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Received: 3/4/2023

Revised: 17/4/2023

Accepted: 9/5/2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31559/BAES2023.8.1.3>



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“she can turn and turn,... and turn again” (4.1.255-6): The Culpability for Desdemona’s Soft-Porn Performance

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Abstract:

In the cannon of Shakespeare’s criticism, *Othello’s* Desdemona is often depicted as an icon of modesty, wifeliness, and Christian virtue; however, many psychoanalytic critics tout a more venal and meretricious interpretation of her character. The subtle process of gradually goading teen Desdemona into the trap of a prostituted, soft-porn practitioner by the male agency is orchestrated through extolling her to an exquisitely beautiful, feminine icon while dropping seemingly innocuous innuendoes of the need to offer such beauty and charm, whether platonically or carnally, to men. Her culpable passivity and disinclination to unequivocally reject attempts to prostitute her render her in collusion to her moral descent. Taking her amorous history, erotic propensity, and resolute decision-making, Desdemona strikes us as a sexual experimenter who marries Othello for her own gratification, having turned away many European princes. Shakespeare projects an image of her as an exquisitely beautiful celebrity who takes pride in flaunting her charms, seducing men, and leaving a trail of broken hearts. In the psychologically intense slap scene, without verbally agreeing to the behests of her spouse-turned-pimp, she nonetheless undertakes his every utterable and non-utterable whim. Desdemona’s sudden, inexplicable reticence to spurn Othello’s prompting in this scene while surrounded by her Venetian compatriots who are oxymoronically transformed to function as depraved, ferocious voyeurs reinforce her image as purposely feeble and unerringly eroticized, rendering her a complicit performer rather than a helpless victim. Whether willing or compelled, Desdemona’s conflicting, character-trope served Shakespeare’s performative histrionics, business acumen, and rendered *Othello* a popular, considerably successful classic.

Keywords: *Desdemona; erotic; Othello; performative; psychoanalytic critics; sexual experimental.*

1. Introduction

Characterization studies on *Othello* (1603-1604) hardly do justice to Desdemona despite that her traumatic abuse and notorious dehumanization is almost unheralded in the entire corpus of Shakespeare’s canon (Shakespeare, 1963). Although there have not been many studies that probe her arcane, altering personas, there has been illuminating, psychoanalytic research that attempts to provide answers to her paradoxical character and its latent, subconscious drives that is quite convincing. Reid (1970), Mason (1970), Byles (1989), Smith and Siegel (2010) to mention a few, stress the interplay of guilt, aggression, and submission that gravitate her behavioral reaction one way or another and align her crisis along her superego pathology. Reid (1970) discerns a marked distinction between Desdemona’s discourse before and after the slap scene and finds it difficult to reconcile the two. While critiquing Bradley’s and Halstead’s idealized reverence for Desdemona’s pristine virtue, he concludes that Desdemona finds “pleasurable” Iago’s nuanced sexual metaphors. He also elaborates that notwithstanding her paradoxical argument that can be interpreted in a variety of ways, she still invites “dispraise of herself” (Reid, 1970, 247). Other scholars such as Kott (1960, 118) and (Reik (1966, 61) harp on more daring assessments that relegate her suffering to being a “slut” and to harboring “penis envy”. Her Oedipal guilt for sacking her father and replacing him with a racially unapproved moor intertwined with her aggressive impetus to assert the power of her beauty, particularly on her spouse, further mystifies her intractable character. Aside from the agreeable or polemical backdrops of these extrapolations and albeit of the conflicting drives within Desdemona’s character, her harboring multifarious incentives point to a rich, impassioned essence teeming with an oversexed libido. Although she operates from her disadvantaged, subliminal niche, whenever she finds the opportunity conducive, she unleashes a

young woman who is uninhibited, quite eager to experiment, and keen on reaching the apex of her sexual gratification. It is argued in this paper that she has a vibrant, eroticized, sociable character that basks in flattery and attention, as is subtly evinced in the slap scene particularly.

