

DESIRING BLACKNESS: SEXUALITY, RACE, AND FEMININE WILL

IN THE 1623 FOLIO *OTHELLO*

By

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*Othello* by William Shakespeare exists in two early printed versions, as a 1622 Quarto and a 1623 Folio. Despite their differences, they have only recently been regarded as two distinct plays worthy of their own interpretations. In her article, “The Two Texts of ‘Othello’ and Early Modern Constructions of Race,” Leah Marcus argues that if critics view the Folio as a case of authorial revision, then it is necessary to realize that the Folio includes variations which far more explicitly racialize Othello as a black Moor and outsider.<sup>1</sup> Other critics such as Kim Hall have discussed the rampant early modern cultural imagery that differentiates white virginity from a ravenous black promiscuity. Hall insists that this syllogism, intertwining ideologies of morality and color, is the factor that forces language “into the realm of racial discourse.”<sup>2</sup> In this schematic, Desdemona’s whiteness, chastity, and innocence become foils to Othello’s darkness, foreign virility, and violent rage.<sup>3</sup> In *Barbarous Play*, Lara Bovilsky rightly recognizes a lacuna in the race and gender debates centering on the polarization of whiteness and blackness. Bovilsky insists that Hall’s explanation ignores the moral blackening of white women and their consequent racialization in favor of underscoring the demonization of the dark exotic woman.<sup>4</sup>

This essay will further the discussion of the begrimed and blackened Desdemona by delving into the textual variants found in the Quarto and Folio texts of *Othello*. These seemingly minute textual alterations provocatively weave divergent depictions of the role of race in the manifestation of Desdemona’s will. In Part I of this essay the exchanges between Brabantio, Iago, and Roderigo

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus, Leah, “The Two Texts of ‘Othello’ and Early Modern Constructions of Race,” in *Textual Performances: The Modern Reproduction of Shakespeare’s Drama*, ed. Lukas Erne and Margaret Jane Kidnie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 21-36.

<sup>2</sup> Hall, Kim, *Things of Darkness: Economics of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 6.

<sup>3</sup> According to Ania Loomba, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, geographical location, skin color, and class worked in tandem to produce ‘nature.’ Black Africans were often depicted as overtly sexual with deviant domestic practices while Muslims were described as irrationally jealous and unable to control their anger. Loomba insists that Othello embodies the prevailing stereotypes of both blackamoors and the turbaned Turk. Furthermore, it is Othello’s active predisposition towards misogynistic thoughts that initiates his racial victimization. Loomba, Ania, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 67-105.

<sup>4</sup> Racial difference, Bovilsky insists, is coded and produced by sexual difference. The dehumanization of Iago’s sexual rhetoric attacks not only Othello but Desdemona as well. Bovilsky, Lara, *Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

found in the Folio include an intensified racialization of the Moor and increased pornographic descriptions of female sexuality. While, as Bovilsky suggests, their inflammatory rhetoric specifically demonstrates a communal racialization and victimization of Desdemona, I will show how the Folio undermines these assertions by giving audiences a complex and political Desdemona using Othello's dark and exotic otherness to spearhead her transition from daughter to wife, from child to woman. Furthermore, I argue that this strategic and assertive Venetian noblewoman actively *desires* to be blackened.<sup>5</sup> By eloping and entering into an exogamic union of her own volition, Desdemona seemingly assimilates to societal expectations but at the same time reconfigures these structures, making restrictive ideologies work for a marginalized feminine subject. Desdemona's choice of a husband and her rejection of the "curled darlings" of her nation in favor of a Moor function in a twofold manner. While it may amplify audience revulsion over her elopement through anxieties of miscegenation, her choice strategically claims a specifically sexual ownership over her body, one that draws attention to a threatening female agency which rejects, chooses, and manipulates her reproductive purpose in a patriarchal world. In this light, Desdemona desires the Moor precisely because *he is black*.

In the second part of this essay, the misogynistic discourse imposed upon the rhetorically persuasive and sexually knowledgeable wife convinces Othello that Desdemona's decision to love a Moor is unnatural and therefore, a reflection of her immorality. His defamatory attacks dishearten the once self-possessed and empowered Desdemona. In lines found only in the Folio, Desdemona intimates the perception of her marriage as unlawful and briefly reverts to presenting herself through an ideological whiteness. Circumscribed by an unattainable model of domestic passivity and obedience, Desdemona learns that to be a reproductive woman and a wife inevitably requires a stain

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<sup>5</sup> While discourses in the early modern period on "race" and "blackness" were far more fluid than the essentialist rhetoric associated with the terms today due to the history of slavery and colonialism, it is precisely this fluidity and elusiveness that interests me most, particularly when one reflects upon the role Shakespearean texts have played in colonization and the subordination of "othered" bodies.

upon her virtue through the consummation of a sanctified marriage. In Part III, I discuss how Desdemona ultimately renounces her previous claims of a totalizing obedient whiteness, and in her state of complete desolation, she once more desires to align herself with the dark other and writes herself black through her self-representation of the Barbary maid. While her disturbingly erotic and exotic sacrificial death reveals the disturbing patriarchal romanticization of the destruction of black and blackened bodies, I contend that this seeming act of conclusive submission contradictorily proves Desdemona to be a traitor to her Lord, a simultaneous loyal subject and unruly rebel. Through her death, Desdemona fulfills her identification with a virtuous blackness, an erotic potential that reveals the instability of patriarchal authority and unmoors her from the restrictive paradigms of unblemished chastity and damning promiscuity.

## I

Some of the most racially charged language in both texts of *Othello* surfaces in the highly sexualized dialogue found in the first Act of the play, wherein Iago and Roderigo alert Desdemona's father that "now, very now, an old blacke ram/ Is tuping your white Ewe" (1.1. 88-89).<sup>6</sup> In their pornographic depictions of miscegenistic couplings, Iago and Roderigo use differences in age, color, and species to affirm the 'unnatural' fit of Othello and Desdemona's union. Since, however, rough and uncastrated male rams and female ewes are both sheep that mate in nature, this incendiary imagery intending to assert the insurmountable opposition between black and white, ironically reveals that such transgressions are not only possible but natural. In *A true discourse of the late voyages of discoverie* published in 1578, George Best objectively admits that he himself has "seene an Ethiopian as blacke as a cole brought into *Englande*, who taking a faire Englishe woman to Wife, begatte a

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<sup>6</sup> Lines found in both the 1622 Quarto and the 1623 Folio are cited from the second edition of the Norton Shakespeare by act, scene, and line number. Shakespeare, William, "The Tragedy of Othello: the Moor of Venice" in *Norton Shakespeare Based on the Oxford Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 2109-2192. Lines unique to either the Quarto or the Folio are cited by *Q* or *F*, respectively, and the line number from the University of Victoria *Internet Shakespeare Editions*.

Sonne in all respectes as blacke as the Father was.”<sup>7</sup> This account neither disgustingly decries the union between an Ethiopian man and an English woman nor does it disclose a hint of bafflement towards miscegenation. Best finds more interest in the black issue of this exogamic coupling rather than the Englishwoman’s rejection of her kind in favor of a “stranger of here and everywhere” (F 149-50). While critics, such as Lynda Boose and Michael Neill, rightfully emphasize that Best figures blackness as a deviation from whiteness, existing as the consequence of an illicit sexuality between a man and a woman, they gloss over another key aspect to Best’s rendition of his biblical retelling, which I argue, foregrounds the competition between men over the reproductive bodies of women, an antagonism that makes Desdemona’s elopement with Othello all the more threatening.<sup>8</sup>

According to Best, the originary of the African people—the father of the black Moors—was none other than Chus, the blackened offspring of the white Cham and his white wife. Noah had instructed his three sons that while on the ark, they must abstain from engaging in sexual acts with their wives out of reverence and fear of divine judgment. The detail in this biblical adaptation, which I would like to emphasize, lies in the purported reasoning behind Cham’s lustful copulation with his wife. In fact, I argue that carnal “lust” over his wife’s body had very little to do with his actions:

His wicked sonne *Cham* disobeyed, and being persuaded that the first child borne after the floud (by right & law of nature) should inherit & possesse all the dominion of the earth, he, contrarie to his fathers commandement, while they were yet in the Arke, vsed company with his wife, & craftily went about, thereby to disinherit the offspring of his other two brethren, for the which wicked and detestable fact, as an example for contempt of Almighty God, and

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<sup>7</sup> Best, George, *A true discourse of the late voyages of discoverie* (At London: Henry Bynnyman, 1578), 29. As a maritime power and center for commercial trade linking Europe with the East, Venice, like the colonies in the New World, was a melting pot within which the Restoration’s Charles Gildon asserts that due to Desdemona’s exposure to foreign others it should not be considered unwarranted that she should harbor an attraction for the darker hue and act upon it. Gildon defends Desdemona’s choice of Othello when he declares, “Experience tells us, that there’s nothing more common than Matches of this kind, where the Whites and Blacks cohabit, as in both the *Indies* ... which is proof enough, that Nature and Custom have not put any such unpassable bar betwixt Creatures of the same kind because of different colors.” Gildon, Charles, *Miscellaneous Letters and Essays, on Several Subjects. Philosophical, Moral, Historical, Critical, Amorous, Etc. in Prose and Verse* (London: n.p., 1694), 99-100.

