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"There's Some Wonder in This Handkerchief":

Shakespeare's Use of the Handkerchief in *Othello*

By

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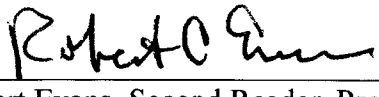

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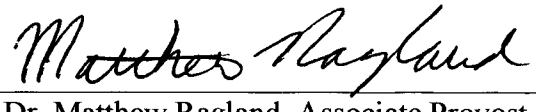

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Abstract

The thesis primarily explores the function of the handkerchief in *Othello*. Shakespeare uses the elopement of Desdemona and Othello as a catalyst for the play's discussion of gender equality in marriage. The characters' views of the appropriateness of female power in marriage create an Elizabethan marriage continuum registering varying degrees of permissive female equality in marriage. Shakespeare then uses the handkerchief to present the consequences of shifting Elizabethan marital views to his Elizabethan audiences, allowing them to question the effectiveness of the patriarchal society in which they live. The thesis also considers the effects of the double standard in regards to adultery and the appropriateness of *Othello*'s inclusion in the domestic tragedy genre.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Othello's 1603-04 date of composition suggests that it is the most highly evolved form of what is now considered to be the domestic tragedy genre of drama. This genre allowed Shakespeare to accomplish his goal in *Othello*: making audiences think critically about the shifting marital norms that had emerged during the Elizabethan Age. To engage this shift and, more broadly, the challenge of patriarchal ideals, Shakespeare commented on the effects of these shifting norms by contrasting them with the past norms of marriage—a giant step forward and a distinction from other domestic tragedies which remained firmly rooted in the time of the real life events that they depict. With *Othello,* Shakespeare took an extant form of drama and made it his own.

Emerging within the last decades of the sixteenth century, domestic tragedy had more than two-dozen inclusions, including *Arden of Faversham* (1592), *A Warning for Fair Women* (circa 1599), *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (1601), *A Woman Killed With Kindness* (1603), *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1605), *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), and *The Vow Breaker* (1636). In *Othello,* Shakespeare presents characters that are as near to domesticity as possible, making readers feel the impact of the destructive force of jealousy in the play. Though most protagonists in this genre were middle class, Sean Benson argues in his study, *Shakespeare, Othello and Domestic Tragedy*, that because Shakespeare's characters were well born, but not royalty, audiences could also relate to them more fully and empathize with their struggles (37). Other characteristics of domestic tragedies included "an adulterous liaison, a spousal murder, provincial characters from outside the tragic norm, and a murder-will-out resolution among other

things," but, Benson observes, *Othello* "brings those expectations and assumptions to the table, only to play off against them, to innovate with the form" (88).

Henry Hitch Adams sums up the expected formula of the domestic tragedy as "sin-adultery-murder-repentance" (95). *Othello* does not follow such a formula in that there is no true sin or adultery, but instead a murder for an alleged adultery. The repentance comes not from the unfaithful wife, but from the husband for his unjustified act of murder. Shakespeare, in fact, inverts the characteristic repentant wife motif of the domestic tragedies, Desdemona's words and actions of the final scene predominantly indicate no such obedient sacrifice. Only the words uttered in her final momentary return to consciousness that acquit Othello of murder suggest the domestic tragedy's traditional wife.

Othello differs from most domestic tragedies in several other ways. Instead of "capitalizing on notorious spousal murders that have scandalized the country" (1, 35), Shakespeare crafts his plays from popular literature, a story by the Italian Cinthio that would resonate with Elizabethan audiences to form the basis of *Othello* in the domestic tragedy genre. Shakespeare also went against another established characteristic: "the quick and inevitable submission of the wife to the importunate suitor" (103). The only potentially "importunate" suitor in the play that Desdemona submits to is the man she marries. Roderigo, rejected, is merely duped into believing he is an importunate suitor. Shakespeare augmented his version of the domestic tragedy by doubling the usual number of spousal murders. Benson explains that "Shakespeare adds race, gender, and religious affiliation to the subgenre's focus on what we now call social class" thereby

questioning a genre that previously focused solely on "local nonaristocratic figures [that were] made famous through murderous scandal" (4, 45).

The common features of domestic tragedies include a love triangle and subsequent spousal murder and domestic items such as handkerchiefs and bed linens (146). It should come as no surprise that these characteristics find their way into *Othello*, proving Shakespeare's familiarity with the genre's characteristics. For the purposes of exploring gender equality in marriage that this thesis will undertake, Shakespeare's recognition of the commonality of domestic tragedies as "depict[ing] mariticides, and to an extent, consequent threats to patriarchal order" and especially "the unisex problem of men and women in the most intimate of human relationships killing one another" is most significant (77). *Othello* shares a major focal point of the domestic tragedy, marriage, through an elopement that takes place only hours before the action of the play begins. For my purposes, the implications of this elopement, in particular the patriarchal reaction to it, serve as the catalyst for the discussion of gender equality in marriage, setting up the play's debate over conflicting marital views.

In generating the dominant issue of his tragedy, Shakespeare allows many of his characters to view elopement and infidelity as the most extreme acts against patriarchal society that a woman of the Elizabethan Age could commit. Elopement and infidelity serve as the means through which the play emphasizes the contrasting early and late Elizabethan views of gender equality in marriage. The early Elizabethan views of marriage sanctioned complete patriarchal rule in dictating whom the daughter should marry, with the daughter's obedience to a male merely switching from her father to her husband at the time of marriage. Early Elizabethan marriages gave women no equality in

marriage. Lena Cowen Orin explains that most often, these newly married women saw even more of their freedoms taken away, ironically holding less independence than when single (175). As such, early Elizabethan marital views were solely advantageous for men, often serving as a means to maintain or expand family power or wealth. However, the late Elizabethan view of marriage allowed the daughter a voice in deciding whom she married as well as the ability to acquire a limited degree of gender equality. Late Elizabethan marriages saw the start of the evolution from marrying to maintain power or wealth to marrying for love and initiated the slow decline of patriarchy. The Elizabethan Age, then, saw the initial transition into more progressive paradigms of marriage, although these changes were not fully established until well beyond the Tudor era.

Othello primarily traverses the issues of gender equality in marriage within patriarchy through the handkerchief. When considered within the boundaries of the domestic tragedy, the handkerchief's function merits serious consideration. A focus on the play's handkerchief has existed since the notorious remarks of one of *Othello's* most condescending critics, Thomas Rymer. Rymer's unapologetic eighteenth-century criticism of Desdemona may have initiated the debate over the play's genre that would re-emerge many years later (in Rosenberg 206-07). Edward Pechter (2004) argues that Rymer's difficulty in assigning the play to the tragic genre (the domestic tragedy genre had not been categorized at this point) is rooted in the handkerchief's function, as he argues that a handkerchief is more appropriate in a comic than in a tragic genre (166). Pechter himself uses Rymer's linkage of the handkerchief to the most private moments in Othello and Desdemona's bedroom to argue for the domestic tragedy label (193).

In *Othello*, Shakespeare presents his social commentary regarding gender equality within marriage by responding to the domestic tragedies already extant. Shakespeare also uses a handkerchief, an especially common domestic object, as a key symbol in his exploration of elopement and conflicting marital views. Responding to the strawberry-embroidered handkerchief prompts *Othello's* female characters to choose and articulate their various stances towards gender equality in marriage. These stances range from adhering to patriarchal expectations to attempting to move past them. Likewise, the play's three major male characters constitute a similar triad of distinct views on gender equality in marriage as they struggle with the emerging demise of patriarchal authority.

I will proceed with a mixture of critical and textual analysis in order to examine these conflicting views of gender equality in marriage symbolized by the handkerchief as it changes hands from one character to another. In the thesis, the text of the play will always serve as the primary focus, complemented by critical exploration to reinforce or expand upon the views that the text reveals. The attitudes towards marriage that the handkerchief represents are based on the Elizabethan marriage norms during the time of *Othello's* composition. Chapter one undertakes a contextual exploration to clarify the shift in gender equality in marriage that began in the Elizabethan Age. Despite the fact that such marital laws were not fully evolved until well after the Tudors, the play reflects contemporary legal changes in marriage, even when limited within one small facet of the law's multi-century growth. The multiple ways in which a couple could be married reveal this shift. Researchers in social history such as Lawrence Stone and Anthony Fletcher offer context and evidence of the progressing marital laws during the Elizabethan era.

Fletcher enhances Stone's findings by offering multiple examples or vignettes from actual marriages that are also reflected across relationships in Shakespeare's canon.

The implications of Othello and Desdemona's elopement, in particular the reaction of their patriarchal society, help illuminate the play's debate over gender equality in marriage. Chapter two of the thesis will examine the characters' divergent reactions to Desdemona's part in elopement found in act one. Chapter three follows this discussion with analysis of Desdemona criticism based on her elopement. The crucial exploration of the reactions of the characters to Desdemona and Othello's elopement will continue in chapter four, which focuses on act two.

Next, chapter five will emphasize the double standard implied in older Elizabethan attitudes toward marriage. Because of this double standard, men such as Cassio are allowed an unlimited and unquestioned number of sexual liaisons. The only female character who understands and uses the double standard to her advantage is Bianca. Paradoxically, as a prostitute she enjoys the kind of sexual liberty men enjoyed, though she is castigated by other women. While Bianca survives, female characters such as Emilia and Desdemona are punished severely for their alleged liaisons, demonstrating the domestic tragedy's exploration of justice and violence. If one considers the definitive reason for Iago's revenge against Othello to be the rumor of Emilia's affair with Othello, then Iago tests her loyalty with the handkerchief's theft and uses her as a pawn for his own purposes. When Emilia proves to be publicly and verbally disloyal by confessing Iago's actions, he kills her. This extreme use and misuse–even murder–of women is validated by the patriarchal paradigm in which the characters and the Elizabethans live, a

paradigm based on complete control of women by men–most especially within the realms of marriage.

In chapter six, the thesis explores the symbolic significance of the handkerchief, which Shakespeare uses to illuminate each character's view towards gender equality in marriage through their attitudes towards patriarchal ideals. The handkerchief is not just viewed differently by various characters in the play; critics have also dissimilarly interpreted its significance. Chapter six will therefore end with an analysis of diverse critical reactions to the handkerchief.

Act four, scene three of *Othello*, commonly referred to as the willow scene, fully reveals the play's larger views of marriage. Here, Shakespeare allows Emilia to explore the late Elizabethan view of marriage through her questioning of Desdemona's newfound role as the traditional submissive wife who maintains the early Elizabethan view of marriage. Through this scene, the last before the fast-paced action of the final act, Shakespeare makes the purpose of the play most fully known by introducing a debate that critics and audiences are undoubtedly still undertaking. Therefore, it is appropriate to conclude the thesis with an analysis of 4.3, which serves to summarize Shakespeare's arguments regarding gender equality within marriage in *Othello*.

Chapter One: Marriage in the Elizabethan Age

Shakespeare uses Desdemona's elopement as a catalyst for exploring the shifting marital views of the Elizabethan Age within the world of *Othello*. Desdemona's elopement manifests the beliefs of a woman who expects to have an equal marital voice in a society that forbids such a thing. Women had few rights during the time of *Othello's* composition. Understanding the oppressive legal conditions of married women in the Renaissance also clarifies the marital views that the handkerchief represents through its various holders.

Critics such as Kim Hall state the basic view that women during the Elizabethan Age held no rights of their own, as they were merely the legal possessions of men (262-63). In equating Desdemona's society to Elizabethan society, many might mistakenly view Desdemona as heroically defying marital norms, gaining unusual freedom and power in marrying for love. However, her marriage legally meant that her ownership was transferred from her father to her husband. This conflict between Desdemona's assumption and her reality is more broadly represented in the clash of Desdemona and Othello's marital expectations that becomes most apparent in 3.4 when Desdemona counters Othello's demands that she produce the handkerchief with her own demands that he rethink his views of Cassio.

Conduct books in the Elizabethan Age took the possession of women as an indisputable fact as they focused on how a man may ascertain an appropriate wife (Fletcher 105). Desdemona demonstrates that she has a choice in whom she marries, as the elopement was a mutual decision. Keith Wrightson argues that one should not generalize that women did not have a degree of freedom in selecting a husband by

describing society's lower stratum that allowed women greater freedom in selection of spouses: "courtship among the lesser gentry [was]... a more personal, intimate and romantic process" (81). However, his points are not fully relatable to *Othello* as it may be assumed that both Othello and Desdemona are members of the upper class.

Desdemona's eloquent speech in her first appearance–a summation of the state of Elizabethan women–explains her divided duty between her husband and her father, as she justifies her elopement to patriarchy (here represented by the Venetian Senate). Hall's emphasis on this scene predicts the larger focus of the play as being an exploration of the societal reaction to the transition of marital norms that occurred between the early and late Elizabethan Age–a reconciliation attempt between these vastly differing attitudes towards marriage (262-63). Hall's narrowing of the predominant critical focus to Desdemona based on her act of elopement highlights the role that gender equality plays in the transition of early and late Elizabethan marital norms. The emerging legalities regarding elopement during the Elizabethan Age exemplify the transition of early to late Elizabethan norms.

Ecclesiastical law grounds the legalities of elopement. While giving an overview of marriage during the Elizabethan Age, Stone explains that the right of veto, "the right [of children] to reject a spouse chosen by the parents on the grounds that the antipathy aroused by a single interview was too great to permit the possibility of the future development of affection," gives the daughter some rights in choosing her husband (Stone 190).

Iago's consistent negativity regarding marriage throughout the play often references shifting Elizabethan marital laws. Iago takes aim at the right of veto when

emphasizing that Desdemona goes to Othello to elope, therefore choosing a husband for herself and opposing her father's previous choices:

> your fair daughter,
>
> At this odd-even and dull watch o'th' night,
>
> Transported...
>
> To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor–.... (1.1.125-29)

Iago's references to the right of veto continue when he describes Desdemona as "win[ning] the Moor" (2.3.337). It is a blatant reversal of traditional gender roles which see the man as traditionally "winning" the woman, thereby claiming her as his possession. The right of veto is also alluded to by Iago when he reminds Othello that Desdemona "did deceive her father marrying you" (3.3.220). Iago views as deception Desdemona's rejection of her father's choice of suitor that the right of veto permits.

Stone explains that elopement is merely one of several means of Renaissance marriage. Closely linked to *Othello* is "the spousals (also called a contract), the formal exchange, usually before witnesses, of oral promises" that "was as legally binding a contract as the church wedding" (31). Wrightson describes the spousals as consisting of either "a promise to marry expressed in words of the present tense in the presence of witnesses" or "a promise made in words of the future tense, provided that it was followed by sexual union" (75). A spousal required neither an actual marriage ceremony nor the presence of clergy for a marriage to be valid: "any sort of exchange of promises before witnesses which was followed by cohabitation was regarded in law as a valid marriage" (Stone 31). Spousals soon gained equal footing with the traditional church ceremony, although Wrightson explains that a church ceremony was a more common and accepted

form of marriage (75). Stone emphasizes the spousals as one of "numerous ways of entering into" marriage, yet "according to ecclesiastical law the spousals was as legally binding a contract as the church wedding" (31). The spousals, therefore, made elopement in *Othello* believable and relevant to Elizabethan society. The challenging of patriarchal society by elopement paralleled the Elizabethan challenge to traditional methods of marriage that the spousals provided.