2. Literature Review

Most critics confine Desdemona's character to the obvious, wifely stereotype who is virtuous and complacent and whose model, Christian upbringing is beyond reproach. Boling (2008), Holmer (2005), Hollindale (1989), and Olson (2015), among many critics, rush to laud her saintly and wifely stock-image while Smith and Siegel (2010) correctly suspend (term) her between a slut and a Christian: "Desdemona is both strumpet and saint, or saint leading to strumpet and vice versa" (2010, 143). Smith and Siegel (2010) duly ascribe to her conflicting, noble and ignoble, attributes. Their discussion is illuminating in many respects, especially while focusing on her active role as an instigator of Othello's jealousy. Their logic, however, shows signs of splintering when they suggest that Desdemona's pattern of behavior smacks of guilt as she abandons Venetian cultural codes "by marrying outside of her race". Yet they make no allusion to her complete, permanent shutting out her father, Brabantio, nor discuss her erotic submission to Othello in the slap scene. They also fail to reference whether her motive while she 'turn[s]' in compliance to Othello's wishes is begotten by "aggression", "guilt" or "submission". Smith and Siegel (2010) obscure Desdemona's prerogative to think freely, unfettered by the baggage of "subjective identification with Othello" (1989, 53). Her unencumbered, independent soul can be defended in many instances in the play, especially in her complete engrossment among her friends unaccompanied by Othello without a single allusion of him.

3. Slap-Scene Quintessence

Desdemona's whoring-out, slap scene, has hardly been discussed with scrutiny to date, despite it being a defining precursor to the brothel scene and despite its defining imprint on the sexually experimenting couple's mutating, suddenly deteriorating relationship. The symbolism of the scene lies in that Othello's abuse of Desdemona is not only confined to a direct act of a hurt spouse taking revenge on his wife for her suspected infidelity, nor to a spontaneous venting out of aggression, nor even to a mere attempt to clear Othello's name from the career-terminating rumor of cuckoldry. Rather, the deprecatory symbolism originates from blackmailing naïve Desdemona for her alleged cheating in order to divest her of her integrity and break her spirit into a meretricious, anathemized specimen of the demonized, female gender. Desdemona, however, takes a share of the blame for allowing to expose herself in the manner of a harlot who engages in a simulated, soft porn act in public, albeit her tears. Smith and Siegel (2010) make an insightful discussion on Desdemona's deliberate attempt to incite her husband's jealousy by consistently ignoring his requests and by being outwardly insensitive in the usage of certain terminology. For instance, when Lodovico informs her of the news from Venice regarding deputizing Cassio while Othello is away, she responds with the phrase "glad on't", even though she knows her husband's aversion to discussing any issue relating to Cassio:

The fact remains, however, that she knows the subject of Cassio's suit angers Othello, but persists in bringing it up anyway (Smith & Siegel, 2010, 151).

Smith and Siegel (2010) further point out that her continual attempts to consciously overshadow Othello lead her to feel guilty to the point where she blames herself for killing her. Her mute participation, though under enormous pressure and compromised circumstances while estranged in Cyprus, still puts her freedom of choice under scrutiny, especially when considering her early assertiveness and predilection for control. Desdemona's ignominious excoriation begins in the immediate aftermath of Othello's beating and seems to achieve the desired effect of softening her. Literally surrounded by the patriarchy in Venice, only the chivalrous, visiting kinsman, Lodovico, is spurred to as much mild action in her honor as he can muster:

Lodovico. Truly, an obedient lady:
I do beseech your lordship, call her back.
Othello. Mistress!
Desdemona. My lord?
Othello. What would you with her, sir?
Lodovico. Who, I, my lord?
Othello. Ay; you did wish that I would make her turn:
Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on,
And turn again; and she can weep, sir, weep;
And she's obedient, as you say, obedient,
Very obedient.... (*Othello* 4.1.250-258)

Upon witnessing Desdemona's physical abuse by Othello, Lodovico good-naturedly interjects by entreating him to call her back and make amends, unbeknownst to him the depraved plans Othello harbors for Desdemona. The latter responds by interrogatively offering Desdemona to him as a prostitute: "what would you with her, [?]" Dismayed and baffled by the opprobrium of Othello's outrageous suggestion, Lodovico unintuitively stammers, "Who, I, my lord?" to which Othello retorts by purposely employing the term 'turn' thrice. As he quits addressing