<sup>8</sup> Boose, Lynda E., “The Getting of a Lawfull Race,” in *Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia A. Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), 35-54. Neill, Michael, “Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in Othello,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1989): 383-412.

disobedience of parents, God would a sonne shuld be borne, whose name was *Chus*, who not only it selfe, but all his posteritie after him, should be so blacke & loathsome.<sup>9</sup>

Cham and his wife copulated for the specific purpose of usurping power from the progeny of his brothers. The immorality at the core of Best's story is not the act of engaging in sex but the manipulation of the laws of nature to subvert power structures and the control of property. The black Chus came into being through his father's deliberate and political intercourse—an act of treason—which sought to arrogate sovereignty from its rightful place.<sup>10</sup> Within this text, Best foregrounds blackness as a menacing force coveting the dominion of whiteness. Furthermore, since blackness actively seeks to conquer by using the futurity of reproduction as its preferred tactic, a woman's choice to consummate a relationship—to bring forth blackness, whiteness, or none at all—becomes necessarily imbricated in discourses of color, race, and power as early as the late sixteenth century. Iago voices the fear of the future black monstrosity which Desdemona would labor to produce as he yells, “Awake the snoring Citizens with a Bell, or else the deuill will make a Grand-sire of you” (1.1.90-1). Like Cham whose act of treason requires the fruitfulness of his wife, the black “deuill” defiles Brabantio through Desdemona's tainted body. In both editions of *Othello*, the communal bigoted rhetoric voiced by Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio attack Othello as an outsider and Desdemona's sexuality as debased and unlawful and at the same time, inadvertently establish a kinship between blackness and the sensual, procreative female body.

Within this framework, racial discourse maintains hegemonic structures through controlling female reproduction. Thus, the depiction of a woman's will—or lack thereof—either threatens to undermine or reify masculine authority. I insist that the Quarto downplays Desdemona's dangerous

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<sup>9</sup> Best, *A true discourse*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> In both early editions, Iago declares Desdemona's elopement to the Moor to be an unlawful acquisition of property when he bellows, “Theeues, Theeues./ Looke to your house, your daughter, and your Bags” (1.1.79-80). Although Iago lists Desdemona as one of Brabantio's possessions, he also insists that Othello the thief does not act alone but with an accomplice. In the Folio, Desdemona, the ‘stolen’ property, acquiesces to this unsanctioned marriage and willfully transfers herself from her father's abode to Othello's arms.



consensual participation in her theft and potential creation of the wrong “kin and kind.” The Quarto primarily depicts Desdemona as a victim, a stolen and passive object, “topped” and “couered with a Barbary horse”(1.1.113). Roderigo states: “Sir, I will answer any thing; But I beseech you,/ If she be in her chamber, or your house,/ Let loose on me the Iustice of the state,/For this delusion” (Q 150-3). In this edition, Desdemona’s elopement with the Moor becomes a questionable act of abduction. By contrast, the Folio provides provocative details meant to incite Brabantio’s anger and disgust toward Othello and his daughter’s actions by further accentuating Othello’s figurative and literal darkness alongside verbal illustrations of a willful and unruly Desdemona. In lines particular to the Folio, Brabantio’s “faire Daughter,” escapes from her father’s domain “At this odde euen and dull watch o’th’night,” debasing and endangering herself by allowing a “knaue of common hire” to transport her “to the grosse claspes of a lasciuious Moore” (F 136-9). These lines of the Folio envision each stage of Desdemona’s illicit clandestine marriage as a moral degradation that begins with a “faire daughter” and evolves into something monstrous and unrecognizable.<sup>11</sup> From a pure and innocent child, the Folio’s Desdemona becomes an audacious daughter escaping from home unbeknownst to her father. This reckless Desdemona gradually becomes a morally culpable woman, who disregards her honor by entrusting her prized chastity to a “common” person. Finally, her dark taint culminates in the inhuman representation of Othello and Desdemona’s lust-driven, interwoven, black and white bodies.

Similar to Iago’s animalistic imagery of the old black ram and white female ewe, Roderigo in the Folio reveals the attraction and affinity between two presumed polar opposites: Brabantio’s fair daughter and the dark lascivious Moor. In *Othello* and specifically the Folio edition, the binaries of

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<sup>11</sup> The Folio adds details regarding Desdemona’s marriage consistent with accounts of clandestine marriages. According to historian Lawrence Stone, a clandestine marriage would often involve the “marriage of a minor without the consent of parent or guardian [and] take place outside the canonical hours... often in the middle of the night [in suspect locations such as] an alehouse, coffee shop, prison, or even a brothel” (22-3). Stone, Lawrence. *Uncertain Unions: Marriage in England, 1660-1753*.(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

young and old, white and black, femininity and monstrosity exemplify what critic Karen Newman describes as “rhetorical miscegenation for despite the semantics of antithesis,” these seeming opposites rhetorically align with each other.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the Quarto, the Folio draws attention to Iago and Roderigo sharing a communal fantasy that imagines Othello’s bestial virility and dark otherness in its precise relation to the assertive, sexually desiring, and fair Venetian daughter.

While the Folio’s Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio underscore the compatibility between the sexualized white feminine body and the dark Moor, their exchanges in the Folio also imagine Desdemona’s filial betrayal and alignment with blackness as a calculated and politically motivated offense. Unlike the Quarto, the Folio includes Roderigo reiterating that Desdemona has transgressed her duty as a daughter and frames her elopement as *treason*—an act that mirrors Cham’s disregard for the filial duty he owes to Noah.<sup>13</sup> In lines unique to the Folio, Roderigo declares, “Your Daughter (if you haue not giuen her leaue)/ I say again, hath made a grosse reuolt” (F 146-7). Historian Malcolm Gaskill emphasizes that in the sixteenth century crimes of treason and acts of rebellion “attacked the social order both of natural and civil relations.”<sup>14</sup> Through her decisions to escape in the dead of night, to entrust her body to a common gondolier, and to marry Othello without the consent of her father, Desdemona violates her status as a noblewoman and the filial bond of submission she owes to *her* Lord and father. Her transgressions rebel against Brabantio, but even more threateningly, her actions resist the mandate of a Christian society and the commandment of Providence: “Honor thy father and thy mother.”<sup>15</sup> In dreadful dismay, the Quarto has Brabantio exclaiming to Roderigo, “O

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<sup>12</sup> For more discussion on early modern femininity as identified with blackness and the monstrous, see Karen Newman, “‘And Wash the Ethiop White’: Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*” in *Essaying Shakespeare* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> As astutely noted by Leah Marcus, the Folio establishes a communal censure against the union of miscegenation by having Roderigo accompany Iago as he taunts Brabantio and by giving Roderigo some of the most vitriolic lines that degrade Othello to an inhuman beast. Marcus, “The Two Texts,” 25.

<sup>14</sup> Gaskill, Malcolm, *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 210.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Gibbon provides a fascinating exchange between his characters Philogus and Tychicus. They debate as to whether or not a daughter’s choice in marriage ought to be honored instead of her father’s. Tychicus quotes Numbers 30:3-9, stating, “If a woman vowe a vowe vnto the Lorde and binde her selfe by a bonde being in her Fathers house in

*thou* deceiuest me” (*Q* 180, emphasis mine). The Folio, however, replaces *thou* with *she*: “Oh she deceaues me”(*F* 181). Brabantio from the Folio construes Desdemona’s elopement as a crime against himself and accuses his daughter as the culprit. Othello is able to violate Brabantio’s possessions and potentially turn this Venetian noble into a grandsire through Desdemona’s deception—a perceived act of filial treason that claims a black desire.

In the Folio, the racist and misogynistic circle comprised of Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio depict Desdemona’s complicit actions as indicative of a treasonous and unruly subject whose feminine sexuality, coupled with Othello’s blackness, becomes a dangerous monstrosity that resists the bounden allegiance and obedience a daughter must give to her lord and father. As previously stated, they attempt to define Othello as inhuman and Desdemona as a young and impetuous daughter who imprudently endangers her chastity and dishonors her father. The long awaited entrance of the purportedly diabolical Moor and rebellious daughter, however, undermines these hyperbolic descriptions of animalistic wantonness and imprudent betrayal.<sup>16</sup> In both early editions of *Othello*, Desdemona’s first words proclaimed in defense of her marriage portray a wise, pragmatic, and self-possessed woman:

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.

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the time of her youth, and her father heare her vow & bond wherewith she hath bound her selfe...[and] her father disallowe her the same daye that he heareth all her vowes and bonds... they shall not be of value, and the Lord will forgiue her”(6). According to biblical law, Brabantio’s disavowal of his daughter’s elopement should have been enough to nullify her marriage to Othello. However, as evidenced by Gibbon’s text, by the end of the sixteenth century, popular discourse challenged this conclusive parental right to determine the man whom a daughter must marry and even supported the daughter’s choice to base her union on love rather than on the duty she owes to her father. Gibbon, Charles, *A vork vvorh the reading VVherein is contained, fine profitable and pithy questions, very expedient, aswell for parents to perceiue howe to bestowe their children in marriage, and to dispose their goods at their death: as for all other persons to receive great profit by the rest of the matters herein expressed* (London: Imprinted by Thomas Orwin, 1591).

<sup>16</sup> Both the Quarto and the Folio present Othello as a dignified and restrained general who forestalls the pleasures of the matrimonial bed for the affairs of the state and whose harrowing story inspires the Duke to suggest, “I thinke this tale would win my Daughter too” (1.3.170). When it comes to Desdemona, however, the Quarto presents this Venetian daughter as a young and unconfident girl while the Folio in the first Act consistently depicts Desdemona as a mature and rhetorically persuasive woman just as adept at articulating her case as her esteemed husband.

