

# Erotic Politics Reconsidered: *Desdemona's Challenge to Othello*

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## Abstract

Adaptations frequently revamp their source-texts by reversing the disposition of margins and center. This principle is epitomized in Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief*, which retells *Othello*, but focuses on the formerly marginalized female characters from Shakespeare's play. My essay examines *Desdemona* as feminist protest, showing how Vogel's adaptation responds to the elegiac politics of Shakespeare's play. Of particular significance is Vogel's transformation of the necrophilic impulse in *Othello*: in Shakespeare's play, of course, Othello vows to love Desdemona after killing her. Fittingly — given that adaptations employ repetition itself as a vehicle for transformation — *Desdemona* both reprises and critiques the death aesthetic of *Othello*.

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## Strange Bedfellows

In the opening passages of his memoir, *The Future Lasts Forever* (published posthumously in 1993), Louis Althusser writes of awakening and slowly realizing that he has strangled his wife H  l  ne while the two were in bed. Written during Althusser's three-year stay in a mental hospital (his sentence for killing H  l  ne), the memoir issues a corrective to accounts of the crime that had circulated in French newspapers.<sup>1</sup> Althusser suggests that H  l  ne wanted to die and therefore that her death should be classified not as homicide, but as a case of suicide-via-third party (Althusser 1993, 281). In a curious way, *The Future Lasts Forever* invokes Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604); the play, of course, also features an act of uxoricide — and a husband who attempts to control narratives of his wife's death. Specifically, Othello instructs his listeners: "Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate," and he instructs future biographers to describe him as "one who lov'd not wisely but too well" (*Othello*, 5.2.234).<sup>2</sup> Obviously, generic properties and literary conventions distinguish the play from the memoir, and these texts are also imprinted by (and help to shape) the vastly different cultural contexts in which and for which they were produced. But analogies, after

all, are useful precisely because of their capacity to forge *unlikely* connections. And an intriguing link between *Othello* and *The Future Lasts Forever* is their shared treatment of wife-killing: In both cases, murder is shrouded in the mists of excess love. Or, to alter the metaphor slightly, the play and the memoir bathe violence in the waters of sentimentality. More specifically, the (marriage) bed becomes the site of murder, and this physical detail powerfully encapsulates the merger of violence and eroticism that characterizes Shakespeare's play and Althusser's memoir.

### Adaptation as Feminist Protest

It is this very phenomenon of eroticized violence that seems the target, or impetus, of Paula Vogel's delightfully irreverent *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* (first performed as a staged reading at Cornell University in 1987), which is a retelling of Shakespeare's *Othello*.<sup>3</sup> *Desdemona* reverses *Othello*'s disposition of margins and center, so that the action of Shakespeare's play is replicated (with some key innovations), but also absorbed and understood from the perspectives of Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca. The play delineates these characters most clearly in terms of marital status: Desdemona is an adulterous wife; Emilia a chaste wife; and Bianca a prostitute who wishes to become a wife. Othello, Iago, and Cassio (the respective mates for Vogel's trio of Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca) never actually appear in the adaptation, although they collectively function as an absent presence that defines female behavior. Vogel's adaptation both preserves and critiques the vexed knowledge-quest that consumes *Othello*: The calumniated woman plot requires that Othello seek knowledge of his wife, an epistemological arrangement that positions Othello as subject/seeker and Desdemona as object. *Desdemona* complicates subject-object distinctions, however, because its heroine ultimately awakens to the grim realities of her precarious position as the *object* of Othello's obsessive thoughts.

The adaptation further disrupts the calumniated-woman plot in its insistence upon the heroine's exuberantly adulterous acts. Vogel's Desdemona does not simply understand her husband's fears: She also acknowledges that they are warranted. In the play's fifth scene, for example, Desdemona complains about Othello's erratic behavior, citing his recent "rotten moods," "headaches," "handkerchiefs," and "accusations" (with these details, of course, strategically and humorously reprising *Othello*) and faults her husband for believing the rumors linking her to Michael Cassio, stating: "Leave it to a cuckold to be jealous of a eunuch" (Vogel 2000, 233-35). Though *Desdemona* redresses the marginalization of female characters in Shakespeare's play, Vogel's text also offers a piercing critique of women's collusion in patriarchal structures. To do so, *Desdemona* puts adaptation in the service of feminist protest, a strategy that exposes the elegiac politics of tragedy.