Lodovico, he disdainfully directs his attention to her piteous, fallen figure after “striking” her a few lines earlier (*Othello* 1.4.243). Towering and gloating over her underdeveloped body with conquering bravado, swaggering among his cheering militant loyalists, one cannot but wonder at how the scene was originally choreographed on the Jacobian, early modern stage. The endemic performative manner and context in which ‘turn’ was uttered while Othello putatively forcefully commands Desdemona to carry on his behest is impossible to know, leaving us with countless, unanswered queries: Does he knock her down and cause her to be “dashed to the ground,” bruised and bleeding (Boling, 2008, 3)? At what physical proximity does he keep himself close to her, what savage and vengeful body posture does he assume, and what facial expression does he bear? Does he rail at her in a blustering and domineering tone to prove his sexual dominance? As he manhandles her, does he tear pieces of her dress exposing parts of her body to give visible affirmation of her unfaithfulness while simultaneously offering his overlooking, glorified gender a voyeuristic peak at his triumph? Does he control her in his grip in the fashion of a ventriloquist, moving his dummy-bride at whim while ordering her to ‘turn’, stoop, and bend? Is she forced to ‘turn’ by groveling on her hands and knees, and does he perhaps command her to circle round herself while suggestively and slavishly toadying however he instructs? More shockingly, would he have been obscene to, say, grab her by the hair while standing in front to simulate oral rape, or would he have held her from the waist for a similar sexual notoriety? Did the moral laxity post-Elizabeth at the outset of James I’s reign in 1604 allow acting companies to stage such graphic, nefarious misogyny. Finally, how socio-politically centered is the play and does it deliberately extol Othello’s status to a remarkably brave general and defender of the Christendom only to sack him as a contemptible other, the assimilation of whom into Europe can only result in tragedy.

Nor have such questions as what manner, tone, and demeanor did the seeming victim assume to Othello’s blustering command barrage to ‘turn’? Did she bear a face of pity or that of an engaged seductress, putting aside for a moment the fact that her role was played by a man? Did she garner overriding pathos mixed with overwhelming aversion or tantalize the enwrapped erotica and jubilant voyeurism from her gender mixed audiences? Does her employment of the dramatic device of weeping engender audience empathy as an estranged, naïve girl who did not know what she is duped into, or does she invite the perverted and beastly, masculine libido as an anathemized, helpless prey? Does she act timid and vulnerable, being surrounded by a throng of rapacious-looking, sex-hungry men, or does she wipe away her tears swiftly and participate in the masochistic erotica of the moment while taking advantage of the cover provided by her husband’s notional, patriarchal tutelage? Indeed, if she were acting as though she was soliciting males’ perverse passions under pressure for better sales, what higher tiers of aphrodisiac experience does she entangle herself in, and does her erotic diversion amidst the gazes of lusty men fulfill her super-ego’s desire to have “confirmation of her beauty” (Smith & Siegel, 2010 140)? But to be impartial, is her mysterious passivity in this slap scene to be decoded as consent to her ignominious, public exposé? These extrapolations that the scene is replete with must be taken into consideration when embarking on her characterization analysis; however, understandably, one can only make cautious, tepid conjectures without anticipating definitive answers on her authentic reception from a long-forgone, still-somewhat-misunderstood audience.

4. Desdemona’s Independent character

To regard Desdemona other than an independent, young woman with a clear sense of purpose as she genuinely purveys at her inaugural advent on the stage, in the Willow song, and later at her incarceration in her bed chamber before her death would be a gross misapprehension of her essence. As she unscrupulously complies with Othello’s indeterminately coercive and demoralizingly libidinous set of commands to ‘turn’ via, among other conjectured eventualities, simulating an erotic set of maneuvers to titillate the menagerie of ogling, horny men surrounding her is when her latent, sexualized persona projects itself. It is then that her paradoxical self comes to the fore, failing the logic of a martyrdom-suicide quest and shedding the garb of demure, victimized circumspection. Had the Christian wife in her uttered a single word in remonstrance or a gesture of desperation in response to Othello’s ungodly, indecent intimidation, there would have been ample room to defend her pious virtue and uphold her devotion “to Venetian wifeliness” without scenting a tinge of schizophrenic residue (Boling, 2008, 2). Her behavior pre- and post-the slap scene even in the subsequent brothel scene may unproblematically be vouched for on grounds of her steadfast, Christian conservatism, but though she succeeds in levying our earnest pathos as she is thrust into Othello’s mob, her infamous reticence stops us short from unqualified commiseration.

Were we to suspend all Desdemona’s preconceived stereotypes and restart at default, we can easily sense that on one side Othello’s ‘turn’ command is indecent and replete with unscrupulousness, but were we to imagine that his behest was less vehement and more of a forced suggestion, Desdemona’s deemed plight and ostensible weeping would be seen from a whole new prism. Her tears may be construed less as an obvious reaction to her helpless rejection for her bullying and more of a masochistic rite she is endeavoring to carry out to attain the then tabooed, subconsciously desired fetish of harmless, soft-porn fun, or public whoredom vulgarly popularized. The diametrically opposed gulfs that separate the two saint-slut choices are clear and are often interchangeable; however, the fact that she does not let out an utterance or betray a single, muffled grunt to voice her disagreement to Othello’s allegedly forced prostituting is strong proof of her latent pleasure to be the magnet of public voyeurism. Her thorough disinclination to speak in the slap scene and elsewhere stems, according to Smith and Siegel (2010, 138), from her inherent “superego pathology”, a pride so deeply entrenched that she is ready to risk losing her life than jeopardize her hypothesized beauty recognition by her husband.