I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband.  
And so much duty as my mother showed  
To you, preferring you before her father,  
So much I challenge that I may profess  
Due to the Moor my lord. (1.3.208-17)

In this resolute speech, Desdemona transgresses cultural limitations through the institution of marriage, the societal structure designed to protect the patrilineal transfer of property from father to husband. She tactfully emphasizes the words “duty,” “life,” and “education” to delineate a normative and thereby, naturalized trajectory, which Brabantio had systematically prepared her to follow. As his daughter, she owes Brabantio her honor and submission, and these inculcated attributes mold her into the ideal wife. In her strategic move, she momentarily effaces the presentation of her will with that of her mother's to enforce the necessary break between maidenhood and womanhood in accordance with a recognizable chronological series of events.<sup>17</sup> This tactful deflection of her specific situation as Brabantio's daughter—her father's subject—to the experience and choices of her mother, a figure otherwise absent from this play, subtly transmutes this conflict from a personal dilemma of broken bonds between Brabantio and Desdemona to a general structural problem that requires all women to leave one lord for another to continue the cyclical reproduction of mankind.<sup>18</sup>

Rather than carelessly abandoning socially prescribed trajectories and identities (e.g. not marrying at all or becoming Othello's mistress instead of his lawful wife), Desdemona manipulates her position as a circumscribed feminine subject. For Louis Althusser practices, rituals, and beliefs

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<sup>17</sup> According to Cohen, Desdemona's mother, a figure largely absent in this play, surfaces as a conduit to Desdemona's memories of the Barbary maid and as her means of asserting her defiance against Brabantio. Cohen compares Othello's emotional ties to his mother that surfaces in his descriptions of the handkerchief that he gives to Desdemona with Desdemona's cold and calculating evocation of her maternal exemplar. Cohen argues that Othello's painful remembrances of his past and of his mother haunt his present and serve as an impetus for his violent aggressions against his wife. Cohen, Derek, *Searching Shakespeare: Studies in Culture and Authority* (Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto, 2003), 100-101.

<sup>18</sup> Bartels brilliantly describes Desdemona as an actress, adept at manipulating patriarchal systems from within. She astutely notes that through Desdemona's speech, her elopement and miscegenation “become not only acceptable but also expected behavior,” forcing Brabantio to relinquish his suit against Othello. Bartels, Emily C., “Strategies of Submission: Desdemona, the Duchess, and the Assertion of Desire” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 36, no.2 (Spring, 1996): 417-433.

such as Desdemona's prescribed path from a chaste maid to a virtuous wife, sustain and regenerate her position as an eternal subject. Indeed, in this process of interpellation, Desdemona has been "hailed" by her society, and the overall consequences of her decisions and actions fit within the societal apparatuses of the Church and State.<sup>19</sup> After all, she does marry, and her union is later sanctioned by the Venetian Senate. However, within this framework of interpellation, Desdemona locates an interstice through eloping with a heroic outsider—the black Othello—a marriage that simultaneously conforms and rebels. Her seemingly conservative decision to marry negotiates strategies of resistance through an individualized usage of power that reorients the patriarchal forces of her father and the Venetian senate and positions them to defeat the masculine desire specifically at odds with her will.<sup>20</sup> This ultimately works because her father inhabits a constrained position as subject to the power of the state. Although Desdemona, a possession of her father, theoretically inhabits the most disenfranchised status, she ingeniously uses to her advantage the same structural hierarchy that has marginalized her will. The senate silences Brabantio and sanctions Desdemona's desires because the manifestation of her will coincides with the interests of the Venetian state aligned with the victorious general and Moor, Othello.

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<sup>19</sup> Althusser describes the process of interpellation as a hailing, such as when a policeman yells: "Hey you there!" The interpellated individual "will turn around... [and] he will become a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him"(118). However, the chronological succession of "hail" and then "turn" does not occur in practice. Althusser explains that the hailing and interpellation of individuals are one and the same thing. Michel Pêcheux identifies resistance in this inescapable Althusserian world by labeling those who respond to the hail as "Good Subjects" and those who resist as "Bad Subjects." José Esteban Muñoz builds upon this alternative and offers a third option—disidentification—that is the hybrid version of the "Good" and "Bad" subject. Althusser, Louis, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review press, 2001), 85-127.

<sup>20</sup> I want to consider Bartel's examples of female characters, such as Desdemona who uses submission to voice her desire, as women who partake in Muñoz's disidentification. Since Muñoz's process posits a non-normative subject who answers to a normative hail, this compellingly reveals how in the flux of power, subjects are bombarded with callings that originate from sources both sanctioned and outlawed, protected and denied by various hegemonic structures. Due to the proliferation of authority needed to manage and maintain power structures, a subject cannot simultaneously fulfill a totalizing obedience to all authority figures. Turning to one hail requires the disavowal of another. Muñoz, José Esteban, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1-30.

Although Desdemona usurps Brabantio's prerogative to choose a husband for his daughter, her exogamic union benefits the state.<sup>21</sup> When Desdemona testifies before the Venetian Senate that she had not been charmed into loving the Moor but had freely consented to do so, she ends her assertive declaration with: "So much I challenge, that I may professe/ Due to the Moore my Lord" (*F* 525-6). This conformity and willful subjection to the authority of her husband ambiguously demonstrates self-possession through submission. Kathryn Schwarz explains that such acts of volition "confound the distinction between affective allegiance and appropriative defiance [by] rearticulat[ing] dominant discourses from unexpected locations."<sup>22</sup> Instead of providing a heedless young woman blatantly disregarding the norms of her society to fulfill her lustful appetites, Desdemona's first speech found in both editions of *Othello* underscores how her confounding voice manipulates discourses of submission to challenge structures bent upon mitigating and obstructing the threatening presence of her choice and her will. Strategically, in the presence of powerful Venetian men and specifically her *father*, Desdemona emphatically proclaims her desire for blackness. She foregrounds Othello's status as a dark outsider to whom she now submits and carries his handkerchief as a symbol of her newly forged alliance.<sup>23</sup> Desdemona exhibits self-mastery by transferring her body from father to husband and not just any man—any Othello—but to a *Moor*. Desdemona's rhetoric, which accentuates Othello's blackened otherness, serves to unequivocally

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<sup>21</sup> Lynda E. Boose explains the importance of the sacred marriage ritual as a pattern of and for the community, which simultaneously dissolves and reasserts the bonds between father and daughter. Boose, Lynda E., "The Father and the Bride in Shakespeare," *PMLA* 97, no. 3 (1982): 325-47.

<sup>22</sup> Schwarz, Kathryn. *What You Will: Gender, Contract, and Shakespearean Social Space* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ian Smith draws attention to Othello's descriptions of the handkerchief as "dyde in Mummey" (*F* 2223) and offers a compelling argument that this piece of cloth would have been black after the Moorish fashion. While Ian Smith attends to the black handkerchief in relation to Othello's subjectivity, I wish to utilize his insight to develop Desdemona as a text who is read by the male figures in her life and who seizes this seemingly disempowered position of being an inert object and victim of her involuntary bodily fluids and instead, writes her own body with a textile representation of blackness. If the Egyptian handkerchief was indeed dyed black, and if the association between cloth and skin prevailed in the early seventeenth century cultural milieu, then Desdemona's acceptance of this seemingly trivial article demands just as much attention as its loss. By accepting the black handkerchief, Desdemona incorporates the hankie to her outfit and to her person. Its blackness visually reminds audiences of her allegiance to Othello and of her own sexually knowledgeable and darkened body. While sporting the black hankie, Desdemona constantly underscores her consent to the transgression of mingling bodies and bloods. Smith, Ian, "Othello's Black Handkerchief" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64, no.1 (2013): 1-25.

sever the filial ties to her father. I insist that the Folio's prior emphasis on the moral associations of racial color terminology is integral to understanding the momentous impact and strength of Desdemona's revolt against Brabantio.<sup>24</sup>

By desiring blackness, Desdemona underscores her self-determination as a willful and sexual woman, a threatening assertion that is made acceptable by the location of this black otherness in glorious Othello. Furthermore, the paradoxical reiteration of Desdemona both as daughter and wife, obedient subject and rebel draws attention to her highly complex and insightful final declaration. For the perpetuation of a patrilineal order, the female subject must be loyal and *fickle*. A woman's duty to her father ought to be respected until her marriage, an event which necessitates a change in her allegiance.<sup>25</sup> Ironically, it is in Desdemona's performance of an overwhelming subjection to the authority of the Moor her Lord that she simultaneously enacts a betrayal that her father interprets as treasonous. Through her rhetorical self-effacement and seeming submission, Desdemona's voice dominates this masculine public space and garners the protection of the state to fulfill her desires.

When attempting to explain the reasons for which Desdemona desires a stranger over other Venetians and the Florentine Cassio, critics often turn to her statement: "I saw *Othello's* visage in his mind" (1.3.287), a phrase usually interpreted to mean that she overlooked his black skin and alien parts, preferring his inner moral fortitude and whiteness.<sup>26</sup> However, according to Sharon Patricia Holland, "there is no raceless course of desire" and racist practices and ideologies, exemplified by

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<sup>24</sup> According to Boose, the black male and white female union is, throughout the Elizabethan period "and earlier, most frequently depicted as the ultimate romantic-transgressive model of erotic love." Boose, "The Getting of a Lawfull Race," 41.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion on the inadequacy of patriarchy as a social system, see Lagretta Tallent Lenker, *Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare and Shaw* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2001).

