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*Men, Women and War: An Examination of Gender Conflicts within
Othello*

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ENG 175 Introduction to Literature
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Men, Women and War: An Examination of Gender Conflicts within *Othello*

"If you wanna be happy for the rest of your life, never make a pretty woman your wife."

– Jimmy Soul, "*If You Wanna Be Happy*"

In his *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, John Knox asserted emphatically that "it doth manifestlie repugne that any woman shal reigne or beare dominion ouer man ... that woman in her greatest perfection was made to serue and obey man, not to rule and command him" (pp.15). Knox's strongly misogynistic diatribe (per today's standards) against the idea of women rulers seemed ironically futile under the successive reign of the two powerful women monarchs – Queen Mary I and Queen Elizabeth I – in his own time. Nevertheless, Knox brought up a surfacing issue that was amid the 16th century England, an atypical period when the female constituents of the society, who were traditionally overpowered by their male counterparts, held actual political authority. The issue itself, namely, women's role in a still predominantly patriarchal society, certainly became a focal point for examination within the literary community of that socio-politically changing time period. *Othello*, written around the end of the Elizabethan Era, without doubt also reflects this trend and shows that Shakespeare must have made an intentional effort to address this issue in the play.

On the surface, the tragedy of *Othello* seems to be a precise and artful enactment of Iago's cunning and vengeful master plan. But a close reading of *Othello* reveals that the

marriage between Othello and Desdemona, allegedly destroyed by Iago, is in fact built on a very shaky social contract nicely disguised as the consummation of love. Iago, simply serving as a magnifying glass, faithfully exposes the true purposes both Othello and Desdemona have concealed under their marriage. So Iago might have been a mere scapegoat for a jealous husband's journey towards ruin. On the one hand, Othello, a conspicuous Moor, needs the marriage to conform to the ethnically homogenous Venetian society and to help himself establish and maintain his share of patriarchal power within that society. On the other hand, Desdemona, an adventurous and ambitious woman, needs the marriage to break away from the patriarchal and paternal society and to provide herself with much needed independence free of men's influence. Thus, through "honest" Iago, we see the ingenuity in Shakespeare's direct, although often hidden, transformation of *Othello* into a recount of the gender conflict between patriarch Othello and proto-feminist Desdemona, and the root of much of the tragedy in the play emerges from the conflicting and opposite personal interests between Othello and Desdemona.

Othello's racial inferiority and military superiority together creates within him an oxymoronic sense of inclusiveness and otherness at the same time. From the beginning of the play, we start to see that while Othello is crucial to the military prowess of the Venetian society, his identity as a Moor is an inevitable and fatal drawback for his inclusion in this society. In the first act, the Duke of Venice does include Othello as part of his political regime when he says that "valiant Othello, we must straight employ you / against the general enemy Ottoman" (*Othello*, Act 1 Sc.3: 50-51), but the sense of inclusiveness is not strong enough to offset the

sense of otherness brought forward by Brabantio when he says that his daughter cannot “fall in love with what she feared to look on” (100). Here, the recognition from the Duke and the rejection and alienation from Brabantio pinpoints exactly the central problem Othello needs to face: his two-sided identity. Daniel Vitkus in his essay *Turning Turk in Othello* captures the essence of this problem by stating that Othello

is, in the words of Iago, "an erring barbarian" (1.3.43) who has strayed from his natural course into the civilized, super-subtle environment of Venice. As a "noble Moor," Othello is a walking paradox, a contradiction in terms. He is a "purified" and Christianized Moor, converted to whiteness, washed clean by the waters of baptism. Or at least it appears so at first. But the play seems to prove the ancient proverb "*abluis Aethiopem, quid frustra*" as the Moor shows his true color-demonic black, burnt by hellfire and cursed by God. (pp. 161)

Brabantio’s highlighting of Othello’s obvious otherness proves that, although needed in the Venetian society, Othello is by no means credible and trustworthy enough to be a member of the community. Othello, as response, refutes Brabantio’s accusation and claims that he has “won his daughter” (*Othello*, Act 1 Sc.3: 96). Othello’s strategy here is to establish a sense of sameness with the Venetian men and to show that he too is capable of winning the love of Venetian women. But the solution itself creates yet another problem: Othello, by legitimizing himself as an equal member among Venetian men, depends his inclusion within the Venetian patriarchy on the success of his own ability to gain (amorously) an upper hand from its women

counterparts. It implies that he needs to always maintain some dominating power over women in order to be accepted into the elite Venetian “men’s club.”