Our disappointment at Desdemona's surrender as she consents to twist and *turn*, bend and bare, sway and tease without a single utterance of discontent foretells her misstep into the immoral abyss she allows herself to descend to. If we reassess that her behavior is consensual and that her "my lord" retort is uttered in sexualized prurience than horrid distress, then we would unfailingly come upon her self-absorbed sensuality and unrestrainable, public-sex fetishism. Her acquiescence foregrounds her persona in this scene as a lascivious, devilish gamer who is "quite capable of deception" (Dickes, 1970, 238). Her passive agreement underpins her potential to euphemistically recognize the moor as a sexual dominator and public pimp, underpinning her coquettish, oversexed persona, a behavior that harks us back to her overindulgent chitchat with her male friends in Act I. Envisioning her in such an erotic light, evading a plethora of options for bailing out is a far cry from being cornered in a "situation she realistically believes offer[s] no escape route" (Vanita, 1994, 344). Bradley (1932, 150), for instance, believes that her contrived set of behavioral norms are unrealistically doltish, that identify more with the "suffering... of... dumb creatures tortured without cause" than to a woman with a discriminating intellect and a human soul, as she clearly manifests elsewhere.

Playing a key role in Desdemona's subtle slide into soft pornography is the irreconcilably culpable inaction of *all* men in Cyprus (precluding Lodovico), arguably including her own Venetian townsmen who sailed either on her husband's ship to fight the Ottomans or sailed with her on the same ship that brought her to the island. They complicitly look on as Othello engages in her acerbic calumny. Their silence is unfathomable because if the deterrent is fear from Othello, it is implausible to be *this* apprehensive from a man who they regard in a similar, if not identical, bigoted pedestal their senator Brabantio regards him in. Othello's scandalously weak image is indelibly imprinted during his insolent dragging and shoving through Venice's streets by Brabantio's hostile mob —possibly including the very men who are present with him to defend Cyprus —as he was brought before The Duke to answer to the charge of bewitching Desdemona into accepting him in marriage (*Othello* 1.2.100). It is inconceivable, therefore, that Desdemona's own townsmen are made to put up with, much less be pleased by, the oxymoronic sight of their native Venetian darling being treated as a prostituted offering in their *own* honor, while inauspiciously being denied the solace of another female by an African Arab who is desperately and obsequiously eager to assimilate into their folds. Besides, if fear from Othello is a hinderance, it is more in keeping to fear their punishment in Venice by Desdemona's politically influential father, by their raucous mob community, and by The Duke himself. To buy into Shakespeare's notion that the very group of men who beheld Othello's humiliation in Venice have suddenly grown incapacitated by fear, falling short from halting the dehumanization of their young sister and their own senator's daughter, or, as strangely, that they have developed a sudden, perverse attraction to her is absurd. Irrespective, Shakespeare's notion in thus laying bare our basic, animalistic instincts through portraying Desdemona as exceedingly submissive and acquiescent while depicting the male lot as beastly and treacherous, behaving like cavemen who renege against the civilizing, Christian commandments they were brought up to honor is a travesty to logic; however, despite the illogicality, barbarism, and sadism of the difficult scene, its mere staging for many decades without disruption speaks favorably of the maturity of early modern audiences.

At the end of his above retort, Othello invokes the term obedient, alluding to an earlier intimate chat he had with his cherished "Desdemon" (3.3.54). As the couple's amorous courting climaxes in the previous act while still enjoying their semi-honeymoon in Cyprus, Desdemona unwisely puts unrelenting pressure on him to forgive Cassio and restore him to his first lieutenant position. She seems in her element as she engages in aphrodisiac, romantic discourse with Othello in the presence of Iago and Emilia while pushing for Cassio's reappointment. Due to his many preoccupations with matters of his governorship in addition to his warranted, lingering anger towards Cassio over picking up a fight while intoxicated with Roderigo and Montano and stabbing the latter, arguably Othello attempts to extricate himself from Desdemona's persistent demand to have a meeting to discuss Cassio. Caving in under her persistence, he later concedes to meet with her and casually remarks that he will 'deny' her nothing. Gratified, Desdemona plays on another meaning of the term 'deny', as a pun for complete sexual liberty during their intimacy, and supplies his imagination with food for thought as she intimately suggests that she will be thoroughly 'obedient' to his wildest 'fancies':

Othello. I will deny thee nothing:

Whereon, I do beseech thee, grant me this,

To leave me but a little to myself.