Because consummation factored into the completion of the spousal, it therefore gains an important focus in law and in *Othello*. Critics' arguments concern whether or not Othello and Desdemona ever consummated their marriage and if so when the consummation could have taken place, often looking for a time in Cyprus. The consummation could possibly have occurred the first night that Othello and Desdemona spent in Cyprus. Evidence of this possibility may be seen in Othello's statement that "The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue; / That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you" (2.3.9-10). However, there is also the possibility that the consummation was to occur much later in the play. Evidence of such a possibility is Desdemona's mention of the wedding sheets in act four. The sheets being specified as wedding sheets may be viewed as a general association with her marriage or, some think, may indicate an object[1] specifically related to the imminent consummation that never happens: "Prithee tonight / Lay on my bed my wedding sheets" (4.2.108-09). For the marriage to have been valid under the spousals, consummation would have had to have taken place very soon after

[1] More recent criticism such as Ian Smith's "Othello's Black Handkerchief" gives an overview of criticism that views the handkerchief as white because it is associated with Desdemona's virginity and because it is thought to be representational of the "'wedding-bed sheets, the visual proof of their consummated marriage'" as it is "'spotted with strawberry-red fruit'" (1). Yet Smith relates Edward A. Snow's views which "claims that the 'spotted' handkerchief is potent as visible proof of Desdemona's adultery largely because it subconsciously evokes for Othello the blood-stained sheets of the wedding-bed and his wife's loss of virginity" (1).

the "promise to marry" according to Wrightson. If Shakespeare had spousals in mind when writing *Othello*, it is more likely that the consummation occurred in Venice on the night of the elopement.

Regardless of whether spousals were the method of elopement that Shakespeare had in mind, elopement was a highly controversial topic for Elizabethan audiences. Stone speaks of the very relevant conflict between these elopements and traditional church weddings that was being ruled on in 1604 (the approximate time of *Othello's* composition): "... Marriages performed at night, in secular places like inns or private houses, or in towns or villages remote from the place of residence, would subject the officiating clergy to serious penalties" (32). In the before mentioned quote from Iago, it is specifically noted that Desdemona is going to Othello at night and therefore that the marriage is occurring at night. The mention of marriage at night then continues Shakespeare's desire to reference current issues in marital law. Stone also mentions a legal attempt to maintain patriarchal rule: "The canons also forbade the marriage of persons under twenty-one without the consent of parents or guardian" (32). Such a fact may seemingly present several problems in *Othello* if Stone's research is taken without question. First, the English may have had a hard time accepting the fact that the elopement occurred at night (as implied in the opening scene) as this may have recently proven difficult in England. Secondly, if E. A. J. Honingmann's *Arden 3* introductory arguments hold true that Desdemona was a teenager, then elopement was impossible, considering that no one under twenty-one could marry without parental permission (Honingmann 42, Stone 32). Yet Wrightson contradicts Honingmann's claim, thereby supporting Stone, by insisting that the spousals could be declared by anyone age seven or

older, noting that laws allowed consummation by a female as young as age twelve (75). The issue of an underage woman needing parental consent to marry is also alluded to by Iago: "Your daughter, if you have not given her leave, I say again, hath made a gross revolt" (1.1.135-36). The mention of Brabantio giving Desdemona "leave" to marry is not only a reference to the patriarchal demand that daughters not marry a suitor that their father has not chosen, but also to the legality of an underage woman needing permission from a parent to marry.

Elopement strongly opposed the patriarchal purpose of marriage which argues the advantages of the male against those of the female. There were clear reasons for marrying, such as family monetary gain or the maintenance or extension of power that were certainly not based on love. Stone explains: "The three objectives of family planning were the continuity of the male line, the preservation intact of the inherited property, and the acquisition through marriage of further property or useful political alliances" (42). If Othello and Desdemona married for "love or lust," then their marriage was based on faulty foundations according to patriarchy (Stone 86). The play's blatant disapproval as voiced by Brabantio (and to a lesser degree, by Iago) is perhaps frighteningly justified by society (Stone 86).

The stance that Othello and Desdemona take against the earlier rules of marriage in their society carries a larger moralistic motive (Stone 87). The societal rules of marriage granted permission for the husband to have an affair (Stone 102). Fletcher explains the commonly held early Elizabethan belief that "a woman's adultery was the ultimate betrayal," going so far as to claim it as the catalyst for the breakdown of the social structure (109). These facts are also related to the double standard that existed

between men and women of the Elizabethan Age which will be discussed in detail in chapter five.

An alternate interpretation of Desdemona's choice to elope sees it as an act of revenge or hatred against a strong patriarchal society. Such a view would be much in line with Fletcher's question of "how far did women absorb and accept the gender role men created for them?" (121). During the Elizabethan Age, the strain of father/daughter relations reflected the treatment of women (Stone 58). Stone explains that fathers routinely used violence to maintain order (112). When paired with the father's goals for his daughter in marriage, this fact serves to explain the objective attitude that men had towards women during the early Elizabethan Age. Patriarchal rulership during this time had the ultimate goal of the daughter unquestionably accepting her father's choice of a spouse as well as of career (Stone 178-79). However, such a high degree of male power could inadvertently result in the daughter detesting her father, or in Desdemona's case, the patriarchal society (Stone 168).

The marital attitudes and norms depicted in *Othello* mostly represent a mid-Elizabethan stance towards marriage. Desdemona also initially falls into this middle ground before her reversion to more patriarchal stances towards marriage in act five. The play's marital attitudes and norms are a mixture of both early Elizabethan attitudes and emerging marital laws that slowly allowed women an equal voice in marriage. Both Desdemona and Emilia temporarily break free of such a traditional relationship and speak out against the largely unchallenged paradigm. By doing so they are not members of the submissive female majority but are active voices against unquestioned obedience. Just as

Desdemona overrules the authority of her father in choosing a husband, Emilia forsakes the wives' subordination to their husbands by speaking out against Iago.

The mid-Elizabethan stance towards marriage that *Othello* takes is also evidenced by the overall attitude of Iago towards shifting marital laws. Iago's general complaints against the legalities of Othello's marriage are applicable to Elizabethan marriage laws. He says to Othello:

> Are you fast married?...
>
> [Brabantio] will divorce you,
>
> Or put upon you what restraint or grievance
>
> The law, with all his might to enforce it on,
>
> Will give him cable. (1.2.11-17)

Iago is not ready to accept anything that goes against traditional patriarchal marital norms and insists that patriarchy is strong enough to restrain any efforts at new laws that challenge it–exactly the attitude that was found within the early Elizabethan Age. Yet Iago acknowledges the possibility that such laws have a chance at succeeding, specifically the law of spousals and the law of veto. He acknowledges this through "Faith, he [Othello] tonight hath boarded a land carrack. / If it prove lawful prize, he's made forever" (1.2.50-51). "If it prove" recognizes such a possibility (1.2.51). In fact, Iago acknowledges the legality of the marriage by stating to Cassio that "He's married" (1.2.52). Iago's recognition and acceptance of Othello and Desdemona's marriage parallels the slow recognition and acceptance of changing marital norms that Elizabethan society itself was undertaking.

Socio-historical records show that real life counterparts paralleled the fictitious actions of Desdemona's elopement well before the Elizabethan Age (Stone 183). In addition, there was an alignment towards late Elizabethan views of marriage by the powerful religious authorities of the day, showing that *Othello* was on the cusp of demonstrating these changing attitudes towards marriage (Stone 190). In this manner Shakespeare uses the socio-historical trends of marriage to demonstrate a clash of traditional views of marriage from the early Elizabethan Age with what was slowly morphing into the view of marriage that would become more fully realized during the Jacobean Age. *Othello* explores the possible consequences of going against tradition, just as Shakespeare does in plays such as *Romeo and Juliet* (Stone 87).

Much documented evidence of marriages represents the range of changes during the Elizabethan Age. Some examples of the submissive wife are offered in this range, but most examples show wives exhibiting equal power with their husbands. All of the historical examples reflect the various stances that *Othello's* characters take towards marriage when in possession of the handkerchief. The evidence shows marrying for love being pitted against patriarchal marriage expectations, emphasizing how *Othello* easily fits into this range of marriage vignettes.

Among the most relevant vignettes are John Thynne and Joan Hayward's marriage of 1575, which shows a woman who rebelled in a less obvious way by throwing her duties in her husband's face (Fletcher 154). Fletcher explains that "...Joan took badly to the way she was treated by her husband's family at Longleat" (154). As a result, "her early letters, signed 'your obedient wife', attempted, probably unsuccessfully, to prompt him to his duty in standing up for her and in pleasing her father with whom he at first

lodged" (154). However, there was evidence of equal partnership in this marriage: "John accepted his wife's instructing in how he should handle his legal and political affairs and her criticisms of his inefficient handling of business" (Fletcher 155). Such a marriage reminds one of the equal status that Othello gives Desdemona through accepting her influence in a planned meeting with Cassio, as well as his own attempts to move beyond traditional patriarchal marital ideals.

Another example of equality in marriage that occurs near *Othello's* composition is the 1600 marriage of Margaret and Thomas Hoby in which Thomas allows Mary a degree of equality (Fletcher 157). Fletcher explains that "Thomas Hoby clearly took his wife seriously and treated her as something like an equal partner in the management of their estate at Hackness" (157). Othello, too, attempts to treat Desdemona as "an equal partner" in marriage.

Closer to *Othello's* plot is the marriage of Thomas and Maria Thynne (1585), whose marriage also resembles that in *Romeo and Juliet* because of the feuding families from which each came (Fletcher 155). The larger view of this marriage may be an echo of *Othello's* source, the moral of which serves as a warning to those who marry against their parents' wishes. Fletcher explains that the passionate love that Thomas and Maria shared was susceptible to the restraints and destruction of patriarchy: "The fact that they began as adolescent runaways did not mean that the patriarchal issues did not arise in due course" (156). Maria became outspoken against the society in which she lived (156-57). Her outspokenness came to light after the death of Thomas' parents: "When in 1604, on John Thynne's death, the couple inherited Longleat and the capable and high-spirited Maria took over the role that Joan Thynne had played in the 1580s of managing the estate

a new tension came into the marriage" (156). Certainly, the Thynne marriage, as famously scandalous as it was, would live in legend even into the early 1600s when *Othello* was composed. It is quite possible that Desdemona is a tribute to Maria.

Marriages of the Stuart Age are also worth exploration. The marriage of Sir Robert Harley and Brilliana Conway in 1623 is a rare mixture of romance and arrangement in marriage, yet the patriarchal side of the marriage took precedence as Robert followed society's belief of not showing overt love to his wife, resulting in Brilliana displaying her love to him through obedience (Fletcher 158-59). The Harley marriage may indeed be an example of romance as a basis for marriage being converted into patriarchal relationships or, more simply, an example of romance being unsuccessful in the face of paternalistic society. It is reminiscent of the marriage of Othello and Desdemona as it was based on romantic love, but soon destroyed by a society that will not acknowledge love as a basis for marriage. The Harleys may be viewed as attempting to move past patriarchal marital ideals but ultimately held back by the restraints of tradition.

More hopeful is Ralph Verney and Mary Blacknall's 1629 marriage which shows a move from patriarchy to equality in marriage (160). In this respect, their marriage is the opposite of Othello and Desdemona's, which began with a degree of equality and dissolved into greater submissiveness on the part of Desdemona. Much like the Othello that Desdemona faced in the later acts of the play, Mary continually attempted to adjust to the submissiveness desired by her husband, which, ironically, aided in her gaining equality (Fletcher 160).

However, there are several marriages that demonstrate the disastrous results of a woman who went against patriarchal rule. The marriage of Elizabeth and Percy Freke occurring near 1671 is one such example. The Freke marriage originated from plans made without parental consent (Fletcher 163). It was a terribly unhappy marriage for Elizabeth, who turned to writing for strength. Perhaps this marriage, which began in the same manner as Othello and Desdemona's, may be thought of as a warning to those who marry against their parents' wishes–the warning that Cinthio desired. Similarly, Elizabeth Pepys bravely defied her husband's rule (168-69). The marriage between Samuel and Elizabeth Pepys was like Othello and Desdemona's in two ways: there was a significant difference in age and it was a marriage grounded solely in romantic love (169). The other parallel was the fact that the marriage dissolved into violence for the Pepyses, as Samuel intimidated Elizabeth into obedience (170).

These marriages demonstrate the marital views of the Tudor and even the Stuart Age. It was the beginning of changes from marriages being based on patriarchal advantages to marriages being based on companionship and love (Stone 271). However, the common belief still persisted that marrying for love was the most unstable of marital foundations, always leading to disaster (Stone 272). The common belief against marrying for love can be seen as a step back in the progress of individual choice that much of the late Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Stuart eras embodied, as well as a hindrance to those who attempted to move forward along the marriage continuum. The arranged or patriarchal mode of marriage was gradually dissolving and being replaced with the more bearable view of marriage that gave the spouses involved the right to choose.

Thus *Othello* is both of and ahead of its time. The ideas of marriage that it promotes through the actions of Desdemona and the attitudes of Emilia came into reality more fully during the late Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Stuart Ages. Although *Othello* as a whole demonstrates the shifting Elizabethan attitudes towards marriage (most especially in regards to gender equality in marriage), acts one and two give an abundance of examples of the patriarchal reaction to Desdemona's elopement through the voice of Iago and the other men of the play. As such the next chapter will explore the male reaction towards Desdemona's act of elopement, followed by an exploration of critical reactions towards Desdemona based on her elopement before continuing the male reaction to her elopement in act two.

Chapter Two: The Case for Patriarchy in Act One

The social anger of *Othello's* male characters towards the Elizabethan women's desire for equal rights focuses on Desdemona's elopement. The remarks of the male characters in regards to elopement more broadly demonstrate patriarchal society's paranoid view of women as both the instigators of men's downfall and the root of any problem that a male experiences. The negative descriptions of Desdemona that the characters in act one give indicate the belief that elopement is a means through which a woman can gain unwarranted power over men. A common theme among these descriptors is the harm that Desdemona will cause Othello through her elopement and an overall negative view of marriage. The descriptors also suggest a resentful attitude towards the independence that Desdemona asserted through elopement. Such an attitude extends to the refusal of the males to believe that Desdemona's actions were entirely her will, thereby justifying racist remarks about Othello, as he is soon believed to have forced Desdemona to elope. Just as the collective blame falls on Desdemona for her part in the elopement, the collective anger of these male characters expresses itself in the voice of Iago. Iago's untruthful words articulate Elizabethan society's denial of equal rights in marriage.

Even before the text identifies the elopement by anything more than "this" and "such a matter," Iago exemplifies the collective male anger within the play's first twenty lines by speaking negatively of women (1.1.3, 5). Amid his derogatory assault on Cassio, he describes him as "A fellow almost damned in a fair wife," suggesting that women, especially those that are "fair," destroy men and that Cassio is the weaker for succumbing to such fairness (1.1.22). In fact, Iago displays a negative marital view by seeing the

married man as being "damned," perhaps fueled by his own psychological distrust. Iago also uses references to women to insult Cassio's military knowledge by saying that he "knows [no] / More than a spinster"[1] (1.1.24-25), implying that society frowns upon a woman who fails to marry, her only "occupation."

Iago depicts the elopement and Cassio's promotion as examples of Othello's recent poor decisions. The association of the two actions serves as the catalyst for Iago's revenge. Theft can further bind the two actions as Iago argues that Desdemona has been "stolen" from Brabantio, just as Cassio has "stolen" Iago's promotion.

The theme of theft continues in Iago's discussion of the elopement, which he describes in the most graphic and extreme ways possible. For example, when informing Brabantio of Desdemona's elopement, Iago speaks of "thieves" and tells the Senator to "Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags!" (1.1.81, 82). Roderigo tells Brabantio, "you're robb'd," emphasizing Brabantio's ownership of Desdemona (1.1.87). Iago will build upon the depiction of Othello stealing Desdemona with a description of Othello's piratical acquisition of Desdemona in act one, scene two: "Faith, he tonight hath boarded a land carrack. / If it prove lawful prize, he's made forever" (1.2.50-51). The use of "lawful" with "prize" in a conditional clause also brings to mind evolving Elizabethan marital laws that debate elopement's legality (1.2.50-51). Here, the conditional legal acceptance of the marriage is contingent upon whether emerging marital laws are accepted.

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[1] The word's denotation of "unmarried" gives it this derogatory connotation (*OED* s.v.2.a.).

Iago becomes most graphic when he describes Desdemona and Othello in copulative, bestial terms. He tells Brabantio that "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.90-91). By comparing Desdemona to a "white ewe," Iago indicates that he sees a female as no more valuable than livestock to be possessed by both men and male animals. By likening Desdemona to an animal, he subsequently does the same to Othello, as evidenced in his comparison of Othello and Desdemona's copulation to "making the beast with two backs" (1.1.119-20).

