

2021

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### Recommended Citation

Wilson, Madeleine Dax (2021) "The Green World is Calling and She Must Go: Rhetoric of Adventure and Betrayal in Shakespeare's Othello," *Toyon Literary Magazine*: Vol. 67 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/toyon/vol67/iss1/16>

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# **The Green World is Calling and She Must Go: Rhetoric of Adventure and Betrayal in Shakespeare's *Othello***

Madeleine Dax Wilson

William Shakespeare never came closer in his career to earning the title of 'feminist' than with the tragedy *Othello*. Although popular scholarship on the play concerns itself chiefly with the racial othering of the titular character, ascribing his downfall to the venomous tongues of Venetian society, *Othello* is not the first fatality of the story, and his own prejudices are what direct him down the path that leads to Desdemona's murder. In the first two acts of his late-career play, Shakespeare condemns the Early Modern fixation with assigning women their identity based on an imagined binary—the Virgin or the Whore—by turning *Othello*'s inability to view an entire gender outside of this dichotomy into a trait of tragedy that ultimately predicts his doom.

From the play's outset, descriptions of Desdemona and her speeches detailing her elopement paint her as a particularly level-headed and empathic player in the Venice of Shakespeare's story; her blamelessness in the face of her untimely murder allows her to stand-in for women at large being overzealously sorted into one of the two identities allowed to them (Virgin/Whore) and her decision to keep *Othello*'s betrayal to herself establishes her as a martyr for this cause. Her passionate plea to the senators of Venice, "that [she] did love the Moor to live with him," illuminates the inherently contradictory, and thus intrinsically doomed, nature of Desdemona and *Othello*'s relationship (Shakespeare 1.3.249). When they marry, Desdemona is unquestionably innocent both in her sexual inexperience and limited knowledge of the world outside of Venice. Upon eloping with *Othello*, she expects to quickly rectify both of those points as they begin their life together. The very thing that bonds them, despite its foreignness to her, is what

she expects to gain through their marriage—worldly experience. Once she begins to acquire this, Othello cannot help but project onto her the shame and guilt that he has been trained to associate with innocence lost.

The explanation Othello offers for how the pair falls in love shocks the Venetians hearing it for the same reason it endears the audience to the couple; their marriage is built on an exchange, not one of wealth or value, but of stories for compassion (Shakespeare 1.3.131-170). Although this initially reflects a sense of strength in their burgeoning relationship, since their connection comes from a distinctly internal place, there is an unspoken expectation that each character will continue to play their respective part once married—and this limitation of personal growth becomes their downfall. Desdemona's innocence is what fosters Othello's devotion. The idea of her losing this virginal quality disrupts his worldview so completely that it creates a fissure in his mental guard and Iago takes advantage of this vulnerability. In fact, innocence, chastity, and virtue are such interconnected ideas in reference to Elizabethan women that the moment Othello senses any change within his wife it immediately sends him into ambiguous distress, and he welcomes an explanation for this subconscious panic in any form, even extreme and uncharacteristic betrayal. What Othello neglects to realize is that Desdemona chooses experience and autonomy long before she steps foot on the battlefield in Cyprus; from her first entrance into the play, after eloping with the man she loves, Desdemona speaks for herself.

When the story begins, the most betrayed—and least lamenting—person on the stage is Desdemona. The first act of the play takes place on her wedding night, yet directly after speaking their vows and convincing politicians of their right to be in love, her newly ordained husband gets a military assignment overseas, and any planned celebration or consummation is postponed. In her plea to the Venetian politicians to allow her to follow her husband to Cyprus, she speaks in deeply religious terms to address the rights she refuses to be cheated of, and Shakespeare grants her the dual rhe-

torical power of having rational thought guided entirely by emotional impulses. Her union with Othello becomes something “consecrate[d]” and were she to be left behind in Venice, her “rites” would be “bereft” her (Shakespeare 1.3.255, 258). Through this dialogue, Desdemona owns up to her shortcomings as a daughter while asserting that her claim to a happy, sexually fulfilled marriage is divinely given. Desdemona also relates her relationship to Othello back to the natural order of the world—her turn has come to love a husband as her mother did her father, emotionally as well as physically. By first establishing the legitimacy of her claims, and giving her passion credence so she can break free of the trope of the overly emotional woman, Desdemona pronounces her agency and gains the permission she seeks to follow Othello to Cyprus and to seek her own adventure.