Desdemona. Shall I deny you? No: farewell, my lord.

Othello. Farewell, my Desdemona: I'll come to thee straight.

Desdemona. Emilia, come. Be as your fancies teach you;

Whate'er you be, I am obedient. (*Othello* 3.3.83-89)

5. Othello's Disadvantaged Backdrop

Due to hailing from the exotic and mysterious African Ottoman culture, and therefore a treasure trove for myth-making, Othello was a perfect fit for Shakespeare as a black African, former Muslim who was likely to remain culturally bound to his homeland albeit of his embrasure of Christianity. Such arcanelly crafted and inherently untrustworthy persona, therefore, was preconditioned to abuse women, possessed incurably psychotic jealousy and was prone to murder based on trivial evidence. Exacerbated by Desdemona's inconsiderate, laissez-faire

attitude to express her affection to her man in public, the result was inescapably tragic: while flirting with her spouse earlier in view of others, her promise to be sexually 'obedient' is etched in Othello's mind as an improper travesty that he swings back on her at the culmination of his jealousy bout as he mocks her claim to be 'obedient'. Conversely and in doing justice to Desdemona, Othello's deliberate taking out of context his own wife's intimate discourse and using it against her evinces the treacherous, indiscreet state of the masculine psyche which purposely misconstrues and preempts women's overt speech but condones men's.

Othello reiterates 'obedient' thrice in affirmation of the relational affinity with 'turn,' which is mentioned as many times, and clearly seems to refer to a causal codependence between the terms and her indulgent course of action that ultimately leads her to alleged, matrimonial treason. His reiteration of the two terms also indicates his keenness to clear his reputation from the devastating impact of an ominous, cuckoldry rumor. Othello's narcissistic, paranoid overreaction to the possibility of rumor-spreading against Desdemona's honor that ironically, he himself creates and nurtures is purposefully aforethought so that he would be eulogized by his chauvinistic peers as purged and reclaimed to the hypothetical male fraternity, thereby safeguarding his image as "the bravest warrior" in Venice (Holmer, 2005, 132). Despite his misleading, salient fury and declamatory swagger and despite his intensely troubled psyche to the extent that make in Leavis' words his: "inner timbers... part at once" (1953, 144), Othello clearly manifests that he is still in possession of adequate cognitive ability to deftly manipulate the different connotations of 'turn,' even with the omnipresence of Iago's "toxic compound of vengeful resentment" (Cauchi, 2020, 296). This leads to the surmise that Desdemona's murder originates from Othello's own need for self-preservation, out of fear to the hegemonic, patriarchal enterprise he is dependent on.

A simple retracing of Desdemona's behavior in the play yields her decidedly assertive, socially engaged character. In (1.3-Add page no), she boldly addresses the pillars of patriarchy--represented by her father, her husband, The Duke, and the senators--and introduces herself as a direct, mature young woman who deferentially but firmly informs her sire of her decision to end his guardianship rights in favor of her new spouse. She is advanced at her reception in Cyprus in (2.1) by a crowd of all-male friends and admirers as playful, licentious, and coquettish. In the fifth act, she poses as an exceedingly tolerant, devout wife whose exemplary, matrimonial loyalty is redoubtable till the end of her short life. Amidst Desdemona's vacillation within her vortex of facade personas, Shakespeare timely picks a feeble, aphrodisiac moment under Othello's nominal coercion in which she simulates her sexual slip into his lewd world of sex-hungry, youthfully militants who have been estranged for months from their wives/lovers over in Venice. Desdemona's schizophrenic behavior here leads us to the corollary that she is indeed "specious" and fraught with inconsistencies (Stoll, 1915, 16). Earlier when she commences to speak to clarify the relationship she has with Othello, we immediately catch on to her firm resolve and unencumbered independence. As she sets out to Brabantio the shifting patriarchal dynamics, she unequivocally discloses that she is no longer the same impressionable, little girl he raised. The meek, Christian housewife persona she manifests towards the end of the play is markedly different from the persona she imports in the following lines. Her unfaltering tone and a select choice of words put paid to Brabantio's badgering once and for all:

My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty:
To you I am bound for life and education;
My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you; you are the lord of duty;
I am hitherto your daughter: but here's my husband,
And so much duty as my mother show'd
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord. (*Othello* 1.3.180-89)

With her many flaws, Desdemona rapidly exchanges her momentary glitter for stigmatized lackluster. One such weak moment is her inability to predict the behavior of her husband and the issues that irk him, which casts aspersions on the genuineness of their amatory affair and realigns it instead in the direction of a fetishized sexual experiment, especially on part of Desdemona, the nascent initiator. She misreads his mind and believes that he is not as jealous and irate as he really is: the son where he was born/Drew all such humors from him (*Othello* 3.4.30-31).