What follows is an account of the relationship between *Othello* and *Desdemona*. Analysis of the two plays is deliberately interlaced, as this permits the best means of examining how *Desdemona* comments on and transforms *Othello*. While both texts continue to invite new staged versions, and these performances raise fascinating dramaturgical questions, my argument focuses on the plays as written texts. Still, drama is the scopophilic genre *par excellence*, and it therefore requires interpretations that are attuned to the visual. *Othello* dramatizes epistemological crisis (investigative procedures were being overhauled in the seventeenth century); tensions over visual evidence (or "ocular proof") were especially acute, and *Othello*, of course, expressly engages with economies of gazing, a point illustrated in the hero's pledge to be satisfied with nothing less or other than "ocular proof" of Desdemona's infidelity.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, Othello is the primary spectator and audience for the mini-drama presided over by Iago. On the other hand, as Valerie Wayne reminds us, Othello also inadvertently positions himself as a *reader* of Desdemona, projecting his (misogynist) fears/suspensions onto her (Wayne 1991). In short, *Othello* clarifies how the activities of reading and seeing converge. *Desdemona* elaborates on this point, particularly in its dramatization of the ways in which its characters are trapped within and by their own flawed interpretations of themselves and each other. Capitalizing on early modern anxieties about cultural difference, *Othello* ultimately presents "a near schizophrenic hero," who defines himself as, simultaneously, "Christian and infidel" (Loomba 1989, 289). By contrast, *Desdemona* ultimately erodes distinctions between its female characters. Ironically, perhaps, while the erasure of differences between women may have been intended as *Desdemona*'s strongest feminist protest against patriarchy, it might actually compromise the play's radical politics. I return to the vexed issue of female solidarity later in the essay. For the moment, it should be noted that *Desdemona* foregrounds relationships among women, and the ensuing dynamics provide a barometer by which to measure feminist movement. At the same time, *Desdemona*'s consideration of sexuality — particularly those expressions and behaviors that challenge cultural norms — refreshes awareness of the ways in which, as Carole S. Vance suggests, "The tension between sexual danger and sexual pleasure is a powerful one in women's lives" (Vance 1984, 1).

Criticism of tragedy has proven to be a potent measure of the inroads made by feminist approaches to literature, which have often served to render visible the values, ideals, or ideologies buttressing existing theoretical models. For example, in a pivotal essay on *Othello* that was first published in 1980, Carol Thomas Neely writes: "The men's murderous fancies are untouched by the women's affection, wit, and shrewishness. The play ends as it began, in a world of men — political, loveless, undomesticated" (Neely 1980, 214). This view, of course, stands in opposition to more

traditional readings of tragedy, which tend to emphasize the suffering and affirm the nobility of the tragic hero.<sup>5</sup> Neely's point is that the sympathies and sensibilities discernible in traditional readings are themselves generated by culture-bound assumptions.

### Sisterhood is Sorrowful: The Problem of Collective Politics

Though Neely's article helped to steer interpretation of *Othello* in a new direction, she herself eventually criticized her essay's exclusive focus on gender at the expense of other considerations, such as race and class. If Neely's feminist re-reading of *Othello* is compromised somewhat by its singular attention to gender and its neglect of other kinds of difference, this very limitation helps to put into perspective important debates and tensions associated with feminist theory and criticism for the last few decades. Audre Lorde eloquently synthesizes these debates in "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," when she writes: "To imply that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how these tools are used by women without awareness against each other" (Lorde 1983, 95). Calling for an acknowledgment of variety and diversity among women, Lorde articulates the dangers of invoking a false universality: Doing so certifies as normative the experiences of select women, while marginalizing those who do not fit this putative norm. The problem is one of ventriloquism, with certain feminists having appropriated the act of speaking on behalf of all other women. This point is skilfully argued by Anne McClintock in her very fine study of the gendering of imperialism. She writes: "Since the late 1970s, an impassioned and compelling feminist critique has emerged — largely from women of color — that challenges certain Eurocentric feminists who claim to give voice to an essential womanhood (in universal conflict with an essential masculinity)" (McClintock 1995, 7).