Iago extends his sexually explicit consummation descriptions with "you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse" (1.1.113-14). Iago offers the most explicit, stereotypically racist instance of likening Othello to an animal by also rendering Desdemona sexually bestial in appetite. Such a rendering substantiates Iago's condemnation of the elopement by both implying that Desdemona's virtue surpasses Othello's and labeling the marriage as unnatural and sinful. Even though such a description now treats Desdemona as a person rather than an animal, it still refuses her a legitimate identity, as it refers to her only in terms of her function.

Although still within the patriarchal realm, Roderigo speaks less crudely to Brabantio of Othello and Desdemona's elopement, referring to Desdemona as "your fair daughter" (1.1.125). Even though he echoes Iago's use of "your," his "fair" adds a complimentary attribute to Desdemona (1.1.125). He reports Desdemona as being abducted or "Transported... / To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor," an idea that Brabantio will echo later in the act (1.1.127, 129). Lastly, Roderigo describes Desdemona's part in the elopement as "a gross revolt, / Tying her duty, beauty, wit, and fortunes / In an extravagant and wheeling stranger" (1.1.137-39).

Revolt reveals the men's attitudes towards Desdemona's elopement as the *OED* cites two 1596 definitions: one as "an act of protest or defiance; ... refusal to submit to established custom and practice" (def.3) and another (in both 1596 and 1609) as "a change of allegiance" (def.2). By going against the tradition of succumbing to her father's choice of husband and instead choosing for herself, she indeed refused "to submit to established custom and practice." Her act of elopement could be viewed as "a change of allegiance" as she is no longer following her father's will or patriarchy in general. This view is most appropriate, as it evinces Othello's attempt to reconcile marriage into a military paradigm. Within such a paradigm, he categorizes Desdemona's alleged adultery as a show of "allegiance" to another man.

Roderigo's description of Desdemona's elopement also reveals his feelings towards Othello, specifically through the use of "stranger"[1] (1.1.139). Its denotations of Othello being a foreigner and "not one's own" suggest that her elopement actions have ostracized Desdemona from society. Society may not know what to do with her, now an "outsider" like Othello. There is then a cause and effect relationship between *revolt* and *stranger* in that such actions make Desdemona a stranger to her own society.

Despite his disapproval of her elopement, Roderigo displays an admiration of Desdemona when he praises her "beauty, wit, and fortunes" (1.1.138). Despite "beauty" and "wit" having a strictly complimentary implication, "fortunes"[2] can suggest Desdemona's monetary value. When considered within the play's context, the monetary

[1] A 1576 use is defined by the *OED* as "a non-member of a society" ("Stranger," def.5.a). Another use near the play's composition originated from 1600 and is defined by the *OED* as "a foreigner" (def.1.a). Lastly, an earlier use cited from 1577 is defined by the *OED* as "not one's own (or its own); alien" (def.13.c).

[2] The *OED* gives a 1596 definition as a "position as determined by wealth" (def.6).

reference of *fortunes* is most likely Roderigo's intent. He may have seen her *fortunes* as a positive reason for wooing Desdemona.

Brabantio also disapproves of Desdemona's elopement. For example, he quickly refers to Desdemona as an "unhappy girl"[1] who "deceives me / Past thought" (1.1.167,169-70). Like *revolt*, *unhappy* exemplifies the male characters' refusal to accept Desdemona's actions in elopement. *Unhappy* was used in both 1587 and 1600 to mean "unfortunate, unlucky, ill-fated: miserable in lot or circumstances" (def.2.a.). Shakespeare most likely used this later definition of *unhappy*, as, in her father's view, only an "unlucky or ill-fated" woman would marry against patriarchy. Brabantio believes that Othello forced Desdemona's hand in marriage, causing her to become "unlucky" and even "miserable." All implications of *unhappy* suggest Desdemona's innocence and Othello's alleged conjuring powers. They do not grant Desdemona independent agency.

Brabantio's difficulty in accepting Desdemona's elopement as an independent action exemplifies the success of Iago and Roderigo's efforts to instill their negative attitudes towards Desdemona's elopement and more largely toward Othello. For example, Brabantio asks, "Is there not charms / By which the property of youth and maidhood / May be abused?"[2] (1.1.175-77), suggesting Desdemona was both "misguided, mistaken" (1584 def.1) and "misused; ...wronged" (1608 def.3.a.). Brabantio's questions imply his disbelief that any woman (especially Desdemona) would act against patriarchy.

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[1] The description of Desdemona as "an unhappy girl" has several shades of meaning, from a person who is "subject to, suffering from, misfortunes or evil" (def.2.d) to one who is "causing misfortune or trouble (to oneself or others)" (def.1.a.). Such a use shows that Desdemona's actions are viewed only through the patriarchal lens, as only the implications of elopement on males are considered. Her fate as a woman is not worthy of consideration.

[2] The first definition of *abused* would imply that Desdemona was "misguided" by Othello into elopement (allowing her independence) and was "mistaken" in her choice to elope. While being wronged implies that Desdemona was acted upon with no choice in the elopement (def.1).

Brabantio reiterates his use of *abused* later to the Senate, "She is abused, stol'n from me, and corrupted" (1.3.62). These descriptors suggest violence, revolt, and degradation. Each of these descriptors reconfirms Brabantio's possessive attitude towards Desdemona. She, like a prized good, is "abused" and therefore has diminished in value. This alleged abuse portrays Othello as a violator, destroying her innocence and purity. Brabantio extends the degree of her abuse to include an improper wedding and sexual abuse. Corruption would likely follow, as Othello may destroy her value through the words and actions he forces upon her. Iago's innuendoes about the consummation certainly affect such a sense of corruption.

In act one, scene two, Brabantio continues to struggle with his disbelief. Here, he questions Othello as if he were a brigand, asking where he has "stowed my daughter" (1.2.63). These words exemplify the persistence of his disbelief of Desdemona's independent actions. Such disbelief momentarily silences his anger towards Desdemona, causing him to speak of her in positive terms in order to reinforce his accusations against Othello:

> Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her!
> For I'll refer me to all things of sense,
> If she in chains of magic were not bound
> Whether a maid so tender, fair, and happy,
> So opposite to marriage that she shunned
> The wealthy curlèd darlings of our nation,
> Would ever have, t'incur a general mock,
> Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom

Of such a thing as thou–to fear, not to delight. (1.2.65-72)

Guardage was first used in this very instance to mean "keeping, guardianship," (n.). It implies the strongest link of the play to patriarchy as a daughter was guarded by her father and released into the "guardage" of the man her father chose as her husband (1.2.171).

The passage also shows that Brabantio had viewed Desdemona as the perfect female according to society's expectations. Until her elopement, she has shown submission to her father by denying suitors that were unacceptable to him. Brabantio's description of Desdemona as "A maiden never bold; / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself " epitomizes his tactic of using positive terms regarding Desdemona in order to more effectively attack Othello (1.3.96-98). Yet these attributes of Desdemona may only exist superficially. Despite the fact that the courtship of Othello and Desdemona allegedly took place entirely in Brabantio's house, there had to have been some instances where the two met in private to plan their elopement or used Cassio as a go-between. This would imply that Desdemona and Othello put up the façade that Brabantio wanted to see, but at some point secretly acted in the opposite manner. This façade was successful, as Brabantio champions Desdemona as a female who adhered to societal expectations, but "in spite of nature, / Of years, of country, credit, everything, / [has fallen] in love with what she feared to look on" (1.3.98-100). His description of Othello as "what she feared to look on" suggests that her actions in elopement are the very thing that her society fears "to look on." Such a society has "feared" that a woman will challenge it (1.3.99). Desdemona's challenge occurs in both her own actions and her own specific choice of husband.

Other males in 1.3 share Brabantio's difficulty accepting Desdemona's actions. The senator who questions Othello shares Brabantio's disbelief in Desdemona's independent elopement: "Did you by indirect and forcèd courses / Subdue and poison this young maid's affections?" (1.3.113-14). "Forcèd courses" may be equivalent to Brabantio's earlier use of "abuse" (1.3.62). The Duke also echoes Brabantio's disbelief of Desdemona's independent, rebellious actions, threatening action against "Whoe'er he be that in this foul proceeding / Hath thus beguiled your daughter of herself, / And you of her" (1.3.67-69). The use of "foul" and "beguiled" also echo the earlier accusations that Brabantio makes towards Othello charming or even forcing her into elopement. Othello defines the "forced courses" that Brabantio has earlier accused him of as the natural marital process through which a daughter separates from her father. He advocates a more progressive marital view, as the "abduction" was a mutual decision between himself and Desdemona. Yet his claim that "I won his daughter" consists of purposeful phrasing that assures his alignment with the other males (1.3.96).

Although the Duke first describes the so-called theft of Desdemona as a "foul proceeding" (1.3.67), by the end of the scene he holds a more positive marital view, as he speaks to Othello of "the gloss of your new fortunes" (1.3.229-30). Yet his description of Desdemona maintains the context of her as a male possession, part of Othello's "fortunes."

Othello responds to this description by using "my" when referring to Desdemona: "To his conveyance I assign my wife" (1.3.288) and "Honest Iago, / My Desdemona must I leave to thee" (1.3.297-98). These references are troubling because they could indicate Othello following Brabantio's suit in viewing Desdemona as a possession.

However, the possessiveness he uses when referring to Desdemona as "my wife" may only serve as a formality or a means of maintaining professionalism when giving the order to Iago. The fact that he repeats this order in a more personal, friendly, and even warmer tone negates the conclusion that he sees Desdemona as only a possession. In the repetition of his order for Iago to protect Desdemona, the "My Desdemona" may be viewed as comparable to "my love," "my joy," or "my heart."

Iago's later, more private reference in 1.3 to the elopement of Othello and Desdemona (specifically to Desdemona's role in that action) supports his view of elopement in the first act: "It was a violent commencement in her" (1.3.346-47). With this statement he suggests to Roderigo that the marriage's sudden and hasty start will doom the marriage. The choice of *violent* to describe Desdemona's elopement corroborates previous descriptors used by other characters when referring to the elopement. The negative connotation of *violent* reaffirms the anger and disapproval that the male characters in this act express.

The male attitude represented in Iago's 1.3 descriptions has its origins in the first scene of the play. Similar to Iago's use of a "violent" start (1.3.347) is Roderigo's already discussed 1.1 description which sees the elopement as "a gross revolt" (1.1.137) and Desdemona as betraying "her duty" (1.1.138). Brabantio reinforces Iago and Roderigo's phrasing adding "she deceives me" (1.1.169) and asking "How got she out?" when comparing her part in elopement to "treason of the blood" (1.1.173). He suggests that, as she is his property, that they simply "apprehend her" (1.1.181).

Act one, scene three sees the culmination of Brabantio's 1.2 attitude regarding Desdemona's elopement, which is so unsettling that by 1.3 he feels he no longer has a

daughter. His cries of "My daughter! Oh, my daughter!" prompt the Duke and senators to ask "Dead?" to which Brabantio responds "Ay, to me" (1.3.61). The response further proves Brabantio's complete unreceptiveness to any actions that challenge patriarchy.

Brabantio refers to his daughter's elopement as an act occurring "in spite of nature," equating it with the shocking act of "fall[ing] in love" (1.3.98,100). The very idea that her "perfection so could err / Against all rules of nature" renders it "maimed" (1.3.102-03). The men consider anything diminishing patriarchal power to be "against nature" (1.3.103). Before Desdemona's first appearance, Brabantio's last words regarding the elopement are "If she confess that she was half the wooer, / Destruction on my head if my bad blame / Light on the man!" (1.3.178-80). These words suggest that if Desdemona did willingly elope, then he has failed to fully control his daughter.

The difficulty Brabantio and the other males in the first act express through their continued questioning of Desdemona's independent actions may parallel the difficulty that early Elizabethan society had in accepting that a female would act so boldly against patriarchy. More broadly, it predicts the emerging struggles that patriarchal society faced by the late Elizabethan era.

The first act should not be considered as only demonstrating a negative view of elopement, however. There are several indicators of a semi-positive view of elopement in the act. For example, the senator in 1.3 asks a question that jolts the first act's predominant male attitudes: "Or came it [marriage] by request, and such fair question / As soul to soul affordeth?" (1.3.115-16). This question allows the option of marriage for love to enter the debate. It is noteworthy that, other than this senator's brief questioning of Othello, only Othello and Desdemona speak of marrying for love in the first act. Act

one, scene three specifically demonstrates that Othello speaks against the predominant marital views by insisting that he and Desdemona dared to marry purely for love. He states that "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them" (1.3.169-70). Othello adds that he "did thrive in this fair lady's love, / And she in mine" (1.3.127-28).

In her third speech, Desdemona also attempts to use love to justify her elopement: "That I did love the Moor to live with him, / My downright violence and storm of fortunes / May trumpet to the world" (1.3.251-53). Her use of "violence" notably differs from Iago's earlier use of the word as a revolt at 1.3.347. She uses the word to mean something done suddenly, but not necessarily wrongly. Her assertiveness in addressing the Duke, although utilizing a guise that suggests women's inferiority, evidences her claim of gender equality:

> Most gracious Duke,
>
> To my unfolding lend your prosperous ear,
>
> And let me find a charter in your voice,
>
> T' assist my simpleness. (1.3.246-49)

Amid act one's predominant male patriarchal voice, the lone female voice of equality emerges through Desdemona. The feminine voice can be extrapolated from the first act's exploration of the male view of equality in marriage, making possible a focus on Desdemona's developing attitude of marriage that moves from merely asserting love as the basis of marriage to asserting an equal voice and power in marriage. Desdemona's attitudes represent the emerging debate about gender equality in marriage. Through Desdemona, Shakespeare allows this debate to take the stage. The importance of

Desdemona's role in presenting the marital gender equality debate to Elizabethan audiences necessitates examining the critical issues behind Desdemona's attitudes before further exploring how the text addresses the elopement in act two.

Chapter Three: Critical Reception of Desdemona

As the previous chapter has shown, the most severe critics of Desdemona's elopement are the play's male characters. Desdemona's disobedience of societal rules in marrying without her father's permission may be more broadly viewed as a defiance of the patriarchal expectations of her gender. Such an action by a leading female character certainly attests to Shakespeare's awareness of changing attitudes towards women. By attributing such openly defiant actions to a female, Shakespeare forces social issues regarding equality in marriage to the forefront of the viewer's mind.

Many modern critics have based their assessment of Desdemona on her elopement. Mary Beth Rose, for example, views the play as "Shakespeare dramatiz[ing] the contradictions inherent in individual choice and parental consent in the heroics of marriage" (148). Her view centralizes elopement as the play's major emphasis, relegating the actual marriage (and the effects of adultery within it) to a secondary focus. Bringing the elopement into critical focus should not be negated; however, I will use it here as a catalyst for the larger discussion of gender equality in marriage. Such a focus will reveal the necessity of finding a place along a continuum of Elizabethan marital views for women such as Desdemona who live in a time in which the sociological shift might afford them more equality within marriage. The stance that each of the play's women takes towards marriage puts them at differing points along such a continuum. These points range from a position that adheres completely to patriarchal expectations of marriage, giving women no rights in marriage, to one that challenges patriarchal marriage ideals, giving women equal rights in marriage. Within the continuum's paradigm, elopement serves as merely one factor in determining a woman's placement, not the sole

factor or focus as critics such as Rose have made it. However, a focus on elopement has proven a hallmark of Desdemona criticism, resulting in negative views of Desdemona. Such views form the basis of the exploration of gender equality in marriage that prevails in *Othello*, an exploration enlightened by recent perspectives in cultural materialism theory.

The significance of cultural materialism to Shakespeare studies rests in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield's assumption that "a play by Shakespeare is related to the contexts of its production" (viii). Cultural materialism resembles "new historicism, a perspective concerned generally with the interaction in this period between State power and cultural forms" (3). Both cultural materialists and new historicists would be interested in the relationship of marriage laws (always favorable to patriarchy) to the emphasis on marriage equality in *Othello*.