<sup>26</sup> For example, Sibylle Baumbach further echoes this reading when she notes that Desdemona appeals her countrymen to "transcend man's outer appearance and behold the true face in the inside of the body, in a man's psyche instead of his body" (148). Desdemona's fair exterior matches Othello's fair metaphysical soul. This interpretation downplays Othello's otherness and effaces the sensual figurative blackness inextricably bound to his presence. In the process of whitening Othello, Desdemona loses the political components to her choice of a husband, which she foregrounds in her first speech. If Desdemona's fair presence solely functions to offset Othello's alien and black virility, then I argue that her existence reifies racist and misogynistic ideologies. Baumbach, Sibylle, *Shakespeare and the Art of Physiognomy* (Tirill: Humanities-Ebooks, 2008).

the exchange between Brabantio, Iago, and Roderigo in the first act of the play, attempt to limit human desire by prescribing positive and negative couplings.<sup>27</sup> Desdemona neither marries Othello out of naiveté nor out of disregard for the community censure against the perceived unnaturalness of miscegenation. Their clandestine marriage attests to the fact that both Othello and Desdemona were well-aware of the transgressive potential of their exogamic union. Furthermore, Othello did not woo Desdemona with mundane tales of a white Venetian male but with exotic and strange stories of fantastic cannibals and the travails of war and slavery. For Desdemona, Othello becomes the paradigm of virtue and heroism through his foreign experiences geographically located in dark and unchristian lands. I argue that Desdemona's love for Othello stems from his otherness and worldliness. She marries and desires Othello not in spite of his blackness but precisely because he is both *black* and *virtuous*. This incongruence between Othello's black exterior and his valiant soul—his contradictory status as outsider and noble defender of the state—becomes the model for a matured sexuality and virtuous blackness that Desdemona identifies with and claims as her own through their matrimonial union and the merging of their bodies into one.<sup>28</sup>

As exemplified by Desdemona's first speech in the play found in both the Quarto and the Folio, she possesses a very acute understanding of her contradictory position as a chaste daughter and an assertive wife, a compliant subject and a determined rebel. By loving the Moor, she takes part in a self-formation that resists the compulsory binary classifications of white or black, saint or whore, and shares deeply in Othello's virtuous blackness. Audre Lorde describes this intense sharing as the power of the erotic, a resource feared, demonized, and oppressed by patriarchal societies. The partaking of this intense and erotic feeling enables her to forge connections across similarities *and*

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<sup>27</sup> Holland challenges us to recognize the racist hailing that determines our private desires, which is necessarily dangerous, fictitious, and fantastic. According to Holland, the "black body is the quintessential sign for subjection." Thus, when Desdemona desires Othello and aligns her self-representation with the Barbary maid, she claims the abject within her and experiences a conflicting desire to be both black and virtuous, to rebel and submit, a paradox that manifests itself throughout the play. Holland, Sharon, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Mendelson, Sara Heller and Crawford, Patricia M., *Women in Early Modern England, 1550-1720* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 38.



differences, a courage that explains Desdemona's desire to no longer be a "Moth of Peace" (1.3.255) but to hazard the dangers of accompanying her husband to war-torn Cyprus.<sup>29</sup> In her erotic sharing in Othello's paradoxical virtuous blackness, she taps into what Lorde identifies as a limitless potential to challenge oppressive color-morality syllogisms and the restrictive misogynistic frameworks of her society.

In the Quarto, when Desdemona entreats the Duke to allow her to join Othello in Cyprus, a moment in the play with the possibility to present a confident and assertive young woman, the Quarto offers a weaker version of her character than does the Folio:<sup>30</sup>

BRA: Ile not haue it so.

OTH: Nor I.

DESD: Nor I; I would not there reside,  
To put my father in impatient thoughts  
By being in his eye. Most gracious duke,  
To my vnfoldings lend a gracious eare,  
And let me finde a charter in your voice.  
And if my simplenesse.—

DUKE: What would you—speake. (*Q* 589-597)

After interjecting a childlike retort, merely parroting both her father's and husband's disapproval, Desdemona finds herself at the center of every man's attention. Unprepared, Desdemona tries to express her preference and does so with something far from eloquence and poise. Indeed, these lines found in the Quarto present a vastly different Desdemona from her prior articulate and commanding performance. After redundantly asking the *gracious* duke to lend a *gracious* ear, her uncouth "*simpleness*" – her lack of confidence in her voice and in her will—is all too painfully real.

This Desdemona seems to have more in common with the imprudent and reckless daughter

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<sup>29</sup> Lorde, Audre, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1978), 8.

<sup>30</sup> After many years of warfare between the Ottoman Empire and the Venetian state, in 1570 Cyprus fell under the control of the Ottomans. Thus, by the time *Othello* was purportedly performed in 1604, the English associated Cyprus with stereotypes of the barbarous and jealous Turk. I would like to suggest that the change of setting from a civilized and Christian Venice to Cyprus parallels Othello's psychological transition from a decorated general to a passionately enraged Moor. Finkel, Caroline, *Osman's Dream: The History of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 158.

previously imagined by Brabantio, Iago, and Roderigo. With more pressing matters on his mind, such as war with the Turks, the Duke hastily interrupts the young woman and orders her to state her request.

By comparison, Desdemona in the Folio remains consistent with a mature and self-possessed noblewoman who uses conventions of submission to voice her will. The Folio's version attests to Lorde's empowering erotic potential, when Desdemona efficiently and unabashedly articulates her desires and captivates the attention of her political and male superiors:

DESD: Most Gracious Duke,  
To my vnfolding, lend your prosperous eare,  
And let me find a Charter in your voice  
T'assist my simplenesse.

DUKE: What would you *Desdemona*? (F 591-597)

Desdemona's language testifies to her innate strength and determination worthy of the respect of high ranking male Venetian aristocrats. Besides displaying an extensive vocabulary able to refrain from describing her *most gracious* Duke as having a *gracious* ear, Desdemona's speech in the Folio also ends with a period rather than a dash, indicating that she presents a completed thought and ends her speech out of propriety and craft. The self-assured Desdemona knows how to maximize her performance before the Venetian senate and is confident in her ability to persuade the Duke. At this strategic point, she understands the import of carving out a public space, separate from her father and husband, in which her voice—her voice alone—will be heard. The Duke waits for her to finish speaking, and rather than ordering Desdemona to state her cause, he respectfully calls her by name and inquires after her desires. Instead of portraying an unruly and extravagant youth unable to express her wants with restraint and decorum, the Folio edition of this scene consistently illustrates Desdemona as a sexually desiring, pragmatic, and willful noblewoman.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Natasha Korda traces how Othello's inability to value objects properly—his over investment in the signification of the displaced handkerchief and his devaluation of Desdemona—exemplifies racial disparities. Similarly, she insists that

Furthermore, unlike the meek Desdemona from the Quarto who states that she “*did loue the Moore... Euen to the vtmost pleasure of*” her Lord (Q 598, 601, emphasis mine), the Folio maintains that her declarations match her present will, wants, and desires. In the Folio, she adamantly states that she currently and indefinitely “*loue[s] the Moore*” and that her heart is subdued not to *his pleasure* but to “*the very quality*” of her Lord (F 598,601). In the Quarto, her timid request prompts audiences to question if it is of her own volition to be subdued to Othello and to follow him to Cyprus. As if to assure the Venetian senate that this is indeed her own choice and not the result of her husband’s coercion, Othello adds, “*Beseech you let her will*” (Q 610).<sup>32</sup> The Quarto’s Othello emphasizes her *will* and consent to compensate for Desdemona’s weak and unconfident performance.<sup>33</sup> By contrast, Desdemona from the Folio makes it perfectly clear that her ongoing affections for Othello inspire her to become bold and voice her personal desires that will give her pleasure. Therefore, in this edition, Othello exclaims, “*Let her haue your voice*” (F 610). In this masculine public sphere comprised of government officials and military generals, Othello refers to Desdemona as though she were a statesman vying for political power for which the men must perform a democratic vote. Othello does not need to guarantee that his wife’s heart instructs her words for she has most eloquently made her case independent of her husband. Instead, he demands her political esteem in the eyes of the Venetian senate. In the Folio, Desdemona is a rhetorically persuasive young adult exploring her avenues for self-representation and power. Through her deep erotic sharing with the valiant Moor, the Folio’s Desdemona becomes a warrior in her own right and

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Desdemona’s elopement with the Moor demonstrates a woman’s irrational behavior and unwieldy extravagance. While I agree that Iago, Brabantio, and Roderigo attempt to portray Desdemona as a volatile and unruly youth, I believe that their assertions are undermined by Desdemona’s persuasive rhetorical performance found in the Folio version of *Othello*. Voiced by Desdemona, the extravagance that aligns her with a dark stranger turns into a strategic move that unites her with the valiant Moor and even furthers the interests of the state. Korda, Natasha, *Shakespeare’s Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 111-141.

<sup>32</sup> Potter, Lois, “Editing Desdemona,” *Arden: Editing Shakespeare*, ed. Ann Thompson and Gordon McMullan (London: Thomson Learning, 2003), 81-94.

<sup>33</sup> Kathryn Schwarz argues that feminine will is integral to the perpetuation of patriarchal systems of power. At the same time, however, mastery requires a limit on feminine desire. Too little will undermines the contractual agreement as coerced and nonconsensual. Alternatively, too much will threatens to destabilize the woman’s subservient position. Schwarz, *What You Will*, 12.

recognizes the intrinsic feminine power that allows her to bring to fruition her will by virtue of her voice.

While Brabantio, Iago, and Roderigo in the Folio describe in excessive detail the ‘unnatural’ coupling between Desdemona’s fair body and the black Othello, they also emphasize Desdemona’s willing participation in this exogamic union and frame her act of volition as a blatant and senseless disregard for masculine authority. Their hyperbolic uproar, however, loses credibility when Othello and Desdemona appear onstage and present themselves as loyal and honorable subjects to the Duke and the Venetian senate. I contend that although the Folio further accentuates Othello as a racialized other and includes far more misogynistic depictions of female sexuality, this text consistently gives audiences in the first Act of the play, a matured sexual couple who convincingly work together to appeal their marriage as lawful. In the Folio, audiences witness a self-possessed Desdemona whose desire for a transgressive blackness allows her to claim her body as her own in a way that a man of her father’s choosing and of her fair complexion could never accomplish. Although Desdemona exists as a circumscribed female subject, she tactfully gets her will by using her claim of Othello as her husband to conform to societal expectations while at the same time performing a rebellion against her father. Unlike in the Quarto, the Folio gives audiences a matured and rhetorically persuasive Desdemona who skillfully asserts her threatening desire for miscegenation through acts of submission.