Arguably, she judges him by her European, cultural standards and convinces herself that he lost his jealousy under the heat of the Ottoman sun. Her self-engrossment leads her to erroneously project her liberal Venetian ideals to decode his mindset, as Neely (1987, 228) maintains: "She is not jealous and therefore he is not jealous." (1987, 228). Her misjudgment underscores the cultural paradigm shift with Othello. Even a worse miscommunication is her injudicious, persistent advocacy for Cassio's reinstatement during singularly anachronistic times "to the point of folly" as Dickes (1970, 279) argues. In direct opposition to Desdemona's European openness, Shakespeare creates Othello's hyper jealousy, which he implicitly blames on his foreign background and identity crisis, to create a conflict. The difference in their paradigmatic cognition processes and cultural awareness are a chief reason that leads to the serious fissure in their relationship.

6. Desdemona's Incongruent Obtuseness

Another of Desdemona's vulnerability is her inability to discern satire and detect belittlement. In her chitchat with her male friends as she first sets foot on Cypriote land, contrary to the subtle discourse and incisive logic with which she addresses her community in (1.3), she projects herself as some sort of a harlequin that invites her male friends to pursue their diminutive quips, though to her defense, Iago and Cassio initially adopt a guise of innocuous praise of her immaculate looks to obscure their ulterior, underhanded motives. Unlike other locales in the play where she dexterously imparts an inspiring, iconic stance, her being an unwitting teenager in this scene certainly bears her author's hallmark as he attempts to momentarily dull her senses and render her witless to Iago and Cassio's immodest scheming. Prior to her affected, celebrated entry, the two engage in typical, gender-exclusive chatter that reveals their chauvinistic objectifying of beautiful women like her, their racist coveting of her African mate, and their reductive fixation on physical perfection solely. Answering a question from one of the men present concerning the identity of Othello's wife, Cassio, who is deemed good-natured and harmless to Desdemona, begins his praise by providing a resplendent, detailed account of her phenomenal beauty, an account that betrays inveterate jealousy towards Othello for having 'achieved' her:

... he [Othello] hath achieved a maid
That paragon's description and wild fame;
One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,
And in the essential vesture of creation
Does tire the ingener. (*Othello* 2.1.64)

Yet right after this sublime preface, Cassio mires the avowed reverence he accords her by the use of the bawd assertion that he would be comforted to know that Othello, the epitome of masculinity, with his "tall ship" docks in Desdemona's bay to "make love's quick pants" in her embrace, uplifting men's "extincted spirits" and "bring[ing] all Cyprus comfort" (*Othello* 2.1.79-82). This abject vision of Cassio, who is putatively a close friend and a confidante, resketches his character as a diehard member of his masculine agency, in cahoots with its treachery and opportunism. As Desdemona later converses with him after some period of salivating at her figure in enraptured admiration, Cassio takes her hand, lover-like "by the palm" (*Othello* 2.1.267), and amorously whispers in her ear with overfriendly ecstasy that irks even Iago, who is commonly acknowledged as the man with the loosest morals. As a woman married to a man who holds high political office, Desdemona's unscrupulous behavior is starkly at odds with her later conservatism and so is ill-advised to the point where onlooking Iago's acrimony is poignantly sharpened that he becomes intent on destroying her.

The initiation of Desdemona into the role of a virtual, "impudent strumpet" begins at her arrival in Cyprus (*Othello* 4.2.80). Then, she is given a regal reception by Cassio, Iago, and their crowd that seems earnest and appropriate to the wife of their governor and potential benefactor. Cassio, who was once a part of the "erotic triangle" with Othello and Desdemona and who invaluablely contributed to making a match between the two takes lead in greeting Desdemona and spontaneously arranges to have all men present forge a human chain to welcome her (Berger, 2004, 12). Albeit a former lover and a substitute romancer to Othello, Cassio affects unrestrained awe at Desdemona's sight that he is unable to stop kissing his "three fingers" as a token of endearment (*Othello* 2.1.173). By doing so, he lays the foundation of the masculine agency's scheme to prostitute her through hyperbolic, vain praise that is of considerable impact on unprincipled women such as Desdemona. Since the two had an amorous history prior to Othello's advent that may have included intimacy, it is grossly injudicious of her to be too liberal with Cassio out of courtesy for her husband's sensitive political post and lest her indiscretion be transmitted. Her amorous behavior with Cassio, moreover, admits the interplay between a best friend and a lover—a fine line that eventually engenders Othello's bitter jealousy. Smith and Seigel (2010,151) take up this point and claim that Desdemona has been seeking to restore her love affair with Cassio all along.