According to Dollimore, *Othello* demonstrates that Shakespeare followed "analysts of literature in the Renaissance [who] were much concerned with its [a drama's] effect" (7). Shakespeare attempts to show not only the current attitudes and norms towards marriage, but also the consequences of Desdemona's defiance of patriarchal rules. Her defiance emphasizes *Othello's* ties to its socio-political context–a point comparably suggested by Katherine McLuskie's claim that in *King Lear* "the audience is invited to make some connection between the events of the action and the form and pressure of their own world" (92). Her claim is relevant to Shakespeare's goal in *Othello* because he displays elopement before two audiences: the male characters of the play and the Elizabethans watching the play, thereby allowing Elizabethans to gauge their reactions to elopement (or more largely to female equality) by comparing their

reactions to those of the play's males. McLuskie's claim of connections to the play's contemporary world is especially true when viewed alongside the larger claim that Dollimore makes regarding Renaissance theatre and the " ...two opposed views of its effectiveness. The one view stressed its capacity to instruct the populace–often, and quite explicitly, to keep them obedient" (7), while "the other view claimed virtually the opposite, stressing the theatre's power to demystify authority and even to subvert it" (8). Through emphasizing the male attitudes towards elopement, *Othello* manages this dual effect of Renaissance theatre. The elopement demonstrates the results of defying traditional patriarchal authority, serving as a warning to other Elizabethans who may consider a similar action (Stone 87).

Feminist critics, who represent another area of criticism closely linked to cultural materialism, also see *Othello* as having dual effects (Dollimore 11). A feminist view reveals how cultural materialism considers Desdemona's elopement (an assertion of power) as a transgressive act. Dollimore speaks to this possibility when he claims that "sexual transgression" is "a real force of social disorder" in *Measure for Measure*, a play written almost simultaneously with *Othello* (72). Should the elopement in *Othello* likewise be equally viewed as a "force" that can have disastrous results on a society that endures it (72)? Shakespeare may use the parameters of accepted Renaissance theatrical goals to pose such a question. A negative view of elopement and female equality in *Othello* was based on the fact that "the authoritarian demonising of deviant behavior was common in the period," therefore explaining the transgression found within the play (Dollimore 74). Such "authoritarian demonizing of deviant behavior" would indeed be strongly apparent in the world of *Othello* where male authority quickly judges

Desdemona for such behavior. Like the "transgressors" of *Measure for Measure*, Desdemona's alleged adultery is "exploited to legitim[ize] an exercise in authoritarian repression" (Dollimore 84). Cultural materialists therefore view the play, in part, as a warning to women against elopement or adultery, but they may alternatively see it as challenging patriarchal society (Stone 87).

To understand the power of Desdemona's purported transgressions within *Othello*, the conditions that a woman such as Desdemona faced must be considered. The military world in which she finds herself, a world containing fierce codes of loyalty focusing solely on the importance of men, magnifies her struggle as a female in a world ruled by males, or as Carole McKewin says, in a world "where masculine conceptions of honor define what a woman is" (128). These men view her as a puzzlement and attempt to classify her into their military world. Their perceptions of Desdemona are contingent on how she reflects the males in the play. Joan Lord Hall explains: "she turns out to be constructed by the men in the play–Brabantio, Roderigo, Cassio, Iago, and, of course, Othello–who all read her somewhat differently" (63). Hall's observation notes that the men objectify her. They relate her to the early Elizabethan traditional marriage paradigm's view of females and perhaps allude to the struggle of the male characters to reconcile Desdemona to such a paradigm. Hall's comments suggest that the understanding of Desdemona is related to the dynamics that occur between the male and female characters of the play as a collective whole.

Perhaps male/female dynamics are best exemplified through the critical trend of pitting Desdemona against Iago, relegating them to an overly simplistic analogy of good versus evil (Hall 63). Despite the comparison's generalization, it does reflect the

polarized views that critics have of Desdemona. Cultural materialists and new historicists argue that the play shows Desdemona challenging Iago (who represents male society). Cultural materialists are specifically interested in the effects of her challenging (Dollimore 8). The conflict between Desdemona and male society can be further broadened beyond simply "male versus female" to exemplify how the characters and text of *Othello* reflect the struggle to reconcile views of traditional marriage (early Elizabethan) with emerging modern views of marriage (late Elizabethan). The play utilizes these clashing paradigms to highlight the problems that arise due to shifting views of gender equality in marriage.

As previously mentioned, the issue of elopement serves as the catalyst for the larger issue of conflicts in marital gender equality found within *Othello*, providing support for critics such as Rose. Of the possible conflicts, many view the most important as existing between Desdemona and the patriarchal expectations that surround her. Desdemona first conflicts with male expectations by opposing her father's views of marriage, an opposition most strongly exhibited through her elopement. She also conflicts with Othello's pressures to conform to patriarchal expectations of marriage. Rose labels this conflict as being one involving Desdemona's private view of marriage versus Othello's view stated in public (132). As Rose states, when Othello thinks about marriage he thinks about it in almost military terms or as "his relationship to the Venetian state" (132). She cites as an example of Othello's views of marriage his 1.3 speech to the senators: "Othello's rhetoric is that of a humble suitor seeking recognition and acceptance by the established state" (139). Her emphasis on public versus private views aids the

understanding of one *possible* initiator of conflict within Othello and Desdemona's marriage (and even in Iago and Emilia's marriage).

Rose argues the equality that Desdemona feels she holds within her marriage with "Openly and proudly acknowledging her love for her husband, Desdemona characterizes herself as a soldier spouse" (137). Equal or proximate ranking would imply that Desdemona would consider herself as an example of the gender equality that she feels her marriage has afforded her. Such ranking then extends to the play's central debate on gender equality in marriage, satisfying Renaissance theater requirements by "demystify[ing] authority...[or] subvert[ing] it" (Dollimore 8).

At times Othello attributes male qualities to Desdemona as when he calls her "my fair warrior" (2.1.182). Othello appears open to a more progressive view of marriage that gives the woman equal power. Rose cites 1.3 as an example: "Othello responds with loving pleasure to Desdemona's self-assertion" (145). Rose uses Othello's response to sustain her public versus private marriage paradigm. Desdemona's self-assertiveness inadvertently does support the equality in marriage that she achieves through involving herself in Othello's military world. Othello's love affords her an alternative to the oppressive society in which she lives. The surprising conflict of patriarchal and military paradigms leading to the revelation of *Othello's* larger debate reveals itself through these vastly differing views of marriage. The differing views of marriage that Othello and Desdemona have more largely represent the early and late Elizabethan views of marriage (marrying for power and wealth versus for love). Rose fails to realize the broad conflict, describing their marriage as "dissolving inevitably from its own unresolved contradictions" (131). The central conceit of the play, according to Rose, involves "the

unresolved paradoxes inherent in the ideals of female equality and wifely obedience" that "contribute to her destruction" (146). By offering such a description, she fails to realize the larger symbolic value of Othello and Desdemona's marital conflicts. The conflict of Desdemona and Othello's views of marriage becomes most important when its significance as a representation of early and late Elizabethan views of marriage and thereby gender equality in marriage is considered.

Critics' differing views of Desdemona reveal the pattern of positive and negative viewpoints grounded in attitudes towards her elopement. They are more broadly a subset of the larger Renaissance issues of marriage laws and equality being challenged by elopement and examined by the play. The scope of my thesis permits only a sampling of the abundance of *Othello* criticism that reveals a predominantly negative stance towards Desdemona based on her elopement. These views may reflect each critic's own attitude towards the larger issue of gender equality within marriage. Not surprisingly, the most notorious and fascinating critic against Desdemona is Thomas Rymer, who in 1693 (in the same century as *Othello's* composition), speaks harshly against Desdemona in outright assaults on her character: "...the silly Woman his Wife... the poor Chicken, his wife...Fool... there is nothing in the noble *Desdemona* that is not below any Countrey Chambermaid with us" (sic, as quoted in Rosenberg 206-07). Rymer takes great offense at the challenge to patriarchy that Desdemona poses by eloping. His triad of insults ending with a sarcastic use of "noble" demonstrates the strength of his offense, possibly echoing those in Elizabethan audiences that were unaccepting of such challenges to patriarchy. The fury contained in his words becomes a voice for men who are threatened

by female equality. His words exemplify the intensity of the debate over gender equality in marriage found within *Othello*.

Less crass but equally strong are the comments of John Quincy Adams (first published in 1863), who states:

> Who can sympathize with *Desdemona*? ... She falls in love and makes a runaway match with a blackamoor, for no better reason than that he has told her a braggart story... For this she not only violates her duties to her father, her family, her sex and her country, but she makes the first advances.... (in Rosenberg 207)

Adams's claims, like Rymer's, condemn a defiant female in a patriarchal society. Adams's comments make the extent and specifics of Desdemona's defiance more apparent, for she is found guilty of defying patriarchal society in several ways. She marries for love instead of advantageously for males: "she falls in love." She further makes her own "match" instead of allowing her father to do so. Her reasons for marrying–"for no better reason than that he has told her a braggart story"–are emotionally impressionistic rather than socially and fiscally pragmatic. The egregious actions of her elopement are described in ascending order of magnitude by Adams, beginning with her violation of "her duties to her father" then "her family," expanding to "her sex," and ending with "her country." The list of patriarchal violations indicates that Desdemona's actions go against the established social and political order of her (and Othello's) time. The critical comments of Rymer and Adams are very much in the cruel, vindictive, and lewd tone of Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio in the opening scenes of the play. They are frighteningly similar not only to those of a generalized patriarchal society, but also to that of a society that may exist within the world of *Othello*.

Like these critics, who seem to ignore Othello's equal part in the elopement, W. H. Auden (1962) also views Desdemona's elopement as completely destructive for all involved: "her deception of her own father makes an unpleasant impression: Shakespeare does not allow us to forget that the shock of the marriage kills him" (88). Auden certainly exaggerates the extent of the "damage" that Desdemona's elopement causes. By focusing on her elopement, he makes the same mistake that Rose does in disregarding the larger issue of gender equality. Auden's comments are very much in line with Iago's comments toward Brabantio found in 1.1.

Rose (1988) echoes Adams's comments when stating, "the fact that Brabantio remains permanently unreconciled to the match creates a lingering, negative resonance throughout the play that is never overcome" (147). Even though her words are less clear than Adams's, she does begin to pick up on the fact that the anger expressed by Brabantio exemplifies a key way in which patriarchal society adamantly opposes female equality in marriage. However, her emphasis on a minor character who is absent past the first act is questionable. Her view may also suggest that in Desdemona's choice of husband Othello's stronger influence than Brabantio's also defies patriarchy.

Despite the strength of the negative criticism of the sampling given, these comments are not representative of all critics. A sampling of positive critical comments towards Desdemona reveal that the nineteenth-century began the emergence of a more positive view of Desdemona ironically based largely on her elopement. A.C. Bradley (1904) summarizes Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1818-19 description of Desdemona: "the 'eternal womanly' in its most lovely and adorable form, simple and innocent as a child, ardent with the courage and idealism of a saint, radiant with that heavenly purity of

heart which men worship" (190). Coleridge's influence is most apparent in Bradley's own comments, in which he expanded Coleridge's view of Desdemona through his own work while simultaneously refocusing the previous critical stance toward Desdemona. He argues against criticism that faults Desdemona solely on her act of elopement and critics who fail to consider the starkly different Desdemona found towards the end of the play (Bradley 191). Through these views, Bradley sees the elopement of Desdemona as a positive action. Unlike previous critics who fault Desdemona based only on her action of elopement, Bradley indeed praises her for it as he views it as a worthy attribute: "we do not perceive how astonishing this love and boldness must have been in a maiden so quiet and submissive" (191). Bradley later describes her as having "a most unusual boldness of action" (192). His repeated use of "boldness" as a descriptor exemplifies his positive connotation towards Desdemona's actions of elopement (192). Bradley speaks of her initial speech to her father regarding her duty towards her husband as a symbol of greatness, almost a rite of passage: "Desdemona does not shrink before the Senate; and her language to her father, though deeply respectful, is firm enough to stir in us some sympathy with the old man who could not survive his daughter's loss" (192). Critics such as Coleridge and Bradley are reminiscent of the comments that Michael Cassio makes concerning Desdemona in act two.

James L. Calderwood (1989) depicts Desdemona in a pure light, yet links her to a male in terms of purpose or function, thereby stripping her of autonomy: "For she too is Othello's ensign in Venice, the beautiful white flag that parades the virtues and value of the Moor" (147). No longer the strong-willed independent woman, Desdemona's function and basis are merely to support the male's image, a stance appropriate to early

Elizabethan views of marriage. The underlying male purpose still persists in Elizabethan descriptions of women as being an object of beauty and purity. Iago and, to a lesser degree, Cassio, strongly exhibit such a belief.

Later twentieth-century critics such as Mark Van Doren (1939) and Harold Bloom (2008) refocus criticism positively towards Desdemona. Van Doren speaks highly of Desdemona, saying "Othello was no better armed against the perfection of Desdemona than against the cunning of Iago. It was a new perfection, too fine and small for one large Moor to master" (203). As such, he implies a disarming viewpoint of equality within marriage by viewing Desdemona in such a positive light. However, his comments equally manifest the opposite–an attitude that sees the marriage of Othello and Desdemona as unequal because Othello wasn't prepared or "armed" for Desdemona's goodness, implying a negative view of his side of their marriage. Bloom speaks of "Desdemona's surpassing human worth" (441). He implies a positive stance towards female equality in marriage by seeing Desdemona as reaching beyond the parameters of "human worthi[ness]" (441). These critics echo Coleridge and Bradley who deem Desdemona heroic for her defiant actions, likewise echoing Cassio. Cassio also views Desdemona in a positive light, advocating Desdemona's equality in marriage. The stark contrast between critics such as Rymer and Bradley (as well as other later critics) continues to be reflected in the views of the play's characters regarding Desdemona and Othello's elopement. An exploration of the characters' reaction to Desdemona in the second act offers significant viewpoints that elucidate these views.

Chapter Four: The Case for Patriarchy in Act 2

Othello's second act further explores the negative patriarchal views of women found within the male characters' descriptions of Desdemona's elopement. The second act gives specific views of patriarchal expectations of women's behavior in marriage such as not speaking out of turn and serving to fulfill men's sexual desires. Through elopement, Desdemona has rebelled against such expectations by assuming the male role in choosing her spouse. Iago's derogatory descriptions of Desdemona prompted by her elopement now begin to mirror the larger negative marital views that emerge from his view of women. He views women who speak out of turn as being loud and overbearing and warns men against a wife's potential deception due to her voracious sexual appetite. As the act concludes Iago's plan to use Desdemona to hurt Othello is challenged by Cassio's positive feelings towards Desdemona. However positive, Cassio's words still exhibit roots in patriarchal views of women.

Iago's generalized description of women given early in the act indicates patriarchal views of women that justify his society's rejection of gender equality within marriage:

> You [women] are pictures out of doors,
>
> Bells in your parlors, wildcats in your kitchens,
>
> Saints in your injuries, devils being offended,
>
> Players in your huswifery, and huswives in your beds. (2.1.111-14)

The double use of *huswife* brings necessary attention to the word. By 1599 the *OED* indicates that *huswife* has become "derogatory" and descriptive not of a housewife, but of "a frivolous, impertinent, or disreputable woman or girl; a hussy" (def. 2). Iago's use of

huswife demonstrates both the disparagement with which patriarchal society views women and the strain in Iago's own marriage with its lack of love on his part. The resultant void that Emilia may feel is manifested in her desperate attempts to win Iago's favor by giving him the handkerchief.

Although his society idealizes women's silence, Iago classifies women as loud and overbearing. Desdemona has been quite "loud" in her elopement. Similarly, *bells* is an extreme term that describes women who challenge patriarchal expectations (2.1.109). It is associated with a 1589 use as "bellow, roar, ...a loud noise" (def.8). Iago also equates these women with *wildcats*, a derogatory term that emphasizes their untamed animal spirit, another female stereotype (2.1.112).