*Desdemona* has been faulted for the very problem outlined by Lorde and McClintock. For instance, in their introduction to the play, Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier comment that *Desdemona's* "notable omission of race as a further mode of adapting *Othello* may represent an unfortunate simplification on the part of Vogel" (Fischlin and Fortier 2000, 234). Of course, performances of *Desdemona* need not feature all-white casts.<sup>6</sup> Still, Vogel's text would appear to evade treating race as a specific source of tension between Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca. On the other hand, as Fischlin and Fortier also acknowledge, Vogel "provocatively recasts Emilia as stage-Irish and Bianca as stage-cockney, [with] the servants being more clearly depicted in terms of class and nation than they are in Shakespeare, where Emilia is not classed in terms of speech at all" (234). Thus, Vogel distinguishes characters on the basis of geographical region and nationality, and class differences prove to be the most potent mediators of social identity, including sexual roles.

*Desdemona* adroitly raises questions about the very possibility of solidarity among women, and the play warns that dangers accompany women's inability to view themselves as a social collective. If this stance fails adequately to address matters of race or ethnicity, it does shed light on a past and current objective of feminism, namely achieving an equitable balance between celebrating differences between women and working on behalf of all of them.<sup>7</sup>

From its first scene, *Desdemona* chronicles ways in which its female characters work at cross-purposes. A stage direction notes that the play opens to show a nearly empty stage. Though devoid of actors, the stage is meant to feature one lonely item — a woman's handkerchief. Here, Vogel invokes *Othello* by training her audience's attention on a richly symbolic artifact from Shakespeare's play.<sup>8</sup> Emilia inaugurates the action: She happens along and, spying the handkerchief, she scoops it up and hides it in the bodice of her dress. As is true of her Shakespearean predecessor, Vogel's Emilia commits a duplicitous act — she takes Desdemona's handkerchief and then professes ignorance of its whereabouts — and this helps to solidify Othello's suspicions about his wife.

In the play's very next scene, Desdemona exacts a promise of complete loyalty and truthfulness from Emilia, which is the preamble to several questions about Othello's behavior. Emilia assures Desdemona that she has heard nothing of Othello's jealousy regarding Cassio. After she offers this declaration, however, stage directions read: "(But as DESDEMONA is to EMILIA'S back, EMILIA drops a secret smile into the wash bucket. EMILIA raises her head again, though, with a sincere, servile face, and turns to DESDEMONA)" (Vogel 2000, 240). Here, servility is shown to be a social mask Emilia wears in order to camouflage what she does know. Once again, *Desdemona* skilfully recreates *Othello*: Shakespeare's hero errs in trusting that Iago is "honest," just as Desdemona accepts at face value her servant's show of trustworthiness. Both plays, therefore, call attention to the epistemological dimensions of hierarchical relationships, with the "master" presuming (or fantasizing about) pure or complete knowledge of the servant.

Shakespeare's play never specifically addresses Emilia's motive for betraying Desdemona. By contrast, Vogel's adaptation emphasizes what Marianne Novy refers to as "the exploitative possibilities in relationships between women of different classes" (Novy 1999, 67). Emilia can never forget her position as servant; she is, in virtually every scene, performing a chore or task for Desdemona, with these acts underscoring the peculiar intimacy of mistress-servant relationships. For example, the fourth scene consists entirely of a stage direction that reads "EMILIA, scrubbing. DESDEMONA lies on her back on the table, feet propped up, absentmindedly fondling the pick, and staring into space" (Vogel 2000, 239). This single instance graphically illustrates how the

labor of Emilia produces the luxuries enjoyed by Desdemona. The resulting arrangement between the two characters can perhaps best be described as symbiotic. It should be noted, however, that Desdemona's infidelity undercuts her power over Emilia. In the adaptation, just as in the source-text, the possession of secrets connotes power.