Desdemona's persona as a partaker in amorous, dialogic trivia that involve overt sexual content sketches a picture of her character as decidedly independent though indulgent and foolhardy. Earlier when she chats with the trio (Iago, Emilia, and Cassio), she projects herself as an unrestrained libertine, so much so that she chides Emilia for her unwarranted reserve for abstaining from a response to her husband's graphic description of their oral love habits:

Sir, would she give you so much of her lips/As of her tongue she oft bestows on me, You'll have enough
(*Othello* 2.1.100-102).

Since Iago does not receive a response from Cassio who remains dead silent for many lines, it is realistic to speculate that Iago's use of the term 'sir' is unlikely to be addressed to aloof Cassio alone but to the male members of the audience for the purpose of letting them in on the embedded aphrodisiac ambience created. His invitation to men as possible partners in the intimate sampling of his wife's lips and tongue indicates his offering Emilia as a semi-prostitute and paves the way for Othello's identical suggestion to offer Desdemona to Lodovico first and, implicitly, to all men.

Desdemona's transition from a typical, beautiful, and sociable girl is performed with facility because the core of her character does not lend her off as a conservative prude, a housewife with limited worldview, nor a religious

moralist. She is easily converted because she is inherently libidinous, eroticized by the gazes of aroused men. Her proselytization, which is performed seamlessly, begins to take a more apparent shape as Cassio's and Iago's insinuations become more audacious and graphic. Upon Iago's allusion to "Bells in your parlors" vaginal analogy (*Othello* 2.1.110), Desdemona tepidly scolds him for a "slanderer," yet tickled by the suggestive analogy nonetheless, she does not go any further in her reprobation and promptly overlooks his transgression by urging him to 'write' about (or describe) her. As he fails to match her homage expectations, Desdemona persists in urging him to 'assay' her further to produce a more concupiscent portrait. In response to her prompting, Iago does so towards the end of their conversation as he boldly asserts that a "wight" with her peerless beauty ought to "suckle fools and chronicle small beer" (*Othello* 2.1.160), in reference to her fancied, coquettish role to entertain all men and offer them if not free access to her breast and body, at least allow them the provision of a voyeuristic vista to all her other corporal, feminine charms.

Surprisingly, Iago's audacious suggestion to Desdemona to offer her body as a soft porn performer sits well with Desdemona and is not taken as an offense. Her silence implies her agreement to the content of Iago's metaphor. Her image would suffer irreparable damage had she verbalized a consenting response, but she is kept reserved, demure, and masculinely approved as she cautiously defers her response till Cassio makes his: "Is he not a most/profane and liberal counsellor" (*Othello* 2.1.163-4). To her relief, Cassio, who is a reliable reflection of the patriarchy, proves to be as licentious as she had known him to be. As he explicitly condones Iago's suggestion, he appears to harbor the same derogatory misogyny relating to female commodification. His retort that Iago "speaks home" (*Othello* 2.1.165), or candidly, represents Cassio's and Iago's undeclared, insidious hope to corrupt her and simultaneously offers a statement that introduces the patriarchal stereotype of women as gratifiers of men's sexual needs. After Cassio's approbation, uncoincidentally Desdemona is prevented from interpolation through Othello's timely reentry. Putting the authorial intervention that prevents her from making a response aside, Desdemona already expounds enough of her character to make us pause and recalibrate the icon of virtue, Christian rectitude, and sacrificial martyrdom some critics believe she emblemizes. Her infamous passivity in this instance ought not be attributed to her own innate frailty as a young, immature girl but to being equally venal and lewd as the patriarchy that resourcefully persisted in whoring her out.