Iago's view of women's outspokenness is also linked to his almost paranoid belief that they are threatening to men. Iago then views women as deceivers: "Saints[1] in... [their] injuries," the basis for Iago's perception of Desdemona (2.1.113). He interprets the aura of goodness that Othello sees as a façade of feigned innocence that hides her actions, ultimately hurting Brabantio and all men.

Iago is perhaps most concerned with women's unfaithfulness to their husbands since he believes that Emilia has cuckolded him. He destroys Othello through rumoring Desdemona has cuckolded him. In retaliation, Iago adds another criticism especially relevant to his view of both Desdemona and Emilia: "You rise to play, and go to bed to work" (2.1.117). Such words indicate that patriarchy sees its purpose as providing sexual

[1] Around the time of the play's composition, *saint* not only referred to a canonized person, but also "of heathen deities" as well as "allusively or ironically" (def.2.a, 1598). Therefore, Iago's use of "saints" in an ironic sense as heathen "deities" would certainly coincide with the rest of his pattern of descriptors of women.

pleasure to men. Iago then believes that both Emilia and Desdemona have satisfied this attribution through the bedroom "work" of an affair.

Iago's derogatory description of Desdemona and Emilia continues throughout act two. He further builds his assault on women by attacking Desdemona through Emilia especially in the first part of 2.1 which shows ostensible banter among Iago, Desdemona, and Emilia. His first words concerning Emilia are an insult prompted by Cassio's compliments towards her.

The words found in the first part of 2.1 introduce another pattern that Iago utilizes to attack women: counteracting all of Cassio's positive comments regarding Desdemona and Emilia. For example, Iago responds to Cassio's chivalry towards Emilia with "Sir, would she give you so much of her lips / As of her tongue she oft bestows on me, / You would have enough" (2.1.102-04). These comments are a continuation of Iago's earlier comments towards women that affront them for speaking out and may more specifically apply to Desdemona for her elopement.

A prominent example of Iago attacking women who speak out is prompted by Desdemona's playful comments regarding Emilia's silence: "Alas, she has no speech!" (2.1.105). These comments narrow his assault by focusing his derision towards Emilia's outspokenness:

> In faith, too much.
>
> I find it still, when I have leave to sleep.
>
> Marry, before Your Ladyship, I grant,
>
> She puts her tongue a little in her heart
>
> And chides with thinking. (2.1.106-09)

Emilia defends herself (and all women) with "You have little cause to say so" (2.1.110). Such a defense references the women of the Elizabethan Age, as men have "little cause" to suppress their freedom, but do.

A pattern of body imagery begins in the first half of 2.1. Of the body parts that will be symbolically focused on throughout the second act, the most important is the tongue. The tongue's focus symbolizes patriarchal society's attempts to control and possess women, precipitating the Renaissance's methods of physically punishing women for speaking out of turn. Through her tongue, Emilia will momentarily exhibit independent and transgressive behavior by dangerously crossing patriarchal lines.

Iago uses the banter of these words (ostensibly intended to pass the time until Othello's arrival as well as to entertain Desdemona) as a tactical shift to narrow his attack on women, which now focuses on Desdemona. He playfully insults Desdemona in response to her question, "What wouldst write of me if thou shouldst praise me?" (2.1.119). She dangerously adds, "I am not merry; but I do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise" (2.1.124-25). Here, Desdemona unknowingly reinforces Iago's earlier generalized insults towards women that reflect his view of women's perpetual deception. Iago advantageously utilizes comparable deception by presenting a façade of exhibiting difficulty in giving complimentary words to Desdemona: "my invention / Comes from my pate as birdlime does from frieze– / It plucks out brains and all" (2.1.127-29). In reality, he readily devises false compliments when they necessarily serve his goal. Iago's conversation with Desdemona uses proverbs to disguise the semi-hatred that he feels towards her. Such proverbs ensure that his use of Desdemona to hurt Othello

remains hidden. These proverbs also demonstrate how Iago's plan alternates public, sexually charged praise with private insults.

The latter half of 2.1 reveals another facet of Iago's specific attack on Desdemona, as well as an additional motive for attacking Othello. Othello shows signs of supporting equality in marriage, thereby acting against patriarchy. Iago, then, depicts him as evil–no longer the "black ram" but now an outright curse on Desdemona: "If she had been blessed, she would never have loved the Moor" (2.1.255-56). This curse on Desdemona explains her "unnatural" marriage. Brabantio, too, much earlier in the play, suggests Othello's ability to curse Desdemona by insisting that Othello has been employing "a practice / Of arts inhibited and out of warrant" (1.2.79-80).

The couplets that make up Iago's jest in the first half of 2.1 have a further purpose in that Iago uses them to attack women. However, they are ironically advantageous to Desdemona as they give her the opportunity to question and explore, even test, the societal limitations of her freedom. She continues to present a range of women that reveals Iago's attitudes towards females. For example, she presents a "black and witty" woman (2.1.133) and a "foul and foolish" woman (2.1.141). However, she most significantly asks "what praise couldst thou bestow on a deserving woman indeed, one that in the authority of her merit, did justly put on the vouch of very malice itself?" (2.1.145-47). This question aptly describes the Desdemona of act five, foreshadowing the play's events. Iago provides a lengthy response to her inquiry, proving examples of a proper, patriarchal woman's virtues. This response recalls the attack on women in 2.1.110-14 a few lines earlier, as these virtues invert the attributions of women in this earlier description. Such virtues describe a woman that "Had tongue at will, and yet was

never loud," "Fled from her wish, and yet said 'Now I may,'" and "could think and ne'er disclose her mind" (2.1.149, 150-51, 156).

Iago's hostility towards Desdemona for her rebellious actions continues to focus primarily on her elopement, the most blatant claim of equality in marriage. As 2.1 approaches its end, Iago echoes an act one description of Othello and Desdemona's elopement: "Mark me with what violence[1] she first loved the Moor" (2.1.225). *Violence* reflects the play's attitudes that categorize Desdemona's choice to go against male expectations as a sudden, strong attack and threat to the maintenance of that system.

Iago follows the attribution of *violence* to Othello and Desdemona's elopement by giving the reasons that he feels Desdemona married Othello: "for bragging and telling her fantastical lies" (2.1.226). Such a description implies that deception grounds the marriage. However, Iago reasons it unfathomable that Desdemona would fall in love with Othello's "prating" as he says to Roderigo, "let not thy discreet heart think it" (2.1.227). He designates "prating" as an insufficient foundation for love or marriage.

The scene moves back into its established pattern of body imagery as Iago makes a transition from a woman's tongue to her eyes when suggesting and justifying his fabrication of Desdemona's adultery, recalling the patriarchal attributions given earlier. He refers to her sexual appetite with "her eye must be fed" (2.1.228), then suggests that Othello, because of his "defective[ness]," will not be satisfaction enough: "what delight shall she have to look on the devil?" (2.1.228-29, 233). Iago's focus on these responses of Desdemona predominantly serves his own plot against Othello. He effortlessly eases from a focus on Desdemona to one on Othello, revealing his true focus. His conclusion

[1] *Violence* also means "vehemence or intensity of emotion, behavior, or language; extreme fervor; passion," with the *OED* citing this line as an example (def. 4).

that she will soon "abhor the Moor" (2.1.236) and that "Very nature will instruct her in it [adultery] and compel her to some second choice" sets up the accusation of her cuckolding Othello (2.1.236-37). Iago also reveals Cassio's function in his plot by making it perfectly clear who will be the "second choice": "Now sir, this granted–as it is a most pregnant and unforced position–who stands so eminent in the degree of this fortune as Cassio does?" (2.1.237-40).

The weakness of Iago's plot is evidenced by Roderigo's refusal to agree: "I cannot believe that in her; she's full of most blessed condition" (2.1.252-53). These lines also predict Iago's attempted murder of Roderigo in act five when (like Emilia) Roderigo proves threatening and is therefore eliminated. Furthermore, Iago quickly refutes Roderigo, reminding readers of his attempts to confute every compliment that Cassio gives Desdemona.

Near the end of 2.1, Iago changes tactics. He inadvertently praises Desdemona by portraying her as the very portrait of pure innocence and the tragic victim. However, this seemingly positive view does not last long as he begins to refer to Othello in positive terms:

> The Moor, howbeit that I endure him not,
> Is of a constant, loving, noble nature,
> And I dare think he'll prove to Desdemona
> A most dear husband. (2.1.290-93)

When 2.1 is combined with the negative connotation of his 1.1 presentation of Othello and Desdemona's elopement to Brabantio, such a contradiction shows that Iago's attitudes towards Othello and Desdemona shift as needed to accomplish his plot.

The intent to use Desdemona as a pawn for his revenge against Othello evinces itself in the late 2.1 words that build upon Iago's earlier conversation with Roderigo. Speaking to the audience, he discloses his deepest and truest feelings towards Desdemona. He claims a type of love for her: "Now, I do love her too, / Not out of absolute lust–though peradventure / I stand accountant for as great a sin–" implying that he has feelings more like those that he will express when Emilia gives him the handkerchief (2.1.293-95). Iago views Desdemona, like the handkerchief, as a pawn to use for his revenge against Othello. He indeed speaks of Desdemona as a means "to diet my revenge" (2.1.296). Iago gives a second motive for destroying Othello that specifies Emilia's alleged adultery, but more broadly shows his use of Desdemona:

> I do suspect the lusty Moor
> Hath leaped into my seat, the thought whereof
> Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my innards;
> And nothing can or shall content my soul
> Till I am evened with him, wife for wife. (2.1.297-301)

Despite the predominance of Iago's negative views towards Desdemona in 2.1, there is a character who remains unabashedly positive in his view towards Desdemona: Cassio. His positive view is most prominently exhibited when he initially responds to Montano's question of whether Othello is married:

> Most fortunately. He hath achieved a maid
> That paragons description and wild fame,
> One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,
> And in th'essential vesture of creation

Does tire the engineer. (2.1.63-67)

Cassio views Othello as extremely lucky to have married Desdemona, viewing her as ideal, while simultaneously relegating her to a mere possession that Othello has acquired. This idea of possessiveness indicated in the word *achieved* compromises all that follows. Despite the description's eloquence and flattery, *achieved* causes the words to describe an object.

Cassio continues his positive depiction of Desdemona as he describes the storm and its threats being calmed by Desdemona:

The guttered rocks and congregated sands–

Traitors ensteeped to clog the guiltless keel–

As having sense of beauty, do omit

Their mortal natures, letting go safely by

The divine Desdemona. (2.1.71-75)

These descriptions and those that follow are troubling. Although they indicate that Cassio sees Desdemona as an equal (or perhaps a superior) to Othello, since he soon labels her as Othello's "captain," they quickly revert to traditional patriarchal views of women as she later becomes "the riches of the ship" (2.1.76, 85). Although reverting to male views of women, his praise of Desdemona provides the means for him to express his approval of Othello and Desdemona's elopement, as he supports their distinctive views towards marriage. For example, Iago later asks Othello, "Did Michael Cassio, when you wooed my lady, / Know of your love?" (3.3.103-04), to which Othello responds: "He did from first to last… / and went between us very oft" (3.3.105, 109). Although such comments may indicate Cassio's belief that women should have a voice in choosing whom they

marry, they are overpowered by his predominance view of Desdemona as an object to be possessed and admired by men, a view his behavior toward Bianca underscores.

Despite the positive connotations towards Desdemona provided by Cassio, 2.3 shows the act's continuation of Iago's negative stance manifested toward Desdemona. This stance is especially apparent through Iago's attempts in 2.3 to "prove" Desdemona's adultery, all part of his plan against Othello. Here, Iago's assertion that "Our general's wife is now the general" most clearly exemplifies Desdemona's assertion of gender equality as a further motive (2.3.308-09). This statement also serves to reinforce Iago's belief that Desdemona's assertions threaten patriarchal society. Ironically, she gains such power or promotion by following society's ideals of female behavior.

Iago substantiates these ideas and introduces the double standard by excusing Othello's sexual desires: "Our general cast us thus early for the love of his Desdemona; who let us not therefore blame" (2.3.14-15). However, Desdemona receives the stereotypical lusty female label for her part in the consummation: "He hath not yet made wanton the night with her, and she is sport for Jove" (2.3.15-17). The claim that Desdemona "is sport[1] for Jove" greatly insults Desdemona (2.3.16-17). Cassio, who refuses to acknowledge such carnal and unladylike description of Desdemona, immediately negates the insult, "She's a most exquisite lady" (2.3.18). Iago's reply: "And, I'll warrant her, full of game" reinforces his earlier stereotypical attribution, evoking his generalized description of women evidenced in his 2.1 comments. Cassio insists that she would never have such common attributes: "she's a most fresh and delicate creature" (2.3.20). *Sport's* carnal suggestions give Iago even more ammunition to

[1] *Sport* is of special relevance as it is another example of the *OED* citing the play as an example of a new use of a word. Here, the *OED* defines "sport" as "lovemaking, amorous play; (also) sexual intercourse; an instance of this, an amorous exploit" (def.1.c.)

use against Desdemona. With the preceding passage, Iago moves from attacking all womankind to attacking Desdemona.

The pattern of body imagery also continues in 2.3. Iago reminds readers of his rationalization for Desdemona's adultery when saying to Cassio, "What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation" (2.3.21-22). As he did before, he equates *eye* with an overly active sexual appetite. Yet Cassio interprets *eye* as having both positive and negative connotations: "An inviting eye and yet methinks quite modest" (2.3.23), reminding readers of the "perfection" that he attributes to Desdemona. Iago next says that her lips are "an alarum[1] to love" and a temptation to men (2.3.24).

Cassio's response to Iago's use of body imagery to prove Desdemona's lustiness is a summation of his view towards Desdemona: "She is indeed perfection" (2.3.25). Iago's summation, "Well, happiness to their sheets!" (2.3.26), represents a final attempt to apply patriarchal attributions such as "huswives" and women's "work" given in the earlier 2.1 passage to Desdemona and highlights the sheets that will become a late focus in act five (2.1.110-14).

Since using body imagery proved ineffective when countered by Cassio's responses, Iago's subsequent reference to Desdemona's elopement introduces a view that sees Othello as the victim and Desdemona as the aggressor:

> And then for her
>
> To win the Moor–were't to renounce his baptism,
>
> All seals and symbols of redeemed sin–
>
> His soul is so enfettered to her love

[1] *Alarum* is a word Shakespeare has already used in *Henry VI 2* and *Richard III* to mean "a call to arms, a warning of danger" (def.1.a.).

That she may make, unmake, do what she list,

Even as her appetite shall play the god

With his weak function. (2.3.336-42)

Iago insists that Desdemona's assumption of the male role in courtship endangers Othello's soul and goes against Christianity. Furthermore, due to Othello's "contemplation, mark, and denouncement of her parts and graces" (2.3.311-12), Iago believes that Othello has abandoned his society's marital expectations (and implicitly his military leadership) as he assumes marital beliefs that challenge patriarchy (another possible motivation for Iago's plot). Iago then implies that Othello has surrendered to Desdemona's marital equality stance during their courtship. Though he often speaks despairingly of Desdemona, Iago here uses *graces*. It may be a sarcastic use, as its combination with *parts* asserts the patriarchal view that women exist to please men sexually. He also uses *graces* as false flattery towards Desdemona that will convince Cassio to seek her help (another step towards his goal of destroying Othello). Earlier, Iago gives another example of such false flattery with: "She is so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition, she holds it a vice in her goodness not do more than she is requested" that is said before he instructs Cassio to "confess yourself freely to her; importune her help to put you in your place again" (2.3.312-13). Cassio shows desperation in turning to Iago for help as he does not question the sincerity of Iago's words regarding Desdemona.

A soliloquy near the end of 2.3, containing Iago's final words of the act that concern Desdemona, summarizes the various methods of attack that he has used as well as reinforces her challenges to patriarchy as a possible motive for his revengeful plot. He

refers to Desdemona as "inclining" and says she is able "to subdue / In any honest suit," implying her persuasive ability (2.3.334-35). He further states, "she's framed as fruitful / As the free elements," which could imply that she is far from chaste or modest (2.3.335-36). Iago feels that Desdemona's actions against societal expectations give her power over Othello–power that her society feels no woman should have. Iago plans to counteract Desdemona's negative effects on patriarchal society by using the power that she has over Othello against her: "So I will turn her virtue into pitch" (2.3.354). Iago wants "to win the Moor" just as she has (2.3.337).