## II

In the first Act of the Folio, Desdemona’s rhetorical power and desire for Othello and his blackness publicizes her transition from maidenhood to womanhood and enables her to successfully defend her marriage. However, at the same time that her erotic strength receives praise from the senate, she has suffered degradation from her father, Iago, and Roderigo. Although their racist and misogynistic ideologies construct insurmountable differences between the loyal woman and the unfaithful adulteress, just as they construct other binaries such as white and black, as the play

progresses the Folio shows how these discourses intertwine in such a way that Desdemona constantly inhabits an unstable position wherein the vacillating balance of her virtuous and black representation threatens to become a tool for those wanting to defame her reputation. For example, as her persuasive speech triumphantly defends her marriage with Othello and garners the approval of the Duke, it also purportedly evinces an illicit sexuality at the heart of a duplicitous feminine ‘nature.’ In Act 2 Scene 1, Iago begins his long exchange of misogynistic jests with a complaint bemoaning Emilia’s forthright speech: “Sir, would she giue you so much of her lippes/ as her tongue she oft bestowes on me,/ You would haue enough” (2.1. 103-5). Iago’s sexually ambiguous reference to a woman’s tongue connects her rhetorical agency to her sensual body, which can both exasperate and satisfy her male counterpart. As his misanthropic entertainment progresses, he seamlessly conflates a woman’s oral orifice with her vaginal orifice, her verbal wit with promiscuity.<sup>34</sup> Through Iago’s contemptuous riddles, the efficacy of Desdemona’s voice reflects the carnal potency of her nether regions.<sup>35</sup>

In both the Quarto and the Folio Desdemona challenges Iago and reveals her own self-perceived virtuous blackness when she inquires, “What praise could’st thou bestow on a deseruing woman indeed? One, that in the authority of her merit, did iustly put on the vouch of very malice it selfe”(2.1.147-9). Prior to posing this question, Iago’s bawdy riddles employ stereotypical binaries, but like the valiant Moor her Lord who, in spite of his blackness, is championed for his valor and

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<sup>34</sup> Gabriel A. Rieger suggests classifying *Othello* as a satiric tragedy wherein jealous characters direct aggressive sexual attacks onto powerful and decorated men and women. Rieger crafts an in depth analysis of Iago’s misogynistic banter that plays upon tropes of color, wit, promiscuity, and sexual service. Rieger, Gabriel A., *Sex and Satiric Tragedy in Early Modern England: Penetrating Wit* (Farham: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 101-24.

<sup>35</sup> A contemporary example of the prevalence of such a conflation in early modern England is aptly exemplified in the vindictive poem *To Pamphilia from the father-in-law of Seralius* (1621). Sir Edward Denny intensifies his attack on Lady Mary Wroth’s wit and words via her sexual body. In his slanderous and tasteless insult, he writes: “Common oysters such as thine gape wide/ and take in pearles or worse at every tide.” Denny visually likens an indiscriminate half-opened shellfish to Wroth’s genital labia, and more importantly, like Iago, Denny refuses to differentiate Wroth’s rhetorical power from her “compromised” reproductive body. Denny, Sir Edward, “To Pamphilia from the father-in-law of Seralius,” *Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, ed. Josephine A. Roberts (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 32-33.

praised as possessing a “constant, louing, Noble Nature,” Desdemona believes that she could also transcend such restrictive classifications. By Act 4, however, Iago has succeeded in poisoning Othello’s mind by reminding him that “She did deceiue her father marrying you”(3.3.210), a statement that parallels Brabantio’s caring words of wisdom: “Look to her (Moore) if thou hast eies to see:/ She ha’s deceiu’d her Father, and may thee” (1.3.291-2). To reiterate, Desdemona’s verbal efficacy enables the assertion of her will and rebellion against her father, but in addition, it also mortifies Brabantio before other high-ranking Venetian noblemen. In fact, Brabantio’s public humiliation echoes a cuckold’s communal abasement, and thus, in a patriarchal rationale, her filial treason mirrors the deception of adultery. This ideological conflation of the dangerously immanent female reproductive body and the public representations of Desdemona’s will serves to confirm Othello’s suspicions of her innate and unrestrainable promiscuity. In a society which espouses such stringent demarcations between white virginity and black promiscuity, a wife—a husband’s bedfellow—inhabits a compromised position through a marital carnal knowledge and a dangerous rhetorical persuasiveness that inevitably taint the “authority of her merit.”

Like Desdemona’s virtuous blackness and erotic inner strength that bring both praise and suspicion, her transitional moments initially endow Othello with great joy but later cause him to believe Iago and violently act upon his jealousy. In Act 3 Scene 4, Othello hearkens back to when he received Desdemona as his wife and repeats the same gesture that once signified their mutual consent to marry. With her hand, he diagnoses Desdemona by reading her as a text that involuntarily emits signs symptomatic of her natural proclivity toward treason against her father and husband:

OTH: Giue me your hand.  
This hand is moist, my Lady.

DES: It hath felt no age, nor known no sorrow.

OTH: This argues fruitfulness, and liberall heart:  
Hot, hot, and moyst. This hand of yours requires  
A sequester from Liberty: Fasting, and Prayer,

Much Castigation, Exercise deuout,  
For Heere's a yong, and sweating diuell here  
That commonly rebels: 'Tis a good hand,  
A Franke one.

DES: You may (indeed) say so:  
For 'twas that hand that gaue away my heart. (F 2178-2189)

Desdemona is victimized by her outward bodily signs, the heat of her touch and her unruly fluids.<sup>36</sup> Othello repeats, “hot, hot and moist” (F 2182), and from these subtle hints he claims to decipher Desdemona’s true interiority, an inner blackened morality that overwhelms her guise of fair beauty. Her youthful and moist body represents a sexual zeal, which coupled with her “fruitfulness”—her fecundity—poses a direct threat to Othello and to the state of her soul. In Othello’s retrospective analysis, Desdemona’s strong and composed rhetorical delivery at the Venetian senate, her partaking in Iago’s misogynistic banter, and her amorous escape from home in the dead of night all suddenly fall under the traditional patriarchal classification of an insubordinate, mobile, and unruly woman. However, it is not her generous, free, and magnanimous disposition by itself that Othello finds worrisome but her liberality located in a feminine body. By association, Othello sees Desdemona’s extension of kindness to Cassio as an extension of her sexual reproductive body and thus, a violation of her chastity.

Othello asks for her hand, and she gives it freely. This gesture of trust connotes friendship and is a custom that often signifies agreement, such as when a woman accepts a marriage proposal. When Desdemona agreed to become his wife, she offered Othello her hand and symbolically renounced her virgin maidenhood. Her frank hand and impartial demeanor provoke Othello precisely because he had been the beneficiary of that hand. The significance of this gesture to

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<sup>36</sup> Gail Kern Paster explains that heat was interpreted as an indicator of life and cold was an indicator of death. Therefore, the hot and dry male was constructed as naturally superior to his cold and wet female counterpart. Although Desdemona is appropriately feminine and moist, her unbecoming and masculine heat might be a sign of her assertive and defiantly threatening sexuality. For more on the early modern conceptions of a woman as victimized by her humoral body, see Gail Kern Paster’s article, “The Unbearable Coldness of Female Being: Women’s Imperfection and the Humoral Economy” *The English Literary Renaissance* 28, no. 3 (1998): 416-38.

inflame suspicion and resentment in the mind of a jealous husband is not unique to Othello. Another Shakespearean character, the rash and despotic Leontes from *The Winter's Tale* also witnesses his wife, Hermione, give her hand to Polixenes and exclaims in an aside, "Too hot, too hot! To mingle friendship far, is mingling bloods."<sup>37</sup> Overcome by poisonous jealousy, both men interpret this innocent gesture as passionate and lusty because it is through this trivial act that they both gained access to their wives' sexual bodies. For Othello, however, the discourse intertwining color and morality insidiously taints Desdemona's consent to marry him because this act is an acceptance of his blackness and the immoral connotations associated with his visage.<sup>38</sup> At the moment when Othello is overwhelmed with suspicion and jealousy, there is no difference between a figurative and literal feminine blackness. They are one and the same. Desdemona is his "sweating diuell"—his des-demon—a member of the frailer sex designed to succumb to temptation and awaken the carnal beast in man.

The Quarto and Folio portray Desdemona's reactions to Othello's damaging accusations in differently nuanced ways. When in Act 4 Scene 2 Othello attacks Desdemona by calling her an impudent strumpet, the Quarto has Desdemona asserting that she preserves her vessel "From any hated foule vnlawfull touch" (Q 2781). In this text, Desdemona views her marriage as lawful and natural, sanctified and pure. Complicating Desdemona, the Folio alters this line to: "From any *other* foul unlawful touch" (F 2781). Perhaps the Folio's version of Desdemona is giving Othello a bit of sass in response to his unwarranted invectives. I suggest, however, that this textual variation should be interpreted as one of Holland's quotidian acts of racism that in the heat of passion reveals

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<sup>37</sup> Shakespeare, William. *The Winter's Tale*. ed. J.H.P. Pafford (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1963), 1.2.108-9.