It is worth asking why Vogel rewrites Desdemona so that her character appears to bear out the misogynistic arguments — usually promulgated by Iago — that are discernible in *Othello*. That is, the corroboration of sexist attitudes seems at odds with the spirit and purpose of a feminist retelling. But Vogel's strategy becomes clear when one considers how the critical tradition (especially prior to the advent of feminist work) had equated feminine virtue and female chastity. Or, as Shirley Nelson Garner points out, "The major critics of *Othello* idealized Desdemona, seeing her as near to divine, if not actually" (Garner 1996, 295). My own experience teaching *Desdemona* to undergraduates indicates that the heroine's outspoken delight in her own sensuality is unsettling to (some) readers. In any case, endowing Desdemona with an abundant sexual appetite virtually ensures that readers must confront their own assumptions about the "proper" behavior for female characters. An unfaithful heroine/victim requires a new calibration of empathy. Novy acknowledges this point when she asks: "Do we feel different about a husband killing a wife who really is unfaithful? Should we? In what ways do we feel the same?" (Novy 1999, 72-73). Here Novy articulates an issue that is central to understanding how Vogel's text functions in conversation with (and opposition to) Shakespeare's. But the collective pronoun employed in Novy's questions downplays, or obscures, diversity of response. For example, *within Othello*, the answer to Novy's first question is a resounding "yes." After all, Shakespeare's hero regrets committing murder only after learning that he has been duped about his wife's guilt. As Garner suggests, the palimpsest of criticism accompanying *Othello* tends to uphold the notion that Desdemona's chastity is required, if the conventions of tragedy are to be fulfilled. Put a bit differently, the glories of tragic recognition have, traditionally, been ceded to Othello precisely because he errs in killing a chaste wife. By implication, a guilty Desdemona would deserve the punishment meted out to her in the play. *Desdemona*, however, challenges readers to question not only this interpretive paradigm, but the ideologies of gender and sexuality that nourish it.

### Performing Desire

Whatever social tensions divide Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca, a fleeting unity emerges when they collectively participate in the production of the myth of chastity. One of Emilia's more unpleasant duties involves scrubbing the blood off the bed-sheets that were soiled by Desdemona and Othello on their first night together as husband and wife. Emilia and Desdemona reveal that

they used the blood of a hen, donated by Bianca, in order to provide the necessary proof of Desdemona's virginity on her wedding night. Emilia attributes the excessive staining of the sheets to Bianca's inability to provide a sufficiently elderly hen. Emilia explains: "Young chick blood's no good for bridal sheets, it's the devil to come out" (Vogel 2000, 237). This conversation disgusts Desdemona, who says that the public airing of sheets stained with virgins' blood is a "barbaric custom" (237). She adds: "Nobody displays bridal sheets on Cyprus" (237). Emilia responds, "There aren't any virgins to be had on Cyprus," and the two joke that at least half of those who congregated to gawk at the sheets were there "to pay their last respects to the chicken!" (237). Ironically, the flash of female solidarity that briefly unites Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca actually works to their collective detriment, since it requires them to perpetuate an ideal — female chastity — that redounds to their disadvantage.

In fact, Emilia presents a rationale for female obeisance to patriarchal structures:

For us in the bottom ranks, when man and wife hate each other, what is left in a lifetime of marriage but to save and scrimp, plot, and plan? . . . I'd like to rise a bit in the world, and women can only do that through their mates — no matter what class buggers they all are. I says to [Iago] each night, "I long for the day you make me a lieutenant's widow!" (Vogel 2000, 240)

By her own account, Emilia hungers for the luxuries that would accompany Iago's promotion to a better position. Of course, she also admits to telling her husband that she yearns for the freedoms that she imagines accompany widowhood. This moment arcs back to *Othello* in a playful way, exploiting the comedic potential discernible in Shakespeare's text. After all, the basic set-up of *Othello* — older man married to young and beautiful wife — could easily elicit a farcical conclusion. While Emilia's mini-lesson on marriage is both humorous and pleasingly irreverent, even her apprehension of the economic realities of marriage does not induce in her a revolutionary, radical, or even mildly feminist attitude. Capitulation to sexist institutions, rather than protest against them, ultimately defines Emilia's actions. Desdemona's sexual licentiousness (and Bianca's work as a prostitute) may, initially, render these two characters the more likely social rebels. But in truth Vogel emphasizes their startlingly traditional or conformist attitudes. And *Desdemona's* overall logic, its relentless progression towards the violent denouement prefigured in *Othello*, hints that oppression can best be accomplished via the conformity or acquiescence of the oppressed. If pragmatism, in the form of understanding the economic basis of marriage, prevents Emilia's rebellion against the forces of (patriarchal) tradition, Desdemona proves to be distracted by her own epicurean tendencies. Reacting in frustration to the boredom of married life, Desdemona seeks

novelty and excitement, and believes she finds them, at Bianca's (it seems that even working girls need one night off a week, and Desdemona is only too happy to fill in for her friend).