The generalized male attitudes towards elopement in act two are part of the collective stance that the male characters in the play and the male critics take toward Desdemona. Such a stance persists, in part, because of the double standard which exists between males and females.

Chapter Five: The Double Standard

Desdemona's alleged infidelity is another catalyst for *Othello*'s discussion of gender equality in marriage. The double standard contained within the play allows the male punishment of Desdemona's purportedly disobedient actions to focus the play on women's roles in marriage. Through such an emphasis, Shakespeare causes Elizabethan society to question its beliefs regarding female roles in marriage that are the remnant of early Elizabethan marital ideals. By advocating the marital rights of women through Desdemona's alleged adultery, Shakespeare may evoke sympathy for women who face a society that gives severe judgment for even an accusation of adultery. Shakespeare's interest in the consequences of female sexuality can also be seen in contemporaneous plays such as *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*. Such an emphasis necessitates a deeper exploration of how Shakespeare's ideas intersect with current feminist issues which will now be addressed through a discussion dedicated to the concept of the double standard.

Combined with historical analyses such as those provided by cultural historians Laurence Stone and Anthony Fletcher, Shakespeare's plays reveal a continuum of marital attitudes that reflect the double standard. There are three basic positions where women can be placed along the Elizabethan continuum of marital attitudes. The first, a position linked closely with the early Elizabethan Age's adherence to traditional patriarchal marital norms, gives women no choice in marriage and transfers patriarchal power from fathers to husbands in marriage. The second position, somewhat progressive and similar to the attitudes of the late Elizabethan Age, looks both forward and backward regarding marital attitudes. Although yielding rights to women, it does not relinquish all patriarchal

rules, thereby remaining advantageous for men. The third position, consisting of pseudo-modern marital attitudes not beginning to emerge until the late Elizabethan Age, looks forward to greater equality in marriage for women.

Placing *Othello's* women along the continuum sees Desdemona predominantly in the middle position, although she attempts to return to the patriarchal ideals of the first position when realizing Othello's insistence on patriarchal marital ideals. Her demand (or command) of Othello to meet with Cassio and her obvious questioning of patriarchal authority (though disguised in jest) with Iago in act two demonstrates an attempt to exert gender equality in marriage through an insistence that her voice be heard. Although some critics have viewed Othello as equally responsible for the loss of the handkerchief, the predominant critical focus remains on Desdemona's actions of losing the handkerchief–a symbolic defiance of patriarchal authority (Harry Berger Jr., 236-37). These actions force her into the middle position of the continuum, preventing further movement. Her apparent attempts towards gender equality in marriage occur too quickly and are vulnerable to attack by males such as Iago, who attempt to prove her unfaithfulness and her failure to recognize the sanctity of marriage through the handkerchief's loss. In Desdemona's largely patriarchal world, her gender equality in marriage cannot survive this ambush.

Emilia may be seen at the first position of the continuum, rooted in the past despite the contemporary views that she expresses in the willow scene. The strong feminist views that she expresses are only fully revealed when in the companionship of

another woman[1]. Iago quickly silences any exertion of Emilia's views in front of men as demonstrated by the banter of their first interaction when arriving at Cyprus in 2.1. After he makes up his mind regarding Emilia's alleged adultery, Iago will not consider the matter any further. Other than being passed up for lieutenancy, that supposed infidelity is the only basis of his hatred towards Othello that the text gives. The alleged infidelity is also the explanation for his dismissive attitude towards Emilia throughout the play.

Emilia abuses her bond with Desdemona, preventing herself from moving up the continuum, by deciding not to return the handkerchief to Desdemona. Emilia's abuse negates any progress towards equality within marriage that she has made. She uses the handkerchief as a means to express obedience to Iago, thereby reaffirming her traditional patriarchal stance in marriage. Emilia's disobedient affirmations regarding Iago in the play's final scene prove to be her only real progress. These late affirmations not only fail to save Desdemona's life, but also cost Emilia her own. By killing Emilia, Iago silences her and any other woman who fights for equality within marriage.

Bianca may be seen in the third position of the continuum. She gains gender equality through the sexual actions of her vocation, an advantageous negotiation of the double standard, proving that patriarchy permits women equality when it serves the male purpose. However, Iago condemns her for her vocation and uses it to attribute the murder of Roderigo and wounding of Cassio to her.

Women such as Emilia also condemn Bianca's sexual actions. Emilia views Bianca's equality as beyond the patriarchal norm. Her strong words against Bianca are

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[1] A point suggested by Carole McKewin's essay "Counsel of Gall and Grace: Intimate Conversations between Women in Shakespeare's Plays," specifically her discussion of Desdemona and Emilia on pages 128 and 129 of its reprint in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare.*

grounded in Bianca's assertiveness in patriarchal society. They also reflect her frustration at failing to negotiate the double standard advantageously as Bianca has.

Bianca shows more respect for the handkerchief than any other character by refusing Cassio's orders to copy it. Some critics view her assumed refusal to copy the pattern as the recognition of the individuality and possession of the handkerchief by another woman (Hodgson 318). She may be jealous of Cassio's supposed infidelity proved by this forgotten handkerchief of another woman. The handkerchief is then a symbolic threat to her advantageous negotiation of the double standard. Her refusal to copy the handkerchief is a refusal to obey the male patriarchal society that surrounds her.

The women's resulting placement on the continuum due to their sexual behavior warrants an exploration of Cassio, who represents the free sexual liaisons that the double standard allows men. His behavior towards Bianca evinces his view of women as merely a possession or a sexual object. Cassio's jovial and disrespectful conversation with Iago about Bianca (which Othello mistakes for a discussion about his affair with Desdemona) reveals his true feelings towards women. These feelings are more apparent when considered alongside his attitude towards the handkerchief (a representation of the marriage bed).[1] As his deep respect towards Desdemona (and even Emilia) proves, these attitudes do not entirely represent his view towards all women. Cassio, like Bianca, advantageously adheres to the traditional patriarchal view of marriage. His place on the continuum supports the plight of female equality in marriage, as he gives Bianca work that enables the sexual liaisons that allow her greater equality. Despite the double

[1] Critics such as Andrews compare the handkerchief to love by saying that its "loss directly symbolizes the loss of love" (281). Andrews's beliefs are further echoed by John A. Hodgson: "Desdemona's handkerchief symbolizes true and honorable love" (313). Hodgson likewise cites Knight who calls it "a symbol of domestic sanctity," Elliot who says it "signifies 'a rare bond of love,'" and Robert B. Heilman who calls it a "symbolization of love" (313).

standard and Cassio's adherence to patriarchal attitudes, his sexual actions are deemed punishable by Othello after overhearing Cassio's conversation with Bianca.

An exploration of Iago in regards to the double standard should be undertaken before leaving this issue. Iago is as important as Cassio in embodying the double standard. He reveals the male advantages of the double standard when negatively describing sexual activity initiated by a woman, in particular when describing Othello and Desdemona's marital consummation which is seen in a negative light for this reason. His words to Brabantio evidences such emphasis: "your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" (1.1.18-20). Iago's choice to mention Desdemona first here is deliberate and inconsistent with his references up to this point regarding Othello and Desdemona's marriage and consummation as he has thus far spoken consistently of Othello instigating action in both matters. Lines 18-20, then, signify a shift in his motives for Othello's destruction and a possible hint of a desire to hurt Desdemona because she may seem to be taking on the traditional male role in instigating sexual activity.

Iago gives a description of the double standard when alluding to the freedoms that men hold when speaking to Roderigo: "Our bodies are our gardens, to which our wills are gardeners" (1.3.323-24). He adds that "But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts..." (1.3.332-34). Iago suggests that satisfying lust is natural for a man, as men own their bodies and can do with them as they will. Yet patriarchy sees men as owning the bodies of women, too, therefore restricting women from doing their will. The double standard, then, allows men sexual freedom, but chastises women for practicing such freedom. Iago's belief of men being the owner of their "wills" is further substantiated with another problem that he has with Othello. He

feels that "it is thought abroad that twixt my sheets / He's done my office" (1.3.389-90). Othello has encroached upon Iago's "will" to do with his body and his wife's body as he pleases by having sexual relations with Emilia. Cassio's actions are likewise unpermissive, even though in line with Iago's definition of the double standard. Iago's criticism of Cassio's methods of satisfying his lust are found as he fabricates Cassio's dream that supposedly details sexual relations with Desdemona.

Iago exemplifies the double standard when speaking negatively of Desdemona's assertive actions in satisfying her own will, the very thing that he permits men to do. For example he states:

> His soul is so enfettered to her love
>
> That she may make, unmake, do what she lists,
>
> Even as her appetite shall play the god
>
> With his weak function. (2.3.339-42)

He reinforces this claim against a woman partaking of the double standard in his accusation about her and Cassio with "she repeals him for her body's lust" (2.3.351). This blatantly contradicts what he permits men to do–anything to satisfy their lust. Strangely, Iago alludes to women's permissive actions and wills when suggesting that a handkerchief that he gives Emilia would entitle her to do with it as she chooses: "Why then, 'tis hers, my lord, and being hers, / She may, I think, bestow't on any man" (4.1.11-12). Iago tortures Othello by seeming to allow women the same sexual freedom and control of their bodies if the handkerchief is equated with a woman's body or free will. However, shortly after, Iago is back on track with his views of the double standard. Even though he gives a man permission to satisfy his lust however possible, he says that

women are not allowed the same through his statement to Othello that "There's million now alive / That nightly lie in those unproper beds / Which they dare swear peculiar" (4.1.68-70). Likewise in 5.1 he chastises women for satisfying their own lust by using the wounding of Cassio as an example of "the fruits of whoring" (5.1.118).

The double standard also applies to the means through which Desdemona's guilt is determined. Unlike Cassio, she receives no trial from Othello. The circumstantial proof of the missing handkerchief determines her guilt. Othello's slap and ill treatment towards her for the handkerchief's loss serve as temporary punishments until her ultimate punishment, death, can be carried out. The importance of the handkerchief to Cassio and Desdemona's fate causes it to demand exploration. The next section will accomplish such exploration through examining critical reception of the handkerchief as well as its textual representation and use.

Chapter Six: Reception of the Handkerchief

The handkerchief's ability to reflect the varying marital stances of *Othello's* characters has two major implications. First, if linked to traditional marital views, its passing through multiple characters' hands may represent lost fidelity. Second, the handkerchief may show the weakness and vulnerability of Othello and Desdemona's marriage because it represents different marital ideals for each of them. Othello's attempts to change its representation from matriarchal to patriarchal parallel his own struggle with succumbing to the marital expectations of patriarchy. Desdemona simply sees it as a thing of wonder, grounded and introduced in what she perceives as the fantastical tales that wooed her. She perceives the fantastical tales as her escape from patriarchy. Her adherence to the handkerchief not only results from her desires to obey Othello's wishes, but also from the freedom that she perceives it has given her, as it is a remembrance of the courtship in which she chose her husband. The handkerchief's loss then represents the devastating effects of societal pressure on Othello and Desdemona to conform their marital views to patriarchal expectations.

The handkerchief's passage through the hands of the major characters of *Othello* reveals the play's larger focus on gender equality in marriage, consequently exemplifying Shakespeare's stance in the play between early and late Elizabethan marital views. It becomes the catalyst for the social views that Shakespeare represents through *Othello*, allowing the play both to mirror and challenge Elizabethan marital views. As such, its textual representation of each character's marital view necessitates exploration.

The first of the three women to touch the handkerchief in the play, Desdemona, is strongly attached to the handkerchief, Othello's first gift to her, due to its importance to

Othello. Her attachment is exemplified several times in the text. For example, Emilia explains "she'll run mad / When she shall lack it" (3.3.334-35). In addition, Desdemona states: "Believe me, I had rather have lost my purse / Full of crusadoes" (3.4.25-26) and "Sure, there's some wonder in this handkerchief. / I am most unhappy in the loss of it" (3.4.103-04).

Desdemona's amazement at Othello's insistence that she instantaneously produce the handkerchief (which has for him become a symbol of patriarchy) manifests the incompatibility of Desdemona's later Elizabethan marital views with societal expectations. The pressure to conform to societal expectations that Othello undergoes results in her inability to move completely toward the furthest position of the Elizabethan marital continuum. She is thus restricted to the middle position. Audiences view her as a companion with whom they traverse the broad and changing range of marital attitudes reflected in the Elizabethan Age.

Despite her clear and sincere distress the moment she loses the love token, Desdemona often receives the full blame from critics for the handkerchief's loss. Other critics view Desdemona's loss of the handkerchief deliberately as a possible "act of obedience" to Othello's commands to drop it (Harry Berger Jr. 236-37).

Desdemona discovers the handkerchief's origin or "grasps its significance" only after its loss (Van Doren 197). Othello's explanation of its origins is seen by some critics as the "filling in [of] details omitted when he first gave her the handkerchief" (Berger 239). Alternatively, the first version of the handkerchief's origin (centering on Othello's mother) designates it as having maternal power, for its possession allowed his mother to be "amiable" and able to "subdue my father" (3.4.61). Othello's attempted shift to

patriarchal norms suggests that he takes advantage of the maternal association of the handkerchief to elicit Desdemona's obedience through emotional blackmail, making Desdemona think that she is honoring his mother by safeguarding it. The first tale then has an underlying purpose of patriarchy, even though guised in a focus on Othello's mother. To such critics, Othello's first account of the handkerchief's origin demonstrates that he attempts to use the handkerchief to establish a paternal paradigm of marriage in order to adapt to the societal views that surround him (as suggested by Rose's interpretation of his speech to the senators in 1.3 [239]).

Othello ends the first account of the handkerchief's origin by ordering Desdemona to "look to't well," emphasizing his change to early Elizabethan marital views as well as the loss of its present symbolism of woman's power and influence (3.4.78). Desdemona should treat the handkerchief with reverence, as it now becomes a symbol of male authority. Desdemona's society demands that she respect its importance to Othello by safeguarding the handkerchief at all times (Berger 236).[1] However, the first story of the handkerchief's origin ultimately fails to maintain patriarchal marital standards in the same way that Othello's war stories fail to sufficiently ground his marriage.

Mark Van Doren would see the failure of Desdemona to realize the deep importance of the handkerchief until Othello's revelation of the handkerchief's origin to be evinced by her reactions to Othello at 3.4.70 and 77: "Is't true?" and "Is't possible?" (Van Doren 197; Berger 239). Yet the amazement that Desdemona shows in reaction to Othello's first tale of the handkerchief could also be viewed as congruent with her

[1]Many critics perceive a collective loss of the handkerchief by both Othello and Desdemona (Berger 236, Hodgson 313).

reactions to the tales that Othello told her during their courtship. Certainly, her present reactions could also be applicable to such earlier tales. Desdemona's complete failure to recognize Othello's new view of the handkerchief as a symbol of patriarchal views of marriage emphasizes her progressive marital beliefs.

The exchange of the handkerchief occurring between Othello and Desdemona in 3.3 is crucial to its representation of marriage and love in the play (Andrews 281; Hodgson 313). Desdemona's quick action to employ the handkerchief to remedy Othello's pain by binding his head tests their marriage bonds because its power and significance are grounded in its representation of Othello's love for Desdemona as well as the male authority it holds.[1] Othello's quick dismissal of the handkerchief and failure to recognize it as his mother's ("Your napkin is too little. Let it alone") evidences the test's result: Desdemona's late Elizabethan marriage ideals are not congruent with the now patriarchal marital ideals of Othello (3.3.303-304). Later, just as she fails to produce the handkerchief, she fails to meet Othello's patriarchal expectations. Desdemona alternates between the first and third positions of the continuum because she realizes the handkerchief's present representation of male authority and fails to prevail over patriarchy. The handkerchief, then, keeps her from moving firmly into the third position of the continuum.