However, Desdemona is not a traditional woman in a patriarchal society waiting or willing to be dominated. Unlike Othello, who wishes to conform to a society that has a low tolerance for otherness, Desdemona wants desperately to escape from this said society and its monotonous sameness. Her very action of falling in love with Othello is an attempt to defy the dominance of a patriarchal and paternal society. Before eloping with Othello, Desdemona has already longed for an adventurous or even masculine life. Othello himself realizes that his life story makes Desdemona “wished she has not heard it, yet she wished / That heaven had made her such a man” (*Othello*, Act 1 Sc.3: 164-165). This shows that Desdemona is not satisfied living under other men’s control and shadows, which, at this point in her life, comes mostly from her father Brabantio. Instead, she at least subconsciously seeks opportunities to subvert the patriarchy and even establish for herself a strong, competitive female identity. Diane Dreher in her book *Domination and Defiance* gives us an appealing explanation,

In what Erikson has seen as “the stage of life crucial for the emergence of an integrated female identity,” young women leave behind the secure bonds of childhood and go forth into the unknown, risking lifelong commitment to a stranger in the adventure of awakening love. Most of Shakespeare’s daughters defy their fathers to make this commitment, actively affirming new values and priorities. (pp.96)

Thus when she spots Othello, who is everything her father and the Venetians are not, Desdemona seizes the chance. The priority of Desdemona’s marriage with Othello is to run

away not only from her father's paternal control but also from the patriarchal society her father actively represents. When asked whether she wants to stay peacefully in Venice or go with Othello into imminent war at Cyprus, Desdemona answers that

if I left behind
 A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
 The rites for why I love him are bereft me,
 And I a heavy interim shall support
 By his dear absence. Let me go with him. (*Othello*, Act 1 Sc.3: 258-263)

Desdemona reveals in her answer that she loves Othello for his ability to bring her what the Venetian society is not able to: a chance to wander into the wild world with a sense of freedom and independence. This corresponds well with Othello's admittance that Desdemona "loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them" (169-170). From these evidence, we can categorize Desdemona as a proto-feminist, and she envisions that the marriage will enable her to counter, with an independent female identity, the social and political atmosphere heavily infused with masculinity.

The marriage, as a result of a pair of antithetical interests, builds itself on such an instable foundation that it is destined to collapse. For Othello, the marriage serves as his membership card in the patriarchal society in Venice. He needs to continuously exert control over Desdemona to extend its expiration date. Majorie St. Rose, in *Race and Patriarchy in Othello*, asserts that

Othello, as oppressed Other, is also, in his role as a male within the patriarchal tradition, the oppressor. Othello's need to establish and maintain hegemony over his wife makes

his behaviors no different from that of other men operating in the framework of patriarchy. Ultimately, Othello is as much a man as he is a black man. (pp.25)

On the contrary, Desdemona needs the marriage to achieve equality in every dimension of her married life. Desdemona's persistent request that Cassio be reinstated as Othello's chief lieutenant, for example, shows her invested interest in voicing her political opinions. So the oppressed oppressor Othello, in the face of Desdemona's pressure for equality, would appreciate the chance we as readers has had to do the following comparison:

Brabantio:
Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see.
She has deceived her father, and may thee.
(*Othello*, Act 1 Sc.3: 294-295)

Desdemona:
Nay, we must think *men are not gods*
(*Othello*, Act 3 Sc.4: 150)

Desdemona:
My lord is not my lord; nor should I know him,
As I have spoken for you all my best,
And stood within the blank of his displeasure
For my *free speech!*
(*Othello*, Act 3 Sc.4: 126, 129-31)

The comparison, if made possible to him, must make him feel threatened by Desdemona and her seemingly attractive but destructive female identity and its femininity. Othello at this point also realizes the correctness of Brabantio's skeptical view of Desdemona's real nature:

Othello: Oh, devil, devil!
If that the earth could teem with woman's tears,
Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile.
Out of my sight! (*Othello*, Act 4 Sc.1: 250-53)

Othello's depiction of Desdemona here suits what Karen Newman describes in "*And wash the Ethiop White*" as "a masculine fear of a cultural femininity which is envisioned as a greedy mouth, never satisfied, always seeking increase" (*Shakespeare Reproduced*, pp.152). Thus, Othello and Desdemona are manipulating their mutual marriage to serve their own very

opposite and clashing interests. Othello, after discovering this sad truth, has to cut off the dangerous link by murdering Desdemona to protect his own male identity, even at the cost of igniting the tragic domino effect at the end of the play.