In presenting her heroine as a seeker of novelty and adventure, Vogel revisits a key moment from *Othello*, wherein the hero describes his courtship of Desdemona. Othello notes that his tales of adventure — replete with "Cannibals" and "Anthropophagi," as well as the account of his heroic escape from enslavement — constituted the only "magic" he used to win over Desdemona. Othello reports that Desdemona listened with "a greedy ear," so as to "devour up [his] discourse," and he caps his speech by explaining that Desdemona "wish'd / That heaven had made her such a man" (*Othello*, 1.3.143-63). By Othello's own account, Desdemona's response to his exotic adventures was a desire to be him. That is, Desdemona's real wish was to assume Othello's identity. It seems, then, that marriage to Othello effects the sublimation, rather than the fulfillment, of Desdemona's desire. Vogel follows up on this point: Her Desdemona laments that she had married a "strange dark man" in order to leave the "narrow little Venice with its whispering piazzas behind [. . .] But under that exotic facade was a porcelain white Venetian" (Vogel 2000, 242). This passage distills the cleverness of Vogel's adaptation, which consistently returns to the Shakespearean original precisely in order to transform it. Specifically, the "whispering piazzas" aptly conjure the world of calumny and innuendo so powerfully delineated in *Othello*. And, of course, the charge that sameness, rather than difference, renders Othello distasteful to Desdemona, provides an intriguing commentary on the earlier play's statements about desire and difference.

In the adaptation, Desdemona's dissatisfaction with her marriage leads her to temp-work as a prostitute. Desdemona considers Bianca to be a "free woman — a new woman — who can make her own living in the world, who scorns marriage for the lie that it is" (Vogel 2000, 242). Obviously, there is a profound difference between playing at prostitution (which is what Desdemona does) and actually being a prostitute. On the other hand, it is difficult to maintain the separation between charade and reality when Desdemona actually fills in for Bianca. If we take Vogel's Desdemona at her word, she seeks work as a prostitute because she enjoys doing so. Here is how Desdemona describes her own adventures as a prostitute:

I lie in the blackness of the room at [Bianca's] establishment . . . on sheets that are stained and torn by countless nights. And the men come into that pitch-black room — men of different sizes and smells and shapes, with smooth skin, rough skin, with scarred skin. And they spill their seed into me, — seed from a thousand lands, passed down through generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover the surface of the globe. And I simply lie still there in the darkness, taking them all into me. I close my eyes and in the dark of my mind — oh, how I travel! (242-43)



In Desdemona's fanciful terms, semen magically enables transport — it is only when customers' "seed" spills into her that Desdemona's flights of fancy are recorded. "Seeing the world" may be a lofty goal, and one that reflects Desdemona's desire to be free of all chains that bind her, but if such travel can only be *imagined* — and imagined as the by-product of servicing men's sexual needs — it cannot be accepted as a measure of female autonomy. "Service" is probably the operative word here, as it properly conveys Desdemona's assent to participate in a system that is designed neither around her needs, nor to give her pleasure or power, but to satisfy male customers. Ironically, Desdemona's naïve and somewhat romantic view of prostitution proves to be reciprocal, as Bianca mistakenly believes that marriage guarantees security to women. Though Desdemona's evaluation of prostitution is almost comically misguided, it strikes a serious note by underscoring the heroine's inability to imagine modes of escape that would rewire — rather than uphold — the circuitry of power in the play.