<sup>38</sup> Both Arthur Kirsch and Edward A. Snow describe Othello's downfall as his internalization of Iago's vision of himself as a loathsome Moor rather than the valiant man that Desdemona perceives him to be. By loving Othello and accepting his blackness, Desdemona damns herself in Othello's eyes because he comes to view her attraction toward blackness as unnatural and illicit. Kirsch, Arthur, "The Polarization of Erotic Love in *Othello*," *Modern Language Review* 73 (1978): 721-40. Snow, Edward A., "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in Othello" *English Literary Renaissance* 10, no.3 (1980): 384-412.



Desdemona's view of her marriage to Othello as tainted, *foul* and *unlawful*.<sup>39</sup> Above all, this subconscious slip points to her paradoxical desire that loves and longs for that which she simultaneously hates and fears, a contradictory attraction that parallels Othello's co-constitutive desire for a sexual wife and repulsion toward their shared blackened sensuality. After Othello's slanderous accusation that Desdemona is none other than the "cunning Whore of Venice/That married with *Othello*" (F 2988-9), the Folio has Desdemona kneel before the man who is fully aware of her innocence. In lines completely lacking in the Quarto, Desdemona bends in supplication before "honest" Iago.

Now that she has realized the full implications of blackness and the danger of aligning herself with it, Desdemona temporarily loses confidence in her assertion of a virtuous blackness and reverts to representing herself through an ideological whiteness when addressing a Venetian man. Although distraught, she attempts to present herself in a theatrical act of totalizing feminine submission. Previously, she has stalwartly defended her honor: "to be a Strumpet, I am none" (F 2782); this passionate and aggressive defiance, however, only serves to aggravate Othello and to undermine further her defense. Rather than approach Iago as passionately as she had hitherto conducted herself, the Folio's Desdemona enacts gestures of subordination and verbalizes a complete obedience:<sup>40</sup>

Heere I kneele:  
If ere my will did trespasse 'gainst his Loue,  
Either in discourse of thought, or actuall deed,  
Or that mine Eyes, mine Eares, or any Sence  
Delighted them: or any other Forme.  
Or that I do not yet, and euer did,  
And euer will, (though he do shake me off  
To beggerly diuorcement) Loue him deerely,

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<sup>39</sup> Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Psychoanalysts Neil Smith and Everett Siegel pathologize Desdemona as a narcissistic woman conflicted between her aggressive drives and the expectations of submission expected by her community. I find it troubling that these researchers construct Desdemona as "deviant" for her failure to abide by the circumscriptions of her society's feminine ideal. Smith, Neil & Siegel, Everett, "Desdemona's Inner Conflicts" *Psychoanalytic Review* 97, no.1 (2010): 137-161.

Comfort forswear me. Vnkindnesse may do much,  
And his vnkindnesse may defeat my life,  
But neuer taynt my Loue. I cannot say Whore,  
It do's abhorre me now I speake the word,  
To do the Act, that might the addition earne,  
Not the worlds Masse of vanitie could make me. (F 2865- 2878)

Desdemona has come to understand that a passionate outrage against the charge of black adultery does little to sway the hearts of men. She professes never to have transgressed her duties as a wife—not even in her private thoughts, her secret imagination, has she entertained the pleasures of lust. In these lines, Desdemona presents herself as a sexless object blind to all the beauties of the world save for her beloved Othello.<sup>41</sup> In *A Godly Form of Household Government* published in 1598, Robert Cleaver instructs readers, “If at any time it shall happen, that the wife shall anger or displease her husband, by doing or speaking any thing that shall grieue him, she ought neuer to rest vntill she haue pacified him, and gotten his fauour againe.”<sup>42</sup> Fulfilling the requirements of Cleaver’s ideal and dutiful wife, at this point in the play Desdemona implores Iago to tell her what she should do to win the affections of her husband again and forswears all comfort until his favor returns. These overly dramatic descriptions of extreme fidelity adhere to the standards of an ideological and restrictive feminine whiteness. Within this declaration of unwavering submission, Desdemona states: “I cannot say Whore,/ It do’s abhorre me now I speake the word” (F 2875-6). While emphasizing her innocence, this pun also reveals the absurdity of the unwavering, obedient feminine prototype to which fair women are compared. The merry Desdemona engages in wanton banter, possesses vanity, and appreciates the company of Cassio and Lodovico, but she also insists on her fidelity. As mutually informing racialized and misogynistic discourses overwhelm Othello and dominate his perception of Desdemona, the textual variances found in the Folio more strongly intimate how this once confident woman begins to abandon her previous belief in the liberating potential of a virtuous

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<sup>41</sup> Bartels, *Strategies of Submission*, 428.

<sup>42</sup> Cleaver, *A godly form of household government*, 1849:24.

blackness. If to be a chaste wife a woman must staunchly engage every sensation and thought upon her husband, then she must not hear, see, taste, touch, or feel. She must be dead.

### III

In Desdemona's utmost state of abjection, rather than continuing to align herself with whiteness and innocence as she had previously performed when kneeling before Iago, Desdemona comes to identify herself with blackness and manipulates her claim of darkness to accurately reflect her inner state. In Act 1, Iago refers to Othello as a Barbary horse, and in the unpinning of Desdemona in Act 4, Desdemona represents herself as a Barbary maid, a woman forsaken by her lover.<sup>43</sup> It is important to note that the Quarto and the Folio portray Desdemona differently as Emilia prepares her for bed. In the Quarto, Desdemona uncompromisingly satisfies the requisites of a guiltless victimhood. She briefly mentions the Barbary maid and innocently inquires as to whether or not Emilia would "doe such a thing [adultery] for all the world" (*Q* 3040).<sup>44</sup> By contrast, the Folio once more emphasizes Desdemona's re-identification with blackness. As Emilia undresses her body, Desdemona nonchalantly mentions, "This Lodouico is a proper man" (*F* 3005).<sup>45</sup> In the safety of female company, Desdemona contradicts her previous declaration of impractical steadfast fidelity when she discloses an appreciative notice of other men besides Othello.

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<sup>43</sup> Rather than interpreting Desdemona's interiority as separate from her outward performance of the Barbary maid, Martha Ronk argues that Desdemona's internal and external selves are mutually informing. She insists upon the stark differences between the Desdemona of the first Act and the Desdemona on her death-bed. However, I would like to push back against Ronk's reading because this interpretation necessitates a static conception of ideological darkness. Instead, I take into account Desdemona's performance of blackness in its manifold permutations. Ronk, Martha, "Desdemona's Self-Presentation," *English Literary Renaissance* 35 no. 1 (2005): 52-72.

<sup>44</sup> Critics have long regarded this substantial textual difference as a result of the changing voice of the boy actor playing Desdemona. Regardless of whether or not these lines were removed to prevent an embarrassingly comedic performance of the Willow Song, this textual variation offers a myriad of potential interpretations for scholars to pursue.

<sup>45</sup> According to Potter, this line did not trouble eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics who interpreted Desdemona as unequivocally pure. They found this utterance to be "an interesting example of the strange thoughts that can come into the head of such a woman." While I agree that this line may be interpreted in a variety of ways, one which includes emphasis on her state of distress, I urge editors and directors to give Desdemona the speech prefix to this line. Through doing so, readers and audiences are provided with the opportunity to comprehend the words for themselves and potentially, to view Desdemona as a figure who does not fit within contemporary ideologies of pure, white victimhood. Potter, "Editing Desdemona," 87.

In the Folio, Desdemona actually sings the Willow Song of the Barbary maid, thereby solidifying her desire for blackness.<sup>46</sup> The lyrics enhance the trope of blackness as a sign of despair and abandonment. Early modern depictions of exotic women often cast these dark erotic others as possessing an unbridled and aggressive sexuality, continuously pining after love. In *A Blackmore Maid Wooing a Fair Boy*, the dark woman asks, “Why, lovely boy, why fly’st thou me,/ That languish in these flames for thee?”<sup>47</sup> Despite the heat of her sexual ardor, the white boy remains repulsed by her tawny skin. Hall argues that competitions based on beauty and virtue reinforce the supremacy of the fair, European woman at the expense of the dark, foreign other to protect the white woman’s unstable secondary position. In an early modern understanding of beauty and desirability, “no two women who are the objects of one man’s attention can be fair at the same time. When one is “fair” or desired, the other is almost as a matter of course “other” or dark.”<sup>48</sup> Although I agree that discourses intertwining aesthetics and racial difference have served to marginalize and oppress others, I wish to problematize this narrative of opposition through which repulsive blackness is purportedly always constructed as the antithesis of attractive whiteness. Desdemona’s identification with Othello and the Barbary maid suggests that the signification of blackness functions beyond its antagonistic relation to whiteness.

If according to aesthetic significations, one cannot be both black and favored for it is blackness that actively desires and whiteness that is desired, then it is *blackness* that most often experiences and possesses the discourse to express the pangs of abandonment and an unrequited

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<sup>46</sup> Patricia Parker parallels the sixteenth century popularity of the “monstrous” with the growing appetite for travel narratives and states that the textual history depicting women from “Barbarie” often describe these exotic domestics as an example of a threatening and inhuman female sexuality. Parker, Patricia, “Fantasies of ‘Race’ and ‘Gender’: Africa, *Othello* and bringing to light” *Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, eds. Margo Hendricks and Patricia A. Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), 85-100.

<sup>47</sup> Rainolds, Henry. “A Blackmoor Maid wooing a fair Boy” *Minor Poets of the Caroline Period*, ed. George Saintsbury (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), 171.