Othello, as analyzed above, examines the distribution of power and authority among men and women within a highly structured and patriarchal society. Although modern feminism did not appear until roughly three centuries after *Othello*, the play has contained in itself a subtly violent war between men and women, offering both the audience in Elizabethan England and the global citizens in 21st century an effective way to investigate the relationship between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and patriarchy and feminist movement.

Works Cited

Dreher, Diane. *Domination and Defiance: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986. Print.

Knox, John. *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*. Ed. Edward Arber. London: University College, London., 1878. Print.

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Shakespeare, William. *Othello, the Moor of Venice*. Ed. Bevington, David, David Scott Kastan. New York: Bantam Dell, 2004. Print.

St. Rose, Marjorie. "Race and Patriarchy in *Othello*." *College of the Bahamas Research Journal* Vol.XI (2002): 25-33. Print.

Vitkus, Daniel J. "Turning Turk in *Othello*: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.2 (1997): 145-176. Print.

Methodology/Research Process

This is a revised paper originally written for **ENG 175 Introduction to Literature** for Spring 2015 semester with instructor **Dr. Robert W. Reeder**. The goal of the paper was to allow students in the class to conduct individual research and combine the research with the class material, namely, Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*. The students should then efficiently utilizing the research to present a clear thesis/argument in the paper and support it with evidence found in the research process. In order to meet the objectives of this paper, I divided my research process into four phases: 1) initial step: brainstorm possible arguments for the paper; 2) information gathering step – use different databases and online literary journals to uncover relevant source materials; 3) evaluation step – read through and compare source materials and select from those materials promising evidence in support of possible arguments produced in initial step; 4) selection and integration step – decide which sources are to be included during the paper writing process.

Before beginning the research process, I have identified several topics heavily discussed in class, ranging from issues like racial prejudice, gender differences, epistemology of evidence, to sexual jealousy. The ample amount of topics facilitated my initial process and helped ease my brainstorm effort. After conducting a preliminary database search through Phillips Memorial Library's *List of Databases*, especially with intensive use of *MLA International Bibliography* and *JSTOR* websites, I narrowed down my research areas and decided to focus my paper on the examination of gender relations in *Othello*, which is a relatively less focused area within the current scholarly community. During my preliminary research process, I also came across two

very inspiring scholarly articles, one comparing the roles of women in Shakespeare's *Othello* and Verdi's *Otello*, the other analyzing the role of woman perceived by the readers and audiences in the Antebellum North. Although the two articles were not referenced later in my paper, they provided me basic perspective regarding the issue at hand: the imbalanced power distribution between genders and how this disparity in power causes both genders to act in certain ways in theatrical works, specifically in *Othello* and its adapted plays on stage. Then after the preliminary database research, I began to construct the backbone of my paper using *Othello* (borrowed from HELIN Catalog) as my primary resource/reference and academic journals and databases as secondary sources (e.g. MLA International Bibliography, JSTOR, Google Scholars, etc.). For the database research, I utilized key word search function and tried to locate the most relevant articles. To achieve this goal, I also used some of the bibliography page found in the relevant works from prominent Shakespearean scholars.

After an extensive review of the information uncovered through the above described research process, which included original documents, literary criticisms, website articles, and primary text *Othello*, I integrated as much relevant information in my paper. With extra help from Google eBooks, I was able to consult electronic copies of some rare documents. Similarly, I used RefWorks to collect and manage my sources information and EasyBib to export works cited page and annotated bibliography.

Annotated Bibliography

Dreher, Diane. *Domination and Defiance: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986. Print.

Dreher explores the relationship between fathers and daughters in Shakespeare's major works and thus her book gives the readers a unique perspective in thinking about the how the female roles function in a patriarchy. Unlike most of the sources referenced in this paper, this source offers a quite interesting view as it identifies that the power struggle between men and women exists not exclusively in marriage, but also in a family setting, between a parent and a child. So this source supports the point that Desdemona's unwillingness to submit to male authority has already revealed itself very early on in Desdemona's life and is sure not first present only after her marriage.