For much of the play, pursuit of pleasure seems to be Desdemona's main goal, a point illuminated in the scene that features Bianca instructing her pupil in additional tricks of the trade (or perhaps skills to please tricks). More specifically, Bianca explains that some of her customers like to play a bit rough and engage in spanking, and she offers to demonstrate on Desdemona, who eagerly agrees to cooperate. This interlude of flagellation is designed as a dress rehearsal for the "real thing" — surely, prostitution calls into question the concept of the "real thing" — but both Desdemona and Bianca seem to enjoy it. As with other provocative inventions of Vogel's adaptation, one might ask: Why is this performance of masochism, whereby Desdemona learns to demonstrate pleasure when her partner inflicts pain, incorporated into the text? One possibility is that this episode is intended to convey the theatricality of all expressions of desire. Theatricality accompanies desire because, as Lynda Hart suggests, desire "takes place in the fantasy one constructs with others" (Hart 1998, 9). She adds that desire is "theatrical" "in much the same way that the play always takes place in the space between the spectators and performers" (9-10). In effect, the dynamism, or alchemy, of theater creates a temporary though productive and powerful location, one from which, to borrow a phrase from Vogel, we can "confront the disturbing questions of our time" (Vogel 1996, 231).

True to her word, Vogel uses *Desdemona* to explore several "disturbing questions" that range over complex and shifting terrain. The training Bianca provides to Desdemona may prove unsettling to some readers precisely because it affirms desire as both an appetite and a performance grounded in specific cultural and social frameworks. In recasting Shakespeare's heroine as a guilt-free adulterer (and the pseudo-apprentice to a prostitute), Vogel has pleasure triumph over propriety — if only temporarily. Desdemona's brief foray into sadomasochism allows Vogel to highlight distinctions between sadomasochism as consensual practice and masochism as pretext

for actual violence. This Desdemona expresses eagerness to feign being hurt, and she proves to be a quick study, rapidly learning to synchronize her screams with the slaps she is administered. Desdemona's eagerness to engage in sexual play should not, of course, be confused with a desire to experience actual pain, much less total annihilation and death. This may seem an obvious point, but it nonetheless merits emphasis, if only to dislodge the Freudian view — arguably, the normative view — of gender and sexuality. Freud moors his assessment of "normal" heterosexual relations to his understanding of "somasochism," which he defines in terms of exertion of force and accompanying surrender to it. Specifically, Freud states: "The sexuality of most men shows an admixture of aggression, of a propensity to subdue, the biological significance of which lies in the necessity for overcoming the resistance of the sexual object" (Freud 1970, 21). Of women's sexuality, Freud writes, "Masochism comprises all passive attitudes to the sexual life and the sexual object" (92). The passages from Freud's work selected for inclusion here mute female desire, suggesting that women may surrender or acquiesce to sexual attention, but they do not actively seek it. While I have no wish to reinstall Freud as supreme authority on gender and sexuality, it is important to recognize the enduring legacy, and attendant implications, of his views.

Stretched to its chilling limits, the masochism that Freud assigns to female sexuality culminates in a death wish. To understand the durability of this myth, we might recall Althusser's rationale for murdering his wife. Describing his killing of H el ene as a fulfillment of her death-wish, Althusser would appear to find an accomplice in Freud. *Othello*, too, deflects blame away from its murderer, as Shakespeare's heroine uses her dying words to claim responsibility for her death, thereby exculpating her husband. When asked who is responsible for killing her, Desdemona responds: "Nobody. I myself. Farewell" (*Othello*, 5.2.125). And immediately before being killed, Desdemona seems resigned to her fate. Or so, at least, is the conclusion of Alan Sinfield, who writes of Shakespeare's character: "Desdemona does not manage much opposition to her death" (Sinfield 1992, 53). Perhaps unwittingly, in this interpretation of Desdemona's murder Sinfield reprises a conversation that Althusser ostensibly had with "an old doctor friend" about killing H el ene. As Althusser recounts the conversation, the friend in question remarked on H el ene's lack of resistance to her own murder, asking: "Does that mean she was aware of her impending death and wanted to die at your hands, and thus passively let herself be killed? It cannot be ruled out" (Althusser 1993, 281). Admittedly they make for strange bedfellows (and certainly the synopses provided here are not intended to be exhaustive renditions of their respective work), but Shakespeare, Freud, and Althusser mutually engender a thematic of female passivity.