Experience, then, must be considered as another right of marriage; throughout the play, their consummation is oft alluded to but never satisfied. Because of this oversight, Desdemona’s eventual murder, on the couple’s wedding sheets no less, becomes a stand-in climax both in the narrative and their relationship. Othello’s experiences as a slave and a child raised in warfare are what first endear him to Desdemona; it is a life wrought with adventure that contrasts her own upbringing enough to make her yearn for it. Were she to be left in Venice when Othello leaves for Cyprus, not only would she be cheated of her singular wedding night rights but also of her chance to share his experiences. She likens herself, left behind in Venice, to a “moth in peace,” drawing a parallel to a delicate insect in perpetual darkness: idle and deprived of its singular joy, its source of light (Shakespeare 1.3.257). Desdemona’s description of herself reflects deeply on her expectations of what marriage to Othello will bring her: a brand new world to explore and engage with, where peace is a disappointment. From the moment she boards a ship to Cyprus and gets tossed by foreign waves, she begins to grow and change as a person; gaining experience is an inevitability, but Othello’s mental image of his wife as the Virgin remains static. Because the Desdemona who arrives is not the woman who wept over his life

anecdotes that were so different from her own, and because she now has the diplomatic responsibilities of a high-ranking military wife, she no longer resembles the image Othello has of her in his mind. In order to reconcile Desdemona's newfound agency with his dichotomous view of women, Othello must categorize his wife as a Whore—a subconscious switch that Iago latches onto, and that serves as the turning point for the fate of the pair.

Shakespeare's story has lived many lives since it was written in the early seventeenth century, and analysis of it should always highlight the two ways of interacting with the text: as a piece of literature and in performance. The 2013 production of *Othello* at the National Theatre in London nimbly illustrates the imbalance of innocence and experience as the fundamental flaw in Desdemona and Othello's relationship while maintaining a sense of real intimacy and devotion between the pair (Hytner). The actor Olivia Vinall brings a playfulness to her role and to her character's relationships that manifests as a young but nuanced Desdemona who lands at Cyprus the picture of a child heading off to summer camp: complete with an oversized backpack and a military helmet tucked under her arm. Vinall's delivery of her plea to the Venetian Senators masks her innocent desire to 'tag along' with her new husband on his deployment behind a powerful appeal to be allowed her basic rights as a wife. Her youth and inherent kindness are paramount to her portrayal of a newly married woman, newly estranged from her only parent, who successfully implores a room full of men to let her embark alongside her husband to a warzone. Only in fleeting moments does her desperation to be alongside Othello so she might have a great adventure of her own slip through: Vinall slams the table at the end of this speech to punctuate her point, and in doing so, ultimately convinces the room of her reasoning while seizing her autonomy from the grips of the Venetian patriarchy. Alongside Vinall, Adrian Lester plays an Othello that is initially unwilling to see Desdemona as anything other than a stagnant, virginal figure. When he meets her at Cyprus, however, the change in her is evident, and he becomes immediately vulnerable to Iago's persuasion. From then

on, any sign of vitality and agency in Desdemona is immediately misconstrued as infidelity and a betrayal of the fictional, perennially innocent wife that Lester's Othello believes he married. Because the National Theatre's production uses visual cues, like clothing and furniture, from the twenty-first century military world, the contemporary relevance of the play's condemnation of binary thinking is present at all times throughout the performance.

Centering the conversation about Othello's trajectory around the Virgin/Whore complex and analyzing his downfall through a feminist framework does not diminish the truth that is to be found in more common, post-colonial readings of the text. When Desdemona ceases to fit into the box Othello had designated for her, he fails to reconcile the imagined version of Desdemona with her authentic, multifaceted identity, and he can no longer recognize her as the wife he loves. Before any of these doubts, however, Othello's own failure to stay inside the box Venetian society would have him occupy—a racial other, and thus subservient—generates a foundation of the same ambiguous distress he experiences when Desdemona begins to break down his binary thinking towards women. By the time Othello's story is being told, he has internalized decades of cognitive dissonance surrounding his own liminal identity. In one of the play's most infamous lines, Othello is simultaneously praised and slandered when a senator commends him for behaving "more fair than black" because his actions don't align neatly with his outwardly expressed identity (Shakespeare 1.2.291). It's no great leap, then, for Iago's monstrous influence to take complete control of a man who is already disoriented by identity and hyper-aware that a person's exterior can conceal their true nature. The tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice is not that a husband kills his wife over a lie, a jealous misconception, but that the husband could not bear to recognize the liminal identity of his wife and of himself—a shared experience that could have united them in a world plagued with binary thinking.

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