</sup> “*Othellophilia*, the critical and cultural fixation on Shakespeare’s tragedy of inter-racial marriage to the exclusion of broader definitions, and more positive visions, of inter-racial eroticism. [...] in Anglo-American culture from the Renaissance onward, the most widely read, canonical narratives of inter-racial sex have involved black men and white women, and not black women and white men, [...] Whatever Shakespeare’s point in telling the story, it has served well as cautionary tale for white women.