### Peripeteia as Feminist Protest

Vogel's characters give the lie to this theme of female passivity, but ultimately they prove to be studies in frustration — at least to readers wishing for a transformation of the nightmarish conclusion in *Othello*. Mirroring its source-text, *Desdemona*'s final scenes feature an eruption of jealousy. Upon learning that the handkerchief given to her by Cassio actually belongs to Desdemona, Bianca concludes that Cassio must have been sexually intimate with Desdemona. Once she suspects this, Bianca turns violent, advancing on Desdemona and threatening her with a hoof-pick. On her way out of the room, Bianca reveals that the night Desdemona had filled in for her had coincided with Iago's regular visit. To their horror, Desdemona and Emilia establish that Iago had indeed been a client on the night in question (he is identified by the short duration of his visit). It is worth noting that *Desdemona*'s enactment of jealous rage furthers the play's desensitizing project. Rather than presenting her female characters as idyllic contrasts to their male counterparts in *Othello*, Vogel opts to emphasize the structural relations in which Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca participate — to their collective undoing.

In the wake of Bianca's departure, Emilia and Desdemona attempt to assess the severity of their situation. Initially, Emilia tries to reassure Desdemona, telling her, "I'm sure your husband loves you!" (Vogel 2000, 253). Skeptical, Desdemona asks for proof. Emilia is prepared to provide just this, and she launches into a description of Othello's "loving" behavior: "I've seen him, sometimes when you walk in the garden, slip behind the arbor just to watch you, unaware . . . and at night . . . in the corridor . . . outside your room — sometimes he just stands there. Miss, when you're asleep . . . he just stands there" (252). Desdemona interrupts this narrative only to offer a frightened exclamation. Emilia continues in her recounting of Othello's behavior: "And once . . . I saw . . . I came upon him unbeknowin', and he didn't see me — I'm sure — he was in your chamber room and he gathered up the sheets from your bed, like a body, and . . . he held it to his face, like, like a bouquet, all breathin' it in" (252). After this description, stage directions note that the two women "both realize OTHELLO'S been smelling the sheets for traces of a lover" (253). Reflecting upon Othello's behavior, Desdemona says, "That isn't love. It isn't love" (253). Vogel's heroine, therefore, powerfully contradicts the self-serving claim of Shakespeare's Othello, who, we remember, stands almost over the corpse of his wife and says that he killed her because he "lov'd not wisely but too well" (*Othello*, 5.2.345).

## Conclusion

The conclusion of *Desdemona* blurs into that of *Othello*, so that the curtain falls on Vogel's play only to open onto the murderous denouement of Shakespeare's. In *Desdemona*, the seeming acquiescence of Shakespeare's heroine becomes would-be resistance. Recognizing that

her secrets have been exposed, Desdemona tries to come up with a plan to save her own life. Knowing that Othello will return later (and evidently suspecting that he will have murder on his mind), Desdemona instructs Emilia: "Now listen carefully . . . I'll go to my own chamber tonight. You're to wait up for my husband's return — tell him I'm ill and I've taken to my bed. He's not to disturb me, I'm not well. I'll turn in before he comes, and I'll . . . pretend to sleep if he should come to me" (Vogel 2000, 253). After a pause, Desdemona adds, "Surely [Othello will] not . . . harm a sleeping woman" (253). This declaration/plea nullifies the assumption that Desdemona participates in her own murder by failing to oppose it. Vogel's text suggests that strategy only masquerades as surrender, leaving no doubt about Desdemona's will to live. But because *Desdemona* melts into *Othello*, readers know that the heroine is doomed.

The final question *Desdemona* leaves us with is this: *Why*, even in the hands of a feminist redactor, are the female characters resurrected from *Othello* ultimately relegated to the same violent ends as their namesakes? That is, why does *Desdemona* recapitulate, rather than reject or transform, the deadly erotics enacted in Shakespeare's play? Surely one answer is that retaining the specter of death best permits Vogel to dramatize the effects of female collusion in sexist structures or systems. But perhaps more important, the tense final moments of the adaptation powerfully illuminate the intimacy of Desdemona's murder. In a grim obverse of Othello's relationship with Iago, which is ultimately sealed in the blood of their respective wives, the adaptation shows how Desdemona and Emilia are, finally, linked on the basis of a shared victimhood. Moreover, both wives are to be punished for the sexual excesses of Desdemona, a point that underscores Vogel's critique of class-based inequities. In effect, *Desdemona's* conclusion dramatizes tragic recognition in slow motion: In full cognizance of imminent violence, Desdemona and Emilia can do nothing but await death. Rather than paying homage to the moribund heroic world of *Othello*, then, Vogel's adaptation records its violent excesses. This is an important point, since it highlights Vogel's critique of tragedy, whose customary function, as Mary Beth Rose suggests, is to chronicle "the need for a future by destroying the past and then mourning its disappearance" (Rose 1988, 206). Graphically illuminating her heroine's recognition of and terror at her plight, Vogel severs murder from romance. And the sympathies the adaptation generates for Desdemona and Emilia indicate that the play's harshest critique is reserved for a deeply entrenched and persistent ideology, a feminine ethic that rests upon the metonymical relationship of (female) chastity and (feminine) virtue.