The second woman to touch the handkerchief, Emilia, desperately uses it to mend her marriage (Hodgson 315-17) and follows Desdemona's attempts to use it to test patriarchy. Upon accidentally finding it, she momentarily considers returning the handkerchief to Desdemona: "I am glad I have found this napkin. / This was her first

[1] Such an idea is suggested by Margaret Loftus Ranald's 1979 article "'As Marriage Binds, and Blood Breaks': English Marriage and Shakespeare" (Lamb, Waddington).

remembrance from the Moor" (3.3.306-07). Emilia then considers how the handkerchief would benefit her and please Iago: "My wayward husband hath a hundred times / Wooed me to steal it" (3.3.308-09). Emilia's loyalty to Desdemona at first prevails:

> but she so loves the token–
>
> For he conjured her she should ever keep it–
>
> That she reserves it evermore about her
>
> To kiss and talk to. (3.3.309-12)

Her defensive loyalty to Desdemona is revealed when the meaning of *conjured* is considered. The *OED* gives a 1604 definition of *conjured* as a verb meaning "to entreat (a person) by something for which he has a strong regard; to appeal solemnly or earnestly to; to beseech, implore" (def.4.a). Emilia's words, then, suggest that she knows how important the handkerchief is to Desdemona and to Desdemona and Othello's marriage.

Emilia reaches a means of reconciling the two possible actions regarding the handkerchief through her decision to copy the handkerchief before giving it to Iago: "I'll have the work ta'en out / And give't to Iago" (3.3.312-13). However, time does not permit this option as Iago enters as she finishes speaking. She concludes that she will follow her patriarchal duty by giving the handkerchief to Iago: "I [do] nothing but to please his fantasy" (3.3.315). However, when Iago will not divulge his plans for the handkerchief, she attempts to get it back: "If it be not for some purpose of import, / Give't me again. Poor lady, she'll run mad / When she shall lack it" (3.3.333-35).

Through briefly considering the handkerchief's importance, Emilia recognizes (if only fleetingly) the sanctity and reverence of marriage it represents (Andrews 281; Hodgson 313). By freely taking a private memento of another woman's marriage, it is as

if she takes away the marriage's sanctity. The potential damage that its loss can have on Desdemona's marriage parallels the challenge to patriarchal rules of marriage felt within Desdemona's demands of marital equality. Emilia's choice to potentially harm Desdemona's marriage foreshadows her marital attitudes found within the willow scene. Yet her hesitation to take the handkerchief ultimately rests in her relationship with Desdemona, not her recognition of marital sanctity.

Emilia's ulterior motive to use the handkerchief as a means to save her own marriage (even if damaging another's) is clear (Hodgson 315-17). The handkerchief then symbolizes a sacrifice of Desdemona for Emilia's sake. She casts aside her loyalty to Desdemona on an uncertain gamble, showing that, like Iago, she will go to any extreme necessary to accomplish what she wants. If one believes Iago's unlikely suspicion that she committed adultery with Othello, this offering would be a sacrificial attempt to make amends to her husband.

If Emilia considers the handkerchief to symbolize the sanctity of Othello and Desdemona's marriage, she tests her own marriage by giving it to Iago. She questions the place of traditional marriage in evolving Elizabethan society through the handkerchief. By questioning whether an act of obedience will improve her marriage, she uses the handkerchief's patriarchal representation for her own gain, weakly attempting to move beyond an early Elizabethan marital stance. Emilia's test of patriarchy and her attempts to use the handkerchief to save her own marriage are ultimately acts of patriarchal obedience, thereby rooting her to the first position of the continuum

Bianca, the last woman to touch the handkerchief, views it with respect. While Emilia immediately considers copying the handkerchief, Bianca's words and actions to

Cassio imply that she refuses to do so. Some critics view her refusal to copy the pattern as the recognition of the individuality and possession of the handkerchief by another woman (John Hodgson 318). Such recognition manifests itself in Bianca's angry response to Cassio's order that she copy the handkerchief: "whence came this? / This is some token from a newer friend" (3.4.181-82). Cassio merely accuses her of jealousy. However Bianca's anger is more than jealousy; it is fear resulting from her relationship with Cassio and her negotiation of patriarchal society being threatened by another woman. Bianca's refusal of Cassio's demands also suggests her dismissal of patriarchal standards of female obedience, indicating her desire to move to the further end of the continuum.

The handkerchief's possession by the play's three major male characters reveals equally diverse marital attitudes. Othello fails to use the handkerchief to reconcile love with the patriarchal marital demands of his society.[1] The diminishing authority that grounds his 3.4 conversation with Desdemona in which he demands that she produce the handkerchief further exemplifies his realization of a male dominated society's unacceptance of marriages based on love. Othello perceives Desdemona's dismissal of his commands as outright defiance of his desired authority. She attempts to assert equality despite her temporizing fear at her present inability to produce the handkerchief, "Why so I can, sir, but I will not now" (3.4.88), but more through her insistence that Othello meet with Cassio. Although Othello continues his demands in an attempt to regain control of both Desdemona and the conversation, his continued calls for "The handkerchief!" are met with her repeated mention of Cassio. This episode represents the

[1] A point suggested by Rose (139).

verbal conflict of their present opposing views of marriage. Such conflict grows violent as it soon manifests itself in Othello's slap of Desdemona and most fully in the murders of Emilia and Desdemona.

Othello's response to Iago's "but such a handkerchief– / I am sure it was your wife's–did I today / See Cassio wipe his beard with" ends with his "All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven. / 'Tis gone. / Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!" and shows his complete recognition of his failure to reconcile love with patriarchal marital expectations (3.3.452-54, 460-62). Like Desdemona, Othello is relegated to the middle stance of the marriage continuum as he fails to move forward or fully backward because of his unsuccessful attempts to maintain his own values when beset by society's demands and Iago's poisonous words.

For Iago, the second male to touch the handkerchief, the handkerchief represents patriarchal marital ideals, particularly absolute female submissiveness. His strong ties to these ideas are evidenced by his numerous derogatory comments and actions towards the play's women. He exhibits false empathy when speaking directly to Desdemona only as a necessary part of his plan to destroy Othello. His treatment of the handkerchief directly reflects his views of women and marriage as things that exist for man's advantage–one definition of patriarchy. He would most likely belong at the first position (and would only seem to move further if it proved useful to his plan to destroy Othello). Iago's possession of the handkerchief completes his desire to turn the handkerchief into a symbol of patriarchal authority in order to destroy Othello.

Cassio, the last man to touch the handkerchief, displays attributes of both early and late Elizabethan views of women and marriage. His gracious speech and manner

towards Desdemona and Emilia upon their arrival at Cyprus outwardly suggest the breeding and manners of a man who considers women as individuals to be shown reverence. These affectionate actions are a double-edged sword. While they can express reverence for women, they can also destroy them (as Cassio's kissing of Desdemona's hand is only used against her by Iago). Cassio assumes female ownership through his chivalry, which gives him permission to kiss any woman he chooses.

Cassio's disparaging words towards Bianca during the staged conversation in 4.1 that Othello overhears contradict his behavior towards Desdemona and Emilia, proving the patriarchal undertones of his chivalric actions. The combination of his differing words towards Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca represent his entire view of women: things of beauty worthy of flattery, but all in the guise of achieving what he ultimately wants from them. Although at times he moves past his place on the continuum through his flattering words to Desdemona and his enabling of Emilia, Cassio refuses to stay at the latter end of the continuum. Therefore, he most comfortably relegates himself to the early Elizabethan views of women and marriage.

Cassio's treatment of the handkerchief, an object found in his quarters, manifests his attitudes towards women. By associating it with a female, the handkerchief becomes an object representing Cassio's multiple sexual encounters, the mere remnant of a past sexual liaison. Cassio's request to have the handkerchief copied demonstrates how he uses it to his advantage (as he does women) by turning it into a gift to women that he had liaisons with or an object used to woo a woman into such a liaison. He either genuinely does not recognize the sanctity of marriage that the handkerchief represents or chooses to dismiss it.

Othello as a whole demonstrates the shifting Elizabethan attitudes towards marriage by way of the various views towards marriage that each character's temporary possession of the handkerchief reveals. However, one of the most well-known scenes of the play, commonly referred to as the willow scene, also indicates such shifts. For this reason, a textual analysis of the scene is beneficial and will be undertaken in the next section, as it serves as a summation of the differing stances towards gender equality within marriage that *Othello* presents to its audience.

Chapter Seven: The Willow Scene

Act four, scene three, the willow scene, is an especially useful scene to analyze as Shakespeare devotes complete attention to competing attitudes towards gender equality in marriage through the dialogue of Desdemona and Emilia. The scene more largely explores the Elizabethan audience's attitudes towards women and women's equality in marriage through the norms and boundaries that the female characters of the scene test. Act four, scene three represents these conflicting Elizabethan attitudes through its juxtaposition of two women with differing stances on the Elizabethan marriage continuum.

Although Desdemona and Emilia talk freely, outside the restrictive presence of men, the patriarchal influence in the scene is still evidenced by the orders from Othello that open the scene. Shakespeare uses the initial lines of 4.3 to establish the extent to which Othello has given into patriarchal norms. The tone of the scene instigated by Othello's opening lines to Desdemona reflects Othello's attempts to move to the earliest position of the Elizabethan Age's marriage continuum. It is a tone that sees women as unquestionably under the direct command and control of men. Desdemona's fall from Othello's good graces is evident by the manner in which Othello speaks to her. His words to Desdemona are given as a direct order: "Get you to bed on th'instant. I will be returned forthwith. Dismiss your attendant there. Look't be done" (4.3.8-10). Othello's orders contain no sign of affection towards Desdemona. These orders are given as if to an inferior or army subordinate. Othello establishes a hierarchy of command with these lines. Such a hierarchy sees Othello commanding Desdemona, who commands Emilia.

Emilia is relegated farthest down the scale as she is merely an unnamed "attendant" that should be "dismiss[ed]" (4.3.9).

The beginning of 4.3 evinces the attempts of Desdemona to adhere to Othello's patriarchy. Desdemona's overwhelming desire to regain Othello's good graces by obeying him is prevalent throughout the scene, but most apparent in these opening lines. She attempts to obey Othello as soon as he leaves, as indicated by her lines to Emilia: "He says he will return incontinent, / And hath commanded me to go to bed, / And bid me to dismiss you" (4.3.12-14). Desdemona follows this command with a second attempt to both dismiss Emilia and get into bed, just as Othello has ordered. Desdemona assumes that Emilia shares her view of submissiveness to Othello and, therefore, her position on the continuum. In this regard, both of them "must not now displease him" or any other man, as they must desperately attempt to get back into favor with their husbands (4.3.17).

Emilia's words reaffirm her desired stance on the Elizabethan marriage continuum. Emilia encourages Desdemona to question her position of absolute submissiveness to Othello and her newfound relegation to the early position of the continuum. She accomplishes these actions through her response: "Dismiss me?" (4.3.15). Her response initiates defensive words from Desdemona. Desdemona arguably defends Othello's orders and, more broadly, her new stance on the marriage continuum. Such a defense ultimately shows the beginnings of the conflict between the two women's opinions regarding women's rights in marriage. The individual choices in their own roles as wives come into question. Desdemona's defensive attitude is demonstrated by, "It was his bidding. Therefore, good Emilia, / Give me my nightly wearing, and adieu. / We must not now displease him" (4.3.16-18).

Desdemona's defense, especially "we must not now displease him," provokes Emilia to reassert her challenges to her society. Emilia retorts her new opinion of Othello and his recent behavior: "I would you had never seen him!" (4.3.19). Desdemona also reaffirms her desired position on the marriage continuum through "So would not I," a re-declaration of her love and devotion to Othello and perhaps her obedience to him that further reveals the divisive stances that she and Emilia take (4.3.20).

Desdemona struggles to fully accept patriarchy. She recognizes Othello's faults (indeed the faults of all men), but will take a submissive posture out of love. Her struggle is indicated by her attempts to readjust her expectations–her happiness even–in order to maintain her beliefs and stance: "My love doth so approve him / That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns–" (4.3.20-21). However, she interrupts herself to follow his order, perhaps catching herself as she either realizes that her list of faults is larger than she would like to admit or that she is realizing her potential for disobedience. Desdemona, then, surveys the weak points of her devotion or vulnerabilities, showing that she checks herself by returning to and refocusing her attempts to obey Othello's orders. By changing the subject or rather returning to it, she refocuses the conversation and scene on Othello or on the debate of gender equality in marriage through "Prithee, unpin me–" and quickly completes her statement that Othello's faults "have grace and favor in them" (4.3.22).

Desdemona's attempts to adjust to patriarchal societal ideals necessitate a means of releasing her previous assertive attitude. She does so by resetting the tone of her thoughts and the conversation. By doing so, she effectively regains her command and control of Emilia, who responds: "I have laid those sheets you bade me on the bed"

(4.3.23-24). Emilia's reaffirmation of her status by her obedience to Desdemona may be viewed as an apology for her outburst and defiance of both Desdemona and Othello. Emilia then recognizes the change in behavior or ideals that Desdemona is undertaking. Her reply further serves to focus the imagery of the scene on the bed and marital intimacy. Desdemona's words in the scene are also used to focus the conversation on the wedding bed, specifically on the importance of the sheets. Ultimately, the conversation moves into a discussion of death, ironic since the bed is being prepared for both Desdemona and Emilia's final resting place. Desdemona further focuses the scene on the bed and death by first questioning her own thought pattern: "how foolish are our minds!" (4.3.25) and then mentioning death: "If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me / In one of these same sheets" (4.3.26-27). Emilia's dismissal of her comments, "Come, come, you talk," serves as a means to shift the topic of conversation again (4.3.27).

Emilia wants Desdemona to question patriarchy. Desdemona unknowingly accomplishes Emilia's desire by recollecting her mother: "My mother had a maid called Barbary, / She was in love, and he she loved proved mad / And did forsake her" (4.3.28-30). The love that Barbary had is much like the love that she and Othello now seem to share, as Barbary's lover went "mad" just as Othello seemingly has (4.3.29). Desdemona's early definition of love here is madness or tragedy. Like Barbary, she too will die because of her husband's madness in the form of jealousy. She may then recognize the failure of her own assertive actions against patriarchy and realize how such a society destroys women.

Shakespeare emphasizes Desdemona's conversion to enacting patriarchal ideals (even if she does not fully believe them) through the mention of the "willow song." The

larger symbol of the song may not be Desdemona's impending death, but the willow tree itself, which will last generations past her, and which therefore stands as a symbol of her tragic fate. The willow tree is the representation of the female trapped in a patriarchal society and stands as a testament of the fate of a woman who attempted to defy such a society. These ideas are suggested by Desdemona's reference to the song as "an old thing": "She had a song of 'Willow.' / An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune, / And she died singing it" (4.3.30-32). Shakespeare uses the song not just to remind readers of the symbolic entrapment of women in a male society or in a jealousy-laced marriage but also to foreshadow the death that the next act will bring: "That song tonight / Will not go from my mind" (4.3.32-33).

As act four, scene three reaches its middle section, Desdemona leaves her momentary lapse of considering the world in which she finds herself trapped and returns to following Othello's orders, as she tells Emilia to finish: "Prithee, dispatch" (4.3.35). Desdemona suddenly switches topics of conversation for the third time in the scene by mentioning Lodovico: "This Lodovico is a proper man" (4.3.38). The clash of ideals between the two women is continued as Emilia takes advantage of the new subject of Lodovico to return to her plans of unraveling Desdemona's patriarchal adherence. In a conversation reminiscent of the one that Iago and Cassio have in 2.1 regarding Desdemona, she chastises Desdemona for not choosing a husband more suited to her. Her plan seems to be indicated by her response to Desdemona: "A very handsome man," adding another attribute to him (4.3.39). Desdemona responds to Emilia's plan: "He speaks well" (4.3.40). Such a response may indicate that Desdemona is questioning her attempts to revert to early Elizabethan marital views, exactly the goal of Emilia. Emilia

seems to push further by saying of Lodovico: "I know a lady in Venice would have walked barefoot to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip" (4.3.41-42). Yet she pushes Desdemona too far, as Desdemona reverts to the "willow song" and thus back to her patriarchal stance.