7. The Crafting Paradox of Desdemona's Persona

From Shakespeare's dramaturgical rationale, Desdemona's design as a thirteen/fourteen-year-old child does not constitute a prohibitive barricade that cordons off her sociable, libertine life choices. One must note that Desdemona's history with men is rich. Her many associations with suitors and her arguably willing reciprocity mark her as a sexualized, lascivious woman who basks in male attention. The fact that she manages to woo Europe's nobles and dignitaries enrich her relationship track record. Apart from Iago and Cassio who still covet Othello for his boon, Roderigo has an unlucky, laborious history of attempting to win her love. The extreme, desperate endeavor to win Desdemona is recognized from Brabantio's reaction soon as Roderigo sets foot in the neighborhood:

I have charged thee not to haunt about my doors:
In honest plainness thou hast heard me say
My daughter is not for thee. (*Othello* 1.1.96-8)

Desdemona's abundant, previous affairs and long trail of former lovers/enchanters indicate her liberal upbringing and unconstrained opportunity to exhibit her beauty in the community. When the senate attempts to locate her whereabouts, they are unable to find her. They send for her on three different occasions before they discover her location, unbeknownst to her helpless, permissive father. Her being out and about Venice as she has been wont to do, consorting with friends and being on romantic dates with lovers--which is in fact what happens as she courts Othello--bespeaks the state of her liberal upbringing. As an early teen who already acts like an adult with effectively no house-rules, social circumspection, or some semblance of a governable soul, Desdemona casts an image of herself as a brat. Ironically, several months later as she marries Othello, she suddenly evolves into an exemplar of saintly Christianity and content wifeliness as many critics would have us believe. Her meretricious transformation into a public temptress, therefore, lies in the compass of her aspiring, lewd soul. Having been raised freely by her parents, her decision to elope with and marry Othello is certainly in keeping with her character.

The only half-convincing attempt Desdemona makes at appearing saintly and prudish is evinced in her abstention from confessing to Emilia that Othello suffocated her as she lays dying. But while her behavior may be construed along the lines of contemporary traditional domesticity or religious martyrdom idolization, even a stronger case can be made that she did so out of the love she bears Othello, invoking a Romeo-Juliet type of rapport that lives on posthumously. Dwelling on this notion, Othello remains passionately in love as observed from his reluctance to kill her and from kissing and mourning her sleeping figure prior to suffocating her. More significantly, Desdemona purveys an image of herself as a woman who is too afraid of death, an image that is far-removed from the contrived image of a martyr who is sacrificing herself for the sake of her faith or the welfare of her spouse. As Othello begins to hustle her in their bed chamber after he wearies of her disingenuous excuses for a moratorium, she frantically runs around and scrambles for a reason to save her life. Tragically, what comes to her mind after repeatedly entreating Othello to let her live is to make another prayer yet again, which fails to convince him knowing that he offered her the same as he first walked in:

Desdemona. O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!
 Othello. Down, strumpet!
 Desdemona. Kill me to-morrow: let me live to-night!
 Othello. Nay, if you strive —
 Desdemona. But half an hour!
 Othello. Being done, there is no pause.
 Desdemona. But while I say one prayer! (5.2.78)

Desdemona's distraught, sanctimonious attempt at making god's worship subservient to her temporal survival is understandably borne in the expeditious necessity of her present duress; nonetheless, her fervor to live and staunch aversion to be heavenly irrevocably blemish her Christian exemplar image, as Mason articulately observes: The damage to her symbolic value is greater when we see her passively *leaving everything to heaven*. She ought in a sense to have *embodied* Heaven.... For this task she had the wrong sort of purity (1970, 147).

Her religiously and culturally steeped rejoinder to Othello is in stark contrast with her earlier, pervasively secular and wanton discourse. Failing to ascend to the status of a Christian altruist, Desdemona's uninspiring, mundane impurity naturally loses her deference and sublimity.

8. Conclusion

Othello represents a test-field of sexual experimentation realized through gender polemics at the outset of a novel, Jacobean era that ushered in the promise of newly found freedoms after the long, conservative reign of Elizabeth I. Among Shakespeare's potential reasons for creating his female protagonist precedent in *Othello* is to actualize his caustically ignominious degradation of the female gender to create a controversial theme that appeals to the pathos of his women patrons. Analogously, he offers his patriarchal audiences sadistic and beastly voyeurism at a submissive teenage girl who is forcibly eroticized, partially denuded, manhandled, knocked down, and 'turn[ed]' round ventriloquistically for the purpose of anathematizing her image to a commodified whore that is fit for all abuse, especially the sexual. He offers his audiences a provocative, profane drama to tantalize and awaken their unspoken, taboo drives and unreleased sexual inhibitions. The barely pubescent, thirteen/fourteen-year-old Desdemona is created to embody the contemporary, male stereotype of the idealized female. Desdemona's initial ecstasy at commencing her virtual prostituting journey with the euphoric privilege she is accorded by Cassio and Iago as a remarkably beautiful lady who "loves company" quickly transmogrifies into a morally questionable seductress (*Othello* 3.3.184).

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