<sup>48</sup> Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 181. Hall further elaborates how color has served to maintain male domination. Unlike class or gender, color constructs women as secondary and different but does not necessarily compromise systems of patriarchy. Hall, Kim, “‘I rather would wish to be a black-moor:’ Beauty, Race, and Rank in Lady Mary Wroth’s *Urania*” *Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, eds. Margo Hendricks and Patricia A. Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), 181.

love. A virtuous blackness also gives Desdemona the ability to state her visual appreciation of Lodovico while maintaining her assertion of innocence. While this paradoxical embodiment bestows upon Desdemona the liberty to claim an inner sensuality, to break free from the idealistic shell of purity, and to harness her erotic potential, it also provides her with a realistic portrayal of womanhood *with whom* she can relate and *through whom* she can express her black despair. Desdemona does not possess memories of fair feminine figures using a discourse that will enable her to voice the injustice of her forsaken position.<sup>49</sup> Although the Willow Song was in fact an English folk song, in *Othello* Desdemona clearly associates its domestic origins with the exotic. Its familiar tune and lyrics invoke remembrances of the Barbary maid, and this intense emotional recollection once more depicts the mingling of white and black that has resurfaced throughout the play. Desdemona seizes the only avenue available for her to convey her inner passions by displacing her self-representation and adopting the rhetoric voiced by the dark other. Through aligning her position with the experience of the Barbary maid, Desdemona ultimately rejects her native hue and willingly racializes her self-representation to verbally express her inner state.

In the Folio, as she sings the Willow Song of the Barbary maid, Desdemona interweaves her personal thoughts with the existing lyrics: “*Let no body blame him, his scorne I approue*” (F 3020). Desdemona accepts Othello’s unwarranted mistreatment and even defends his behavior. This utterance perfectly echoes the excessive submissiveness that Cleaver instructs obedient English wives to follow.<sup>50</sup> Rather than confess the truth, Desdemona incriminates herself for her own

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<sup>49</sup> Lynn Enterline theorizes a habit of alterity inculcated through early modern Latin grammar schooling which fostered a “general disposition toward impersonation, and hence a propensity for drama.” In order for young boys to express their feelings, they displaced their own subjectivity onto the passions of others—usually classical female figures who had endured intense pain and bodily violation—to ventriloquize and convincingly express their ‘true’ internal passions. I believe that Desdemona enacts a similar displacement as a fair woman who cannot voice her despair unless she personifies the Barbary maid. Enterline, Lynn, *Shakespeare’s Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

<sup>50</sup> “And if he shall chance to blame her without a cause, and for that which she could not helpe or remedy, (which thing sometimes happeneth euen of the best men) yet she must beare it patiently... [and] euermore looke vpon him with

murder, and with her expiring breath, she ingratiates herself to the Moor her Lord. Although Desdemona seems to collapse her black despair with Cleaver's version of unequivocal submission and white innocence, Leah Marcus offers a novel interpretation of this sacrificial woman. While the trope of the sensuous dark lady pervaded early modern discourse, European travel narratives from India and specifically, descriptions of the sati increasingly captivated the imagination of sixteenth and early-seventeenth century England. These narratives often compare English women to their foreign counterparts and depict the sati as a Christian-like heathen, redeemed by her fatal devotion. For example, in praise of the Indian widow, *The Fardle of Facions*, a London 1555 pamphlet, describes the sati as being "So gladde... to have the victorie in the contention of wifely chastity, and honest behavior toward her husband."<sup>51</sup> Such early modern travel narratives depict the pure Hindu widow as figuratively whitened, attaining a virtuous Christianized blackness through her willing self-destruction at the demands of a "heathenish" culture. In this framework, sacrifice transforms the dark woman from an object of disdain into a model worthy of feminine emulation. Instead of reading Desdemona's dramatic submissiveness as a reversion to whiteness, Marcus interprets Desdemona's actions as signs of her increasing exotification. Her sacrificial death mimics the heroic chastity of the exemplary burning Indian widow.

Indeed, Desdemona's death and the preparatory events leading to her sacrifice upon the altar of her matrimonial bed parallel the descriptive staging of erotic immolation found in European writings, in which the Hindu woman's final journey is accompanied by music similar to a wedding

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a louing and cheerefull countenance; and so rather let her take the fault vpon her, then seeme to be displeas'd." Cleaver, *A Godly Form*, 107.

<sup>51</sup> This 1555 London pamphlet demonstrates that an exposure to foreign people and exotic customs was understood through a Eurocentric and Christian model. Exchanges with foreign "others" forced Englishmen and women to reflect upon their own society. Similarly, in *The travels of certaine Englishmen* published in 1612, William Biddulph describes an account of the stringent and, oftentimes, fatal disciplinary measures taken against adulterous Islamic wives in Aleppo. After contemplating these foreign practices, Biddulph suggests that: "If the like order were in England, women would be more dutifull and faithfull to their husbands than many of them are: and especially, if there were the like punishment for whores, there would be lesse whoredome." I contend that such travel narratives influenced societal expectations and that these changing perspectives were being enacted and challenged upon the Renaissance stage. Biddulph, William, *The travels of certaine Englishmen* (London: Imprinted by Henry Bynnyman, 1609), 56.

melody.<sup>52</sup> Ania Loomba draws attention to the voyeuristic focus of colonial accounts absorbed in the “spectacle of burning and obsessively describ[ing] the beautiful young widow as she strips herself of clothes and ornaments to ascend the fire.”<sup>53</sup> Similarly, playgoers witness the undressing of Desdemona, and the same Western impulse to rescue the sati from the burning flames has resurfaced time and again during theatrical performances of Desdemona’s murder.<sup>54</sup> When turning to the erotics of Desdemona’s death, it is important to realize that this purifying religious act is transformed into a heathenish sacrifice reminiscent of early modern accounts of the sati. Othello presides over the ceremony as a judge and priest. He commands Desdemona to confess her sins and thus, die with a pure heart. Although she insists on her innocence and pleads for her life, Othello refuses to grant her a legal trial in which he will accuse her of adultery.

This last scene wherein Desdemona and Othello appear onstage together stands in direct contrast to the very first time the couple graced the stage. In Act I, the Duke upholds justice by allowing Othello to present his case before the Venetian senate and by permitting Desdemona to serve as a witness to their love. In Act 5, Othello dismisses the assertion of her innocence and denies her right to bring forth her own witness.<sup>55</sup> In *Burning Women*, Pompa Banerjee explains that in spite of the similar smell of burning flesh, the sight of living bodies on fire, European travelers distanced the immolation of Indian widows from the rampant witchburning of European women by understanding the sati “as exemplifying the barbarism of a heathenish culture that burned “saintly”

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<sup>52</sup> Banarjee, Pompa, *Burning Women: Widows, Witches, and Early Modern European Travelers in India* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

<sup>53</sup> Loomba, Ania, “Dead Women Tell No Tales’: Issues of Female Subjectivity, Subaltern Agency and Tradition in Colonial and Postcolonial Writings on Widow Immolation in India.” *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (New York: Routledge, 2003), 255.

<sup>54</sup> In a well-known 1812 American performance, one of the guards shot the actor playing Othello in the arm while yelling, “It will never be said that in my presence a confounded Negro has killed a white woman!” cited in Neill, “Unproper Beds,” 8-10.

<sup>55</sup> According to Laura Gowing, adultery trials were primarily held in Church Courts wherein witnesses were called forth to testify “whose interpretation... deserved to be accepted.” While over-friendliness has been noted as a cause for suspicion in Elizabethan England, Desdemona’s reputation as a virtuous wife would have weakened Othello’s case against her. Gowing, Laura, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 1996), 43.

(or at least innocent) women...in contrast to their own civilized and Christian cultures, which, in burning witches, punished extremely wicked women.”<sup>56</sup> With these manifold resemblances, one could easily perceive how Desdemona’s sacrifice further vilifies and racializes Othello as foreign and barbaric. For example, Arthur L. Little interprets the killing of the angelic-like Desdemona as a trap in which Othello is forced to confront his own “damning and inescapable blackness.”<sup>57</sup> Critics often interpret Desdemona as a character who functions as the paradigm of whiteness that directly contrasts Othello’s black otherness. Predictably, the Moor of Venice fulfills the expression of his “blackness” by denying Desdemona a civilized trial and by performing the role of a satanic priest presiding over the murder of his wife.

However, while this scene invokes images of the sati who proves her virtue and chastity through her bodily destruction, I suggest that it also draws upon the paradoxical consummation rituals which require the sacrifice of the hymen to ‘confirm’ a woman’s virginity. The symbolics of Desdemona’s death upon her matrimonial sheets also reverberates with exotic consummation rituals found in other early modern travel narratives. In *A geographical historie of Africa*, Leo Africanus explains the consummation ritual in the city of Fez:

A certaine woman standeth before the doore, expecting till the bridegroom hauing deflowered his bride reacheth her a napkin stained with blood, which napkin she carrieth incontinent and sheweth to the guests, proclaiming that the bride was euer till that time an vnspotted and pure virgine.<sup>58</sup>

Many critics have used this excerpt to illuminate the exotic rituals upon which Desdemona’s handkerchief is founded. The hankie, then, becomes a curio of the ‘other’ and a provocative symbol of the deflowering of Desdemona.<sup>59</sup> As discussed previously in this essay, the characters in *Othello*

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<sup>56</sup> Banarjee, *Burning Women*, 71.

<sup>57</sup> Little, Arthur L., *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 97.

<sup>58</sup> Africanus, Leo, *A geographical historie of Africa* (London: Eliot’s Court Press, 1600), 143.