Shakespeare reveals his second use of the "willow song" as dramatic foreshadowing as the scene nears its halfway point. The "willow song" predicts Desdemona's death in several ways. For example, "The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree" shows that Desdemona is a "poor soul" who will forever be memorialized by her tragic death and be like the woman in the song who will sit "sighing" for eternity as she does now (4.3.43). Desdemona continues: "The fresh streams ran by her and murmured her moans; / Sing willow, willow, willow; / Her salt tears fell from her, and softened the stones–" (4.3.47-49). The "moans" that "the fresh streams ... murmured" suggest the moans and sighs that Desdemona will utter when Othello strangles her (4.3.47). These are eerie foreshadowings and meticulous details of the murder. It is also notable that "salt tears fell from her, and softened the stones," for the tears accompanying Desdemona's murder greatly affect Othello, as he speaks in an ironic softness towards her during moments of the murder. The tears begin to soften the hard heart of Othello much as they do the "stones" that Shakespeare mentions (4.3.49).

Desdemona interrupts the song with an order to Emilia: "Lay by these" (4.3.50). Such an order puts Desdemona's continual desire to obey Othello against the foreshadowing of her own murder as well as the attempts of Emilia to dissuade her from absolute submissiveness. Desdemona's order demonstrates Shakespeare's reversion to the first function of the willow song as a representation of Desdemona's failed struggle

against patriarchy taking place in the first half of the play. She continues the song again: "Sing willow, willow, willow–" (4.3.51). As before, she interrupts the song with an order to Emilia: "Prithee, hie thee. He'll come anon" (4.3.52). Such an order shows the same determination to obey Othello, desiring that Emilia share in her obedience. Desdemona desires to bring Emilia back into the early Elizabethan Age's paradigm that she now assumes.

However, the most important example of Shakespeare's use of the willow song as dramatic foreshadowing occurs in the line: "Let nobody blame him; his scorn I approve–" (4.3.53). The last words that Desdemona speaks in a momentary resurrection are in Othello's defense, erasing all blame for his part in the murder and indicating that Desdemona "approve[s]" the "scorn" of Othello (4.3.53). To make the point even more apparent to audiences, Shakespeare has Desdemona draw attention to it by saying, "nay, that's not next" (4.3.54).

Shakespeare moves beyond his use of the willow song as dramatic foreshadowing by now using the entire scene to accomplish such means. Dramatically, there is an interruption in the proceedings by a strong wind: "Hark! Who is't that knocks?" Desdemona asks (4.3.55). "It's the wind" replies Emilia (4.3.56). The wind foreshadows the knocking of Emilia in 5.2. Desdemona continues: "I called my love false love; but what said he then? / Sing willow, willow, willow; / If I court more women, you'll couch with more men" (4.3.56-58). Desdemona's love with Othello is indeed a "false love" or a different love than she originally thought, implying that he has changed in his marital ideals, succumbing to patriarchal society. It may also be a reference to Iago's claim that theirs is an ungrounded love as it is based on the quick action of elopement. Shakespeare

could use such a description of Othello and Desdemona's love to speak against elopement.

Shakespeare also uses "If I court more women, you'll couch with more men" to allude to the double standard, as the lover being referenced tells the woman that he is allowed to be with other women, a fact that he presumes is acceptable as he openly declares the prospect to her (4.3.58). The lover justifies such actions because he feels that she will simply "couch with more men" in retaliation. The lines also foreshadow the accusations that Desdemona will face in her final scene, that she has "couch[ed] with more men," in particular Cassio. In fact, through calling Desdemona "that cunning whore of Venice," Othello has already put forth such an accusation (4.2.93).

The continued use of the scene to foreshadow later actions of the play is shown as the scene enters its final section. The next line, "Mine eyes do itch; / Doth that bode weeping?" predicts the many tears that will fall from Desdemona and Othello in her final scene (4.3.59-60). It also serves to remind readers of the image of the willow tree, which is often thought of as a "weeping," thereby connecting it to the continual weeping cry that is exhibited by Barbary in the refrain "willow, willow, willow" (4.3.51).

Shakespeare uses the remainder of 4.3 to emphasize the clash of marital views between Desdemona and Emilia. Both women are struggling to negotiate their own marriages. Emilia has especially struggled as she has watched Othello's abuse of Desdemona–the result of her failure to return the handkerchief to Desdemona. Desdemona's struggle to adapt to patriarchy is more recent. She is now trying to accommodate patriarchy's expectations of women. Several lines exemplify Desdemona's struggle:

Oh, these men, these men!

Dost thou in conscience think–tell me, Emilia–

That there be women do abuse their husbands

In such gross kind? (4.3.61-64)

Here, Desdemona brings up the subject that will prove to be her downfall–the accusations of her adultery. They will bring her to trial in act five with Othello as judge, jury, and executioner. Her absolute submissiveness to the patriarchal, early Elizabethan stance of the continuum is demonstrated by her bewilderment and almost disbelief that women would be unfaithful to their husbands. These disbeliefs will be more apparent in her attempts at self-defense in act five. Like the questioning of the superstitious knocking and the itching of the eyes yielding tears, Desdemona questions Emilia on the ways of the world and those who dare to transgress the society that they inhabit.

Shakespeare appropriately follows Desdemona's reference to societal disobedience with Emilia's attempts to speak out against patriarchy and restrain Desdemona from fully accepting such ideals. Emilia's motherly or sisterly position shows that she is more worldly and more frustrated by patriarchal values than Desdemona. Her reply to Desdemona makes this abundantly clear: "there be some such, no question" (4.3.65). Desdemona replies: "Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?" (4.3.66). This reply shows that Desdemona still cannot comprehend the fact that a woman would be unfaithful to her husband, the complete opposite reaction that Emilia has to such a notion. Emilia's reply of "Why, would not you?" is a clear indication of the stark differences in their positions regarding societal views of marriage (4.3.67). Desdemona's purity, goodness, and innocence are all wrapped together in her reply: "No, by this

heavenly light!" (4.3.67). Her refusal is almost sacred as she swears by a "heavenly light"–a religious vow that is the most serious vow that Desdemona can make–showing her complete adherence to fidelity that manifests her love for Othello. Emilia's reply of "Nor I neither by this heavenly light; / I might do't as well i'th dark" negates Desdemona's use of "heavenly" (4.3.68-69). She makes the joke that evil deeds are best done in the dark, which also serves as an appropriate foreshadowing of the final scene of the play where Othello desires to put out the lights, thereby committing his murder in darkness. He might suppose Desdemona's and any woman's unfaithful acts to be committed in similar darkness. Ultimately, of course, he puts out the "heavenly light" that is Desdemona's goodness.

Just as strong as Desdemona's use of "heavenly light" is Emilia's view of the act of adultery as "a small vice" (4.3.72). Her classification of adultery reflects the stance she strives to take in the marriage continuum. Viewing adultery as trivial shows her frustration over the double standard that accepts such acts by men.

The final lines of 4.3 most explicitly demonstrate the clash of ideals between Desdemona and Emilia. Desdemona still cannot accept that any woman, especially a woman she trusts so, would engage in adultery and thus replies, "Good troth, I think thou wouldst not" (4.3.73). Emilia's reply indicates her insistence that in theory it is acceptable for women to be unfaithful to their husbands, indeed that she feels it is almost expected: "By my troth, I think I should, and undo't when I had done" (4.3.74-75). Emilia then gives a list of conditions under which she would not be unfaithful: "Marry, I would not do such a thing for a joint ring, nor for measures of lawn, nor for gowns, petticoats, nor caps, nor any petty exhibitions" (4.3.75-77).

Emilia's response reflects the trusting relationship that Desdemona and Emilia have, for Emilia chides Desdemona over her exuberant choice of words "For all the world" (4.3.70). Desdemona is appalled at Emilia's words and more so at her outright defiance of patriarchal society or of her marriage vows. She maintains her place in marital fidelity by stating: "Beshrew me if I would do such a wrong / For the whole world" (4.3.81-82).

Desdemona's repeated assertions indicate her now unmovable stance on the continuum of Elizabethan Age's women's rights. Emilia seems determined to move to the position farthest along the continuum: "Why the wrong is but a wrong i'th' world, and having the world for your labor, 'tis a wrong in your own world, and you might quickly make it right" (4.3.83-85). She, for the first time, is attempting to rationalize the facts of the real world and the double standard to Desdemona. Emilia's assertion of the injustice toward women in the patriarchal world in which she and Desdemona find themselves may be a direct appeal to the Elizabethan audience, demonstrating how they too are stuck in such a world but have the opportunity (as she does) to move past the hold of tradition and the early Elizabethan Age.

The final lines of the scene give each woman the opportunity to provide a summation of their views towards patriarchy. Emilia's final speech of the scene, a final attempt to persuade Desdemona that the possibility exists that women are unfaithful to their husbands, is a summation of her feelings towards her own marriage. She begins: "Yes, a dozen, and as many / To th' vantage as would store the world they played for" (4.3.87-88). Emilia continues in a different manner, actually providing the rationale for

why women are unfaithful, as she casts the blame on the husbands, which re-addresses the double standard:

> But I do think it is their husbands' faults
>
> If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties
>
> And pour our treasures into foreign laps,
>
> Or else break out in peevish jealousies,
>
> Throwing restraint upon us? (4.3.89-93)

Emilia lists many attributes of both Othello and Iago. For example, she mentions "break[ing] out in peevish jealousies" (4.3.92), which is exactly what Iago has done and what Othello is doing and will continue to do.

Emilia continues her summation against patriarchy: "Or say they strike us, / Or scant our former having in despite?" (4.3.93-94). Othello has previously struck and been very spiteful to Desdemona. Could Emilia purposefully be working in references to Othello's previous actions to make her speech more effective to Desdemona? The speech could reflect Emilia and Iago's relationship as well. She continues her justification for being unfaithful: "Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace, / Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know / Their wives have sense like them" (4.3.95-97). She desires to remedy the double standard by making sure that women let men know that they can indulge their sexuality as well and are free to take revenge on men who do so following that overall use of ethics in the play. Emilia continues: "They see, and smell / And have their palates both for sweet and sour / As husbands have" (4.3.97-99). She puts women on the same level of sense and physicality as men, echoing the choice of equality

for men and women. It is the same cry that Shakespeare may pose in the play for gender equality in marriage. Emilia, growing angrier, poses the rhetorical question:

> What is it that they do
>
> When they change us for others? Is it sport?
>
> I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
>
> I think it doth. (4.3.99-102)

Emilia attempts to understand why men act the way they do and why they feel they are justified in openly cavorting with other women. She attempts one final call for equality between men and women and the elimination of the double standard:

> Is't frailty that thus errs?
>
> It is so, too. And have not we affections,
>
> Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
>
> Then let them use us well; else let them know,
>
> The ills we do, their ills instruct us so. (4.3.102-106)

Emilia's final plea and call to Elizabethan women is summed up in her final line of this scene: "The ills we do, their ills instruct us so" (4.3.106). It is perhaps the completion of the most important pair of lines in the scene for Emilia, as Shakespeare uses a rhyming couplet here to draw emphasis. Yet her "infidelity" is not corporal but verbal; at the end she chooses loyalty to Desdemona and truth over Iago.

Desdemona dismisses Emilia's summation. Desdemona's summation is an indication of her love for Othello as it is spoken in simple terms showing that she restrains from fully expressing her thoughts, following society's desire that women be silent: "Good night, good night. God me such uses send / Not to pick bad from bad, but

by bad mend" (4.3.107-08). These lines are emphasized by a rhyming couplet as well. Like Emilia's couplet, they echo and reaffirm the stance that she takes on the marriage continuum despite her failed attempts to move forward. Desdemona will not move from her stance. No amount of explanation, joking or serious, will move her. She remains insistent on her view and more broadly in her faithful position. She does not want to move past it, but resigns, through a self-realization of her failed action, to the patriarchal world in which she lives until Othello is "righted" into the loving man she married. Desdemona's "I do not think there is any such woman" (4.3.86) might best be completed with "that would succeed in going against patriarchy."

Conclusion

After considering Stone's suggestion that *Othello* is an allegorical warning to others against questioning patriarchy, the question must be asked how Shakespeare desires readers and audiences to respond to the failed challenge to patriarchy that is represented by the elopement (87). Shakespeare purposefully avoids answering such a question, instead demanding that readers infer the greater implications defying patrarchy, especially when the defiance is a tragic failure. Does the tragic fate of the couple who dared act out of love against patriarchy simply imply that the Elizabethan society paralleled in *Othello* is not yet ready to accept such challenges? The consideration of Fletcher's socio-historical case studies suggests a mixed response to this question. To an extent, the answer is yes, Elizabethan and early Jacobean society is not yet ready or more appropriately willing to accept challenges. Patriarchal society at the beginning of the Elizabethan Age rested on a firm foundation that was able to withstand challenges and, in fact, to defeat them. However as the Elizabethan Age reached its midpoint around 1580, the foundation began to show gradual weakness, as evidenced by the examples of marriage that Fletcher provides. Fletcher describes men who were willing to allow women a degree of authority in household affairs and more largely in marriage. However, the gradual allowance of such feminine power was not without its setbacks.

Shakespeare, then, more accurately describes the state of mid-to-late Elizabethan marriages, at least, according to the timeline of Fletcher's examples. In Othello and Desdemona's marriage, Othello was willing to allow Desdemona authority. Yet, as in Fletcher's examples, the allowance of limited authority to the wife during the Elizabethan Age was not a simple matter. The transition into gender equality in marriage that Othello

and Desdemona's marriage exemplifies is, then, not without its failures. Desdemona took the limited authority that Othello allowed her and attempted to gain more power as exemplified by her interruptions of Othello's demands to produce the handkerchief with her insistence that he meet with Cassio. The spiral of disaster that begins with the loss of the handkerchief demonstrates the failed effort to completely escape patriarchal values. *Othello* appropriately joins Fletcher's marriage vignettes in demonstrating that effective strides in gender equality were made slowly. An abrupt action such as elopement will most often prove unsuccessful under these circumstances.

In Shakespeare's time, gender equality must be taken through small steps, always under the permissive eye of a male. When Desdemona chooses a husband for herself, she has taken too broad a step. Despite the fact that elopement was also Othello's choice, general male society (in the form of the male characters of the play) remains focused on Desdemona's actions of elopement, seemingly seeing little wrongdoing on the part of Othello. After all, he obeyed patriarchy by claiming a woman as his property and taking such property from its male owner (Brabantio).

The answer to what a failed effort to escape patriarchal values implies is found through the introspection of the Elizabethan society in which it was first presented as well as the introspection of future readers of the play. *Othello* at least opened the doors to the discussion of gender equality in marriage and the decreasing effectiveness of patriarchal marital traditions. The law of veto that was passed during the Elizabethan era was a demonstration of the fact that patriarchal marital traditions were being questioned. *Othello* then took such questioning a step further, playing out one result of an outright defiance of societal ideals. This result does not mean that Shakespeare was adamantly

against challenging society's marital norms. Shakespeare knew the risk of allowing a happy ending to the play. After all, the success of challenges to Elizabethan society, although guised in Venetian society, would surely not have gotten past the authorities of Shakespeare's day. Yet Shakespeare accomplished a great deal by simply putting the challenging of Elizabethan society before his contemporaries, permitting the questioning of such a society's effectiveness.

Despite *Othello's* accomplishments during Shakespeare's time, the question of how contemporary readers of the play should respond remains. Despite the vast improvements in female rights that have occurred over the last few centuries, female equality is not without its challenges. The double standard inherent in the plot of the play in many ways still exists in the twenty-first century. Society still permits men more sexual freedom, while chastising women for actions that men are freely permitted. Stereotypes still remain as well for females. *Othello*, then, like so many of Shakespeare's plays, is still a contemporary play. The play encourages society to challenge its unquestioned obedience to established mores, but remains a warning not to abandon such views too abruptly.

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