Kahn, Edward. "Desdemona and the Role of Women in the Antebellum North." *Theatre Journal* 60.2 (2008): 235-55. Web.

Kahn very aptly captures in his essay the changing attitude readers and critics have had towards Desdemona over the years. The attitude changed from the "idealization of her virtue, to disapproval of her passivity, and finally to condemnation of her independence."

This article serves as confirmation and support if one were to argue that Desdemona's independence and active participation in civil affairs eventually led her to the tragic outcome. It provides a solid cultural context drawn from Antebellum Period in the United States, with a focus on New England America. It is a continuation of the previous source's examination of the role of women perceived by people in a larger and social context.

Knox, John. *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*. Ed. Edward Arber. London: University College, London., 1878. Print.

John Knox's book reflects the sixteenth century patriarchal society's frequent, if not prevailing, attitude and sentiment towards women rulers. Deeply rooted in his opposition to the idea of a Catholic female ruler, John Knox attacks not only female's ability to rule over men but also Catholic's ability to rule over Protestants. Thus, this source is useful for examining both the patriarchal bias towards women and the relationship between Catholics and Protestants at that period in England.

The source provides a general historical background in this paper and serves as a very interesting, relevant, and effective lead in for the paper.

Levenson, Jill L. "The Society of Women in the History of Othello from Shakespeare to Verdi." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 81.4 (2012): 850-59. Web.

Levenson's essay provides a highly detailed and chronological review of the roles of women in some of the variations of Shakespeare's *Othello* and its related translations

and adapted plays. It serves as a good starting point for anyone who wants to examine how the roles of women in *Othello* was perceived within the literary community up to 19th century.

Newman, Karen. "'And wash the Ethiop White': Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*." *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*. Ed. Howard, Jean E., and Marion F O'Connor. Oxon: Routledge, 1987. Print.

Newman's essay addresses multiple issues regarding race, gender, sexuality, and social status in Shakespeare's *Othello*. She skillfully combines those issues together and presents their intertwined relationship in her essay. She connects Othello's race with Desdemona's femininity, and by doing so, Newman helps bridge the internal struggles of Othello and Desdemona to their external marriage conflict.

Shakespeare, William. *Othello, the Moor of Venice*. Ed. Bevington, David, David Scott Kastan. New York: Bantam Dell, 2004. Print.

This is the primary source for the paper and through a close reading of *Othello*, the reader are able to discover many intriguing topics and themes within its tragic story.

Shulman, Alix Kates. "Sex and Power: Sexual Bases of Radical Feminism." *Signs* 5.4, Women: Sex and Sexuality (1980): 590-604. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 May 2015.

Shulman recounts the origin and history of radical feminism since 1949, and although the essay focuses on explaining radical feminism through sexual bases, it offers the readers a good picture of the modern feminism movement and its similarities with Desdemona's demonstration of strong female identity in *Othello*.

St. Rose, Marjorie. "Race and Patriarchy in *Othello*." *College of the Bahamas Research Journal* Vol.XI (2002): 25-33. Print.

This essay examines primarily the issue of race and patriarchy in *Othello*. It gives special attention to Othello's own race and how his interaction with the Venetian patriarchal society reflects his sense of inferiority caused by his race.

Vitkus, Daniel J. "Turning Turk in *Othello*: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.2 (1997): 145-176. Print.

Vitkus first analyzes in his essay the cultural and historical background in Elizabethan England and how the big environment of the time affects the message conveyed in *Othello*. While he places some emphasis on the influence of religious difference on Othello, he also argues that because of the fact that Othello is both a military leader and a racial minority at the same time, Othello has a double identity that can cause conflicts in his own behavior.

Vanita, Ruth. "'Proper' Men and 'Fallen' Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in *Othello*." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*. Vol. 34, No. 2, Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama (1994): 341-56. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 May 2015.

Vanita proposes in her article that all the male characters present at the scene of Othello's murdering of his wife are responsible for the death of Desdemona. Because the patriarchal society has the tendency to associate infidelity to the female victims of familial conflicts and murders, it often normalizes the murders and thus treat murderers of wives as achieving justice. The author argues that the collusive agreement between men undermines the safety of women. Therefore, this source supports the idea that the patriarchal society in Venice is responsible for Desdemona's death.