<sup>59</sup> For a more elaborate discussion on the significance of the handkerchief as a reduction of the bridal sheets that symbolically ties together “issues of marital consummation, judicial evidence, murder perceived as legal execution,” see



couple Desdemona's agency and verbal efficacy with voyeuristic depictions of her sexuality. However, the bed itself, the site of the transgressive consummation, is never actually materialized before Elizabethan playgoers until the last Act of the play, wherein audiences devour the presentation of Desdemona's sleeping body lying upon her matrimonial bed and awaiting the coming of her Lord. In the ensuing struggle between Desdemona and Othello, audiences get to see the "monstrous" fantasy of a white woman topped by a black Moor, and the moment of a figurative penetration manifests in her climactic death. When Othello finally overcomes Desdemona, Emilia—like the maid from Fez—barges into the bedchamber as if she had been waiting just outside the door. However, the bloody cloth, the symbol of Desdemona's virginity, does not exist. The evidence of purity lies in her lifeless body. During this deferred consummation, Othello does *not* make Desdemona bleed. Like the maid from Fez, Emilia resoundingly proclaims the innocence of her lady, who died in a pseudo-consummation ritual designed to efficiently ascertain the virtue of a once intact hymen. Othello attempts to forever stabilize Desdemona's feminized virtue through the only possible patriarchal guarantee—death.

While the destruction of the hymen in a consummation ritual and of the body in a sacrifice may romanticize a woman's perceived obedience, chastity, and ultimate subjection to male dominion, I insist that these practices, predicated upon the convergence of the material feminine body and a woman's will, manifest the contingent flux of power which frustrates and impairs the fantasy of a totalizing patriarchal authority.<sup>60</sup> Although the bloody napkin from Fez provides 'evidence' for a woman's prior virginal body, it does not guarantee her continued chastity and willful subservience to her husband. Likewise, the sati's sacrifice blurs the distinction between a woman's

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Lynda E. Boose, 'Othello's Handkerchief: 'The Recognizance and Pledge of Love,' *English Literary Renaissance* 5, no. 3 (1975): 374.

<sup>60</sup> Elaine Scarry effectively describes the body as a site wherein sovereignty most acutely exercises its power and becomes the locus of consent itself. Desdemona's self-incrimination, like the sati's willful death, could be interpreted as a statement of mastery over her voice and her body. Scarry, Elaine, "Consent and the Body: Injury, Departure, and Desire," *New Literary History* 21, no. 4 (1990): 868-895.

acquiescence to patriarchal authority and the fulfillment of her own will. While Desdemona's last words seem to perform a conclusive obedience and subjection to Othello, I argue that from her first speech until her final utterances, Desdemona embodies a virtuous blackness that constantly resists the uncomplicated classifications of the idealized virtuous wife and the cunning treasonous whore. Most importantly, this virtuous blackness entraps male hegemonic figures within the very patriarchal ideologies designed to reify masculine dominion. In the beginning of the Folio, Desdemona tactfully forces Brabantio to relinquish his control over her body by utilizing the normative trajectory from daughter to child-bearing wife and by simultaneously embodying the loyal subject and the female rebel. Desdemona's death also enacts a concurrent subjection and rebellion, a submissive conformity and resistance. I argue that this dual self-representation continues throughout the play and is most present in her consensual destruction and (post?)humorous utterance.

On her death bed, Desdemona initially cries out, "O falsely, falsely murder'd"(F 3384) and later appears to retract this statement when she tells Emilia that nobody committed the murder but she herself. Emily C. Bartels offers a provocative reading of this performance of passivity when she states that Desdemona's "dying voice" actually serves to "destabilize the master narrative that has defamed her and puts incriminating words in Othello's mouth... undoing himself in order to undo her."<sup>61</sup> Once again, it is in Desdemona's verbal submission that her voice most disturbs male narratives, wants, and desires:

*Oth.* Why, how should she be murdered?

*Emilia.* Alas: who knows?

*Oth.* You heard her say herself it was not I.

*Emilia.* She said so: I must needs report the truth.

*Oth.* She's like a Liar gone to burning hell,  
'Twas I that kill'd her. (5.2.134-9)

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<sup>61</sup> Bartels, *Strategies of Submission*, 430.

Initially, Othello feigns innocence and verifies that Emilia had heard Desdemona's equivocation. Emilia's concession, however, derives from her faith in the honesty and virtue of her mistress. This inevitably provokes Othello to proclaim Desdemona a "liar" and a "whore" by confessing to his role in the murder of his wife. Her last words that "profess due to the Moor [her] Lord" portray the faithful and self-effacing subject protecting Othello's reputation only to betray him in the end. Similar to her first speech, this proclamation of submission transforms her from the ultimate subject to a rebel who traps her master with the same web of misogynistic beliefs used to circumscribe her mobility and destroy her life. Desdemona's virtuous blackness first threatens masculine hegemonic spheres when she transitions from daughter to wife, causing the senate to sanctify her marriage and her father to die with a broken heart. This dangerous erotic potential arises again to reclaim her reputation by paradoxically denouncing it, and as she once more transitions, this time from the living to the dead, her dying words prompt Emilia to likewise rebel against Iago, revealing his machinations fueled by intertwining discourses of race and sexuality.

The Folio's theatrical version of Desdemona reveals the consequences of requiring women to represent themselves through the polarizing color-morality ideologies of the early modern world. Through desiring blackness, Desdemona asserts her will, professes an inevitable dark female sensuality, and maintains her virtue in spite of her ostensibly paradoxical self-identification. From the first Act of the play, Desdemona ceaselessly challenges the restrictive classifications through which fair women are required to negotiate themselves. I suggest reading the death of this darkened Venetian woman not simply as an act that "others" Othello but as a death that confronts Elizabethan audiences with the horrors of their idealized notions of unequivocal purity, submission, and white virtue. Critic Valerie Traub argues that although dramatic characters such as Desdemona were written and initially performed by men, these creations of the male-imagination provided the discourses that "women encountered, willfully appropriated, silently disavowed, and publicly

contested.”<sup>62</sup> Acclaimed Restoration female playwright Aphra Behn provides insight to such willful appropriation of male depictions of women in her praise of Sir Francis Fane’s play, *The Sacrifice*:

*In your Despina all those Passions meet,  
Which Womans Frailties perfectly compleat:  
Pride, and Revenge, Ambition, Love, and Rage  
At once her wilful haughty Soul Engage:  
And while her Rigid Honor we Esteem,  
The dire Effects as justly must condemn.  
She shows a Virtue so severely, Nice,  
As has betray’d it to a pitch of Vice,  
All which confess a Godlike Power in you,  
Who could form Woman to her self so true.*<sup>63</sup>

Behn commends Fane with his construction of an exotic woman comprised of various passions, and rather than interpreting Despina’s heroic chastity as exemplary of a universal feminine virtue, Behn takes this construction and inverts the male fantasy of womanly submission. Like Despina, Desdemona conveys a range of emotions, strengths, insecurities, hopes and fears that change as *Othello* progresses, and rather than interpreting Desdemona as the pure victim of barbaric aggression, I urge us to follow Behn’s suit and explore the destabilizing potential of this woman’s martyrdom. Desdemona’s guiltless death, invoking images of the sati and the bride from Fez, distorts her act of feminine submission from a “Virtue so severely, Nice... to a pitch of Vice.”

The romanticized heroic chastity praised by European men collapses when embodied by Desdemona, a provocative character who reveals her assertive virtuous blackness through acts of submission. In December of 1660, for the first time in English commercial stage history, a living, breathing woman graced the public stage.<sup>64</sup> Of all the Shakespearean heroines, it was Desdemona who had the privilege to be the first role performed by an actress. There is something about

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<sup>62</sup> Traub, Valerie, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21.

<sup>63</sup> Fane, Sir Francis, *The Sacrifice a Tragedy* (London: Printed by J.R. for John Weld, 1685).

<sup>64</sup> The King’s Company performed this historic production of *Othello*. Of its four initial actresses—Katherine Corey, Anne Marshall, Mrs. Eastland, and Mrs. Weaver—Anne Marshall is presumed to have been the actress who played the role of Desdemona. Howe, Elizabeth, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 24.

Desdemona that made her the perfect tragic Shakespearean female character to be enacted for this significant moment.

The Folio's problematic Desdemona has historically troubled editors limited by their moral prejudices and who construct true sympathetic victims as indisputably pure. The Desdemona from the Folio provides a complex Venetian noblewoman who eludes the reigning classifications of white chastity and black promiscuity of the early modern world through her literal and figurative marriage of binaries. In the beginning of the play, audiences witness Desdemona using racial discourse to emphasize that she is no longer the property of her father and to take ownership over her matured sexuality and sensuous "black" body. Race and sexuality intertwine and mutually produce each other in Desdemona's assertion of power as she enters a male domain and public sphere. Before the Venetian Senate, she succeeds in her attempt to straddle the division between maidenhood and womanhood through her simultaneous subjection and rebellion. Ironically, it is through her position as Othello's wife—his loyal subject—that Desdemona exercises the most authority and is proclaimed by Cassio as his "great Captains Captaine"(2.1.75).

In the beginning of the play, Desdemona believes that she can be both "black" and virtuous, but as "blackness" reeks up racial hatred and jealousy in the course of the play, she momentarily loses faith in the ability for blackness to convey her inner state. However, before her death, Desdemona once more aligns herself with a virtuous blackness and figuratively chooses to racialize her self-representation by ventriloquizing the rhetoric of the Barbary maid. Desdemona uses the language of blackness to adequately express her despair, tumultuous internal passions, and experience as a woman. In the 1623 Folio version of *Othello*, Desdemona deviates from a passive victimhood. Her dangerous erotic potential undoes patriarchal authority through the same structures and ideologies used to circumscribe the mobility of women and to occlude their willful voices. Through her exotic life and death, Desdemona destabilizes the fair feminine ideal—an unattainable

model that can only be fulfilled through an existence devoid of human senses. In the rejection of her native hue, Desdemona manifests the complexities of a womanhood that is inherently “othering” and necessarily darkening, a complexity that conforms and rebels through her desire for blackness.

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*at their death: as for all other persons to receive great profit by the rest of the matters herein expressed.*

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