Vogel's critique notwithstanding, the chastity-theme promulgated in *Othello* seems lodged in an echo chamber, fated for ceaseless repetition (the future, as Althusser might say, does indeed seem to last forever). Consider, for example, the powerful narratives generated through juridical

processes and therefore stamped with the imprimatur of justice. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, "In both rape and sexual-harassment cases the inquiry tends to focus [. . .] on the woman's conduct and character" (Crenshaw 1992, 408). She adds that "our own legal system once drew a connection — as a matter of law — between lack of chastity and lack of veracity" (412).<sup>9</sup> *Desdemona's* complex engagement with *Othello* suggests that the words "she wanted it" are deployed — in narrative and "real-life" contexts — against women, as though the very existence of (female) desire is damning. Ultimately relinquishing her *Desdemona* to the plot of *Othello*, Vogel forcefully indicts the prescription of desire. As Vance has suggested, women have often been compelled to choose between pleasure or danger, with (female) desire thus "restricted to zones protected and privileged in the culture: marriage and the nuclear family" (Vance 1984, 3). These zones of permissibility may have been renegotiated since the nineteenth century, as Vance suggests, but *Desdemona* elegizes those victims who (like the eponymous heroine) have been sacrificed on the altar of propriety.

### Notes

1. Althusser struggled with mental illness throughout much of his life, for which he was "treated" with electroconvulsive shock therapy. His memoir is often a poignant chronicle of his suffering. It is this very emphasis on his own suffering that invites comparison to *Othello's* similar attempts at narrative "self-fashioning," to borrow a term from Stephen Greenblatt (Greenblatt 1980).
2. All references to Shakespeare's *Othello* are to *The Riverside Shakespeare* (1997).
3. For a synopsis of performances, see Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier's Introduction to *Desdemona*, in *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (2000).
4. See Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the Renaissance* (1991), for an analysis of the ways in which ocular proof was subject to mistrust. On the other hand, Patricia Parker's survey of myriad texts charts the ascendance of what she terms an "ocular impulse." Consult "Fantasies of 'Race' and 'Gender': Africa, *Othello*, and Bringing to Light" (1994).
5. Richard Levin presents a fierce critique of feminist criticism's diminution of the role of the tragic hero in "Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy" (1988). In her introduction to a collection of essays interrogating how gender and genre intersect, Madelon Sprengnether provides a useful synopsis of both feminist critics' treatment of tragedy and Levin's objections (1996).
6. An analysis of the racial or ethnic composition of the casts for all productions of *Desdemona* is outside the scope of this essay. I would point out, however, that *Desdemona*, like *Othello*, compels interrogation of race-based casting. For an illuminating discussion of ways in which

assumptions about race influence casting decisions, see Celia Daileader, "Casting Black Actors: Beyond Othellophilia" (2000).

7. In her essay "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" (1999), Susan Moller Okin suggests that feminism must actively work to cross geographical and cultural boundaries precisely because patriarchy traverses all such borders. She also argues that sometimes the defense of "group rights" (as a means of advancing or shoring up multiculturalism) comes at the expense of women's rights. Although Okin's privileging of gender is sure to anger some feminists, she — like Vogel — does suggest the necessity of a collective feminist politics.
8. Kenneth Burke's essay, "*Othello*: An Essay to Illustrate a Method" (1951), skilfully traces significations of the handkerchief — and the critical ire it has provoked.
9. Crenshaw's comprehensive study of the history of litigation in the United States turns up abundant evidence regarding the ways in which women of color are doubly discriminated against, particularly when it comes to the perceived credibility of their testimony (Crenshaw 1992, 412-13). Similarly, journalistic accounts of violent crime affirm that "society views the victimization of some women as being less important than that of others" (414).

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